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ROB NELSON
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The Daily Tar Heel

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Stop Waiting

On Jan. 24, the DTH called on UNC to work to improve fire safety in residence halls. Instead, UNC is passing the buck on to students.

It took a fraternity fire that killed five people to get town officials to pass an ordinance requiring sprinklers in all Greek houses. It seems University officials are content to wait for a few on-campus residents to die before they do anything themselves – despite a rash of fires recently in Morrison Residence Hall.

As a Wednesday e-mail to all campus residents shows, UNC would rather punish people who don't go outside after an alarm than prevent that fire or alarm in the first place.

Residence halls need up-to-date fire alarm systems. UNC officials need to get off their butts and press the N.C. General Assembly for those safeguards before another tragedy. And Residence Hall Association President Murray Coleman needs to start acting like the student advocate he was elected to be.

Prevention, Not Just Punishment

In the e-mail sent to all on-campus residents, Sue Kitchen, vice chancellor for student affairs, placed the bulk of the responsibility for fire safety on students. She said people who didn't leave their room when a fire alarm went off would be charged with a misdemeanor, fined and taken to Honor Court.

Yes, it is important that students leave their residence halls when a fire alarm goes off. That protects both students and firefighters.

But there's no way to enforce it. Police and fire departments don't have the staff to devote to a full search of a 1,000-student residence hall – and the residents who went outside shouldn't have to wait for them to.

And too much of the burden for reporting stragglers stands to fall on resident assistants. Besides, it's naive to think that RAs are going to turn their friends in to the police.

Increased punishment for not leaving residence halls might deter some students from staying in their rooms during fire alarms.

But it won't get to everyone. If UNC expects students to take a more active role in safety, it must meet them halfway.

Residence Halls Need Sprinklers

While UNC officials seem happy to drag their feet on upgrading residence hall safety, Chapel Hill's fire chief says residence halls need better fire safety equipment now.

"After a number of years of trying to educate young people about fire evacuation, I'm thoroughly convinced that all student housing, including fraternity and sorority houses, should have sprinklers," Chapel Hill Fire Chief Dan Jones told The News & Observer. "The students need to be protected where they are because they don't leave."

Even if students left all the time, there would be times they couldn't. A fire in the hall, for example, could keep an entire suite or floor of people trapped in their rooms.

Sprinklers will go off before an alarm and will start putting out the flames before firefighters arrive, Deputy Fire Chief Robert Bosworth told The Chapel Hill Herald.

That could have helped minimize the dangers of the Morrison fire Wednesday, he said. The fire occurred behind closed doors in a lounge, but smoke detectors and alarms are

in the hall. Luckily, the fire didn't spread to students' rooms. Sprinklers would have erased that threat to begin with.

UNC Officials Need to Get Off Their Butts

In a Jan. 24 editorial following the death of three students at Seton Hall University, The Daily Tar Heel called on UNC to update residence halls' fire protection systems.

The DTH asked officials to push lawmakers for money for sprinklers and better alarms, to cut down on false alarms and to e-mail people the official cause for any alarm.

Since then, UNC officials can't point to a single thing they've done differently.

As any public policy expert will tell you, a tragedy like Seton Hall can spark reforms. Hog waste lagoon spills caused lawmakers to regulate pork farmers, for example. The bombing of Pan-Am Flight 103 sparked airports worldwide to tighten security.

But neither Kitchen nor interim Director of University Housing Dean Bresciani phoned or wrote state lawmakers about the issue. In their defense, Kitchen pointed to UNC's gradual implementation of new fire safety equipment since 1993, while Bresciani said making some hasty lobbying efforts would have made UNC look unprepared.

Gradual implementation is OK with air-conditioners or intellectual climate, but it's absurd when lives are at stake. Had Kitchen and Bresciani pushed the issue after the Seton Hall and Morrison fires, lawmakers might have been more willing to speed up that gradual plan. Though they've already missed the perfect window of opportunity, they should start lobbying lawmakers now.

Meanwhile, Bresciani has vowed to act on the DTH's suggestion of sending e-mail messages to residents to inform them of the cause of every fire alarm in their building. He said Friday that he would bring the idea to RHA.

Lame Duck Coleman

Problem is, RHA has been anything but vocal about fire safety. RHA has been quiet in the wake of Morrison's most recent fire.

RHA President Murray Coleman said Thursday that Kitchen's policy was a good one. "This should've happened a long time ago," he said. If it should have happened a long time ago, Murray, you should have suggested something a long time ago.

It's Coleman's job to be an advocate for on-campus residents. He should not endorse a policy that places the bulk of the responsibility for increased safety on the students.

Perhaps Coleman has been too busy planning pre-Duke game pep rallies, because he has taken no solid initiative to push for better safeguards. He told the DTH that since the fires, he had gone to some meetings, e-mailed area governors to encourage them to talk to RAs and area directors and tried to get police to sponsor fire-safety programs.

Problem is, he said he had no specific timeline. Given his meager accomplishments thus far, it seems like all talk and no action.

We deserve better from both University officials and RHA.



Extra Days Won't Benefit Education

Over the years, many folks around here have accused officials in UNC-system General Administration of lacking a heart, while others have questioned if they have any brains.

But with the administration's recent insistence that the state's public universities make up the three class days lost to January's snow, one must naturally wonder if the folks running this show have lost both simultaneously.

Following Friday's meeting of interim Chancellor Bill McCoy, the Student Advisory Committee to the Chancellor and a host of other administrators, it appears that those of us in Chapel Hill will give up Good Friday, and a Saturday and a Sunday of different weekends to replace the snow days.

That was the proposal recommended to McCoy, who will make the final decision, subject to the administration's approval, about how best to meet their mandate that we reschedule lost instructional time.

According to a member of the advisory committee, McCoy first tried to tell the higher powers that their idea was ludicrous. Atta boy, McCoy.

That failing, he then argued that our exam reading days, few as they may be, ought to count as instructional days. At least someone at the top is clued-in to reality.

After all, students use those days to study and learn. But to no avail: The administrators' heads were apparently still buried in snow.

Indeed, McCoy is not the bad guy in this debacle. In fact, he took unnecessary flack for not canceling class for the initial snowfall that barely covered the ground. We'd be here until June if not for his wise judgement.

Having to attend class is not, in and of itself, so troubling. That's why we're here in the first place – that's what we all pay or get paid for. Although many will find the days painful, three days most certainly will not kill even the laziest student or busiest professor.

What is so infuriating, however, is that anyone could be so damned simple-minded as to blindly follow policy, foolishly believing that



BRANDON BRISCOE
VOICE OF REASON

making up class is worth the scheduling hassles and headaches.

Furthermore, the mandate is unbelievably inconsiderate – students and professors alike have other plans and things to do on week-ends.

Rest assured those decision-makers in the administration will see no need to come into work on Sunday when the rest of us are in class. After all, how could they miss their regular Sunday morning church service or golf game?

And what about the support personnel that run the University on a school day – will they report on a weekend? Busses, food service, and housekeeping are all needed with classes in session.

Instead of putting the slow start and confusing schedules behind us, these administrators will have us prolong the troubles.

Professors, not expecting the extra days, have already reworked their syllabi, cutting fat from courses and rescheduling due dates. Most classes will be back on track long before Good Friday even appears on the calendar.

What's more, many professors took the snow in stride, laughing it off and moving on with life. Thank goodness doctorates don't ruin everyone.

Admittedly, many students and professors will ignore the added days, especially if the class can catch up during regular hours. And only the professors with the coldest hearts will demand the attendance of students who have to work on weekends or who have planned to

spend the Easter weekend with their families.

It should also be mentioned that we have an exceptionally long school year as it is. For example, Princeton University, with two weeks less time, manages to educate its students better than UNC, if you trust the magazine rankings and even if you don't.

Time doesn't necessarily improve the quality of an education – time can be wasted. And while the length of our calendar is an entirely separate question, administrators should have taken comfort in the knowledge that we aren't falling behind our "peer institutions" with a measly three lost days.

Some things are simply more important and worth worrying about than how many days of class we attend.

Why aren't administrators finding money for teacher salaries, or looking for a new chancellor without botching the process, or renovating the Undergraduate Library or Student Union on time, or preventing people from being hit by cars?

We should have enjoyed the snow, cleaned it up and moved on with life.

Quite frankly, following petty policy at the cost of so much confusion and scheduling conflict is worthless.

Of course, prone to clichés, someone in the administration will inevitably ask in reply whether we would prefer a doctor who pays attention to details or one who seeks to expedite everything.

A good doctor is one who doesn't order unnecessary surgery.

And a good administrator is one who has an inkling of common sense and who doesn't create additional problems. This rescheduling nonsense will be as inconvenient as the snow that caused it, and there will be no sledding or snowmen or picturesque photo-ops to make it worthwhile.

Brandon Briscoe is a junior journalism and mass communication major from New Orleans, La. Reach him with tips and comments at brandon_briscoe@unc.edu.

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Office: Suite 104 Carolina Union
Campus Mail Address: CB# 5210 Box 49, Carolina Union
U.S. Mail Address: P.O. Box 3257, Chapel Hill, NC 27515-3257

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READERS' FORUM

Chapel Hill Transit Should Reconsider Silencing Bus Driver

TO THE EDITOR:

In response to the Jan. 24 editorial "I Am Somebody," I would like to say that bus driver Robert Moore's cheerful morning messages made many a passenger's day on the G bus.

For those of you who don't experience the finer pleasures of public transportation, here are a few anecdotes about Robert.

When the bus pulls up to a stop and riders see Robert, smiles wash over the faces of those who are otherwise and on all other days expressionless. As the G bus approaches the law school, smiles return to passengers' faces when Robert recites his morning greeting, "Good morning,

my name is Robert, and I would like to say good morning to all the ladies and gentlemen on the G bus."

To this greeting, the passengers all recite in unison, "Good morning, Robert." At this point, Robert takes time to tell passengers one of a number of messages. Sometimes passengers are instructed to wish their neighbors a good day. Other times, passengers are asked to announce, "I am somebody."

To demonstrate just how much Robert cares, after the dental fellow was killed in the crosswalk on Manning Drive, Robert reminded us to look both ways before crossing the street. He assured us that motorists did not always stop at crosswalks and that he did not want any of us to get hurt. Can any other bus driver claim such compassion?

I don't think so.

I would like to urge Chapel Hill Transit Director Robert Godding to reverse his decision about Moore.

We should not have to request Robert to perform his morning routine, and Robert should be able to use the microphone so that everyone on the bus can enjoy his morning cheer. The complaint of one passenger is not worth such harsh decisions. Please reconsider.

Jennifer Hoke
Second-Year Graduate Student
Physical Therapy

Ready, Set, Go ...

The Daily Tar Heel opinions page kicks off its coverage of student elections today, with the publication of the platforms of the six candidates for student body president. Stay tuned for all the other contenders.



The Daily Tar Heel welcomes reader comments and criticism. Letters to the editor should be no longer than 300 words. Students should include their year, major and phone number. The DTH reserves the right to edit letters for space, clarity and vulgarity. Publication is not guaranteed. Bring letters to the DTH office at Suite 104, Carolina Union, mail them to P.O. Box 3257, Chapel Hill, NC 27515 or e-mail forum to: editdesk@unc.edu.