

RESPONDING TO A STUDENT DEATH

POLICY SUMMARY

In the event of a Student death, it is incumbent upon the University and its personnel to respond in a sensitive and caring manner while recognizing the range of feelings and responses that surround such serious circumstances. A Student death naturally affects the family and friends of the deceased most acutely, although the entire University community is impacted. To help manage such situations, this policy provides guidance and sets forth response protocols for the University units that typically must respond prudentially in support of the bereaved and the larger University community. University personnel responsible for implementing this policy are to effectively coordinate and communicate with all parties and units as necessary and appropriate while being guided by empathy, sensitivity, and concern for those most directly affected.

REASON FOR THIS POLICY

Established processes and protocols for responding to a Student death help support the University's ability to manage such situations with appropriate proficiency, care, and sensitivity.

ENTITIES AFFECTED BY THIS POLICY

- As outlined in this policy and in its accompanying University's *Student Death Administrative Response Protocols*, all University units that may reasonably expect or are otherwise called upon to respond to the death of a Student.

WHO SHOULD KNOW THIS POLICY

- As outlined in this policy and in its accompanying University's *Student Death Administrative Response Protocols*, all University officials that may reasonably expect or are otherwise called upon to respond to the death of a Student.

DEFINITIONS

Student: for purposes of this policy, any person who: i) has been admitted to the University; ii) participates in new Student activities or functions such as orientation in anticipation of enrollment; or iii) was enrolled in at least one course in any previous term or who is or was registered for at least one course whether online or at any University location in any future term.

Postvention: a predetermined interdisciplinary strategy to effectively and sensitively respond with a series of planned psychological support and crisis interventions with those affected by a Student death. Postvention goals include minimizing significant traumatic reactions, facilitating the grieving or adjustment process, stabilizing the environment, reducing the risks of negative response behaviors, and in cases of death by suicide, reducing the risk of further suicides through contagion.

Primary Contact: the official that serves as the University's principal point of contact for a deceased or incapacitated Student's family or its representatives. Absent an alternative designation by the President or the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Primary Contact is the Dean of Students.

POLICY

A. Guiding Values

As the death of a Student may significantly impact the Northern Arizona University community as well as individual members, the University will respond in an empathetic and sensitive manner appropriate to the gravity of the situation. The University recognizes that members of its community may respond to death and tragedy in different ways depending on the nature of their relationship with the deceased and the specific circumstances involved. Its response will be guided by the following values and objectives:

1. Respect and Compassion. The University will respond with great respect for the deceased in a manner consistent with its legal and administrative obligations, in accordance with the wishes of the family or next of kin and those of the broader University community. In particular, care will be extended to the family or next of kin, the Students, faculty, and staff members most closely involved with the Student prior to the death, and individuals who may have been with or near the Student when the death occurred, or who arrived soon afterward.
2. Discretion and Privacy. In accordance with this policy's *Student Death Administrative Response Protocols*, notifications must be made to numerous offices or units to enable necessary administrative actions in a timely manner. All faculty and staff should exercise discretion in the use, access, and disclosure of information related to the Student and the Student's death. Any information provided will be verified for accuracy and considered carefully before being conveyed to the University community, media, family, or next of kin. Use, access, and disclosure of personal information must accord with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies.
3. Effective and Caring Communication. While the location, time, and circumstances of a Student's death may influence communications and appropriate response processes, to minimize distress for the family or next of kin, the University will seek to minimize the number of interactions and to obtain administrative closure in a timely and efficient manner. In the absence of specific instructions directing an alternative course of action issued by the President or the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Dean of Students acting in the role of Primary Contact will serve as the University's point of contact with the deceased Student's surviving family or next of kin.
4. Cooperation. In the manner outlined in this policy and its accompanying ancillary documents, all University units and personnel will work effectively and supportively together to respond in a timely and efficient manner to the special challenges associated with managing the circumstances that surround the death of a Student.

B. Student Death on the Flagstaff Mountain Campus

Any person who becomes aware of the death of a Student on the Flagstaff mountain campus should immediately notify the NAU Police Department (928-523-3000). University employees should also inform the Office of the Dean of Students (928-523-5181) as soon as possible. The NAU Police Department is responsible for contacting the appropriate services to attend to the body and for investigating all deaths on campus. The Dean of Students will initiate the University's *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol*. If a Student death occurs in a residence hall, the residence hall staff members most immediately involved will describe the situation to the responding NAU Police official. The Center for International Education must be contacted as soon as possible if the deceased is an international Student. Law enforcement and not University administrative staff will notify next of kin whenever possible.

C. Student Death Off-Campus in the United States

Local law enforcement or emergency services will respond to a Student death occurring away from the Flagstaff mountain campus or at other University locations. It is the responsibility of these agencies to notify the deceased's next of kin. If the Student's death occurs in Flagstaff or Coconino County, local law enforcement agencies may notify the NAU Police Department or possibly other campus officials. If any campus official is informed of a Student's death by any outside agency, the official should as soon as possible contact the NAU Police Department and the Office of the Dean of Students to convey the information. The Dean of Students will initiate the *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol* to determine the University's appropriate response.

D. Student Death While Travelling Domestically on University Business or Activity

If a Student death occurs while the Student is travelling on authorized University business or as part of a University sponsored program or activity, the University staff member accompanying the trip, or the faculty advisor, should immediately contact local emergency services and the local law enforcement agency. As soon as possible once the situation is secured, the University staff member or faculty adviser should contact the Dean of Students, who will initiate the *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol* to determine the University's appropriate response.

E. Student Death While Studying Abroad

The program leader or host institution representative will contact the Center for International Education and the U.S. Embassy or Consulate. The Associate Vice President for Global Initiatives (or designee) will contact the Dean of Students, who will initiate the *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol* to determine the University's appropriate response, which will include determining which institutional stakeholders need to be notified and to verify notification of next of kin on record with the Center for International Education. The Center for International Education must be contacted as soon as possible if the deceased is an international Student.

F. Student Death by Suicide

If a Student dies by suicide, the Dean of Students will initiate the *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol* to determine the University's appropriate response. Confirmation of the suicide with affected members of the University community should only occur with the family's approval and then only under the direction of the Postvention Response Team. Specific details, such as the method of suicide, should not be shared except as required by law, and positive attention or dramatization of the suicide must not occur. Such information sharing must balance the community's desire for information related to the event and any memorial services with the family's wishes and privacy interests. The Office of the Dean of Students, supported by Campus Health Services, is responsible for coordinating outreach and support services for impacted Students, staff, and faculty.

G. Postvention Response Team

1. Appointed by the Vice President for Student Affairs and led by the Dean of Students, the Postvention Response Team will work in collaboration with all appropriate partners to develop and revise as necessary or advisable the University's *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol* and related strategies. The standing members are recorded on the [Postvention Response Team Members List](#).
2. At the direction of the Dean of Students, the Postvention Response Team will convene upon receiving news of a Student death to initiate and, with the approval of the Vice President for Student Affairs, implement a Postvention strategy tailored for and reflective of the exigent circumstances.
3. At the direction of the Vice President for Student Affairs, as warranted or advisable given the specific circumstances surrounding a Student's death, all University administrators, faculty, and staff will contribute to the University's response to the death of a Student by responding to and collaborating effectively and efficiently with the Postvention Response Team on an ad hoc basis.

H. Verification and Campus Notifications

In the event of a current or non-current Student's death, the Office of the Dean of Students is responsible for carefully verifying the death through confirmation with direct sources. Notifying the University community will occur as follows, or otherwise may be necessary or appropriate given unique or special circumstances.

1. Ongoing Safety Threat. The NAU Police Department is responsible for transmitting a timely Campus Safety Alert if it is determined that there is an ongoing safety threat to the campus community associated with the death of a Student.
2. Non-Emergency University Community Notifications. The Vice President for Student Affairs, in collaboration with a team comprised of University Communications, the Dean of Students, the NAU

Chief of Police, and the leadership of directly affected or impacted University units, will determine as soon as practicable the timing and nature of information that will be shared with the University community at large, as well as how such notifications and information will be communicated.

3. Current Student Verification and Administrative Notifications.

- a. Verification of a current Student's death includes confirming the decedent's status as a Student with the Office of the Registrar.
- b. Upon confirmation of a current Student's death, the Office of the Registrar will close the Student's official University record and update the Student's status to deceased.
- c. The Office of the Dean of Students will issue an email communication to the affected University units, which will constitute official notice to cease communications with and to resolve any outstanding matters, such as billings, cancellation of outstanding payments due, etc.
- d. The Office of the Dean of Students will issue an email communication to the Student's current instructors notifying them of the Student death.
- e. The Office of the Dean of Students will identify and issue an email communication to the professional staff who had contact with the Student in the last 6 to 12 months, as determined through LOUIE ("Lumberjack Online Information Environment") and Salesforce.

4. Non-Current Student Verification and Administrative Notifications.

- a. If the Student's last attendance at the University is within eighteen (18) months of their death, verifications and administrative notifications are managed as with current Students.
- b. If the Student has graduated or has been separated from the University for eighteen (18) months or more, the Dean of Students will confirm the death and transmit appropriate notification to all affected units.
- c. If the Student is listed as a prospective Student with the Office of Admissions:
 - i. The Office of the Dean of Students will notify the Office of Admissions, which will immediately cease all recruitment-related contact.
 - ii. The Office of the Dean of Students will notify the Office of the Registrar, which will update LOUIE as appropriate.

I. Media Communications

All media requests for information regarding a Student death should be directed to [NAU Communications](#), which is responsible for collecting and disseminating information about a Student death for or at the request of external media organizations. NAU Communications coordinates with the NAU Police Department, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Office of General Counsel regarding the release of information to the public. No person involved in the University's response to a Student death should publicly speculate as to the cause of a Student's death or make statements that may reasonably be interpreted or perceived as speculatively assigning responsibility for the cause of a Student's death.

J. Condolence Letters

1. Presidential Condolences Letters. In the event of the death of a current Student, the Office of the Dean of Students will prepare a condolence letter for the President's signature, which will be transmitted to the Assistant to the President, who will finalize the draft, secure the President's signature, and mail the correspondence to the family or next of kin. In the event of the death of a non-current Student, as determined on a case-by-case basis by the Dean of Students in consultation with the Vice President for Student Affairs and all other appropriate campus partners, the Office of the Dean of Students may

prepare a condolence letter for the President's signature to be transmitted to the Assistant to the President, who will finalize the draft, secure the President's signature, and mail the correspondence.

2. Other University Condolence Letters. Out of an abundance of respect for and to minimize potential or prolonged impact on the family, the transmission of written condolences from University employees to the family of a deceased student will be coordinated through the Office of the Dean of Students. Accordingly, other than the President, all University officials, faculty, staff, and Students who may wish to do so are encouraged to submit their written condolences to the Dean of Students, who will transmit all such material to the family bundled as a package, or as otherwise may be appropriate in special or unique circumstances.

K. Student Death Administrative Response Protocols

The University's *Student Death Administrative Response Protocols* for administratively responding to the death of a Student that accompany and extend this policy delineate as a general matter the roles, duties, and responsibilities that should be assumed or fulfilled by individual administrators, staff, or faculty and various campus departments, offices, or units following the death of a Student. Considering the sensitive and unpredictable nature of a death, however, it is not possible for a policy or protocol to fully describe in complete detail all actions that should be taken by the University in all conceivable circumstances that may surround a Student death. Those responsible for implementing this policy should, therefore, be guided by the University's values as outlined in Section A, with an emphasis on the essential communication needs that such situations require, as well as by empathy, sensitivity, provision of appropriate support for the bereaved, and the necessity of preserving important evidence when required.

L. Vigils, Memorials, Remembrances, and Commemorations

The Vice President for Student Affairs, in consultation with the President, the Executive Team, and the leaders of affected University departments, colleges, schools, offices, athletic teams or programs, or any other unit or University entity or organization, is responsible for coordinating and responding to requests or suggestions to conduct any type of official University vigil, memorial, remembrance, or commemoration in response to the death of a Student. No other University official may authorize or approve such official University activities. Students who wish to organize or conduct any type of public service on University grounds in response to the death of a Student peer are encouraged to do so in coordination with the Office of the Dean of Students, so that such events might be planned and conducted in consideration of the decedent family's wishes and any attendant health, safety, and logistical concerns or practicalities.

M. Posthumous Degrees and Certificates of Achievement

Decisions regarding the awarding of posthumous degrees or certificates of achievement to deceased Students will be managed in accordance with the University's *Posthumous Degrees* policy by the Office of the Dean of Students in coordination with the Office of the Provost.

N. Disclosure of Records or Information

Many individuals and offices, including individual faculty members, Housing, Residence Life, the Registrar, Student and Departmental Account Services, Campus Health Services, or others may receive requests for information about a deceased Student from third parties. All such requests should be referred to the Primary Contact (except for media requests, which should be directed to NAU Communications). The Primary Contact will consider information requests on a case-by-case basis in consultation with implicated units or officials as necessary and appropriate. Primary consideration must always be given to requests that are supported in writing by the deceased's immediate or surviving family.

O. Requests for University-Held Personal Data

Family members may request University-held data that pertains to a deceased or incapacitated Student by submitting a *Request Another's University-Held Data* form. Completed forms should be transmitted by mail to the Office of the Dean of Students, P.O. Box 6015, Flagstaff, AZ, 86011, or via DeanofStudents@nau.edu. The Office of the Dean of Students and all other affected offices or units will respond to such requests within a reasonable timeframe in a manner informed by the guiding values outlined in Section A.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Additional unit-specific administrative responsibilities related to the death of a Student are outlined in the *Student Death Administrative Response Protocols* that accompany this policy.

Assistant to the President: receives suggested drafts of, obtains approval for, and transmits presidential condolence correspondence.

Associate Vice President for Global Initiatives: notifies the Dean of Students in the event of a Student death while studying abroad.

Campus Health Services: supports the Office of the Dean of Students in coordinating outreach and support services for impacted Students, staff, and faculty; refers requests for information about a deceased Student to the Primary Contact or NAU Communications as appropriate.

Center for International Education: supports the Office of the Dean of Students and the Primary Contact as appropriate in the event of a Student death occurring while studying abroad or the death of an international Student on campus or while travelling domestically on University business or activity.

Dean of Students: confirms the death of a Student and transmits appropriate notification to all affected units; unless alternative instructions are issued, serves as the Primary Contact; oversees and initiates as appropriate the University's *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol*; assists with determining how information regarding a Student death will be shared.

NAU Chief of Police: oversees any investigation as appropriate related to the death of a Student on the Flagstaff mountain campus; assists with determining the timing and nature of information regarding a Student death and how it will be shared.

NAU Communications: responds to all external requests for information regarding a Student death; assists with determining the timing and nature of information regarding a Student death and how it will be shared; coordinates with the NAU Police Department, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Office of General Counsel to determine the timing and nature of the release of information about a Student death.

NAU Police Department: contacts the appropriate services to attend to the body and investigates as necessary or appropriate Student deaths occurring on the Flagstaff mountain campus; in the event of an ongoing safety concern related to a Student death, transmits a timely Campus Safety Alert to the campus community.

Postvention Response Team: collaborates with all partners to develop, maintain, and implement as appropriate the University's *Student Death Postvention Response Protocol* and related strategies.

Residence Life Staff: assists law enforcement or emergency services responders as necessary and appropriate in the event a Student death occurs in a campus residence facility.

Traveling University Program Staff and Advisors: immediately contact local law enforcement and emergency services in the event a Student death occurs while traveling on authorized University business or as part of a University program or activity; contact the Dean of Students as soon as possible once the immediate situation is secure.

Vice President for Student Affairs: appoints the Postvention Response Team and approves the University's Postvention strategy; in collaboration with appropriate partners and in consultation with the President and others as appropriate, helps to determine how information regarding a Student death will be shared; helps coordinate requests to conduct vigils, memorials, remembrances, or commemorations in response to a Student's death.

PROCEDURES

University actions to be taken when responding to a Student death are outlined in the *Student Death Administrative Response Protocols* that accompany this policy.

RELATED INFORMATION

Forms or Tools

[Student Death Postvention Response Protocol](#)

[Student Death Administrative Response Protocols](#)

[Request Another's University-Held Data](#)

Cross-References

[Posthumous Degrees](#)

Sources

[Arizona Revised Statutes § 14-3971](#)

[Northern Arizona University Emergency Operations Plan](#)

APPENDIX*

[Postvention Response Team Members List](#)

*Disclaimer: all documents, links, or other materials included in this policy's appendix are provided solely for the user's convenience and are not part of official University policy.