

Student Death Protocol

Appalachian State University

For faculty and staff of Appalachian State University

With support from the Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide
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These guidelines are intended to assist faculty, professional staff, administrators and other University employees with addressing student related crises. While some campus officials play more active roles in responding to student crises, it is important for all University faculty and professionals to have a working knowledge of these guidelines. Although the University strives to respond in a consistent manner, the specific facts and circumstances of any crisis may lead the University to adjust the actions suggested in these guidelines.

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Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses

University at Albany, State University of New York

Table of Contents

How to Respond to a Student Death	3
Faculty Guidelines	8
Media Guidelines	9
General Communications Guidelines	11
Memorial Guidelines	12
Appendix A	13
Appendix B	15
Appendix C	16

How to Respond to a Student Death

Appalachian State University intends to provide a safe and positive environment for all students. When tragedy does occur, it is incumbent upon the University to respond in a sensitive and caring manner, recognizing that individuals respond in different ways to different circumstances that may surround a death. The death of a student affects the entire University community, as well as the family and friends of the deceased. Considering the very sensitive and unpredictable nature of a death, no policy or protocol can describe in complete detail all the steps that must be taken. These guidelines are designed to help faculty, professional staff, administrators and other University employees respond to the death of a student in a cohesive manner.

All deaths on campus will be investigated by University Police to determine if there are any signs of possible foul play. The area where the deceased is found will be treated as a crime scene and no one, especially the media, will be permitted in the area until such time as police and medical officials approve.

Do not disturb the death scene. Remember that, unless rendering first aid, it is extremely important not to disturb a death scene. Therefore, exit the area immediately. If at all possible, secure the area in question, being careful to touch as little as possible. If there is another person with you, one of you should stay at the scene to keep others from tampering with the death scene while the other calls the police.

Under no circumstances should staff make any comment or statement about the cause of death. Under North Carolina law, only a medical examiner has authority to determine the cause and manner of a death that is not attended by medical personnel and other types of death, including but not limited to deaths that might reasonably have been due to a violent or traumatic injury or accident. **In the event of the death of a student, all requests for information from news media personnel should be referred to the Office of University Communications (828) 262-6156.** At no time should any staff involved discuss the incident with any persons not directly responding to the situation. For more information about interaction with the media, please see Media Guidelines below.

Guidelines

- 1) If on campus, call **University Police (828) 262-8000**, if off campus **call 9-1-1** – The police department will alert medical personnel as needed. Be prepared to report your exact location. If the death occurs in the Town of Boone or Watauga County, **University Police** may be notified by the corresponding law enforcement agency. In the event **another campus official** is informed of the student's death, **that official** must contact **University Police** as soon as possible to convey the information.
- 2) **Police, medical personnel or the medical examiner** will contact **next of kin** to:
 - a) Inform them of what has happened to their student.

- b) Answer any questions they may have about the cause of or circumstances around the death.
- 3) If a death occurs during University Sponsored Travel, the **University staff member** accompanying the trip 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** shall contact the **Dean of Students Office (828) 262 - 8284**.
- 4) If a death occurs while a Student is studying abroad:
- The **program leader or representative of host institution** will contact the **Office of International Education and Development (828) 262-2046** and the **US Embassy or Consulate**.
 - The **Associate Vice Chancellor of International Education and Development** and/or **Dean of Students** will activate the **Appalachian International Crisis Response Team (ICRP)** to coordinate plans for dealing with the situation.
 - Further details can be found in Section E of the [Appalachian International Crisis Management Protocols](#).
- 5) In the case of an on-campus death, **University Police** will:
- Send an officer to the location immediately to secure the scene and begin an investigation
 - Notify the **Counseling and Psychological Services Center (828) 262-3180** or their counselor on-call when requested. If the Counseling and Psychological Services Center is closed University Police will notify **Daymark (828) 264-4357**. Daymark provides mental health and crises support services to the Boone community.
 - Notify the **University Chief of Police**.
 - Notify the **State Bureau of Investigation**.
 - Notify the **Dean of Students on-call staff person**.
- 6) As soon as possible, the **Dean of Students or designee** should notify the following offices by email and/or phone, or otherwise ensure that the offices have been notified of a student death.
- Primary – contact as soon as possible
 - University Police
 - University Housing (if a residential Student)
 - Office of the Chancellor
 - Academic Affairs
 - University Communications
 - Counseling & Psychological Services
 - Director of Athletics (if deceased is a student-athlete)
 - Office of International Education and Development (if deceased is an international Student or Student abroad)
 - Secondary – contact as soon as practical
 - University Advancement
 - Office of Student Financial Aid

- Office of the Chief Information Officer
 - Office of Student Accounts
 - Student Health Services
 - Office of the Registrar
 - Campus Bookstore
 - General Counsel
 - Others as appropriate
- 7) The **Dean of Students Office** will convene the **Student Postvention Response Team** as soon as possible. This team consists of individuals identified by the **Vice Chancellor for Student Development** and may include representation from the Vice-Chancellor of Student Development, the Dean of Students, University Police Department, University Housing, Counseling and Psychological Services, Chair of Department of deceased student or, in the case of an undeclared student, the VP for Undergraduate Education, CARE Team, University Communications, the Director of Prevention, Provost Office, and the Suicide Prevention Program Coordinator. Others may be pulled in, as appropriate, on a case-by-case basis. These offices will work together to make sure the campus responds to the death in a unified manner. This committee will reconvene within a month of postvention activities being implemented to examine the effectiveness of the response and explore issues that could have been handled better.
- 8) The **Dean of Students Office** will make an effort to contact those close to the student and notify them about the death before any campus-wide announcement is made, if one is deemed necessary. This includes roommates, friends, and other sub-groups the student might be a member of (athletic team, ROTC, Greek affiliation). Because these students will not know when family will be notified, these groups should be encouraged to limit early social media communication, and to recognize that any such communications could be insensitive and painful to the surviving family.
- 9) **University Police** will send out a Campus Safety Alert only if it is determined there is an on-going threat to the University Community.
- 10) As soon as is practical, the **Office of Student Development**, in consultation with the **Student Postvention Response Team**, will determine what, if any, notifications will be made to the campus community. In most circumstances, campus-wide notifications will not be made, but instead affinity groups will be contacted. Affinity groups are identified individuals and groups on campus that may have interacted or known the deceased, such as their residence hall, their classmates, their teammates, their professors, etc. In the event campus communications are made:
- a) Cause of death is not released through email notifications.
 - b) Official information cannot be conveyed until the family is notified.
 - c) When the campus is talking about a death by suicide amongst themselves, whether or not this death has officially been declared a suicide, the **Dean of Students Office** should explain to the family that campus leaders may be encouraged to talk about suicide and its causes in order to help keep students safe. The identity of a student who has died by

suicide does not have to be shared in order for these conversations about suicide to take place.

- 11) For on-campus deaths, the **Counseling and Psychological Services Center, University Housing and the Dean of Students Office** will facilitate face-to-face meetings with students who lived in the same building of the deceased.
 - a) In the case of a suicide, it is a natural impulse for survivors to want a simple reason as to why a suicide happened and this might involve blaming someone close to the deceased. Interventions should involve an explanation of the complexity of suicide. Factors that may contribute to suicide are found in Appendix B.
- 12) The **CARE Team** will arrange to have a “Grieving Room” in the union. This room is intended to be a place where students can come and gather to grieve with their peers. This room will be staffed with at least one counselor from the **Counseling and Psychological Services Center** and other staff as needed.
 - a) Entry to the grieving room will be limited to members of the deceased’s family, faculty, staff and students. Members of the public will be allowed entry only upon invitation of the family or Office of Student Development.
 - b) Media, including student media, will not be allowed access to the “Grieving Room.”
- 13) The **CARE Team** will coordinate support offered to groups affected by the death, such as the student’s friends. In the case of a death by suicide, it is important to remember that those with psychiatric illnesses such as depression, severe substance abuse, severe personality disorders and psychosis, or those who have previously lost someone to suicide or experienced/are experiencing suicidal thoughts themselves, even if not connected to the deceased, may also have a difficult time managing grief and emotions. An effort should be made to also connect with these students, whenever possible. Do not rely on high-risk individuals seeking help on their own, but instead be pro-active and reach out to them. Examples of high-risk groups are found in Appendix C.

Outreach services will be provided, as appropriate, by units such as **University Housing, the Counseling and Psychological Services Center, the Office of Disability Services, the Office of Multicultural Student Development, Appalachian Spiritual Life Association,** and other offices. Outreach services should address the following points:

For Students

- a) Make timely contact with friends of the deceased student.
 - Have a face-to-face meeting with close friends to provide more specific and detailed information, such as information about funeral services.
- b) Encourage expression of feelings.
- c) Promote peer support among friends of the victim.
- e) Avoid glamorization of death by suicide.
 - Do not hold special memorials.
 - Do not normalize suicide as a typical response to distressing life circumstances.
 - Do not present the act as unexplainable.

- Do not talk in detail about the suicide method.
 - Do not portray suicide as the result of a single or simple problem.
 - Do not portray suicide as a heroic, noble or romantic act.
- f) Encourage resumption of routine as soon as possible.

For Family

The **Dean of Students Office** or the assigned **Primary Contact** will assist families with the following:

- a) Accommodate as necessary. This may include providing appropriate housing arrangements for parents and/or other family members visiting campus.
 - b) Offer pastoral care when requested.
 - c) Offer brief psychological counseling when requested.
 - The **Counseling and Psychological Services Center** can provide a couple of sessions to family members in the immediate aftermath of a student death in order to provide grief counseling and processing of feelings. In the event that the family begins to blame or complain about the University or staff handling or involvement with the death, the Counseling and Psychological Services Center would likely need to pull out of the therapeutic role in order to avoid accusations of “conflict of interest”. On-going longer term counseling cannot be provided, but help with referrals for on-going long-term counseling is something that could be provided.
 - d) Provide assistance in concluding University business, i.e. gathering the student’s personal effects. In this, as in all instances, sensitivity to the family’s wishes and requests will be paramount.
- 14) A memorial table outside of the Dean of Students Office in the student union will be set up for all student deaths. The **campus community** is invited to write in a book present at the memorial table. This is part of the campus grieving procedure. The book is later offered as a gift to the family of the deceased student.
- 15) **Each family** is invited to the annual **Student Memorial program**. The student’s name and a statement provided by the family (optional) will be read at the yearly memorial service that recognizes all deceased Appalachian State University students. With permission from the family, the student’s name will be added to a memorial board that lists the name of all deceased Appalachian State University students. This event is a private event and media, including student media, are not allowed.
- 16) The **Central Office of Student Development** will send out an initial letter of condolence to the parents, along with the memorial book (see item 14) to grieving families. If the parents are divorced, one parent will receive the original book, and the other will receive a high-quality copy of the book.
- 17) Responding to the death of a student is a challenging undertaking. **Those affected by the death of the student** are encouraged to seek help as needed. Faculty and staff may receive

free counseling by contacting **Counseling for Faculty and Staff (828) 262-4951**. Students may contact the **Counseling and Psychological Services Center (828) 262-3180**.

Faculty Guidelines

- 1) **Faculty members** should expect to be approached by students affected by the death. These students may ask that they be allowed to miss class and/or postpone some of their academic responsibilities. In this case, the faculty member should refer the student to the Dean of Students Office. It is important to facilitate the grieving process as well as stabilize the environment by reducing the highly emotional tone of the campus, bringing it back to its more ordinary state.
 - a) Handle each request on a case-by case basis.
 - b) Do not cancel class or assignments for everyone. It is important through our actions to convey a sense of normalcy.
 - c) If a service is scheduled at the same time as a class, a faculty member's attendance policies take precedence. Students can decide individually if they are willing to pay any attendance penalty that a faculty member has laid out in their syllabus and miss class to go to the service. Faculty members intending to go to the service should do whatever they ordinarily do when they cannot meet a class for personal reasons.

- 2) Along with other members of the campus community, faculty members can play an important role in helping students who are struggling with the loss of a friend or classmate. Suggestions for faculty to support students in crises following a death are as follows:
 - a) Consult with appropriate offices on campus, such as the **Dean of Students Office** and the **Counseling and Psychological Services Center**.
 - b) Identify counseling resources to students who are struggling.
 - c) Identify tutoring services through the **Learning Assistance Program**.
 - d) Offer to meet with the student to provide extra assistance with assignments.
 - e) Extend an assignment deadline.
 - f) Provide make-up work or examinations.
 - g) Exclude one or more test grades from the final grade computation.
 - h) Compute the final grade or class standing without all work being completed.
 - i) Facilitate a leave of absence or medical withdrawal if that becomes necessary.
 - j) Faculty may talk about/recognize the loss in class. **Before talking about the death, faculty should consult with the Dean of Students Office or the Counseling and Psychological Services Center to make sure they use safe language.**

Media Guidelines

- 1) Out of respect for their families and those closest to students who have died, Appalachian State University does not release a list of names or link cause of death to individuals. It is important to note that under State law, the university must rely on a medical examiner to determine an official cause of death, and when a death occurs off campus the university may not be informed of the cause. From working with students' families and others affected by a loss of life, we learn much that alerts us to areas of concern and greatly informs how we provide health and safety support, as well as grief support and resources, for our community.

At Appalachian State University, we choose to define our students by the unique contributions each person brings to our community. We believe each member of our community should be remembered for the contributions they made in life.

- 2) **University Communications (828) 262-6156** will be responsible for collecting and disseminating information to the media. All media requests for information should be directed to this office. **University Communications** will work with **University Police**, the **Office of Student Development**, and the **Office of General Counsel** to maintain the accuracy and ensure the legality of the information disseminated.
- 3) Under North Carolina law, only a Medical Examiner has authority to determine the cause and manner of a death that is not attended by medical personnel and other types of death, including but not limited to deaths that might reasonably have been due to a violent or traumatic injury or accident. **Accordingly, no person involved in the University's response to a student death will speculate as to the cause of death or make statements assigning responsibility for the cause of death.**
 - a) **University personnel**, including University Communications staff in response to media inquiries, **will not address causes of student deaths**. In the event of media inquiries about suicide, substance abuse, violence or other causes of death as general topics, the **Director of the Counseling and Psychological Services Center** or **another qualified individual** will be identified as a spokesperson in consultation with the **Vice-Chancellor for Student Development**. **Designated spokespersons** involved in media interviews should meet or speak with **University Communications** prior to the interview to review protocol.
- 4) **University Communications** will prepare a written statement about the event that can be read or submitted to the media, if necessary. **Students, parents, faculty, and staff are discouraged from making comments or giving interviews to the media.**
 - a) **University Communications** will emphasize postvention services and resources that assist the campus to regain normalcy in media statements and responses.
- 5) In instances in which a "Grieving Room" (see "How to Respond" section 12), entry will be limited to members of the deceased's family, faculty, staff and students. Members of the public will be allowed entry only upon invitation of the family or Office of Student

Development. Media, including student media, will not be allowed entry under any circumstances.

- 6) Media restrictions apply to members of student media. It is recognized that students who are also members of student media organizations may also be affected by student deaths on campus. Appalachian State University students, therefore, will not be excluded from any media-restricted events provided they do not represent media outlets and/or attempt event coverage of any kind, including note taking, interviews, photography and videography, while in attendance.

General Communications Guidelines

University Communications will utilize the campus-wide communication liaison team to assist in consistent and accurate dissemination of communications. The following guidelines will be communicated in cases in which public inquiry is expected:

- 1) In cases of phone calls, individuals should be told their concerns have been noted and will be forwarded to the most appropriate university administrators. If they would like to leave their names and contact information, that will be shared as well. They should not be promised they will get a return call or response, but politely let them know their conversation will be shared appropriately. Record the caller's information, a brief summary of the concerns, and send the info to ucomm@appstate.edu.
- 2) In the case of emails, these should be forwarded to ucomm@appstate.edu. Please note, it is likely responses will only be sent to individuals who have been verified as having a direct connection to the university, and who are asking a specific question.
- 3) We do not recommend responding to social media posts. If we receive messages via the official "AppState" social media accounts, they will be handled on a case-by-case basis. If you have questions or concerns about any posts on the social media sites not managed by University Communications, please call the University Communications office at [828-262-6156](tel:828-262-6156).

Memorial Guidelines

Appalachian State University, in the interest of the safety of our community, does not promote, participate in or encourage individual memorials on campus. Instead, Appalachian State University encourages the campus community to participate in the annual Student Memorial Program. Those handling specific requests for memorials recognize the need to bring closure to death without creating contagion or imitation issues. The greatest concern for memorials may come from cohort groups of students that have a need to remember a friend, teammate or group member.

- 1) A memorial table outside the Dean of Students Office in the student union will be set up for all student deaths. The **campus community** is invited to write in a book present at the memorial table. This is part of the campus grieving process. The book is later offered as a gift to the family of the deceased student.
- 2) **Each family** is invited to the annual **Student Memorial program**. Each student name and a statement provided by the family (optional) will be read at the yearly memorial service that recognizes all deceased Appalachian State University students. With permission from the family, the student's name will be added to a memorial board that lists the name of all deceased Appalachian State University students.
- 3) For students who are seeking a way to honor the deceased, fundraising or other community service activities should be encouraged.
- 4) When a well-known student has died, it is common for informal "memorial" groups or meetings to develop spontaneously (such as candlelight vigils). **Spontaneous memorials are not to be recognized in any official University communications. The University recognizes and honors all student deaths at the annual memorial service.**

If **University staff** are made aware that an informal memorial is occurring, in the interest of student safety and in consultation with the **Dean of Students office**, a staff member will reach out to the organizers of the event and offer guidance. Language used in a memorial setting can have the unintended consequence of adding to the attractiveness of death for vulnerable individuals seeking peace or escape through death. The purpose of staff guidance is to increase awareness of safe messaging in order to help protect any vulnerable individuals who may be in attendance at these informal memorials.

Appendix A

Local Resources

Campus Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services Center

Free and Confidential Counseling for

Currently Enrolled Students

1st Floor - Miles Annas Student

Support Building

counseling.appstate.edu

(828) 262-3180

Walk-In Hours

Monday – Friday, 8:30am - 11am, 1pm - 4pm

University Police Department

Emergencies

Rivers Street Parking Deck

police.appstate.edu

(828) 262-8000

Download the Appcares Mobile App

Free app available on iPhone and Android.

Easily locate on-campus and off-campus resources. Search ‘appcares’ in the app store.

appcares.appstate.edu

Text “appcares” to 50555

Dean of Students

Assistance for Academic Affairs

324 Plemmons Student Union

deanofstudents.appstate.edu

(828) 262-8284

Sexual Assault

Resources for Survivors of Sexual Assault

sexualassault.appstate.edu

(828) 262-2704

Counseling for Faculty and Staff

Free and Confidential Counseling for Employees

400 University Hall Drive

cfs.appstate.edu

(828) 262-4951

Community Resources

Daymark Recovery Services

Community Mental Health Provider

132 Poplar Grove Connector # B

daymarkrecovery.org

(828) 264-4357

After Hours/Crises Line: (828)264-4357

OASIS (Opposing Abuse with Service, Information and Shelter)

Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

Assistance

225 Birch St., Suite 4

oasisinc.org

(828) 264-1532

Crises Line: (828) 262-5035

Finding Hope: Survivors of Suicide Support Group

Meets the 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month

at the Hunger and Health Coalition

Cost is free

For more information, contact Kim Winbarger

at (828) 262-1628 or

mamadee1989@charter.net

Hunger and Health Coalition

Provides food, pharmacy, clothing, woodlot and more for free or at greatly reduced cost for qualifying individuals

hungerandhealthcoalition.com

(828) 262-1628

United Way 2-1-1

Information and Referral Hotline

From a landline: 211

nc211.org

888-892-1162

Alternate Resources

LGBTQ Student Resources

LGBT Resource Center

Provides resources, support, information, and a welcoming atmosphere for LGBT individuals and their allies

Plemmons Student Union, Room 106

glbt.appstate.edu

(828) 262-8566

Sexuality and Gender Alliance

Strives to create an inclusive and accepting environment for all gender identities and sexual orientations on Appalachian State University's campus and surrounding community

saga.appstate.edu

TRANSACTION

An all-inclusive group on Appalachian State University's campus for students, staff, faculty, and other community members who identify as transgender, transsexual, intersex, gender queer/variant, gender-fluid, questioning, and allies

facebook.com/appstatetransaction

Veteran Resources

Student Veterans Association

Provides a social group and support structure to help veterans adjust to, and become successful in, civilian and college life

veterans.appstate.edu

Veterans Crises Line

24/7 crises counseling for veterans and their families

www.veteranscrisesline.net

1-800-273-TALK[8255] *press 1*

Text to 838255

Vet Self Check

A safe, easy way to learn whether stress and depression might be affecting you

www.vetselfcheck.org

Multicultural Student Resources

Office of Multicultural Student Development

Resources for multicultural students

255 Plemmons Student Union

multicultural.appstate.edu

(828) 262-6158

National Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

24/7 Crises Counseling

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

1-800-273-TALK[8255]

The Trevor Project

24/7 Crises Counseling for LGBTQ Youth Online Support Forum

thetrevorproject.org

1-866-488-7386

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)

24/7 Assistance

rainn.org

1-800-656-HOPE[4673]

National Eating Disorders Association

Confidential Helpline

nationaleatingdisorders.org

1-800-931-2237

Appendix B

Factors that May Contribute to Suicide

Relationships or failure at relationship

Family issues

Psychiatric diagnoses

Substance use or abuse

Constitutional/genetic predisposition/family history

Illogical thinking processes/psychosis

Conscious and unconscious psychological processes or conflicts

Bottled-up anger directed at oneself

Religious, social or cultural beliefs or values potentially leading to guilt and/or shame

Appendix C

High-Risk Groups

Siblings and friends

Accidental and/or intentional first responders or individual(s) who discovered body

Resident life staff who knew the deceased student or have dealt with other campus tragedies

Academic support staff/faculty who knew deceased student

Student development staff that may have had close relationship with individual(s)

Students who have a history of previous suicide attempts

Students in the same residence hall

Students in the same academic department

Students in the same club/student activity

Students on the same athletic team

Student who went to the same high school or is from the same home town as deceased

Student who may identify in other ways with a student who has died (e.g. athletes or artists)