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UMass will review use of drug informants

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) and [Eric Bosco](#)

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18 COMMENTS



NANCY PALMIERI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

The University of Massachusetts Amherst defended its use of students as confidential informants.

AMHERST — The University of Massachusetts Amherst announced Monday that it will review aspects of a campus Police Department program that uses students as confidential drug informants, after a disclosure that an informant for the university police died of a heroin overdose.

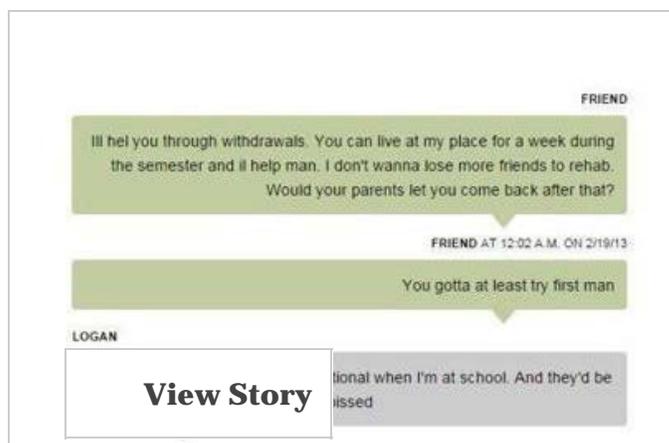
The university defended the program, but said it will review whether to require informants in drug cases to get help for possible addictions and whether to notify parents when a student is recruited into the program.

“The assessment will help determine whether the confidential informant program can operate successfully with a mandatory referral to an addiction specialist or notification to a parent . . . while maintaining a program that deters distribution of illegal, lethal drugs,” UMass said in a statement.

On Sunday, a Globe story detailed how campus police recruited a student caught selling drugs to become an informant. The police

told the student that if he agreed to inform on others, the school would not pursue criminal charges or disciplinary action against him or tell his parents about the arrangement.

He agreed, and less than a year later the 20-year-old junior died of a heroin overdose.



The screenshot shows a text message conversation. The first message, from a 'FRIEND', says: "I'll help you through withdrawals. You can live at my place for a week during the semester and I'll help you. I don't want to lose more friends to rehab. Would your parents let you come back after that?". The second message, from the same 'FRIEND' at 12:02 A.M. on 2/19/13, says: "You gotta at least try first man". Below the messages is a 'View Story' button and a partially visible message from 'LOGAN' that says: "ional when I'm at school. And they'd be missed".

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The death last October has prompted concern over the informant program and criticism from the student's parents and friends over whether the university and its police force could have done more to help the student. The Globe has identified him only by his middle name, Logan, to protect the family's privacy.

On the Amherst campus Monday, students expressed a mix of shock, fear, and anger over the informant program.

The Police Department "created an environment that kept this student in a constant state of fear because he was coerced into participating in this program with a blatant lack of resources and care that should have been provided to help support this student," said Sionan Barrett, speaker of the student Senate, who called Logan's

death “preventable.”

Some legal experts have said that other colleges use student as informants. But officials from at least four other local schools — Boston College, Boston University, Northeastern University, and Tufts University — said Monday that their campus police departments do not utilize the practice.

Officials at several other major campuses in the state did not respond to requests for comment Monday.

UMass police have said they never suspected that Logan was a heroin user. When they caught him selling LSD, they said they found a hypodermic needle that could have been used for other drugs. Officers said Logan denied having a drug problem and refused treatment.

The university said that officials from its police, student affairs, and legal departments will study whether the confidential-informant policy should be changed.

Campus spokesman Edward Blaguszewski said Monday that the matter will be discussed as part of the college’s preparation for a scheduled accreditation review of the UMass Police Department. That review, by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, is expected to conclude in mid-2015, Blaguszewski said.

Mark Mossier, a program manager for the national accrediting agency, said UMass police would still be in compliance with the organization’s standards if it adopted a policy requiring that drug informants be referred to an addiction specialist.

UMass defended its informant program. “The growing use of heroin in Western Massachusetts and elsewhere is a major concern of university officials, and police believe having this tool available is important to protect public safety,” the statement said.

The university said police use informants only after careful consideration and only if they believe doing so can help them to catch “a major drug dealer who poses a significant threat to our students.”

“The informant policy includes a requirement that informants have stated a willingness to cooperate and provide information,” the statement added. “They are made fully aware of their role, and there are strict procedures in place to ensure their safety and protect their identity.”

The school said there currently are no student informants working with campus police.

Logan’s mother said parents should be notified if a student becomes a confidential informant, especially when there are indications of drug use.

The last heroin death at UMass occurred in 2008, when Darby Fassett overdosed at his off-campus home in Hadley. His father, Daniel Fassett, said Monday that school officials should be more open with parents of students who may need help.

“This is about safety,” said Fassett. “The campus police have to tell the parents. I think every parent would say, ‘If my child almost dies, let the parents know.’”

The Globe also reported Sunday that the person who allegedly sold Logan the heroin that killed him is still a student at UMass Amherst.

University officials said they were not aware of that until reading the Globe’s story. UMass has asked Amherst town police, which investigated Logan’s off-campus death, about the identity of the alleged dealer, “so [the university] can take prompt and appropriate action as needed.”

Many UMass students worried Monday that the informant program puts students’ safety at risk, not only from continued drug use but also from the possibility that they could become targets if others discover they are working as informants.

“It just sounds like some secret-agent stuff, like one of those things that happens in the movies but not in real life,” said Keenan Ellis, a senior. “It’s just a strange thing where instead of immediately getting this kid help, they push him even deeper.”

Irene Tzelalias, also a senior, said: “College is unsafe as it is, but not being able to trust your friends makes it even worse.”

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