When the worst happens: Lessons App State learned about student death communications

Presented by Megan Hayes, Chief Communications Officer
On September 2, 2014, a freshman Appalachian State University student was reported missing. Her body was found 11 days later in a wooded area near campus.

During the time she was missing, her disappearance drew national media attention. The campus community, including students, faculty, staff, the local community, families of current students and alumni were unnerved and deeply distressed.

While preliminary autopsy results were released within a few days of the discovery of her body, it was early November before the medical examiner confirmed she had died by suicide. Significant speculation took place during that time about the cause of her death, enhanced by a sensational false crime report.

Over the course of the 2014-15 academic year, eight additional Appalachian students died.

University protocol at the time was to notify the entire campus of the death of a student via email, and place a flower bouquet and a condolence book in a visible area of the Student Union, along with information regarding any upcoming funeral services.
• Appalachian had no documentation of managing a multiple death cluster of this magnitude, nor this level of publicity related to student deaths.

• Ultimately, a team with representatives from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, our university police and University Communications worked together to change university protocols, procedures and policies related to student deaths.

• Communications protocols were changed significantly, informed by best practices and data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, among other key resources.
Were the note in her handwriting?

Like · Reply · 1 · 12 hours ago

No. My daughter was a roommate at her do 1. They said on the news they would take 6 to 8 weeks to find out if the handwriting match but they have evidence already said it does not.

Like · 5 · 12 hours ago

The investigation is not concluded yet. I suspect that many are reading into the words what has not been said.

Like · 2 hours ago

I'm sure this has also affected your daughter. I pray for her that she will be protected and safe from all harm and that the memories I'm sure she has will not hold her captive but will strengthen her.

Like · 1 · 2 hours ago
Objectives

Short-term (beginning Day 1 and throughout duration of unfolding event and related events) objectives were to:

- Clearly and accurately communicate any threats to the safety of university community members
- Reassure students and other members of the university community about safety measures in place
- Provide wellness and prevention information to members of the university community
- Comply with federal reporting requirements (Clery Act), confidentiality laws (FERPA and HIPAA), and university policies, and sensitivity to local law enforcement and coroner protocols
- Reduce rumors
- Manage and respond to unfolding developments
- Understand the impacts of our communications memorializing students who have died
Objectives

As the situation unfolded, we continued our emphasis on the initially identified objectives, and developed the following long-term objectives, which we executed from May 2015 – May 2016:

- Change and develop policies and procedures related to communications regarding student deaths
- Strengthen local and regional media relationships to reduce adversarial mindset and build trust
- Provide and publicize opportunities for prevention and wellness support, education and training
- Educate audiences on “need to know” vs. “want to know” information
Audiences

**Primary:**
- Current students and their families
- Current faculty and staff

**Secondary:**
- Community members
- Alumni*
- Media
- Prospective students and their families
- Prospective faculty & staff
- Leadership boards
- UNC System leadership
- Other UNC System members
- Legislators
- Donors
Research

**Primary:**
- University expertise: faculty, staff with specialized knowledge

**Secondary:**
- Communicating in ways that help mitigate contagion
  - National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention
  - Reporting on Suicide.org
  - Centers for Disease Control
  - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA)
- Context:
  - Statistics from other universities
  - Our own institutional data

**Anecdotal:**
- Feedback from students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, colleagues from other institutions of higher education and other constituency groups
- Social media “listening”
- Media coverage of student deaths and suicides on our campus, other campuses and other reports of “clustering”
February:
Breaking the Rules

• Reporter contacted our media relations specialist: his editor would publish photos and cause of death of each of the nine students who had died.
• More than 190,000 individuals received single direct communication.
• Sentiment change begins: alumni and parent responses to media reports begin to change.
July: Policies & Procedures

- Informed by evidence-based research
- Intentional
- Sensitive & caring
- Reduce contagion
- Reduce anxiety
- Transparency
- Guidance
- Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, APD, University Communications

Student Death Protocol
Appalachian State University

For faculty and staff of Appalachian State University
With support from the Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant #1U79SM061440-01

These guidelines are intended to assist faculty, professional staff, administrators and other University employees with addressing student-related crises. While some campus officials play more active roles in responding to student crises, it is important for all University faculty and professionals to have a working knowledge of these guidelines. Although the University strives to respond in a consistent manner, the specific facts and circumstances of any crisis may lead the University to adjust the actions suggested in these guidelines.

Acknowledgements:
College of the Holy Cross
Daytona Beach Community College
Michigan State University
Pensacola State College
Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses
University at Albany, State University of New York
August: Prevention & wellness

- Full time Student Mental Wellness Coordinator
- Suicide prevention training
- Programming
- AppCares website, communications, news stories, continual targeted outreach
- Postvention team
Current practices: consistency & repetition

Initial notification:
- Leadership, Postvention Team

Postvention Team (within 24 hours):
- Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, APD, UComm

Circles of communication (timing as appropriate):
- Family
- Faculty, Chair
- Affinity groups

Media:
- On request only
- Regular reinforcement of what we will & won’t say

Other Inquiries:
- In person whenever possible
Media relationships

• Outreach
• Personal connections
• PIO/Media summit (2017, 2020)

2015- local:
  ASU alters communications on student deaths
  A freedom from information policy?

2016- national:
  When a Student Dies: Conventional rules don’t apply when communicating about suicide

2018- national:
  Resources for Handling Suicide’s Aftermath

2019- campus:
  Student death: how App State communicates after tragic events
2015:

A freedom from information policy?

Tom Mayer  Nov 22, 2015

There is much to applaud in a new policy now in place regarding the way Appalachian State University will release notices about the death of a student.

Let's begin with the fact that there is a policy at all.

By its own admission, before this semester the university did not have a "very well-thought-out practice" of releasing such news. This, in part, helped fuel rumors last year about the number of student deaths, although, as the Watauga Democrat has reported, that number was not dissimilar from the number of deaths in other, recent years.

The new "Student Death Protocol" also outlines the manner in which faculty and staff should address the scene or substance of a death, and prioritizes which departments and individuals should be contacted.

And, having one source for the release of initial information about a student death, in this case University Communications, can also help prevent unfounded rumor and misinformation from spreading throughout the campus and greater community.

Further, it is also prudent that the cause of death be released by the medical examiner's office, and no less an official source.

Beyond this, the policy becomes problematic.

It is disheartening that an organization built on the foundation of information, should attempt to impede the flow of information.

2019:

Editor's note: This article explains App State's protocol for releasing information about student deaths. However, the article discusses mental health and suicide, which may trigger some students. If you or someone you know is struggling, reach out to the Counseling Center at 828-262-5180 or call the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

The 2019 spring semester has not been without the loss of life on App State's campus. Three students have died.

In the 2014-15 academic year, App State sent out campus-wide emails if a student died. That year, nine students died. In 2013-14, seven. The year before that, eight.

"We just did what we had done before," Chief Communications Officer Megan Hayes said. "And what that year taught us is that we can't afford to do that." Hayes said the App State communications after a student death are intentional and the university needs to understand the implications of those communications.

During the 2014-15 academic year, App State started to review the policy for when a student dies. That summer, App State created the Student Death Protocol.

The Old Way Isn't Always Best

"We got a ton of calls from people saying, 'Why are you sending me this information?'" Assistant Dean of Students Alan Rasmussen said. "'You just made my day horrible' or 'This just reminded me of my cousin who passed away.'"

The Dean of Students Office received similar calls after campus-wide notifications of a student's death were sent to students. Rasmussen said students walked into the office crying even if they didn't have a relationship with the student; they still felt the impact.

The decision to stop sending campus-wide notifications was based on student safety and how App State wanted to remember its students. Another intentional decision Hayes said they made is not stating the cause of death.

"We made a choice to define students by what they contributed in their lives, and that's how we're going to talk about the students," Hayes said. "That was a really important choice for us to make, and we all felt very, very strongly about that when we were developing that protocol."

Hayes said the only person who can determine the cause of an unattended death in North Carolina is the medical examiner.
Postvention Team:

1. Introductions

2. Purpose
   a. Passed away in his [redacted] residence Saturday evening
   b. Sophomore
   c. [redacted]
   d. Family is from [redacted] and currently reside in [redacted]
   e. Parents want to include giving to [redacted] department

3. Important ripple impact:
   a. [redacted] Concerns
   b. [redacted] Club
   c. [redacted]
   d. 3 week class from the summer

4. Campus Notification
   a. Residence Life
      i. Hall Meetings conducted Sunday Evening
   b. [redacted] Club
   c. Others?

5. Outreach to other Students? Staff?
   a. Past roommate
   b. [redacted] and [redacted]
   c. Dr. [redacted] (married team)

6. Communication Issues?
   a. Help addressing social media specifically from all constituents and unofficial parent FB page

7. Memorial Table
   a. Tuesday [redacted] 2019: Book and flowers have been ordered

8. Grieving Room
   a. Send out times to residence hall for tomorrow?

9. Other items for discussion
Want to Know vs. Need to Know:

Date: Mon, Feb 18, 2019 at 4:19 PM
Subject: Failing your University about Suicide Awareness
To: [Redacted]

Good Afternoon,

My name is [Redacted], and I am a sophomore here at Appalachian State. I was very close to [Redacted] who committed suicide around 3 am on Friday morning. The fact that I even have to email you guys is ABSOLUTELY ridiculous. I do not want to disrespect you in any way, and I understand how difficult your job is, however, there have been 3 suicides in 2 months. I have seen nothing regarding these deaths, and it seems like you are all portraying yourselves as to you do not care one bit. I understand you did a memorial but who knew about it and who if you genuinely knew [Redacted] would want to go to that especially when half of us had no idea. From January 1, 2019, until today there have been 8 medical reports on the Campus Crime Log yet not one mentions anything about suicide and I know of 3 and who knows how many there are from last year. I find a major issue with this I don't know why it is so difficult for you guys to send out a formal email not only to pay respect but to also raise awareness. I usually would not be so overwhelmed with emotion however my very close friend took his life, and my grandfather is sitting in the hospital after finding out 2 weeks ago that he had a massive brain tumor and an inoperable lung tumor. There is nothing he can do about his condition and all he is worried about is [Redacted], and how he could do something like that to himself when he is sitting there dying unexpectedly and there is nothing the university has done to pay their respects or try to prevent it. You don't mind letting out an encounter with 1 sexual predator and nothing happened to the girl but you warned the whole school, but when a student takes their own life I think that should gain some attention. Again I am sorry if this came off rude or disrespectful, however, I am completely disgusted with the way you guys are handling this situation. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Thanks, [Redacted]
Release Date: September 6, 2019

Boone, NC – The Boone Police Department is deeply saddened to have to report the loss of another young person. On Thursday, September 5, 2019, at around 6:11 pm, Boone Police and Watauga Medics responded to a residence located at [Redacted] Mac Street, Unit [Redacted], after receiving a 911 call to check the well-being of a resident there. The individual was located and found to be deceased. She was identified as [Redacted] of [Redacted]. The medical examiner has determined that the cause of death was self-inflicted. Boone Police Department detectives are investigating the incident.

In a message to the family, friends and Boone community as a whole, Police Chief Dana Crawford issued the following statement: Our sympathies go out to the family and friends of [Redacted]. We would encourage people who are struggling with thoughts of ending their life to reach out for help. There are resources in the Boone and ASU communities to help. As stated on the Appalachian State University website:

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, help is available. During business hours, visit Counseling and Psychological Services and let the receptionist know that this is an emergency and a counselor will meet with you as soon as possible. After hours, on weekends or during breaks, you may call Counseling and Psychological Services at (828) 262-3180 and select the option to speak to the counselor on call. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is also available 24/7 by phone at 1-800-273-TALK[8255] or by chat. These services are available for those who are struggling with suicidal thoughts and for those who want guidance on how to help a friend. In the event of an in-progress suicide attempt, call 911 immediately to have emergency services sent out.

For those who are not ASU students, Daymark Recovery Services has a Mobile Crisis Unit that is available 24/7. Anyone can just show up at 132 Poplar Grove Connector, Suite B, Boone, NC during business hours or can contact (828) 264-4357 anytime for help. If none of the specialists are available call your local law enforcement agency for assistance.
Release Date: September 6, 2019

Boone, NC – On Thursday, September 5, 2019, at around 6:11 pm, Boone Police and Watauga Medics responded to a residence on Mac Street, after receiving a request to check the welfare of a 24-year-old woman.

The individual was located and found deceased inside her home. Boone Police Department investigators responded to the scene and initiated an investigation to determine the circumstances of the unattended death.

There are no indications that the death is suspicious.

Police Chief Dana Crawford issued the following statement: “Our sympathies are with the friends and family of the deceased. There are no indications that there is an ongoing threat to the community.”
Good Morning App State Parents! Thank you for your patience and support as we waited on more information from the University about the two recent deaths on campus. I had a really good conversation with Alan Rasmussen this morning, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Case Management at App State. He seems kind, compassionate and caring towards our students and families. In addition to the helpful links below, the key takeaway from our conversation is that they are in no way trying to "hide" anything, or keep information from parents or students about tragic deaths of students, whether accidental death, suicide, or unknown cause. They have a very purposeful and strategic way of dealing with these matters and App State's protocol has actually been adopted by other colleges. He welcomes anyone with further questions or concerns to contact him or the office of The Dean of Students (contact info below). His message and links to additional documents of official policies are also below. Please share these resources with your student as you see fit.

Hello

Thank you for speaking to me earlier. Below are the links we discussed and some of the resources we put out there for students. After you review the policy and protocol let me know if you have any questions or concerns. We want to make sure that students have access to all the resources and supports available to them.

Best,

Alan

Our Student Death Policy: https://policy.appstate.edu/Student_Death_Policy

Our Student Death Protocol: https://policy.appstate.edu/...b/.../Student-Death-Protocol.pdf

And there are other links that may be of interest at the bottom of the Policy page.

Counseling Center
(828) 262-3180

The Counseling Center is open 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Monday - Friday to support students but anyone can call the main line for 24 hour support during the nights and weekends.

Office of the Dean of Students is open 8:00am-5:00pm Monday-Friday to help support students in distress by providing resources and support.
(828) 262-8284
Student Union 324

Wellness and Prevention Services is open 8:00am-5:00pm Monday-Friday to help students facilitate student success through overall wellbeing.
(828) 262-3148
First Floor Miles Annas Building

Additional resources can be found at the Appalachian Cares website, http://appcares.appstate.edu. This website provides a comprehensive list of campus, local, regional and national resources, many of which have confidential hotlines available 24 hours a day.