

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 or other academic work (e.g. research). For undergraduate and master's (Plan B) students without research responsibilities, it is the responsibility of the student to: a) notify the Associate Dean or designee of their college of the need for a grief absence in a timely manner, but no later than one week from the student's initial knowledge of the situation, 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.

For master's (Plan A), master's (Plan B) with research responsibilities, and doctoral students, it is the responsibility of the student to: a) notify their advisor/major professor and faculty of the courses in which they are enrolled of the need for a grief absence in a timely manner, but no later than one week from the student's initial knowledge of the situation, b) provide appropriate verification of the grief absence as specified by the advisor/major professor and faculty, and c) complete all missed work as determined in consultation with the advisor/major professor and faculty. It is the responsibility of the advisor/major professor 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) receive verification of the authenticity of a grief absence request upon the student's return, and c) make reasonable accommodations so that the student is not penalized due to a verified grief absence. If employed as a RA or TE, the graduate student must also notify their employer. Both employer and student will swiftly communicate to determine how the student's responsibilities will be covered during their absence. Graduate teaching assistants (TAs) should refer to the bereavement policy in the MSU GEU CBU Article 18.

Students in the graduate professional colleges (CHM, COM, CVM, LAW) with their own grief absence policies are excluded from the above and should follow their own policies.

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

Rationale for the proposed policy:

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. A formal 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.

The proposed policy allows for:

Notification

Designating a single point of contact for undergraduate and master's students (Plan B) without research responsibilities (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. Notification for master's students (Plan A), master's students (Plan B) with research responsibilities, and doctoral students need to be handled as indicated in the second paragraph of the grief absence policy due to their additional responsibilities.

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. Instructors will be notified by the student's Associate Dean of the need to accommodate to the student's absence, allowing for a timely, centralized, and trustworthy notification process. Similar to above, research-based and doctoral students require a separate notification process due to their additional responsibilities.

Accountability

Under this policy the Associate Dean's office verifies that a grief absence is warranted and keeps a record of such requests for undergraduate and Master's (Plan B) without research responsibilities. Similarly, for doctoral and research-based Master's (Plan A) students, and Master's (Plan B) with research responsibilities, their advisors will verify that a grief absence is warranted and keep a record of such requests. If the request is found unwarranted due to dishonesty the student will face consequences as a result of violating MSU's Integrity of Scholarship and Grades Policy.

Latitude

The intention of this policy is to apply to family members. However the policy was intentionally left flexible, to allow the Associate Dean (or designee) to evaluate each request on a case-by-case basis, if needed. This flexibility allows for accommodation of non-traditional family structures and allows students the ability to request a grief absence in other instances whereby the

Associate Dean (or designee) feels there to be legitimate cause for the student to be academically disadvantaged in their classes or other academic work.

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 in which the student is enrolled in, or the appropriate designee for the graduate student. 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 the student 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 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 and graduate program handbooks:

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 should complete the “Grief Absence Request” web form (found at <LINK HERE>) no later than one week after knowledge of the circumstance. I will work with you to make appropriate accommodations so that you are not penalized due to a verified grief absence.

Concerns Expressed By Other University Committees:

Lack of clear delineation of what constitutes a family member in the policy.

The intention of the policy was specifically to apply to family members, but it is necessary to accommodate non-traditional family structures that may not necessarily fall under standard family descriptions as well as other instances whereby the student’s grief would clearly result in the student being academically disadvantaged in their classes or other academic work. Placing the point of contact with the Associate Dean (or designee) will help mitigate potential abuse of this policy and provide a more consistent application of the policy.

Lack of clear specification of who makes the final decision on application of the policy.

Existing University policy already provides this specification. The policy places the decision on the grief absence with the Associate Dean (or designee), who then will communicate that decision with the faculty or instructor of record for the student’s classes. Faculty retain the final decision with regard to the nature/means of the accommodations. Existing policies are already in place to arbitrate any disagreements regarding how the faculty chooses to accommodate the student (outlined within the Student Rights and Responsibilities and the Graduate Rights and

Responsibilities). Language has been included in the policy to direct students who believe that their rights under this policy have been violated to contact the University Ombudsperson whom can direct them to the most applicable university policy.

The name of the policy may pertain to other circumstances other than bereavement of a family member.

The naming of the policy is consistent with the names of other similar policies in place at peer institutions. The intention of this policy is to facilitate notification of instances where a student's grief clearly would result in the student being academically disadvantaged in their classes or other academic work. As bereavement is a subtype of grief, providing a more inclusive name will allow greater flexibility of accommodation at the discretion of the Associate Dean (or designee), including potential withdrawal from classes for the semester.

Why does this policy not mirror the existing policy for graduate student employees?

Graduate student employees have a direct supervisor to whom they report. MSU's Integrity of Scholarship and Grades Policy has set a precedent that the closest approximation of such a supervisor for undergraduate students is the Associate Dean (or designee) for the student's College. For doctoral and research-based Master's (Plan A) students, and Master's (Plan B) with research responsibilities, the proposed policy indicates that students should notify their advisor/major professor. Thus, the proposed policy largely mirrors employee policies while providing additional clarification regarding the responsibilities of each party as it relates to the students classes and other academic work.