

Communicating the Death of a Current Student

OVERVIEW

It is a great loss when a member of the University of Toronto community dies – a loss experienced by the University community and beyond.

When one of our students dies, it is important that the University respond to this tragedy in a sensitive, co-ordinated and timely manner.

When a University office or member of the University community is made aware of a student death, the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students (OVPS) should be notified immediately by contacting the Director, Office of the Vice Provost, Students.

In the event of an on-campus death or a death in the course of University-related activity, call Campus Police.

The following principles and guidelines will facilitate a compassionate, appropriate and thorough response, including any communications. These guidelines apply to all University of Toronto divisions.

PRINCIPLES

The University's response is guided by the following principles:

Sensitivity, respect and compassion: The University will respond with compassion and sensitivity, and with the utmost respect for the deceased and the wishes of the family or next-of-kin. The family or next-of-kin's wishes will play a significant role in the response of the University.

Privacy: Information about the death of a student must be verified prior to any release. The University will not release the name or status of the deceased without the consent of the family. In some situations, where the information is broadly known (for example, through confirmed media reports, etc.), the name of the student may be released. Only in rare situations will the University indicate cause of death. Provincial privacy laws apply to these details, and staff and faculty should take care not to share information that is covered by the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

Support: The death of a student can also have a profound effect on students, staff and faculty. The University, through a number of programs, will provide the support needed as members of our community react to the news in their own way.

Timeliness: The University will respond as quickly as possible. In some cases, notification or confirmation of the death to the University may result in a delay. The University will respect the grieving family by making every effort to streamline contact with family or next-of-kin.

Cooperation: The University will cooperate with external officials where necessary, noting that there will be times when the University will not be given the particulars of the death by external officials.

GUIDELINES

The Office of the Vice-Provost, Students should be notified immediately of the death of a student by contacting the Director of the Office. If notification of the death is provided from a source other than the deceased's family (or estate), the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students will review the information to confirm death prior to initiating a University response.

The Office of the Vice-Provost, Students will ensure that support is available to members of the University community who require it; that the deceased student's academic records, accounts and any other dealings with the University are managed and closed in an appropriate and timely manner; and that all communications with the late student's family (or estate), colleagues and the media are handled appropriately.

The Faculty, college or campus with the strongest connection to the student generally will take the lead in any communications to their community about the death, available supports or memorials. The Office of the Vice Provost, Students and University of Toronto Communications will provide assistance.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

When the University has been made aware of the death of a student, why does the University not immediately notify the community?

The University will not release any information that may directly or indirectly identify the deceased student, nor will the University confirm if a student was a U of T student, until either the family (i.e., next-of-kin) or designate has approved the release of information and specifically what information (student status only or additional information); or the information has been released through official channels such as police or coroner. In the latter situation, it may be determined that only limited information is released by the University. There are occasions where the family may want to have time to inform others before the student's University community is informed.

Why does the University not release the cause of death?

A student may die from natural causes, a tragic accident, or by suicide. In the case of a sudden or unexpected death, the cause of death will be confirmed by the coroner. This may take some time. The University is not usually informed of the cause of death by authorities, and the family or next-of-kin may not wish to provide this information to us.

Should the University be informed of the cause of death, we work hard to honour the wishes of the family or the next-of-kin by either communicating the cause of death, or keeping this information private.

When the cause of death is determined to be suicide, it is important to be careful about how we talk about the cause to minimize the risk of contagion or similar behaviour. The University is guided by the

[Canadian Psychiatric Association Policy Media Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide](#). These guidelines refer to the evidence that certain kinds of reporting on suicide may lead to contagion effects.

The University understands why it is important to confront the stigma surrounding mental health and talk openly about issues like suicide. This discussion needs to occur as part of our ongoing work to address the mental health concerns of our students.