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## COLUMNS

FROM NFPA PRESIDENT JAMES M. SHANNON

>> **first** word



### Fire Safety on College Campuses

NFPA Journal®, *September/October 2008*

Anyone who has sent a son or daughter off to college will tell you how exciting it is to watch a child take that big step toward realizing his or her dreams. But it is also a little scary. We do the best we can to make sure our kids are prepared for the independent lives they are about to start. And that means discussing many different issues aimed at making sure our children will be safe after leaving home.

One of the topics too often left off that list is fire safety. People are much more likely to be aware of substance abuse issues among young people, and the press spends enormous resources to cover any instance of violent crime on campuses. Next to issues like that, the problem of fire in student housing might not seem particularly pressing, especially when the number of residential fires has decreased so markedly in recent decades.

Nonetheless, there are an average of 3,300 structure fires in dormitories, fraternities, and sororities each year, according to NFPA research. Some of the problem is related to behaviors closely associated with other residential fires, such as smoking and alcohol consumption, which may lead some parents to believe that, as long as they have those areas covered, they do not have to deal with any other aspect of fire safety.

But the fire problem among the student population is bigger than that. The NFPA study showed that 72 percent of fires in dormitories, fraternities, and sororities involved cooking equipment. More colleges and universities are building student housing with cooking facilities for residents. That could mean more cooking, hence more cooking fires, or it could mean less cooking using hot plates not suited to the building's wiring and layout. If so, that could mean fewer cooking fires. Either way, students will continue to be a major focus for fire-safety messages.

The good news is that there is a strong chance that members of this generation will have been exposed to NFPA's fire-safety messages long before they get to college. Many will have participated in activities around Fire Prevention Week from the time they were small, and we hope that those experiences stick with them through college and beyond.

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

##### July - August 2008

Advancing residential sprinklers

##### May - June 2008

Chief Warren McDaniels

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The Firewise® philosophy

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2007 Year in Review

##### November - December 2007

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Attacking the fire problem

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Establishing a culture of safety

Every year brings new examples of colleges that have stepped up their efforts to better educate students on fire-safety issues and to install more advanced life-saving technologies, such as sprinklers and automatic detection and alarm systems with automatic fire department notification.

**January - February 2007**  
2006 - A year in review

**November - December 2006**  
Preparedness efforts falling short

However, it only takes one tragedy to remind us that there is more to be done, particularly if we think about off-campus housing, living arrangements that colleges and universities often do not control and that are often not the most fire-safe environments. Early last year, there were two off-campus fires close to NFPA headquarters within weeks of each other, each of which claimed the life of a student. One was caused by a candle, and the other by a barbecue.

Reinforcing fire-safety messages as your son or daughter heads off to college is one way you can make sure they have a great and safe college experience. In addition to NFPA, many other organizations are working hard to improve fire safety on college campuses and in off-campus student housing. One organization we support and work with is the Center for Campus Fire Safety ([www.campusfiresafety.org](http://www.campusfiresafety.org)).

If your children are heading off to college or are already there, I urge you to look at this website and talk to them about their responsibility to protect themselves and their fellow students from fire. It might turn out to be one of the most important conversations you have with them.

**URL:** <http://www.nfpa.org/publicColumn.asp?categoryID=&itemID=40172&src=NFPAJournal>

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