Student Death Response and Postvention Protocol & Policy

Office/Contact: Dean of Students

Sources/Links:

Suicide Prevention Resource Center / AFSP, After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools:
https://sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/afterasuicidetoolkitforschools.pdf

CDC Suicide Prevention Communication Playbook:
https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/playbook/index.html

Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses
Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses – Suicide Prevention Resource Center

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NORTHERN STATE UNIVERSITY

Policies and Guidelines

SUBJECT: Student Death Response and Postvention Protocol & Policy

NUMBER: 3:6

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1. Purpose

The death of a student is a profound loss that may affect family members, friends, classmates, faculty, staff, and the broader university community. The purpose of this protocol is to ensure that Northern State University (Northern) responds to the death of a current student in a coordinated, compassionate, timely, and trauma-informed manner.

This protocol establishes reporting expectations, response coordination, family outreach, communications, academic and administrative follow-up, memorial guidance, and postvention practices that support healing, reduce misinformation, protect privacy, and promote help-seeking among those impacted.

Northern will implement this protocol consistent with applicable South Dakota Board of Regents (SDBOR) policies, state and federal law, and university procedures.

2. Definitions

Current Student: An individual who is enrolled, registered, or otherwise active in university systems at the time of death, including students enrolled in online, dual credit, undergraduate, graduate, non-degree, or continuing education coursework.

Dean of Students Office: The university office responsible for coordinating student death response unless another office is designated by the President.

Student Death Response Team: A multidisciplinary group convened by the Dean of Students or designee to coordinate the university response following verification of a student death.

Postvention: Planned activities implemented after a death to support grieving individuals, reduce trauma, identify individuals who may need additional assistance, promote help-seeking, and restore stability to the campus community.

Suicide Postvention: Postvention practices used when a death is suspected or confirmed to be suicide, including safe messaging, targeted outreach to affected individuals, and steps to reduce contagion risk.

Verified Death: Confirmation of a student death from a reliable source, which may include the family, law enforcement, hospital, coroner/medical examiner, funeral home, obituary, or other official source.

Affected Community: Individuals or groups with a known connection to the student, such as roommates, classmates, friends, teammates, student organization members, residence hall communities, faculty, staff, and supervisors.

3. Policy

A. Faculty, staff, and students must notify the Dean of Students Office as soon as they become aware of the death of a current student. Reports should be made promptly, even when information is incomplete or the report is based on credible but unverified information.

B. The Dean of Students Office shall serve as the central coordinating office for university response efforts, including verification, internal coordination, family outreach, communication planning, student support, and follow-up actions.

C. No campus-wide or targeted university communication announcing a student death shall be issued until the death has been reasonably verified and appropriate university officials have been consulted, except when immediate safety circumstances require emergency notification through established emergency response procedures.

D. University communications shall be factual, compassionate, brief, respectful of family privacy, and consistent with postvention best practices. Communications shall avoid speculation, graphic details, sensational language, and unnecessary disclosure of the method, circumstances, or location of death.

E. If a death is suspected or confirmed to be suicide, university response and communication shall follow suicide postvention principles, including safe messaging, targeted outreach to affected individuals, and promotion of available support resources, including crisis assistance.

F. Northern may provide support for temporary memorials, vigils, or remembrance activities when appropriate and when consistent with family wishes, university policy, safety considerations, and postvention guidance. Permanent memorial requests shall be reviewed through established university procedures and applied consistently.

4. Procedures

A. Immediate Notification and Reporting

Any faculty member, staff member, or student who becomes aware of the death of a current student should notify the Dean of Students Office as soon as reasonably possible. If there is an immediate safety concern, the individual should first contact 911.

The initial report should include the following information, if known:

- Student name and NSU ID number, if available
- Date, time, and location of death
- Source of information
- Contact information for the reporting party
- Family or emergency contact information, if known
- Known connection to campus groups, residence life, athletics, student organizations, or academic programs
- Any immediate concern for affected students, roommates, classmates, friends, or witnesses

B. Verification

The Dean of Students or designee shall attempt to verify the death through one or more reliable sources before issuing university communications. Reliable sources may include family members, law enforcement, hospital or medical personnel, coroner/medical examiner, funeral home, obituary, or other official source.

If the cause or circumstances of death are unknown or under investigation, university communications should state only that the university has learned of the student's death and that additional details will not be shared unless appropriate and confirmed.

C. Activation of Student Death Response Team

After verification, the Dean of Students or designee shall convene a Student Death Response Team appropriate to the circumstances. Membership may include representatives from the following areas:

- Dean of Students Office
- Executive Leadership Team
- Counseling Services
- Residence Life
- Campus Safety / APD
- Marketing and Communications
- Student Success Center
- Athletics, if applicable
- International Programs, if applicable
- Student Conduct & Title IX Coordinator
- Other offices or individuals with a need to know as determined by the Dean of Students

D. Family Outreach

The Dean of Students or designated university representative shall serve as the primary university contact for the family unless another point of contact is designated. Family outreach should be compassionate and should seek to:

- Express condolences on behalf of the university
- Confirm the family's preferred point of contact
- Determine what information the family authorizes the university to share
- Ask whether the family has wishes regarding memorial activities or campus communication
- Provide information about university processes and available assistance
- Coordinate return of personal belongings, when applicable and appropriate
- Avoid overburdening the family with multiple university contacts

E. Internal Coordination and Administrative Actions

The Dean of Students Office shall coordinate appropriate internal notifications and administrative actions. Information should be shared only with individuals who have a legitimate educational, operational, safety, or response-related need to know.

Office/Area	Primary Coordination Responsibilities
Academic Affairs / Registrar	Coordinate enrollment status, academic records, and related academic actions.
Faculty	Receive guidance for responding to affected classes and referring students for support.
Residence Life	Support roommates, floor communities, housing follow-up, and belongings coordination.
Counseling Services	Provide individual, group, and crisis support; assist with postvention planning.
Financial Aid / Student Accounts	Assess applicable account, refund, aid, or billing considerations.
Technology Services	Coordinate university account status in a manner that preserves records and privacy.
Athletics / Student Organizations	Support affected teams, groups, advisors, and coaches when applicable.
Marketing and Communications	Assist with message development, media inquiries, and rumor management.

F. Communication Plan

The Dean of Students, in consultation with Marketing and Communications and appropriate university leadership, shall determine the scope, timing, sender, and content of university communications. Communication should occur in stages based on verification, family wishes, impacted populations, and campus safety considerations.

Message Type	Audience	Sender	Timing
Initial Leadership Notification	President, ELT, Campus Safety/Aberdeen Police Department, Counseling Services, Residence Life, Academic Affairs, Marketing and Communications	Dean of Students or designee	As soon as practicable after credible report or verification
Targeted Internal Notification	Faculty teaching the student, academic dean/chair, residence life staff, coaches, advisors, supervisors, or other affected personnel	Dean of Students or designee	After verification and response team consultation
Affected Student Groups	Roommates, classmates, teammates, student organization members, residence hall community, or close peer groups	Dean of Students, or designated staff	After verification, with support resources available
Campus-Wide Message	All students, faculty, and staff when the death has broad campus impact or misinformation is circulating	President, or Dean of Students	As determined by leadership and Marketing and Communications

Media / Public Inquiries	External media, public, and social media inquiries	Marketing and Communications	Only after coordination with university leadership

All communications should include available support resources. When appropriate, messages should remind community members that support is available through Counseling Services, the Dean of Students Office, Employee Assistance Program resources for employees, community mental health providers, and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

G. Communication Content Standards

University communications should:

- Use compassionate, clear, and respectful language
- Confirm only verified information
- Protect the privacy of the student and family
- Avoid speculation, rumors, and unnecessary details
- Avoid graphic descriptions, method, or location of death
- Encourage help-seeking and peer support
- Provide information about counseling, crisis, and community support resources
- Designate a university contact for questions when appropriate

University communications should not:

- State or imply a cause of death unless verified and appropriate to share
- Describe the method or details of death
- Romanticize, glorify, or sensationalize the death
- Use stigmatizing language such as “committed suicide”
- Frame suicide as inexplicable, inevitable, or caused by a single event
- Provide unauthorized personal, academic, conduct, medical, or family information

H. Sample Communication Language

The following language may be adapted after verification and consultation with appropriate university officials:

Northern State University is saddened to share that we have learned of the death of [student name], a student at Northern. We extend our heartfelt condolences to [student name]’s family, friends, classmates, and all who are impacted by this loss. Support is available for students through Counseling Services and the Dean of Students Office. Employees may access support through the Employee Assistance Program. If you or someone you know needs immediate mental health support, call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

I. Postvention and Support

Postvention response should begin as soon as practical after verification and should be tailored to the affected community. Counseling Services and the Dean of Students Office should work together to identify individuals and groups who may need outreach or support.

Postvention strategies may include:

- Targeted outreach to close friends, roommates, teammates, classmates, student organization members, student employees, and others known to be affected
- Optional group support meetings facilitated by trained professionals
- Consultation with faculty and staff on how to discuss the loss in class or work settings

- Guidance for student leaders, resident assistants, peer mentors, and organization officers
- Visible availability of counseling and crisis resources
- Follow-up outreach after funeral or memorial events and at meaningful dates
- Monitoring for misinformation, distress, or signs that additional support is needed

J. Suicide-Specific Postvention

When the death is suspected or confirmed to be suicide, the university should implement suicide-specific postvention practices to reduce risk and promote healing. The response should emphasize that help is available, recovery is possible, and suicide is preventable.

Suicide-specific communication and response practices should include the following:

- Use the phrase “died by suicide” rather than “committed suicide.”
- Do not describe the method, location, or graphic details.
- Do not suggest the death was caused by one event or circumstance.
- Do not romanticize the death or describe the student as “finally at peace.”
- Provide 988 and campus/community mental health resources in messages.
- Encourage students to seek help for themselves or others.
- Identify and proactively support students who may be at elevated risk because of closeness to the student, previous losses, trauma history, or current distress.
- Coordinate with Counseling Services, Residence Life, faculty, and student leaders to monitor needs over time.

K. Memorials, Vigils, and Remembrance Activities

Northern recognizes the importance of honoring and remembering students while maintaining safety, consistency, and sensitivity. Memorial or remembrance activities should be coordinated with the Dean of Students Office, family wishes when available, and appropriate university offices.

Temporary memorials may be permitted in designated spaces and should be respectful, safe, accessible, and time-limited. Permanent memorial requests shall be reviewed through established university procedures and should be applied consistently across causes of death.

For suicide-related deaths, memorial activities should avoid messaging or practices that could unintentionally romanticize the death. Events should include visible support resources and should focus on connection, remembrance, help-seeking, and community care.

L. Academic and Attendance Considerations

Faculty should be encouraged to exercise reasonable flexibility for affected students and to refer concerns to the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office may coordinate academic support, absence notifications, or other assistance for students impacted by the death.

Faculty and staff should not be expected to provide counseling. They should listen with care, avoid speculation, and connect students to appropriate support resources.

M. Social Media, Rumor Management, and Media Inquiries

News of a student death may spread quickly through social media, text messages, and informal networks. Marketing and Communications, in consultation with the Dean of Students and university leadership, should monitor public communication when appropriate and correct misinformation only when doing so is necessary and appropriate.

University employees should not speculate publicly about the death or disclose private information. Media inquiries should be directed to Marketing and Communications.

N. Follow-Up and After-Action Review

The Dean of Students Office should coordinate follow-up outreach with affected individuals and groups and should assess whether additional support is needed in the days and weeks following the death.

Within approximately 30 days, the Student Death Response Team should conduct an after-action review to evaluate the university response, identify lessons learned, and recommend updates to this protocol as needed.

5. Responsible Administrator

The Dean of Students is responsible for annual review of this policy and its procedures. The Dean of Students Office is responsible for coordinating implementation of the protocol in consultation with appropriate university offices.

6. Source History

Proposed by Dean of Students 09/25/2026; Shared with the Student Government Association, Faculty Senate, and Staff Council 09/29/3036, Shared with Student Affairs Council 10/21/2026. Approved by Executive Leadership 11/23/2026.