

OBITUARIES: Procedures & Guidelines for Class Secretaries

September 4, 2016: Update

TRADITIONAL ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CLASS SECRETARY

Communicating the passing of a classmate typically falls under the purview of the class secretary, though some classes assign this role to a separate class officer known as a class steward, memorialist, in memoriam editor, necrologist, biographer or historian. When the latter is the case, it is still important for the designated communicator to collaborate with the class secretary, as well as with the newsletter editor and the webmaster.

Obituaries run in the online edition of the magazine only (the print edition simply lists the name, class year and date of death of each deceased alum at the end of the Class Notes section). Secretaries ordinarily learn of a death from a classmate or from the *DAM* after it has been reported to the Alumni Records Office (ARO). If you hear of a death before receiving an official notification from the office of *DAM*, or if you aren't sure whether the ARO knows, it is important that you alert Michelle Brown in the ARO (603-646-2253 or Michelle.L.Brown@dartmouth.edu) without delay.

The passing of a classmate is not considered "official" until the College has closed his or her alum file and generated the one-page "Death Notice" of confirmed details. For the purposes of the magazine, no death is considered processed until the secretary or memorialist has received materials from *DAM*—which will always include a "Death Notice" and may include a newspaper obituary, additional info from the deceased's file and materials from the family. Once you have received those materials and have used them to confirm the details of a classmate's obituary, you should submit the obituary to Theresa D'Orsi at classnotes@dartmouth.edu or Theresa.m.dorsi@dartmouth.edu. This process ensures that a classmate is truly deceased and details such as date of death, hometown, survivors, etc. are accurate—it also ensures that the College is aware of the classmate's death. Note that although class officers may publish any information on a class website or on any class social media platform, *DAM* will not accept any obituaries before its process is complete. Note as well that it is NOT appropriate to post obits on class social media platforms without a) first obtaining approval from a member of the family of the deceased, or b) confirming that the memorial information has appeared in the public realm either through direct publication by a family member or by a third party at the behest of the family.

Additional information and requirements with respect to communicating the death of a classmate include the following:

- Obituaries should adhere to the same style guidelines you use in your Class Notes columns. They will go through the standard *DAM* three-editor proofing process.
- The word limit for obituaries on the *DAM* website is 250.
- A friend or family member of the deceased may write an obituary. Let him/her know, however, that you will need to review the copy and make any necessary edits resulting from word count

or stylistic issues, and then you will need to send it to the *DAM* (to the attention of Theresa D’Orsi) for final review and approval.

- Deadlines for submitting obits fall on the 15th of the month following submission of Class Notes columns. All approved obituaries are posted with an online *DAM* issue. For example, the May-June Class Notes section of the *DAM*—due Feb. 28 and posted online by May 1—will go up with obituaries submitted by March 15.

Obituaries posted on the *DAM* website (dartmouthalumnimagazine.com) can be accessed by clicking on the “Class Notes & Obits” tab. Note that the obits section of the *DAM* website allows spouses/significant others, classmates, friends and family members to post additional remembrances and memorial service information with no minimum word count constraint. Photos may be posted as well.

Obituaries posted on class websites are not subject to the 250-word restriction. In the event an expanded version of an obit is drafted, however, it is the responsibility of the class secretary or memorialist to ensure it is both accurate and grammatically correct. The posting of such information on the class website is the individual responsibility of the class officers.

ABOVE & BEYOND

You and your fellow class officers can decide if you want to do more than what is expected with respect to the handling of a classmate’s death. If this is the case, here are a few ideas on how you might go about this:

- Although not a requirement, you may want to share a draft of your obit with a spouse or other family member of the deceased before submitting it to the *DAM*. This serves to ensure accuracy of the content and is a nice way to make the family of the deceased feel included in the process.
- Some classes choose to send a personal condolence note to the family of a deceased classmate on behalf of the entire class. It’s a moving way to help families deal with their loss by showing how much the deceased meant to his/her class and remind them that they are part of a large, caring family. As previously noted, this is typically handled by a class secretary, memorialist or other specially designated class officer. Ideally the designated communicator will be a friend of the deceased who is known to the family.
- Separate from, or in addition to, a personal letter of condolence to the family, class officers might consider making a donation (of a predetermined fixed amount on behalf of the class) in the name of the deceased to an area of the College that was meaningful to him/her or perhaps to a dedicated class project.
- Some class secretaries choose to include the names and dates of death of classmates at the bottom of their columns as a way of alerting readers to those deaths. This is entirely up to the class secretary (some class secretaries make no mention of the deceased, but instead use their class newsletters or websites to communicate that information). If you are planning to write an

obituary, you might also want to include a sentence along the lines of “Find a full obituary at dartmouthalumnimagazine.com.”

- There may be instances in which there is time to alert classmates who might wish to attend a funeral or memorial service. If so, the class secretary might work with other class officers to alert classmates living in the area or who were close friends (if known). Such alerts usually take the form of a social media post (as previously stated, subject to having first obtained family approval, or having verified that a family member published the information or sanctioned its appearance in the public realm) or individual emails relaying the details (bearing in mind that it is still advisable to first obtain family permission in cases where details of the funeral or memorial service have previously been made public). Again, this is entirely up to the individual class secretary and how his or her class executive committee wants to handle such events.
- For obit notices under a class’ control (e.g. on a class website or class Facebook group), the issue of “relative parity” (i.e. of near equal length, as is the case on the *DAM* website, where classmate obits have a 250 maximum word limit) has been brought to the attention of the Secretaries Association. At least one case has been documented where significant differences in obit length and number of associated photos for two deceased classmates led to a volunteer leadership team being perceived as “playing favorites” and not striving to memorialize all deceased classmates in a fair, relatively consistent manner. This is a sensitive topic with no easy remedy that each class leadership team should discuss and determine how to handle on its own.