Created 09.19.25

In Brief: Acknowledging a Death in Our Academic Community

Brief Description

A guide for acknowledging a death in our academic community with students in your course(s).

Introduction

Death—whether sudden or anticipated—can affect students, alumni, faculty, and staff across the Northwestern community in different ways, with some experiencing deep impact. As an instructor, you may find yourself navigating grief in your classroom, even when you are not directly connected to the loss.

This guide offers a tool for reflection and response as a starting point for thoughtful, human-centered pedagogy. It invites instructors to consider the presence and impact of death in academic life, the importance of compassion in teaching, and the boundaries of their role in the academic community. While instructors cannot anticipate or meet every need for every student, they can foster learning environments that acknowledge loss with care and clarity.

1. What Does the Research Tell Us About Acknowledging Death?

Acknowledging a death in the academic community is essential—both as a human response and as a pedagogical technique. While instructors and students may naturally bring intellectual curiosity to difficult topics, real life moments of loss are not always the time for analysis or speculation but rather a call for presence, empathy, and care. Death can affect individuals in complex, multi-dimensional ways—cognitively, emotionally, physically, socially, spiritually, and even financially. These impacts may not be obvious or predictable, but they can significantly disrupt a student's capacity to focus, participate, or meet academic expectations.

A systematic review of literature on bereaved students in higher education revealed that these students can experience a lack of motivation, struggle to concentrate, feel depressed, and feel isolated from their peers, which impacts their learning (Hay et al., 2024). A mixed-methods study examining how 415 bereaved students negotiated the grief process with the competing demands of college reported that the students' resilience in the face of emotional adversity was reflected in behaviors including "continuing to attend class" and "trying to get work completed despite reorientation in priorities" (Cupit et al., 2016). Therefore, it is in the University's best interest to support the development of such resilience, including student bereavement policies that specify how course work is to be managed.

Instructors play a key role in reducing the cognitive and emotional load students carry during times of grief. This includes offering clarity around course expectations, flexible options when possible, and a classroom environment that avoids imposing "feeling rules" (Benesch, 2018)—

subtle or explicit cues about how one should or should not feel. For example, saying "I know you must all be feeling devastated" may unintentionally alienate students whose grief looks or feels different. Upon acknowledging a death, instructors are then positioned to bring awareness to resources that are available to them. In Seah and Wilson's (2011) phenomenological study of university students' grieving experiences, the researchers noted that successful grief resolution is largely dependent on the bereaved person's ability to openly express and share their feelings with others. Northwestern Professor, Dr. Nick Winters, agreed that it is important for both students and professors to acknowledge their feelings about a student's passing. Therefore, following the death of a beloved student, he *urged* the students in his co-curricular program to "come together as much as possible, and to notice and invite people who seem to be isolated"[1]. Instructors can also guide students to staff who work with bereaved students and provide a non-judgmental and empathetic space to grieve.

Reflection Prompts:

- **How might you create space in your course for students to process grief without assuming how they should feel or respond?**
- **How might you reduce the cognitive and emotional load on students during times of loss?** What are ways to practice transparency and an ethic of care in your teaching?

2. Why Does Acknowledging Death Matter?

Death is both a singular event and an ongoing presence in our academic communities. At colleges and universities, the death of a student, alum, faculty, or staff can feel immediate and deeply personal—or distant yet still emotionally resonant. While one loss may be publicly acknowledged, others may be unfolding quietly and concurrently, affecting individuals in different ways across campus.

Death also intersects with the work of instructors in both content and context. Some instructors teach about death directly—through literature, philosophy, medicine, or ethics—while others may find themselves navigating grief in the classroom unexpectedly. For example, the previous *One Book One Northwestern* selection *Crying in H Mart* (Zauner, 2021) invited the campus to reflect on personal loss, cultural identity, and the complexities of grieving—reminding us that death is not only an academic topic to study and analyze but a lived, human experience.

Making meaning of death is both individually and culturally informed. For some, death may feel disorienting or disruptive to daily life; for others, death is omni-present. Some prefer to grieve more privately; others process death through community-based rituals (e.g., a moment of silence). Instructors face a range of variables when responding to death in their courses: class size, timing within the quarter or semester, the nature of their relationship to the deceased,

[1] Dr. Winters facilitated an identity-based co-curricular group, and his response was to a death that represented a broader threat to that community.

and whether the loss is part of a series of recent passings. These factors shape how grief is experienced and expressed in a course. Importantly, what feels like a compassionate or appropriate response to one person may feel insufficient—or even harmful—to another. There is no universal script.

Practices for memorialization vary widely, and, in many cases, we may not know how the deceased wished to be remembered or the comfort level of their loved ones with public recognition of the passing. As instructors, acknowledging this complexity with humility and care is a critical first step in supporting both students and themselves through loss.

Reflection Prompts:

- **How have your own beliefs, cultural background, or experiences shaped the way you respond to death and grief in academic settings?**
- **What assumptions might you have about how students typically grieve?** How might these assumptions affect your teaching?

3. What Can We Do?

Instructors play an important role in supporting students during times of loss, and it is important to recognize the limits of that role. Instructors are not expected to be the sole source of support, nor can they fully know or meet every student's needs. Instead, instructors can remain mindful of their spheres of influence, make thoughtful pedagogical choices, and refer students to appropriate resources on campus when needed. Every response involves trade-offs, and balancing care with boundaries is critical for instructor vitality.

15–30 Minutes | When you first find out about the death

1. **Review what the University has already communicated.**
   To respect family sensitivities, especially in cases involving suicide, allow senior leadership and wellness professionals to craft official language before notifying students in your course(s) (Sanger, 2017).

1–2 Hours | When you first communicate to your students

1. **Coordinate with your co-instructors and teaching assistants to plan and adjust as needed.** If you solo teach, skip to **Step 2**.

2. **Draft an announcement or email message to send to students in your courses.** It is important to acknowledge the death in the way you feel comfortable with and to communicate the following:
   - Resources to support students' well-being, such as:
     - Northwestern University Syllabus Standards (Section: Support for Wellness and Health)
     - NUhelp
   - Your choices and rationale about what's next

- Next class
  - Hold or cancel?
  - Start on time or late?
  - End on time or early?
- Assignments or projects
  - Provide extensions on deadlines?
  - Give an option to revise and/or resubmit?
  - Drop a paper?
- Assessments
  - Reschedule quizzes?
  - Schedule additional review sessions for midterms and exams?

Below we highlight an exemplary approach to communicating with students contribute by Northwestern instructor Dr. Myrna García.

> **Dearest Student,**
>
> **We will not hold class tomorrow given this heavy, tragic news of _____'s passing.**
>
> **If you'd like to gather during our regularly scheduled class time tomorrow, I will hold space at _____.**
>
> **It is completely up to you. There's no need to RSVP. Stay for however long it feels right to you (10 minutes, an hour). I will provide warm drinks (tea, hot chocolate, coffee) and comforting snacks.**
>
> **Please take good care of yourselves. Lean on your communities of support, including me. I also understand that there are campus resources (see below) for you to draw on.**
>
> **I am here to support as we navigate this tragic loss in our class. Email me or text me XXX-XXX-XXXX if/when needed.**
>
> **Un abrazo muy fuerte y paz (Sending hugs and peace),**
> **Dr. G**

1–2 Days | When planning for and meeting with students on the first day of class after death

1. **Re-iterate key points from your earlier communication.** Refer to **"1–2 hours** | When you first communicate to your students."

2. **Be prepared to acknowledge the death without requiring discussion.** According to Hay and colleagues (2024), students might not want to discuss in detail, but they do need a

non-judgmental space that recognizes what happened. Consider the following approaches:

- State your intention in acknowledging the death.
- Communicate that there is no "right" way to grieve or mourn.
- Make all grief-related conversations or activities optional and allow students to opt out easily, without drawing attention to themselves.

3. **Notice and check on students who have missed classes.** To support their academic performance, Plocha et al (2023) recommend that instructors be prepared to reach out and:
    - Ask them how they are doing.
    - Ask them what might be getting in the way of their work.
    - Remind students of available campus resources.

4. **Take care of yourself.**
    - Give yourself the time and space to grieve or process this loss in ways that are helpful for you (Rosenblatt, 2021).
    - Know your limits and point students to appropriate mental health resources within your communications (Sanger, 2017).
    - Reach out to the Employee Assistance Program for 24/7/365 free and confidential access to a variety of mental health and well-being services and resources.

5. **Schedule an individual consultation at the Searle Center.** Please reach out to the Senior Director as this topic is given the highest-level priority.

How to Cite This Guide

Sandoval-Lee, Eun, and Womack, Veronica (with contributions from Jennifer Keys). "In Brief: Acknowledging a Death in Our Academic Community." Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, Northwestern University, June 26, 2025, searle.northwestern.edu/resources/our-tools-guides/learning-teaching-guides/in-brief-acknowledging-a-death.html. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommerical-ShareAlike 4.0 International.