

MERCYHURST
UNIVERSITY



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STUDENT MEDICAL LEAVE POLICY

POLICY NAME: Medical Leave Policy for Mercyhurst University Students

Responsible Oversight Executive: Executive Director, Wellness

Date of Current Revisions or Creation: August 2023

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to communicate the University's Medical Leave Policy for Mercyhurst students.

B. AUTHORITY

Administration has the inherent authority to implement policies and procedures that support the health and safety of our community.

C. DEFINITIONS

1. **Accommodations:** Temporary flexible modifications of a student's schedule and assignments which may emerge out of discussions between the student's faculty, treatment providers, and the student.
2. **ADA Accommodations:** Formal accommodations based on a student meeting the ADA definition of disability.
3. **Approved Absence:** An absence approved by the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA).
4. **Community Provider:** The treatment provider in the student's community who may recommend a medical leave, and/or treat the student while on leave. The community provider may also recommend a reasonable end date for the medical leave and/or suggest additional services that may benefit the student.
5. **Excused Absence:** The date(s) the student is approved by OAA to be excused from classes. Since it may take a few days for the student, community provider, and/or family to discuss whether to take a medical leave, a brief period of excused absence days can be assigned if needed while the decision is made.
6. **Executive Director, Office of Academic Affairs (OAA):** This individual notifies the student and relevant departments that a student is on medical leave. No specific details about the nature or reason for the leave are shared unless a current signed release of information (ROI) is on file.

7. **Executive Director, Wellness:** This individual is a licensed mental health provider who administers Mercyhurst's Counseling and Health Centers and helps assess and treat students requesting counseling services.
8. **Medical Director, Health Center:** This physician serves as the clinical director of the campus student health center and assists and advises nursing staff on medical care and medical accommodations.
9. **Medical Leave (voluntary and involuntary):** Once a student is approved for medical leave, the student typically returns home to pursue active ongoing treatment. The great majority of medical leaves are voluntary. An involuntary medical leave is rare but may occur when the severity of the clinical circumstance does not permit the student to attend classes or live on campus, and the student is unable or unwilling to take a voluntary medical leave.
10. **Medical Leave Clearance date:** The date when the university indicates the student is cleared to return as an active student in the upcoming semester.
11. **Medical Leave Clearance process:** The process that occurs once a student indicates a readiness to end medical leave and return to campus at the start of the next semester. The clearance process typically begins within 4-6 weeks of the start of the new semester. During this time the Executive Director of Wellness or designee will talk directly with the student, and if permitted may also meet with the parent(s) and student together to discuss readiness to return. The primary treatment provider(s) will be asked to document a description of the clinical services rendered, total number of sessions/visits held, diagnostic impression, current medications, any recent safety concerns or hospitalizations, as well as recommendation(s) regarding the student's readiness to return and what added resources/supports would be helpful.

D. SCOPE

This policy applies to all University students including full- and part-time, undergraduate, and graduate, and those residing on campus or at home.

E. POLICY STATEMENT

Mercyhurst works flexibly and collaboratively with students to assist them in achieving their academic goals even while they navigate significant health concerns. Mercyhurst's Health and Counseling Centers' processes and procedures are well aligned with **Bazon Center's Model Policy for Colleges and Universities**, and supportive of the recommendations/guidance for families and students found in **NAMI's "College Guide"** and the 2012 JED Foundation's **"Starting the Conversation: College and Your Mental Health"**.

Students who experience mental and physical health issues on campus can be assessed and treated by Mercyhurst University's Counseling Center clinicians and Cohen Student

Health Center medical staff at no charge. Students can also opt to be seen by local community providers. A community referral may occur if the type or level of treatment a student needs does not exist on campus, or if the student simply prefers being seen off campus. Students may also opt to pursue virtual counseling with a therapist. Students pursuing counseling or medical treatments off campus are encouraged to have the provider pre-check their insurance so that the student is aware of the cost.

Counseling Center staff is diverse and experienced. The Center's consulting psychiatrist can assess students as well as follow medications for ongoing Center clients if they are not already connected with another prescriber. The Counseling Center provides a walk-in-hour one hour a day Monday-Friday for students experiencing an urgent issue. Students seen for ongoing counseling normally receive an appointment within a few days of the student's initial call, or immediately if there is an emergency. Access to crisis counseling is available 24/7, and Residence Life, Campus Policy and Safety, and the Counseling Center work closely together to assist students during these times.

The Health Center staff includes a licensed physician present on site for a half-day Monday-Friday, along with two experienced BSN nurses present five-days a week. The Health and Counseling Centers share an office manager.

Health and Counseling Center staff work closely with other departments and are part of the campus-wide Wellness Initiative. Therapists work collaboratively with Mercyhurst's Active Minds Chapter on Depression Screening Day and involve attendees in dialogue and artwork. A Counseling Center counselor trained in Art Therapy co-facilitates an ongoing Grief Group co-sponsored with Campus Ministry.

Even with this wide array of supports and services, the college years can still be a time of acute emotional and/or physical difficulties for some students. While most students can be assisted and supported on campus, others may elect to take a medical leave and return home. In a very small number of situations, a student's illness or related behaviors may cause an individual to be clearly unsafe to self or others, as well as unaware or unaccepting of their need for help. In these instances, if other strategies do not work, a mandatory medical leave may be pursued.

F. PROCEDURES

1. A student experiencing a medical and/or psychological issue which appears to be significantly and negatively impacting academic success, behavior, relationships and/or mood can be referred to the Mercyhurst Health Center (medical issue) or the Mercyhurst Counseling Center (psychological issue) for assistance.

2. The student will be interviewed, and options explored, regarding the added campus or community supports and resources that may help the student feel better and be more likely to achieve their personal and academic goals. Examples of actions could include medical evaluation and treatment, counseling, meeting with Academic Support counselors, obtaining a tutor, reducing course load, requesting accommodations, extending academic due dates, increasing family supports, etc.
3. Depending on the severity of health concerns, and the level and type of treatment(s) need, students may meet criteria for a medical leave.
4. Staff can discuss the medical leave option with the student and can also consult the student's health care providers at home. However, unless there is an immediate level of life-or-death concern, a student-authorized release of information (ROI) is needed before staff can talk with family members or other entities.
5. Medical leave requests may also be initiated by a community provider and will be directed to the Executive Director of Wellness who will review this with the appropriate Health and/or Counseling Center staff.
6. Medical leave requests made by a student's community provider should include the referring physician/licensed health care provider's name, title, best contact number/email, student diagnosis and/or symptoms, anticipated plan of evaluation/treatment, and a tentative campus return date.
7. The Executive Director of Wellness will review the medical leave request, relevant materials and rationale. If the documentation indicates that the criterion for a medical leave appears met, the Executive Director of Wellness will forward a written recommendation for this to the Executive Director of the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA). OAA can then provide the student with written correspondence formally indicating that the medical leave is approved. OAA will notify the student's faculty, Residence Life, or other applicable departments that a medical leave is in effect. Once the student is clinically cleared to return from medical leave via the office of the Executive Director of Wellness, that office will notify OAA.
8. The medical leave determination date is used to assess whether a student who withdraws from the university after starting the semester will receive some degree of refund. The formula used for medical leave students is the same as that used for any Mercyhurst student who starts a semester and then withdraws, regardless of the reason. The refund percentage declines by a set amount each of the initial few weeks, and then no longer occurs once those first few weeks have passed.
9. The University does reserve the right to potentially refund a student's semester payments, in full or in part, in the event of a catastrophic medical leave.
10. Once a medical leave is approved, the student will receive a "W" for each course in the current semester instead of a grade. This means that the student's overall GPA remains what it was prior to the student attempting the most recent semester. *In exceptional cases, some incomplete grades may be granted, depending on course content and the date of the leave.*
11. While on a medical leave, students are strongly encouraged to focus on the evaluation, treatment, and management of the illness or condition which resulted in

their departure from campus. Students are encouraged to pursue treatment and follow-up that is active, frequent, consistent, and intensive. As students start to feel better, they are encouraged to talk with their providers about gradually taking on more structured activities at home and in the community. Examples include a part-time job, volunteer work, completing a summer class from an institution whose credits Mercyhurst will accept, or other tasks that build concentration, task persistence, and success.

While Waiting for a Medical Leave Approval

1. Recognizing the emergency nature of many medical leave requests, the Counseling or Health Center can ask OAA to provide an immediate regular medical excuse for a student that will cover their absence while a medical leave decision is still being reached. This is helpful if a student has not yet made the decision for a leave but has gone home for a few days to consult with their doctor and stay with family while arriving at a decision. It also assists a student who may have just been admitted to a hospital or treatment facility on an emergency basis and does not yet know how this will impact the rest of the semester.
2. The Executive Director of OAA processes the medical leave requests that have been reviewed and validated by the Executive Director, Wellness. The Executive Director of OAA provides students with a written document affirming the medical leave, and making sure that the student's current faculty, residence life, and other relevant departments know that the student is excused from classes due to that medical leave. The type of medical leave is not shared. A student is free to choose what information to personally share but will need to sign a release of information if requesting that OAA relay any additional data beyond that noted above.

Visits to Campus When on a Medical Leave

1. Students who are on a medical leave due to recent suicide attempts, continued strong preoccupation with suicidal ideation/threats, or with impulses/decisions to physically harm another are not permitted to return to campus until cleared from medical leave.
2. Engaging in on-campus activities while still on medical leave is not generally considered a prescribed part of a student's treatment plan.
3. Students with questions on this should contact the Executive Director, Wellness, or the Vice-President for Student Life.

Progress during Medical Leave

1. Students on medical leave are encouraged to stay in touch with their primary contact person at the Counseling and/or Health Center. Similarly, campus staff members of these departments are encouraged to reach out 1-2 times a semester to see how a student is progressing, and to document progress.

Process of Completing Medical Leave

1. Students requesting to return to campus from medical leave at the start of the next semester should contact the Executive Director, Wellness, by phone or email at least 30-45 days prior to the first day of that new semester. The Executive Director or designee will talk with the student about the return from leave process, ask the student to share their impression of readiness, and answer student questions. The student will also be asked to sign a release of information form at the home provider's office.
2. The provider must be licensed and have the training and experience required for the type of service provided. The letter from the provider should be on that provider's letterhead stationery and signed and dated by the provider. The provider will be asked the number and type of sessions/meetings held with the student, attendance, motivation, main treatment goals, progress, any recent crisis, or hospitalizations, as well as evidence of increasing ability to successfully pursue goals while home, such as maintain a part time job, do ongoing volunteer work, etc.
3. The final decision to approve a student's return from medical leave is made by the University. The Executive Director of Wellness and/or the Medical Director of the Health Center will review information from the treatment provider along with any behavioral evidence that suggests that the student now demonstrates improved abilities to function safely and successfully in a campus setting. These examples of progress may be results of medical or psychological interventions.

Mandatory Medical Leave

1. Almost all medical leaves are voluntary leaves. However, there are occasions where a student's level of illness so negatively affects personal judgement that (a) a student's ability to protect their own physical safety on campus or that of others is significantly compromised, and (b) efforts to engage the student in evaluation/treatment/hospitalization or to take a voluntary medical leave are unsuccessful. In these instances, the University reserves the right to require an involuntary medical leave if indicated.
2. If a student disagrees with being placed on a mandatory medical leave, the student may appeal the recommendation. The appeal must be submitted to the Executive Director, Wellness within five (5) business days of being notified of the leave decision and should indicate the grounds for the appeal.
3. Appeals should not exceed 1500 words. Appeals that do not meet this standard may be returned to the party for correction, but the time for appeal will not be extended unless there is evidence that technical malfunctions caused the appeal document not to meet these standards.
4. The limited grounds for appeal available are as follows:
 - A. Procedural irregularity that affected the outcome of the matter (i.e., a failure to follow the institution's own procedures);
 - B. New information that was not reasonably available at the time of determination that a mandated medical leave was made.

- C. The appeal authority decisionmaker(s) had a conflict of interest or bias for or against an individual party, or for or against complainants or respondents in general, that affected the outcome of the matter.
5. Appeals will be decided by an Appeals Officer who will be free of conflict of interest and bias and will not serve as the hearing decision maker in the same matter.
6. The outcome of the appeal will be provided in writing and include rationale for the decision.

The submission of appeal stays any sanctions for the pendency of an appeal. Supportive measures and remote learning opportunities remain available during the pendency of the appeal. Outcome of appeal will be provided in writing and include rationale for the decision.

The First Semester Back on Campus

1. Students requesting to return from a medical leave should contact the Executive Director, Wellness at jsmith@mercyhurst.edu or 814-824-2037 at least 30-45 days before the start of a new semester.
2. A phone call will be scheduled between the student and a key clinical person on the medical leave team to discuss student perception of treatment progress and readiness to return.
3. Students will sign a release of information form allowing their community provider(s) to share written and/or verbal communication about student's progress with campus clinician.
4. Students who were on a mandated medical leave due to safety concerns towards self or others will be asked how they feel these concerns have been affected by treatment, and providers will be asked about examples of student's progress relative to safety.
5. A phone or virtual appointment between the student and clinician is often held about 30-60 days before students anticipated campus return. With student permission, the parents can also be included in all or part of that conversation.
6. The decision about the student returning to campus will be made, and the student will receive a list of the next steps to take to re-activate their student status, if appropriate, and sign-up for classes.
7. Students returning from medical leave are encouraged to define what will help the upcoming semester be successful.
8. Available campus supports are reviewed with the student: counseling, health center, student financial services, academic supports, tutoring, student clubs/activities, wellness programs, etc.
9. Additional counseling or health services are discussed, along with appointments or referrals if needed.
10. of the College,

RESPONSIBLE OFFICERS:

Vice-President for Student Life, Laura Zirkle, Ph.D.

814-824-2366

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Scheduled Review Date: Ongoing