

Responding to Grief and Loss within the MTSU Community

A Guide for Faculty and Staff

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This guide answers questions commonly asked by faculty, staff, and/or students when faced with a death or other tragedy in the MTSU community. Sadly, this is no longer a rare occurrence on this campus. As the University has grown, so, too, has the annual number of deaths occurring among our students, faculty, and staff. This guide is intended to serve as a resource for responding to the needs of students and colleagues during difficult times.

What does the University do when a student dies?

Notification of a student death can come from many avenues. The news media could be the first source of information, or the notification could come from the family or friends of the deceased. When the University College Advising Center (UCAC, McFarland Building, 898-2339) becomes aware of a currently enrolled student’s death, advisors must then ascertain the validity of the information through more official channels

(e.g., death records), through media accounts or other documentation. The UCAC will then contact the deceased student’s instructors, the chair and dean of the student’s major, and the vice president of Student Affairs, as well as administrative offices involved with the student (i.e., Housing, Records, Business Office, Financial Aid, HR, MTSU Foundation, etc.).

If a student has died, how will the University notify me?

When a death has been verified, the UCAC will send an email to the faculty of the deceased student, and will do so as soon as possible. However, information travels quickly through other outlets, and students with

Facebook pages and text messaging devices may find out before the University can inform you. The UCAC will inform you as quickly as possible with the best information available.

What does the University do when a faculty or staff member dies? How will I find out?

As in the case of the death of a student, notification of the death of a faculty or staff member may come from one of several sources. The news media could be the first source of information, or the notification could come from the family or friends of the deceased. The information may come to a department chair, dean, or a friend or family member also working on campus. Once the validity of the information has been confirmed,

the University will generally send a campus-wide notice with information concerning funeral or other memorial activities. Department chairs, deans or administrative supervisors will work with other faculty and staff to facilitate immediate coverage and a smooth transition of the deceased faculty or staff member’s classroom or other work responsibilities.

What should I expect in terms of initial responses to the news of a death?

Be aware of your own emotional response to the situation. You may or may not have had a personal connection with the deceased. Regardless of your relationship to the student or other community member who has died, be aware that students in your classes and others with whom you have contact may have had a close relationship with the deceased and will grieve the loss. You have a professional responsibility to

manage the classroom and work area at the same time that you are dealing with your own personal response.

One typical response of both faculty and students is to ask for more information about the details of the death. The University can generally only release the information that is publically available. In some cases, this respects a request from the family for confidentiality; in others, additional information is simply not available.



What services are available to me?

Like your students, you may react in different ways to the death of a member of the MTSU community. We all grieve at the loss of a friend or colleague. In the special case of the death of a student, educators can be hit particularly hard. We who believe we are educating the future will often have a strong grief reaction as we see the sudden end of a bright future and deal with the extinguishing of the student's potential.

Moreover, while professors are experts in their given field, most of us are not experts in death practices and services. We may feel out of our element when our expertise clearly does not apply to the situation. That is normal.

Are there faculty on campus who can coach me through this difficult process?

Yes. A list of faculty and staff who are ready to provide you with the support you need is available on page 4 of this guide. We are not therapists, but do have some

Through the State of Tennessee insurance program for faculty and staff, we have access to counseling services via Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). Referrals are available through Magellan Health Services (magellanasist.com), which will evaluate you and then provide a list of local grief counselors and/or mental health providers. You may decide you are interested in having that level of professional assistance in which to discuss your reaction to the death of a student or colleague. More informally, you can contact any of the faculty and/or staff listed on page 4 of this guide to discuss your reactions and to plan for working with your students.

special understanding of death rituals, grief processes, and other issues associated with death and are happy to help out.

Should I share the information I have with students (in a class, in a cohort, in a graduate program)?

Do I have to pay attention to FERPA regulations when a student dies? How much information is appropriate? Sharing this information depends on your class. Is it a large class? A small one? A close-knit one? It also depends on the timing. Is it at the beginning of the semester when students are not yet well acquainted? Or is it at the end of the semester when everyone knows each other, but your students still need to finish finals?

Share information honestly at a time that is appropriate for your class. Be aware of their reactions. Help students remain on task while, at the same time, acknowledging their grief.

FERPA regulations allow faculty and staff to share information with other faculty and staff. However, particularly at such a sensitive time, when talking with students, please be aware of the privacy needs of the family.

How do students typically respond when they learn of the death of a peer or a faculty member? How much attention do I give to this? Do I follow up after the semester ends?

When you share the information, be prepared for a variety of student responses: shock, disbelief, tears, anger, indifference. Sometimes, the reaction may be fear. Each student may respond based on his/her connection with the person who has died, the timing, the circumstances surrounding the death, and each individual's experiences with death. Above all, be flexible in your response to your students and consider their needs as you manage the response in your classroom.

giving of flowers, notes, or memorials from classmates may celebrate the life of the deceased and provide comfort and support to those who are grieving. Later, students and others may ask about more tangible expressions such as planting trees or establishing an award, event, or scholarship in the name of the student. Use your best judgment in helping students plan and carry out any appropriate classroom memorials they may have in mind.

Students may feel the need to "do something." An outward recognition of grief may fill this need. In the immediate period following the death, the spontaneous

Please note that flags will be flown at half-mast for all currently enrolled students or other MTSU community members who have died.



What services are available on campus for students who are troubled by a death?

Student Affairs is equipped to assist students who have learned of the death of a peer or other MTSU community member. Students may call Counseling Services (898-2760) or visit KUC 329 to schedule an appointment to speak with a counselor. Help provided through

Counseling Services is typically short-term; students requiring long-term help will be assisted in making arrangements for ongoing care through an off-campus mental health provider.

What allowances do I make for my students' grief?

Help your students stay focused. They still have to finish their classwork. Some students may need allowances or some flexibility. Be reasonable and fair, but make sure

that students stay on task and don't use the death to avoid finishing their work.

Is it true that students earn an A if a peer in their class dies? What is myth and what is reality?

This is a classic college myth. No student earns an A because a peer dies. In the case of the death of a faculty member, department chairs and deans will make

decisions about how class coverage will be managed and how coursework and grading will be completed.

What happens if the circumstances surrounding a death require a legal investigation?

The University may be legally required to cooperate with investigators by sharing information, by not sharing information, or by taking other actions to support fact-finding for the courts. If you, as a faculty or staff member, are concerned about your legal obligations,

consult your dean or supervisor or MTSU legal counsel (898-2025). If you are concerned about or have a question about the University's official response, be aware that legal requirements may be influencing that response.

Should I attend the funeral of a student? Can I secure a posthumous degree for the student's family?

Your decision to attend the funeral or communicate with the student's family is based on your comfort level. Options could be a card or a personal note. Sensitivity to all concerned is the most important consideration.

All requests for a posthumous degree must originate from the family and should be forwarded to the Office of the Registrar.

How should we respond to a student or colleague who may be suffering with a terminal illness and/or has entered hospice care?

The needs of those who are hospitalized or who are dying at home vary with the individual and the family. Visits by friends and colleagues are well intended and certainly provide a level of support to all, but can place a major strain on the patient and the family during some of the most difficult times. While the spirit of the patient may be willing, such visits may sap the little energy the patient possesses. Therefore, sensitivity is necessary to insure the visit provides the relief and enjoyment that is intended, as opposed to creating additional strain.

Before visiting, you may wish to call ahead to inquire of the family or hospital staff if a visit is appropriate and

would be welcomed. Sometimes cluster visits may be most appropriate, in which a small group all call upon the patient for a brief visit rather than making multiple separate visits. Cards or notes may be welcomed, as well as email, CDs of music, books on tape, or DVDs. Perhaps a group of well-wishers from campus could produce a DVD of greetings or a DVD of an MTSU event the patient would enjoy, rather than actual visits. You may wish to ask the family if you can assist by sitting with the patient to give a respite to the caregiver. Be aware that, depending on the treatment of the patient, flowers may not be allowed in order to prevent infection (i.e., patients on chemo).