

Proposal:

The University Committee on Undergraduate Education recommends that Michigan State University adopt the following policy pertaining to students who lose a close family member during an academic semester in which they are enrolled.

Grief Absence Policy

The faculty and staff should be sensitive to and accommodate the bereavement process of a student who has lost a family member or who is experiencing emotional distress from a similar tragedy so that the student is not academically disadvantaged in their classes. It is the responsibility of the student to: a) notify the Associate Dean of their college of the need for a grief absence prior to leaving campus, b) provide appropriate verification of the grief absence as specified by the Associate Dean, and c) complete all missed work as determined in consultation with the instructor. It is the responsibility of the Associate Dean or designee to: a) determine with the student the expected period of absence – it is expected that some bereavement processes may be more extensive than others depending on individual circumstances, b) notify the faculty that the student will be absent, and c) receive verification of the authenticity of a grief absence request upon the student's return. It is the responsibility of the instructor to work with the student to make reasonable accommodations and to include appropriate language describing such accommodations in their course syllabus, so that the student is not penalized due to a verified grief absence.

Students who believe their rights under this policy have been violated should contact the University Ombudsperson.

Rationale for the proposed policy:

Academic success is not solely based upon a student's presence in the classroom, ability, and motivation. Many factors can impact a student's academic success. In particular, the death of a family member, close friend, or similar tragedy can have a large, negative impact on a student's mental capabilities in and outside of the classroom. We recognize that a time of bereavement is necessary in the mourning process for a student who loses a close family member. Students must be afforded the same right as faculty and staff to attend funeral services and grieve the loss of a close family member.

Requiring students to choose between these obligations and their class attendance or meeting assignment deadlines constitutes an unreasonable burden. Furthermore, such loss often negatively impacts students' academic performance, whether they attend their classes or not.

A formal, but flexible policy regarding grief absence will benefit both students and instructors. Many other universities, including some in the Big Ten, have had grief absence policies for years. These universities have implemented policies similar to the one we propose in ways that maintain flexibility for the instructor while ensuring fair treatment for students and academic integrity.

Currently, no policy exists at MSU that allows students to grieve the death of a family member or deal with a similar tragic circumstance without academic penalty. The current process

requires a student to request accommodations from each of their instructors with no guarantee that their instructors will all agree. The new policy would allow students adequate time for bereavement without fear of academic penalty, while still holding the student accountable to inform their Associate Dean in a timely manner and provide evidence of the authenticity of the situation. Designating a single point of contact for students (the student's Associate Dean or designee) streamlines the process for the student, ensures uniform treatment in all of their classes, and relieves them from needing to explain a personal sorrow multiple times to different instructors. Moreover, the Associate Dean's office can notify the student of standard documentation needed to verify the authenticity of a grief absence, so the student can return to campus with the needed evidence. The policy benefits instructors by relieving them from having to request a grieving student provide evidence of their hardship and having to judge the authenticity of the evidence. The instructor will know that the Associate Dean's office is verifying that a grief absence is warranted, and that a student is unlikely to try to game the system when reporting to the Associate Dean's office, which will keep records of such requests.

Proposed Implementation:

To facilitate the process of grief absence request submission, the Committee recommends that a web form be created in which a completed request would be sent to the appropriate Associate Dean or designee based on the college the student is enrolled in. The web form would contain a drop-down menu of all the colleges at Michigan State University from which the student could select the one in which he/she is enrolled. The student would then be provided a message template advising them to include the appropriate information (i.e. brief description of the circumstance, length of anticipated absence, net ID, student number). Once submitted, the message would be sent as an email with the subject line "Grief Absence Request" to the appropriate Associate Dean or designee (each college in the drop-down menu would be associated with the appropriate email address). From there, the Associate Dean or designee would notify each individual professor of the student's absence and make arrangements with the student regarding verification of the grief absence and appropriateness of the length of absence.

Further, to make students aware of the system, the Committee recommends that the following language be included in course syllabi:

Michigan State University is committed to ensuring that the bereavement process of a student who loses a family member during a semester does not put the student at an academic disadvantage in their classes. If you require a grief absence, you must notify your Associate Dean via the "Grief Absence Request" web form (found at <LINK HERE>) prior to leaving campus. Your Associate Dean will notify me and I will work with you to make appropriate accommodations so that you are not penalized due to a verified grief absence.

Alternate language to be used in the syllabi of courses in which the professor has included proactive accommodations to be used for grief absences could be as follows:

Michigan State University is committed to ensuring that the bereavement process of a student who loses a family member during a semester does not put the student at an academic disadvantage in their classes. In this course, the policy to <REPLACE WITH THE POLICY> is intended to cover all reasons for absence, including reasons related to death of a family member or similar tragedy.