

Case Study
The University of Rhode Island
Smoke-free Residence Halls

Public university located in Kingston, Rhode Island

Enrollment: Approximately 14,000 students (Over 11,000 undergraduate, 3,600 of whom live in residence halls)

Fraternity/sorority membership: Approximately 10% of undergraduates

Gender breakdown: Male: 43%, Female: 57%

Racial breakdown: Caucasian: 75%, Hispanic/Latino: 4%, African American: 4%, Asian/Pacific Islander: 3%, Alaska Native or American Indian: 4%, Multiracial: 0.4%, Unknown: 11%

Summary:

Program/Policy Description. On June 1, 2001, all campus residence halls at the University of Rhode Island (URI) became smoke-free. This policy was accompanied by a ban on campus tobacco sales and an increase in campus cessation services. ***Background.*** The move to ban smoking in residence halls was prompted by survey results showing that 85% of incoming freshmen were nonsmokers, American College Health Association (ACHA) policy recommendations, a fatal fire at Seton Hall University, and pending dorm renovations. ***Strategy for Action.*** A multidisciplinary task force convinced President Robert Carothers to rescind a state exemption that permitted dormitory smoking. The enacted policy change was communicated through information packets, emails, welcome speeches, special events, paycheck stuffers, and a website. Resident Assistants enforced the new policy. A social norms marketing campaign supported a smoke-free normative environment. ***Outcomes.*** There was little opposition to the policy and very few violations have been reported. Behavioral surveys indicate a decrease in smoking rates since the policy change. ***Future Plans.*** A buffer zone banning smoking within 20 feet of residence halls will start in the fall of 2003.

Lessons Learned

URI's Smoke-Free Policy

Background:

As a public university, the University of Rhode Island (URI) is subject to Rhode Island state tobacco policy. When all state-owned buildings in Rhode Island became smoke-free in 1993, the university applied for, and was granted, an exemption to permit smoking in residence halls.

In 1991, a new housing director with an interest in smoke-free residence halls came on board at URI. Concern for creating a safe and healthy working environment for students, faculty, staff, and visitors eventually led to a proposal to make residence halls smoke-free. Knowing that student support was important, the President first requested information on student opinion. The push for smoke-free residence halls was delayed when a 1996 survey found that 67% of students would not be opposed to having a roommate who smoked.

In 1999, the issue was informally raised again; however, the University administration chose not to proceed due to other more pressing issues. Two surveys, designed in-house and based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey, were

administered to assess student tobacco use and attitudes, alcohol use, and other common high-risk behaviors. The 1999 and 2000 surveys revealed that 85% of incoming freshman at URI were nonsmokers (defined as not having smoked a cigarette in the last 30 days). With these results in hand, plus renovated dormitories and the Seton Hall fire fresh in mind, the group approached the student senate with a proposal to institute smoke-free dorms. Despite general student support, the senate decided not to formally take on the issue. Bypassing the student senate ultimately facilitated speedier passage of the new policy; however, having sought the opinion of the student senate resulted in critical buy-in from students.

Several additional key circumstances helped make smoke-free dorms a priority:

- ◆ The June 2000 American College Health Association (ACHA) campus policy recommendations stressed the importance of smoke-free dormitories.
- ◆ A fire at Seton Hall University in 2000, where three students were killed and 54 were injured, brought college fire safety issues to the forefront.
- ◆ URI began a major renovation project on its residence halls in 2000. With renovations underway, the timing was right to implement policies to make residence halls safer, cleaner, and healthier for all students.
- ◆ The proposal made financial sense. Requests for student housing exceeded the number of rooms available. There were plenty of students on the waiting list for dorm rooms to replace smokers who might leave the URI dorms to live off-campus because of the policy change.

Strategy for Action:

Committee Work. Armed with the knowledge that 85% of URI students began college as nonsmokers, URI's Alcohol Team or "A-Team" organized a subgroup to discuss strategies for keeping smoking rates low as students advanced through URI. Health Services teamed with Safety and Risk Management, the Office of the Dean of Students, faculty from the College of Pharmacy, and researchers at URI's Cancer Prevention Research Center to tackle tobacco issues. In addition, the American Cancer Society (ACS) and the Rhode Island Department of Health provided key strategic support and information to assist in URI's efforts to become smoke-free.

Needs Assessment. After conducting an assessment, the "tobacco team" discovered that minimal processes were required to implement a smoke-free residence hall policy. Because smoking in dorms was permitted under a special exemption clause, a ban would simply require that the university president withdraw his request for an exemption. When presented with the data about smoking at URI, the health and safety problems caused by tobacco use to both smokers and nonsmokers, the likelihood that smoke-free dorms would not have a negative financial impact on the school, and the fact that seeking permission from the Board of Governors for Higher Education was not required, President Carothers agreed that URI residence halls should become smoke-free. He made the policy a reality by withdrawing his request for an exemption from the state.

Communicating the Policy Change. Campus policy was revised in March 2001 to include smoke-free dorms and a ban on campus tobacco sales. Hypnotherapy services were added to the campus cessation programs. With financial assistance from the Rhode Island Department of Health, as well as its own funding, URI took the following steps to prepare the URI community for its new smoke-free environment:

- ◆ The smoke-free dorm policy, to take effect June 1, 2001, was announced during the spring to returning students to give them time to consider housing options for the upcoming year, and to air out the dorms over the summer.
- ◆ In the fall, all new and returning students received information in welcome packets and an email explaining the new policies and cessation services.
- ◆ At freshman orientation, President Carothers announced that the incoming class would be the first to graduate from a smoke-free URI. This announcement received standing ovations from both incoming students and parents.
- ◆ Students organized a “smoke-free” Rock and Bowl event at a local bowling alley, drawing over 1200 students, exceeding student attendance at many URI football games.
- ◆ Notices about the new policy and cessation services were distributed to the faculty and staff with their paychecks.
- ◆ URI’s “Breathe Easy...We’re Going Smoke-Free!” webpage was to explain the reasons for going smoke-free and provide information about tobacco and cessation programs (<http://www.uri.edu/smokefree/>).

Enforcement. Resident Assistants (RAs) were instructed about the policy and enforcement during the 2001-2002 RA trainings. Because no smoke of any kind (e.g., candle, incense) is permitted in the URI dorms, smokers were not singled out by the smoke-free policy.

Implementation of a social norms campaign. URI launched a social norms marketing campaign to correct student misperceptions about student smoking and create an environment supportive of the school’s smoke-free policies. As is often the case, perceptions of student smoking rates were much higher than the actual rates, leading to a social atmosphere supportive of smoking. Social norms campaign materials featuring well-known students, faculty, and the URI mascot highlighted the fact that 85% of incoming freshmen do not smoke. These messages also highlighted the benefits of being smoke-free. Additional marketing techniques were also used, including a Public Service Announcement about tobacco recorded by a well-known student rapper.

Outcomes:

Reaction to URI’s new policies has been mostly positive, with mild opposition. Although some discussion arose about a “smoker’s right” to smoke freely in the privacy of his or her own room, the majority of URI students supported the right to smoke-free air. The demand for dorm accommodations at URI still exceeds availability.

In the first year of the policy change, only 18 violations were reported. Upon first offense, violators are issued a “warning ticket” with cessation information. The second offense involves a conversation with the Residence Hall Director to discuss tobacco use, as well as a referral to campus cessation services. A third offense means a hearing with a judicial officer, with the possibility of a fine or loss of campus housing. To date, no student violations beyond the first offense have been reported.

The new policies have been successful in several areas:

- ◆ Despite losing tobacco sales, the campus bookstore turned a profit in 2001 for the first time in years. While the increase in revenue is not necessarily linked to the ban, clearly the ban was not harmful to bookstore sales.
- ◆ Use of the campus hypnotist by students wishing to quit continues, although demand has decreased slightly.
- ◆ Behavioral surveys indicate a decrease in smoking rates among URI students since the implementation of new policy.
- ◆ Health services is confident that when the first cohort of students to have spent all four years at a smoke-free URI graduates in 2005, it will include fewer smokers than previous graduating classes.

Future Plans:

URI will continue its efforts to create a healthy environment for all of its community members through policy revision, provision of cessation services, and continued social norms marketing campaigns. In fall 2003, a 20 foot smoke-free buffer zone banning smoking will be in place around all residences. RAs will officially be charged with enforcing the policy. Proper signage, butt receptacles appropriately placed at least 20 feet from buildings, and peer enforcement will likely minimize the RAs' responsibilities in this area. URI is hopeful that enforcement of the new policy will be a non-issue as it was with residence halls. As URI continues with its smoke-free initiatives, a Smoke-Free Policy Review Committee will be appointed by the president to oversee and evaluate the policies.

Lessons Learned:

Many important lessons were learned as URI developed and implemented tobacco policies.

- ◆ *Know the research literature on college smoking.* Showing people data and numbers on costs to students, staff, and the school at large is very persuasive.
- ◆ *Know the language that best speaks to different members of high-level administration.* If the dean is an economist, use numbers in your argument. If your president is an English literature expert, use powerful prose to persuade.
- ◆ *Personal testimonials are always powerful.* Whether faculty, students, or staff, almost everyone knows someone whose life has been negatively affected by tobacco. Tapping into those personal connections is a powerful persuasion tool.
- ◆ *Know your campus.* It is important to consider natural boundaries, proximity of buildings, and layout of outdoor gathering areas when imposing smoking restrictions.
- ◆ *Know your campus' political climate.* In 1996 and 1999 the campus was not yet ready to consider smoke-free dorms, but by 2001, the timing was right. The political climate on campus shifts annually, with changing administrations, changing student concerns, and events from the outside world that bring certain issues to the forefront.
- ◆ *Persistence is key.* Just because a proposal was turned down previously does not mean that it will be turned down the next time.

University of Rhode Island Smoke-free Policy

- ◆ Smoking is prohibited in all University-owned and operated buildings, including residence halls and apartment complexes.
- ◆ Smoking is prohibited in all vehicles owned and operated by the University.

- ◆ Smoking is prohibited on residence hall and apartment complex porches or balconies and (effective fall 2003) within 20 feet of any residence.
- ◆ Tobacco advertisements are prohibited in University-owned and operated publications.
- ◆ The sale and free distribution of cigarettes and other tobacco products are prohibited.

For more information on URI's tobacco policies, contact:

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Visit URI's "Breathe Easy... We're Going Smoke-free!" website at:

<http://www.uri.edu/smokefree>

This case study was written in September 2003.