

Setting Community Expectations and Standards at the University of Rhode Island

In the following excerpts from his communiqué kicking off the start of the 1997–98 academic year, Robert L. Carothers, president of the University of Rhode Island, urged faculty members to take an active role in setting behavioral expectations and standards for incoming freshman that emphasize the learning process and make it clear that alcohol abuse is not an accepted social norm.



September 1, 1997

Colleagues:

The new semester is about to begin, and the Class of 2001 will begin moving in today. It is an exciting class, about 200 students larger than last year, with average SAT scores that are up some 12 or 13 points. It will also have the most racial and ethnic diversity we have yet seen in Kingston. You have all worked hard to bring in this class, and I congratulate you. Despite the challenges at URI with which we are all too familiar, these students and their families saw the strengths of the University and made their decisions accordingly.

These first few weeks are obviously very important in setting the standards we expect these students to meet and in setting the tone of campus community life. This is a class which expects to be challenged, and I urge you to begin the semester in a way that provides that challenge. The research on student learning is clear that high expectations by faculty and a corresponding student commitment of "time on task" are essential, as are having students actively involved in the learning process and connected in meaningful ways to faculty in and out of class.

It is also during these first few weeks that local social norms are established. Among the most significant of these is the perceived norm regarding the use and abuse of alcohol and other substances. Alcohol abuse by students, especially binge drinking, is one of the most difficult problems on college campuses around the nation. It is also a sufficient condition for most sexual assaults and fighting. Despite recent progress at URI in nudging the norm of student behavior in the right direction, we can expect to continue to see such abuse in the incoming class.

Again, the research is clear that the most progress is made in dealing with this problem when it is treated as a matter of "environment," rather than as an individual matter (although individuals still must be held accountable for their own behavior). We need your help in making clear to students that the abuse of alcohol is not simply some rite of passage we will tolerate. You can do that by speaking out on the subject, and I hope you will do that. You have far more influence than you might imagine! You can also help by articulating your high expectations for work completed in these first few weeks and by not accepting excuses for work not completed on a timely basis because of partying. . . .

In short, let's use these first few weeks of the new semester to affirm the culture for learning to which we are committed. The entering class is strong evidence of the commitment of this outstanding faculty to our students, and we need to work together to ensure that they get off on the right foot, have a successful year and return to us in the fall of 1998 with as little attrition as possible. Thank you.

Robert L. Carothers, President



What Do Faculty Members Think?

According to the Faculty and Staff Environmental Alcohol and Other Drug Survey developed by the Core Institute for Alcohol and Drug Prevention, 64 percent of responding faculty members considered current levels of alcohol and drug use on their campus to be a concern for educators. Ninety percent said that institutions of higher education should be involved in prevention efforts. They also said that alcohol and other drug use negatively affects the personal and academic lives of their students (87 percent and 92 percent, respectively).

But despite these opinions, 78 percent do not describe themselves as "actively involved" in prevention. However, many faculty members would like to become more involved, with 60 percent saying that they would attend a workshop dealing with alcohol and other drug prevention and education efforts, and 40 percent saying they would like to be more involved with prevention on campus.

Survey findings are based on responses from 5,583 faculty and staff members from 31 colleges and universities during the period from December 1994 through March 1997. For additional information visit the Core Institute's Website at <http://www.siu.edu/coreinst>.