

Clarity on Student Emergency Absence Policy

Academic Policies Committee

November 15, 2022

The Emergency Absence Policy was originally designed by the Student Government Association and with work with Faculty Senate was edited to the final policy we have now. When the policy was first developed, the SU Cares Office was brand new and its responsibilities were still being defined. A decision to make this the primary clearing house for review of Emergency Absence requests initially worked and seemed to make sense. However, two things happened. The COVID-19 epidemic happened, which substantially changed perceptions of what defined an emergency that would be appropriately handled through this policy. The needs for the student population expanded. In addition, a clear definition of what was an emergency that should be referred to SU Cares, and was a part of an attendance policy developed by an instructor, became muddled.

The APC Committee wants to clarify that the University does NOT have an attendance policy. We support this and believe that each faculty member should continue to determine whether they will have an attendance policy or not for their course. If they do, they will continue to provide the necessary information for their students in their syllabus. Aside from the reasons listed in the Emergency Absence Policy, each instructor will be responsible for making decisions regarding excused or unexcused absences for their classes.

In cases of COVID-19, University policy (Campus Health) will override the Emergency Absence Policy.

Recommendations

A subcommittee reviewed the current policy and found the following:

- The current policy already explains process and what type of absences will be addressed by this policy. However, it was written pre-COVID and needs to be updated.
- Most of what faculty and students need is already in the policy. The committee recommends that some type of flowchart be developed to assist faculty on knowing how best to resolve the absence requests they receive.
- Clearer language of what constitutes an emergency should be included in the policy. We should consider examples or more reasons that would be considered.
- More clarification is needed on what medical documentation or personal information needs to be provided to SU Cares in order for a decision to be made.
- The SGA must be involved in any changes to the current policy and be a part of making recommendations to the Faculty Senate.

Therefore, the Academic Policies Committee recommends that an ad hoc committee of faculty and students, drawn from one or more relevant Faculty Senate committees and the SGA, be constituted to develop a more clearly defined and more easily communicated Emergency Absence Policy.

Until a revised policy can be developed and approved, clarification of how the current policy operates is needed. In discussion with SU Cares, the APC has provided the step by step process for the Emergency Absence Policy here and recommends this information be used to update the section of the policy discussing “Procedures”.

1. The student will email professor in classes for which they are using emergency excused absence(s). A copy of the email may be sent to sucares@salisbury.edu . The student may also contact SU Cares as soon as reasonably possible if unable to reach professors, preferably prior to expected emergency absence(s), but no later than three (3) University business days after the student returns to campus.
2. SU Cares will notify instructor when they have received communication from the student. **SU Cares will not make a final decision on a request for an emergency absence without documentation from the student.**
3. Student provides documentation to SU Cares by completing an SU Cares report and submitting documentation online. Documentation may include, for example, copy of an obituary, copy of a death certificate, a letter from a licensed physician, mental health professional, medical professional, or other reasonable documentation as determined by SU Cares. Once the student has provided documentation to SU Cares and the appropriate staff member has communicated with the student, the SU Cares representative will communicate with the instructor again. They will let the instructor know how many days the student is expected to be absent and the date of the student’s anticipated return. Appropriate academic personnel may receive a copy of communications.
4. Students are responsible for completing all course requirements. When a student is absent because of emergencies noted above, the student shall discuss with faculty at the earliest opportunity (i) a need for additional time, if necessary and/or (ii) plans for completing missed work, quizzes, exams, labs or other assignments missed.
5. A Dean Of Student/SU Cares designee will assist and support the student as needed through available resources such as case management services, disability accommodations, grief and other counseling, Title IX referral, academic support and proper referrals for additional support. If a student needs to withdraw from a class or classes and does so within established policies and procedures for withdrawing, a Dean of Students/SU Cares designee will assist as necessary with withdrawal and reentry into the university community or will connect the student to the proper offices if appropriate.
6. SU Cares reviews documentation provided by the student and notifies the instructor if the absence request is a part of the Emergency Absence Policy and if documentation was provided. Per the policy, the decision in SU Cares will determine the justification. If the request for consideration does not meet the definition for a justifiable excused absence, SU CARES will refer it back to the appropriate instructor to make their determination on excusing the student, based on their own syllabus.

Currently, SU Cares is being asked to handle all kinds of absences, not only those of a grave or extended nature. Based on the Emergency Absence Policy, the following are the **ONLY** reasons a student shall use the Emergency Absence Policy based on justifiable circumstances:

- Bereavement, including travel related to bereavement;
- **Serious**, contagious, infectious or extended illness of the student or the student's loved one or dependent; (except COVID-19 where University policy will apply current Campus Health guidelines);
- **Serious** medical or mental health conditions;
- Other significant circumstances as approved at the discretion of the faculty member (e.g., **natural disasters that prevent safe travel**).

The following are examples that should **not** be referred to SU Cares as part of the Emergency Absence Policy. This is not all encompassing and is only a representation to assist in defining what may be an appropriate referral. Examples include but are not limited to: transportation difficulties on the way to class; inability to get out of bed to come to class, emergency veterinary care for a pet, broken ankles/bones; minor surgeries or other medical cases such as a tonsillectomy, wisdom teeth, etc.

Example of how specific cases of absenteeism should be handled and who resolves them:

- a. **Instructor resolves through their classroom policy:** transportation difficulties; virus-caused illness such as the flu or cold; travel delays in getting to campus; caring for children, taking family members to appointment, medical considerations with companion animals; lack of access to course materials.
- b. **Instructor has been notified by another office on campus that the student is not permitted to attend class in person:** Instructor should review the notification from the office. If no other guidance is given other than the student cannot attend class in person, the instructor may choose to let the student attend online (if that is an option). Student is still responsible for completing any coursework they can by not attending in person. Instructor is encourage, if possible, to arrange a way for student to complete missed coursework as a result of missed physical classroom attendance.
- c. **Instructor may ask for assistance from SU Cares even if the absence is not covered under the justifiable circumstances:** If a student is requesting an excuse for any type of health related reason that does not fit into the justifiable circumstances and the instructor feels they need more information to make a decision using their own attendance policy (please note: SU Cares can assist with this so the documentation is kept in a private area, but it may take longer for materials to be reviewed, depending on case load in SU Cares).
- d. **Student notifies faculty member they must leave school for surgery and recovery that will last two weeks.** This is not considered an exception for consideration under the Emergency Absence Policy and should be covered by the instructor's attendance policy. The instructor may ask the student to contact SU Cares for support. SU Cares would help the student in returning to school. They may ask for documentation from the student to notify the instructor if its been provided. However, it would be the instructor's attendance policy that guides any final decision on attendance.

e. **Student learns that their home was destroyed in a hurricane the weekend before and they need to go home to assist with recovery.** This situation would fall under the Emergency Absence Policy for exemption for significant circumstances. SU Cares will work with the student to verify the situation and then provide direction to all the student's faculty in regard to attendance support.