

A NEW PROGRAM HELPS DRIVE CAMPUS  
FIRE-SAFETY GROWTH AT OUR NATION'S  
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ■ ED COMEAU

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, firefighters work Sunday afternoon May 12, 1996, at the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house on the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill campus. A fire discovered just after 6 a.m. claimed the lives of five people and left three injured.

# schooled in fire

**I**N JANUARY 2000, A FIRE BROKE out in a residence hall at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, trapping students in their rooms. Three freshmen died. The following March, a fraternity house fire at Bloomsburg University in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, killed another three students.

Both fires focused attention once again on the fire dangers students at colleges and universities all over the United States face.

Contributing to the 1,500 fires that occur each year in college residences is the lack of fire-safety information aimed specifically at college students, which forces many college fire-safety professionals to use inappropriate videos and literature or develop their own materials. Recently, organizers of the Campus Fire Safety Forums, held annually since 1999 at the NFPA Fall Education Conference, decided to do something about the problem by funding the development of material that could be distributed to institutions across the United States. Because one of the goals of this innovative program, which they called “Living

with Fire,” was to eliminate cost as a barrier to using the material, Campus Fire Safety Forum organizers approached several organizations and companies for help. It didn’t take long to sign them up.

#### What’s on the web site?

With the funders on board, organizers began developing their fire-safety material, using discussions and focus groups with educators and students to guide the content.

Several focus groups were held with students, and campus fire safety educators were interviewed to determine what is needed—what would appeal to the students of today.

To enable campus fire-safety educators to assemble their own programs or update exist-

ing programs, the development group put the material together like a toolbox—only these tools include information bulletins covering such topics as fire safety and alcohol, candles, and smoking; automatic sprinkler and alarm systems; building fire-safety features; and fire extinguishers. Bulletins detailing past dormitory and fraternity-house fires are written in Microsoft Word™ and can be easily photocopied. Adding a logo and contact information can also customize the bulletin.

Because some schools don’t have the time to develop lesson plans for delivering much-needed fire-safety messages, “Living with Fire” comes with its own lesson plans that address evacuation, fire behavior, fire extinguishers, off-campus fraternity housing, on-campus residential housing, and on-campus dormitories. Along with these lesson plans come practical activities for interactive learning.

One of the most comprehensive parts of the



toolbox is a library of photographs of fires in student occupancies across the country. These photographs of candle fires, fraternity fires, fire-safety obstructions, off-campus housing fires, successful sprinkler activations, and a demonstration burn in a mock-up of a student's room, can be used to develop customized presentations.

To catch students' attention, the program developers had to come up with creative ideas that would cut through the advertising and media messages that bombard students. One idea, concocted by Campus Firewatch, was to advertise "Living with Fire" on buses. Another was to use stickers on pizza boxes. Every college town has pizza shops for students, and the program developers saw the stickers as an excellent medium for reaching its target audience.

Artwork that local educators can use to print their own stickers is available on the U.S. Fire Administration's web site [www.usfa.fema.gov](http://www.usfa.fema.gov). The Fire Administration agreed to post the material on its high-traffic site to make it accessible and to take care of any copyright issues that might have arisen if it weren't in the public domain.

## THE HIGH POINT OF THE WEEK WAS A LIVE BURN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS CAMPUS.

### Testing the program

To determine whether these concepts worked, the developers decided to test them last spring in Massachusetts. With its five colleges, Amherst provided an excellent laboratory.

In the days leading up to "Living with Fire" week, stickers were distributed to all area pizza shops and promotional ads asking "Are You Ready?—Graduate Alive" were placed on buses that served the colleges. The advertisements' cryptic message created a buzz among students.

Stickers were also put onto Frisbees®, which were handed out to students, in one case by their professor. The idea was success-

ful, with students swapping Frisbees of different colors and messages.

The high point of the week was a live burn in the middle of the University of Massachusetts campus. A mock-up of a student room was built and furnished, then set ablaze, making an indelible impression on the students and providing a great media opportunity.

At Smith College, another mock-up was equipped with an automatic sprinkler system to demonstrate how effectively sprinklers control fires. Thirty seconds after the fire was set, a sprinkler activated and extinguished it. To reinforce just how important sprinklers are, the system was shut off and the contents of the mock-up were reignited. Within five minutes, fire destroyed the room.

In September, a fire-safety booth was erected on the concourse in the center of campus at the University of Massachusetts. Prizes such as a kayak, mountain bike, and discount airline tickets were raffled off. To enter the raffle, students had to complete a fire-safety crossword puzzle, go through fire-extinguisher training, and participate in other safety-related activities. Burned items from past dormitory fires, such as radios, comput-

ers, and lamps, were displayed at an information booth, and videos of the mock-up burns were run continuously.

Also shown was a video called "Graduation: Fatally Denied," which takes the viewer through an evening with a fictional college student named Amelia. We follow her into her room, where we look at the covered smoke detector, the lit candles, the overloaded electrical outlets, her halogen lamp, and a number of other fire dangers. As we watch, Amelia lights a cigarette, sits down to study, and falls asleep.

Suddenly, the sound of the smoke detector wakes her. She tries to escape but is overcome by the smoke and collapses, unconscious. We watch as firefighters pull her burned body out of the building and put her into the ambulance that takes her to the hospital, where she dies. At the end of the video, a fire chief standing in the burned-out shell of Amelia's



room delivers a strong fire-safety message. This video, taped from the student's perspective, and shot at Amherst Fire Department, the University of Massachusetts, and Cooley Dickinson Hospital in nearby Northampton, vividly shows just how frightening a fire can be and what happens when someone is rescued. Its development was underwritten by contributions from the American Cancer Society, Gage-Babcock and Associates, the National Fire Sprinkler Association, Royal & SunAlliance, Simplex-Grinnell, the University Risk Management and Insurance Association, the University of Texas system, Hobbs Group/Kirklind & Co, LLC, and MJ Insurance Sorority Division, all of which are dedicated to reducing the number of fires at colleges and universities across the country.

Through efforts such as this, the developers of "Living with Fire" hope to reduce the number of fires that occur on and off campus each year at our nation's colleges and universities. They also hope that "Living with Fire" will serve as a focal point for new ideas on effectively reaching students with fire-safety information. Given student turnover each year, it's critical to keep such programs fresh with new learning experiences.

[WWW.CAMPUS-FIREWATCH.COM](http://WWW.CAMPUS-FIREWATCH.COM)

**ED COMEAU** is NFPA's former chief fire investigator and publisher of *Campus Firewatch*.