UL officials clarify protocol for student deaths

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With six student deaths reported this semester alone, The University of Louisiana at Lafayette Police Department and Office of Student Affairs explained the protocols, challenges and concerns following the death of a Ragin' Cajun.

With a student body of more than 19,000 students, deaths caused by accident, illness, suicide or crime is inevitable. In the 2015-16 school year, Patricia Cottonham, vice president for student affairs, said UL Lafayette has mourned the death of 14 students and continues to honor students, faculty and staff who have passed away throughout the history of the university.

“The thing I want to clarify is sometimes we find out about things after they happen,” said Cottonham. “I couldn’t even say with 100 percent certainty that we always know for sure when a student passes away. Sometimes it’ll be that the student hasn’t been here for a while, maybe the student was in class last semester and not this semester and it’s because of a death; we never know.”

Cottonham said when the death does occur on campus, the university and campus police follow a strict protocol. First, campus police are notified and contact the police station in the student’s hometown or country, who then contacts the family of the deceased student.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a suicide, traffic accident or homicide,” said Sgt. Billy Abrams of ULPD. “We notify the police agency in the jurisdiction that the student

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is from. Once the notification is made, they give our contact information to the family so that they can then contact us.

"Usually," Abrams continued, "the family will call us with additional questions or we will give them additional instructions as to where to come and what transpired. We tell them what we can and handle it as delicately as possible."

From there, a letter is sent to the university president's and dean's offices to alert them of the student's passing. The president's office then sends a letter to the student's dean, each of the student's professors and any organizations the student may have been a part of.

Additionally, the university flies its flag at half staff on the day of the funeral service and a floral arrangement is sent out to the student's family. Cottonham said although the university keeps a record of reported deaths, the causes of death are not requested or recorded.

"Sometimes when it's local," said Cottonham, "students will know each other and sometimes students will say something to us about the cause of death and it's sort of happenstance. But for us it's tough enough of a death period. We usually don't try to pry. If we have the information, it's good because we know what to expect when dealing with students that are close to them."

Cottonham said the university is especially concerned about suicides and extends its services to the deceased student's roommates, friends and fellow organization members.

"People grieve differently," said Cottonham. "Sometimes people need to grieve individually, but sometimes when it's a group of people who may have known the student, they grieve together — whether it's suicide or not. A motorcycle accident for some is just as devastating as a suicide. So, any time someone loses a friend or a child is always very tough."

Family members are required to provide the Office of Student Financial Aid with the student's death certificate to remove the student's outstanding loans. However, if a parent co-signs the student loan, they may still be responsible for paying the remaining balance. Cottonham said the university strives to offer solutions when dealing with unpaid housing debt, tuition and loans.

"I do think that if a student were in some sort of financial situation with the university, then that debt would be taken care of," said Cottonham. "If the deceased student had a housing debt or something like that, we would try to work with the family and figure out all of those debts for the students."

UL Lafayette invites family, friends and the student body to the university's annual Night of Remembrance on April 27 at 7 p.m. to honor the students, faculty and staff who were lost during the academic year.

"We say every year that we would love to cancel this event one year because it would be a year without any deaths," Cottonham said. "Inevitably, we're going to lose part of our university family during the year and we invite family and friends. This is a way to recognize the students, faculty and staff who are part of the university family and what they meant to us."

"There are spiritual words, comforting words and there is an opportunity for every family member to hear their loved one's name called," she continued. "I do want everyone to know that we do re-