

Fraternities work to increase awareness of fire risks

by Daryl Lang and
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Students at Bloomsburg University said farewell last week to three of their own who died in a March 19 fraternity fire. Tim Knisely and Shawn Kauffman know all too well that a similar tragedy could happen at Penn State. That's why the two Centre Region code inspectors spend much of their time visiting fraternity houses in State College, looking for fire hazards and writing detailed lists of all violations at every house in the hope of getting the problems corrected.

And that's why several of Penn State's fraternities are now working together to increase awareness about fire risks.

It's an uphill battle. Penn State has 52 fraternity houses, more than any other university in the country, and each of them is found guilty of at least a few fire code violations when the inspectors visit.

"It seems like we can't get into these houses enough," said Knisely, a senior fire and housing inspector with the Centre Region Code Administration.

Local officials are looking for the best ways to prevent fires like the one a week ago at Bloomsburg. It was the second fatal fire in six years at a Bloomsburg fraternity.

National Fire Protection Association figures show that in a typical year, there will be 1,800 fires in dorms, fraternities and sororities nationwide, resulting in at least one death. The last fatal fire at a Penn State fraternity was in February 1966, when a house mother died at Sigma Nu fraternity.

But there are a few minor fires each year. Kauffman, an assistant chief for the Alpha Fire Company, was one of the firefighters who responded to a March 8 blaze at Chi Phi, a 68-year-old wood-frame structure on Hamilton Avenue.

The fire, later determined to be caused by electrical wiring, was under control before it spread beyond one bedroom. All the students had left for spring break and no one was injured.

The house had 72 code violations when it was inspected in February 1999 — ranging from inoperable emergency lights to doors incorrectly propped open — but all of those problems had been fixed when the house was checked in December, Kauffman said. Still, he adds, it's common for small violations to crop up again once the inspectors leave.

"There may have been new violations," Kauffman said. "The cause of the fire may have been a violation."

Fraternity life — sometimes with dozens of students sharing a house and acting as hosts huge parties — tends to be rough on fire safety systems.

A review of inspection records shows it is typical for a house to rack up dozens of violations, even if most of them are small and easily repaired.

A February 1999 inspection of Beta Sigma Beta, 255 E. Fairmount Ave., found 71 violations. They included five instances of toasters being used in bedrooms, several fire doors being propped open, garbage cluttering hallways, and duct tape covering the horn of an alarm. After failing to fix all the problems, the fraternity was hit with three citations totaling \$700.

At Delta Tau Delta, where sprinklers were installed after a fire in the early 1980s, violations were noted in the 1999 inspections for plants, wind chimes, and fuzzy dice hanging from the sprinkler heads.

One of the fraternities with the best records, Delta Theta Sigma, 101 N. Patterson St., had only seven violations recorded in April 1999. But they included a propane tank being stored on a porch and a lawn mower being stored in the attic.

Many of the problems can be corrected the same day as the inspection. But they tend to return just as easily.

Fraternity brothers who smoke will often remove the batteries of the

smoke alarm in their room if it's sensitive, said Brian Brassell, president of Tau Kappa Epsilon.

Actions like that are dangerous, said David Felice, chief fire inspector for the Centre Region Code Administration.

"These are set up to save their lives," Felice said. "It almost seems suicidal that they tamper with the fire alarm systems."

In the early 1990s, it wasn't uncommon to find 250 violations per fraternity house, Knisely said. Now, 30 or 40 violations per house are average. Houses with the most violations may have 60 or 70.

"When I started in 1996, most of the time, a code officer wasn't welcome in the house," said Knisely, who spends more than half his time on the job dealing with fraternity house inspections.

Things have improved since then, he said. Most fraternities are willing to cooperate with the code office, though ongoing maintenance at the houses is still a concern.

"We get good cooperation while we're there, but there's not always someone there who takes charge," Knisely said.

Although some houses have a fire marshal whose primary job is safety issues, others just have a house manager, who deals with everything from clogged sinks to fire protection.

Knisely said the Code Administration is researching holding inspections more frequently. For now, the inspection cycle runs every two years. During that time, inspectors sometimes visit houses six or seven times to check on the progress of fixing the situations which led to any violations.

Some problems, especially those requiring new doors to be mounted in the house, take a long time to complete or cost a lot of money, inspectors say. Regular fire inspections have helped at least one fraternity avoid a close call.

In files with the inspection records, Knisely keeps two sets of Polaroid

photographs. The first pictures show the inside of an attic at Pi Lambda Phi taken Jan. 14, 1994. A wooden ladder provided the only access to a loft a fraternity member was using as a bedroom, complete with carpet, a mattress, and clothes scattered about. That week, the fire inspectors ordered him out of the attic.

The second set of photographs shows the same attic, blackened and gutted as the result of a fire. The date on those pictures is Jan. 29, 1994.

"That person would have been dead if he was up there," Knisely said. "There was no way out."

Fire officials point out that a building with a sprinkler system is generally safer than one without. Residential sprinklers are heat-activated and typically spray enough water to keep a fire from spreading once it starts, Kauffman said.

Although legislation is in the works at both the state and national levels to provide money for sprinkler systems, only nine Penn State fraternities — less than 20 percent — have installed them.

"It's something everyone would want to have," said Mike Barrett, vice president of Chi Phi. "It's just not feasible economically." But more of the chapters are taking proactive fire safety measures, like hiring a contractor to do a pre-inspection of the house before the code officers come. The contractors point out what needs to be fixed so that fraternity members can start to work on it.

"We encourage our chapters to do that every semester, even when there's not a code inspection," said Jay Sletson, executive director of the Fraternity Purchasing Association.

Forty-nine fraternities belong to the FPA, a corporation that facilitates work between contractors and fraternities, as well as saving the chapters money on various building materials.

"A lot of the contractors work with us because we guarantee to pay one week after we get the invoice," Sletson said, adding that FPA also has good

relations with the alumni who, in many cases, own the homes.

Some fraternity members, like Acacia President John Zieglerewengerd, are hoping to spread the safety message to their brothers. Along with the Masons of Pennsylvania and the Interfraternity Council, Ziegler's fraternity is organizing a student fire safety program next month.

"I want to spread awareness among the fraternities and the general public," he said.

The program, scheduled for 8 p.m., April 3, in the Sparks Building, will include a presentation from Bonnie Woodruff, whose son died in a 1996 fire at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Education is a particular challenge, fire investigators say, because of the constant turnover as students move on.

"Every semester there's a new group of pledges that come in, and we have to start over with each one," Knisely said.

3 killed in fire at Bloomsburg frat house

by Michelle M. Martinez
Knight-Ridder Tribune
March 20, 2000

BLOOMSBURG, Pa. (KRT) — A fire destroyed a fraternity house near Bloomsburg University early Sunday morning, March 19, killing three people who officials say they believe were students.

As of late Sunday, the Columbia County coroner had not identified the bodies recovered from the Tau Kappa Epsilon (TKE) house on East Fourth Street in this east-central Pennsylvania college town. The coroner is waiting for dental records, officials said.

"They're relatively sure that they know" the identities, Sgt. Leo Sokoloski said Sunday night, March 19. "But they

aren't going to release those names."

Six males were in the home at the time of the fire, Bloomsburg Police Chief Larry Smith said March 19 at a news conference at the university.

Sunday's was the second major fraternity-house blaze at the 7,500-student university in almost five and a half years. In 1994, a morning fire at the Beta Sigma Delta house killed five students, prompting Bloomsburg town and university officials to form a task force to draft safety recommendations for students living off campus.

TKE is an 18-member fraternity. The TKE house had had 12 code violations when the Bloomsburg Code Enforcement Office inspected it in October of 1999. However, all violations had been addressed as of January, he said.



KRT PHOTO BY RICHARD SABATURA
Students from Bloomsburg University console each other at the scene of an off-campus fraternity house fire Monday, March 21, 2000.

Scholarly website promises more depth, accountability

by John J. Goldman
Los Angeles Times
April 2, 2000

NEW YORK — Six prestigious international universities and cultural institutions were to announce Monday that they have formed a company to sell knowledge and education on the Internet, a move that could be a model for courting lifelong learners.

The partnership among Columbia University, London School of Economics and Political Science, the British Library, Cambridge University

Press, Smithsonian Institution and New York Public Library will bring expertise and a vast amount of information to its Fathom Web site. Operations are set to begin later this year.

The site will seek to address one of the most serious weaknesses of the Internet, its founders say: the reliability of information on the Web.

All of Fathom's original content will be authenticated and its standards of editorial integrity monitored by the company's academic council, a panel of senior professors and curators from the participating institutions.

"It is our ambition to be identified as the place to go if you want to have authoritative information on topics across the board," said George Rupp, Columbia's president. "You have a whole range of useful information that would be calibrated by our best scholars."

Much of the information Fathom will provide has never been available outside the participating institutions.

Columbia University will contribute major selections from its oral-history project, one of the largest archives in the world.

Taped interviews range from a discussion with President Eisenhower

during the 1957 Little Rock, Ark., school desegregation crisis.

In a unique and moving memoir, psychoanalyst Muriel Gardiner recollects seeing Nazi soldiers marching into Vienna in the 1930s.

The New York Public Library will give the site 54,000 photographs marking the historical, cultural, and architectural development of New York City.

Among offerings from the London School of Economics will be a lecture by Professor Danny Quah on the "weightless economy," the shift from

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a world of manufacturing to a world of weightless services.

The British Library will have multimedia presentations bringing to life treasured objects such as the Magna Carta and the Lindisfarne Gospels, priceless seventh-century illuminated manuscripts taken to London by Henry VIII. The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History will survey North America's endangered mammals.

Many of the seminars, lectures, databases, performances, and publications offered by Fathom will be free. But charges will occur as users move deeper into the content.

The decision by Columbia to seek other elite partners to form a for-profit company came, officials say, after considerable research, development, and soul-searching. What officials at the university's upper Manhattan campus did not want to do was dilute the

tal base to build upon. The university's innovative Center for New Media Teaching and Learning developed highly original digital tools to aid instruction on campus.

At the same time, Columbia was seeking to capitalize on the \$2 billion-a-year U.S. market for distance learning — projected to grow to \$6 billion by 2003.

"This is a very big business. We really are aimed at the worldwide market, which we think ultimately may be bigger outside the United States," said Ann Kirschner, president and chief executive of Fathom. "Our goal is to make Fathom the place you think of when you think you've got to learn something."

Kirschner has a doctorate degree in English literature and started new-media activities for the National Football League. According to Michael Crow,

Columbia's executive vice provost, she was hired to help provide a balance between entrepreneurial drive and academic vision and the sanctity of the authentication process.

In addition to offering original content and context, Fathom hopes to make money through referral fees — steering site users to courses offered by other academic institutions — commissions on the sales of textbooks, periodicals, documents, and a wide variety of learning tools. Another potential source of revenue is sponsorships for special forums on the Web site.

"Fathom is far more than another distance-learning site," Kirschner said. "We are creating a vibrant Main Street for knowledge and education. We intend to go beyond the current limits of information sites scattered across the Web and also go beyond online education to help raise financial capital. ... The test will be to what degree knowledge capital can raise financial capital."

Court rules public universities may collect student fees despite objections

by Jan Crawford Greenburg
Chicago Tribune
March 23, 2000

WASHINGTON — In order to encourage the "free and open exchange of ideas," the Supreme Court Wednesday, March 23, said public universities can collect mandatory student fees to fund a variety of campus groups — from Amnesty International to the Pro-Life League — even if some students object to the organizations.

In a unanimous decision, the court ruled against a group of conservative students from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who had sued to stop their activity fees from going to organizations they found objectionable. They maintained that forcing them to support the groups violated their constitutional rights.

But the court, in an opinion by Justice Anthony Kennedy, said an important purpose of any university is to "facilitate a wide range of speech." The justices concluded that the university was entitled to collect the mandatory student fees, just as it has during its 151-year history, as long as it doled them out neutrally, without discriminating against groups based on their viewpoints.

"The university may determine that its mission is well served if students have the means to engage in dynamic discussions of philosophical, religious, scientific, social, and political subjects in their extracurricular campus life outside the lecture hall," the court said. "If the university reaches this conclusion, it is entitled to impose a mandatory fee to sustain an open dialogue to these ends."

The objecting students can't complain about those fees, the court said, as long as the school does not "prefer some viewpoints to others." Wednesday's decision reversed a ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit in Chicago.

Civil rights groups hailed the ruling as a significant free speech decision. They argued that the university's fee structure, which they said was a "total victory for the 1st Amendment," because it allows students to "have the opportunity to hear from many different viewpoints and to be able to express the views that they hold important."

in the minority.

Harlow and other civil rights lawyers said a contrary result, allowing students to opt out of funding organizations they oppose, would have dealt a devastating blow to minority groups, such as lesbians and gays. And on liberal campuses, they noted, conservative organizations, too, could have been shut out.

"If the university had lost this case, it would have meant the ability to form student groups on campus would have depended on majority approval," said Matt Coles, director of the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project for the American Civil Liberties Union. "You could create a group and be part of the ongoing debate on university campuses if the majority approved, but not otherwise."

Wisconsin Atty. Gen. James Doyle, whose office defended the university's fee structure, said the ruling was a "total victory for the 1st Amendment," because it allows students to "have the opportunity to hear from many different viewpoints and to be able to express the views that they hold important."

In the opinion, Kennedy acknowledged that "it is all but inevitable" that collecting mandatory student fees will result in subsidies to groups that "some students find objectionable and offensive to their personal beliefs." A university could, if it chose, allow students to opt out of funding those groups, the court said, but the Constitution did not require it.

But the court acknowledged what the university had asserted from the beginning: requiring colleges to allow students to opt out "could be so disruptive and expensive that the program to support extracurricular speech would be ineffective."

In reaching its decision, the court had to grapple with two different views of the 1st Amendment, which protects a person's right to speak freely, as well as his right not to speak.

For example, a state can't force a public university to pledge of neutrality to its faculty and staff, that teachers and lawyers, who must pay mandatory dues to unions and bar associations, can object to their fees going toward political ex-

pression that falls outside the groups' mission.

The students had urged the court to approach the case in a similar way, since they, too, are being required to pay fees which subsidize speech they find objectionable.

But the court said those decisions are "neither applicable nor workable in the context of extracurricular student speech at a university," largely because of the "important and substantial purposes of the university, which seeks to facilitate a wide range of speech."

"It is not for the court to say what is or is not germane to the ideas to be pursued in an institution of higher learning," the court said.

Instead, to protect students' First Amendment rights, the universities must ensure that funding decisions are made on a neutral basis, regardless of the group's viewpoint. It referred to a 1995 case, in which it held a student newspaper at the University of Virginia could not be denied funding because of its religious viewpoints. The school must administer the funds neutrally, the court said then.

The court found "symmetry" in that holding and in its decision in the Wisconsin case, it said.

"When a university requires its students to pay fees to support the extracurricular speech of other students, all in the interest of open discussion, it may not prefer some viewpoints to others," the court said.

Justice David Souter, joined by justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Paul Stevens, did not agree with the court's rationale. Though agreeing with the outcome, the concurring justices said they believed the university was entitled to collect the fees, just as it is able to make other funding decisions, such as selecting classes and inviting speakers.

But, still, the unanimity of the outcome was unusual from a court that generally is closely divided and often thought to be conservative. In ruling for the university, it sided with traditional liberal organizations, suggesting that, as the ACLU's Coles said, "We have a consensus across ideological and political lines about what the First Amendment protects."

Khrushchev and Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus — who describes his conversations with President Eisenhower