

Dear Bobcats,

This afternoon we gathered as a university community to remember and honor the life of one of our students, Ashley Gonzalez-Garcia. Thank you to those of you who were able to attend Ashley's vigil. Your presence today spoke volumes. For those who were unable to attend, I wanted to share the message at the heart of our time together.

In December, we lost Ashley, a third-year computer science major whose passing is a profound loss for her family, friends, classmates, faculty and for all of us who share in the life of this campus. When we lose a member of our community, the grief extends far beyond a single classroom or residence hall – it touches every corner of our university.

Ashley came to us with curiosity, determination and hope. As a computer science student, she was part of a field built on creativity, problem-solving and the belief that knowledge can shape a better future. Even for those who did not know Ashley personally, her presence mattered. Her efforts mattered. Her life mattered. And saying goodbye is never easy.

Moments like today's vigil remind us that a university is more than a place of learning. It is a community bound by shared experiences, hopes and responsibility to care for one another. When we lose a student, we grieve not only for the life that was lived, but also for the future that will now remain unfinished.

Today I made a promise to Ashley's loved ones in attendance that she will always be remembered as a valued member of the FSU community and will forever be a Bobcat.

To our students, faculty and staff, please know that grief does not follow a schedule, and it does not look the same for everyone. Some of you may feel deep sadness, while others may still feel shocked, confused, angry or even numb. There is no "right" way to grieve, and all these emotions are valid.

As we move through the days, weeks and months ahead, I encourage you to lean on one another. You do not have to carry this alone. If you are struggling, please reach out to someone – a friend, a colleague or a mentor – it is so important that you just reach out. Our counseling and mental health services are available to support you, so please use them. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but quite the opposite. It is a true act of strength.

In honor of Ashley's memory, let us recommit ourselves to kindness, compassion and looking out for our friends and neighbors. We need to check on each other often, be patient with ourselves and remember that it is ALWAYS ok to ask for help, *especially* during moments when life feels overwhelming.

Moving forward together, may we do so with empathy, care and a commitment to the well-being of every single member of Bobcat Nation – not just on the hard days, but every day.

With gratitude and care,

Darlene Brannigan Smith, PhD
Interim President

