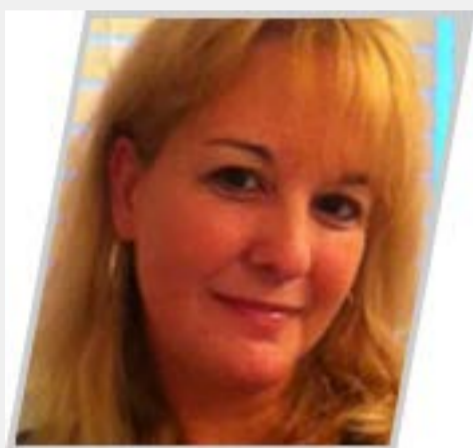


# THE COLLEGE STUDENT'S GUIDE TO **FIRE SAFETY AND EDUCATION**

Fire safety is important, regardless of whether students live on-campus, in Greek Housing, or off-campus. This guide outlines risk factors, and examines school and student responsibilities for fire safety.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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## INTRODUCTION

Firefighters respond to an average of 3,810 fires in college residence halls and Greek housing each year. Since 2000, campus fires have resulted in 122 fatalities and millions of dollars in property damage. According to FEMA, the vast majority of these fires could have been prevented through awareness and education. If a college student's most recent fire prevention training was learning to "stop, drop, and roll" in elementary school, then it's time for a refresher.

The following guide breaks down risks, responsibilities and preventative measures that college students need to know in order to keep themselves and those around them safe. Key elements include:

- Risk factors related to campus fires
- Where responsibility lies: students versus colleges
- How dorms, Greek housing and off-campus apartments differ
- Fire safety considerations for students with disabilities

Knowing about and practicing fire safety is the best way to prevent loss of life and property.

## THE RISK FACTORS

Of the approximately 3,800 campus housing fires that occur in the US each year, the majority (88 percent) are cooking fires. Other causes include:

- Overloaded power strips
- Candles
- Space Heaters
- Arson

*“Fire is a serious threat to a college student's safety. Unlike crimes or personal attacks that typically only harm one victim, fire usually affects all people living in a residence hall. Fire has no conscience. It does not discriminate or select its victims. You can't negotiate with it.”*

**Timothy Ryan**

*Assistant Director/Manager of EH&S  
Office of Public Safety & Emergency Management  
Ithaca College*

Regardless of what causes a fire, many experts agree that lack of knowledge about fire prevention is the real issue. While most students learned about fire safety in elementary school, they need additional training.

The University Housing Fire Report found that fires cause \$26 million in property loss annually. Colleges and universities are not liable for accidents, which makes having an insurance policy essential. (In cases of arson, students will be prosecuted according to the law.)

Students tend to believe their parents' homeowners policies protect them, but that is often untrue. Those policies usually have high deductibles or complicated eligibility requirements that exclude certain claims.

Before moving on campus, students should carefully examine their parent's homeowners policy.

It is usually a good idea to take out a separate policy. To find coverage, students can:

1. Inquire as to how much it would cost to make adjustments to their parents' policy.
2. Check with their school. Many colleges and universities offer special policies with registration.
3. Get several quotes for renter's insurance. A quick online search will bring up a list of companies to call.

## WHAT COLLEGES DO TO KEEP STUDENTS SAFE

Each campus has a safety department that sets and enforces fire safety policies and inspections. Buildings must have smoke detectors, sprinkler systems, and fire alarms in accordance with Uniform Fire Prevention and Building Code and International Fire Code. Campus safety departments organize and carry out fire drills, and instruct students about:

- Evacuation procedures
- Using different types of fire extinguishers
- Reporting fires

### 1) The Campus Fire Safety Right-to-Know Act (2008)

This is an amendment to the Higher Education Opportunity Act that was signed into law by President George W. Bush. Its purpose is to increase campus fire safety awareness across the nation, providing students and their families with the fire safety records of college/universities. Post-secondary institutions are required to publicly display fire safety information and statistics, policies, concerns, and fire safety conditions for prospective and current students.

### 2) Campus Fire Safety Month

In 2013, Congress designated September as Campus Fire Safety Month to encourage colleges and universities to:

- Provide fire safety educational programs
- Evaluate fire safety in on-campus and off-campus student housing
- Develop and enforce applicable fire codes

## WHAT COLLEGES DO TO KEEP STUDENTS SAFE

Following these basic safety guidelines will reduce the chance that students are injured in academic facilities on campus.

- 1) Identify the two closest exits and all potential evacuation routes.
- 2) Know the location of nearest fire alarm and how to use it.
- 3) Never prop open hallway doors or lock fire exit doors.
- 4) Keep corridors clear of flammable materials to prevent rapid fire spread.
- 5) Report vandalized fire equipment to campus public safety.

Campus labs have high ignition potential because of chemical, electrical, and mechanical heat sources. To prevent lab fires, students should:

- Only work under supervision
- Follow campus standard operating procedures for conducting experiments and research
- Never leave experiments or pressure vessels running unattended
- Keep flammable gases and reagents away from heat

## WORST RESIDENCE HALL HAZARDS

Accidental fires, such as ignition of food or other cooking materials and unattended cooking, are some of the most common safety issues in college dorms. Other sources often include:

- Unattended heat sources- candles, incense sticks, space heaters, etc.
- Misuse of cooking equipment/unfamiliarity with equipment and safety procedures
- Alcohol/drugs/misuse of medications
- Extension cord overload

### Randall L. Hormann

President & CEO of Campus Fire Safety

**St. Michael's College, 2/17/14:** An **electric space heater** was responsible for an accidental fire that displaced 22 students at St. Michael's Townhouse 105. Upon hearing smoke alarms, the residents were able to get out safely. The Colchester Fire Department responded and found the dormitory unit's top and bottom floors engulfed in flames, police said.

**University of Massachusetts, 1/18/11:** A **lit candle** ignited a fire in a student's residence hall room when it came into contact with a window shade. The overhead sprinkler system doused the flames. Firefighters found two other rooms with burning candles and in several rooms (including where the fire began) there were hats hung over smoke detectors.

Students have a responsibility for practicing fire safety in their dorms. It is important to follow each school's specific guidelines about what students can and can't have in their rooms. The items most commonly banned due as fire hazards are:

- Hot plates
- Toaster ovens
- George Foreman grills
- Candles
- Halogen and lava lamps
- Space heaters
- Incense

Todd Sigle, Chief of Police at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina, explains that most on-campus residence hall fires are often caused by unattended stove tops, primarily electric ranges. In addition to being left unattended, these cooking tools are also hazardous because they aren't equipped with temperature regulating technology. Sigle noted that, according to the National Fire Protection Association, between 2007-2011, 84% of reported dormitory fires involved cooking equipment.

Sigle has noticed that shared kitchen areas are becoming commonplace as more apartment-style construction replaces traditional residence hall design. Because of this, Sigle stresses that it is critically important for college students to recognize the importance and responsibility of following fire safety practices.

Many times it is simply a matter of paying attention, especially when cooking. In 2012, there were eight cooking fires in residence halls during a very short time period at the University of Kansas. In one instance, a student made macaroni and cheese in the microwave without adding water. Another student left a plastic tray too close to a hot dog warmer.

Isolating the fire by putting a lid over it or closing the door can ensure student safety. When a fire broke out on the third floor of Brown Residence Hall at Duke University, a student's quick thinking prevented injuries. The fire started when a backpack lying against a radiator combusted into flames. When the student found the fire, he closed the door, containing the fire.

## RESIDENCE HALL SAFETY GUIDELINES

### Cooking

- Cook only in designated areas
- Keep clutter away from cooking area
- Never leave cooking unattended
- If a fire starts in a microwave, keep the door closed and unplug the unit



## Candles

Many campuses prohibit the use of wax candles, but flameless candles make a safe substitute. If candles are permitted, students should:

- Keep candles in sturdy holders
- Extinguish flame immediately after using
- Never leave a burning candle unattended
- Keep candles away from draperies and linens



## Smoking

More colleges and universities are becoming designated smoke-free campuses. However, if smoking is permitted, students should:

- Make sure cigarettes and ashes are fully extinguished
- Never toss hot cigarette butts or ashes in the trash can
- Use deep, wide ashtrays and place them on top of something sturdy
- Check chairs and sofas for cigarette butts after parties because furniture is highly flammable
- Avoid smoking when drinking or drowsy



## How to Respond to a Fire Alarm

Fire safety experts stress the importance of practicing escape plans in case of fire in a residence hall room. A fire alarm should never be ignored. Students must get out of the building immediately and stay out until given the direction to come back in.

When a fire occurs students should:

- “Get low and go” under the smoke to the nearest safe exit, assisting people with mobility impairments
- Never use the elevator- take the stairs instead
- Carefully feel a closed door for heat before opening. If it’s hot, find another way out

If trapped in a room:

1. Keep doors closed.
2. Call 911.
3. Put a wet towel under the door to keep out smoke.
4. Open a window and wave a bright cloth or flashlight to signal for help.

# GREEK HOUSING FIRE SAFETY

According to FEMA, six percent of all university housing fires occur in Greek housing. Despite the small portion, fires in fraternity and sorority houses are typically bigger, which makes them more costly and more dangerous than those in residence halls. Fraternity and sorority houses across the country account for 13 percent of non-contained fires, compared to just four percent of confined fires.

Common causes of Greek housing fires include:

- Cooking
- Open flame
- Alcohol
- Smoking
- Physical impairment

Students living in fraternities and sororities should follow the same fire safety rules as students living on-campus:

## **Cooking:**

- Keep clutter away from cooking area
- Never leave cooking unattended
- If a fire starts in a microwave, keep the door closed and unplug the unit

## **Candles:**

- Keep candles in sturdy holders
- Extinguish flame immediately after using
- Never leave a burning candle unattended
- Keep candles away from draperies and linens

## **Smoking:**

- Make sure cigarettes and ashes are fully extinguished
- Never toss hot cigarette butts or ashes in the trash can
- Use deep, wide ashtrays and place them on top of something sturdy
- Check chairs and sofas for cigarette butts after parties because furniture is highly flammable
- Avoid smoking when drinking or drowsy

## **In addition, when moving into Greek housing:**

- Become familiar with fire alarm pull stations, stairways, and emergency exits
- Plan two ways out in case of emergency
- Read instructions on fire extinguishers

In case of fire, students should pull fire alarm and get out immediately, staying low to the ground. If behind a closed door, always carefully feel it for heat before opening. Never open the door if it is hot. If there is no other exit, phone for help and wait for fire fighters.

## OFF-CAMPUS STUDENT APARTMENT FIRE SAFETY

According to the Center for Campus Fire Safety, almost 80 percent of fire-related fatalities in student housing occur off-campus. They are caused by lack of automatic fire sprinklers, missing or disabled smoke alarms, and careless disposal of smoking materials. There are a number of precautions students should take:

- Check for working smoke alarms with back-up power sources in each bedroom
- Identify two ways to exit bedrooms/building
- Make sure sprinkler system is installed and maintained
- Look to see if building address is clearly visible so emergency services can find it.
- Ask when the heating system was last inspected. (Should be within past year.)
- Find out when the last Fire Marshal inspection occurred. (Should be within past year.)
- Exit doors from each unit should have single-cylinder, not double-cylinder deadbolt locks for fast escape.
- Make sure windows open easily.
- Remember the word **PASS** when using a fire extinguisher:



**P**ull the pin and hold extinguisher with nozzle pointed away from you.

**A**im low, pointing to the base of the fire.

**S**queeze lever slowly and evenly.

**S**weep the nozzle from side to side.

In case of fire, students should pull fire alarm and get out immediately, staying low to the ground. If behind a closed door, always carefully feel it for heat before opening. Never open the door if it is hot. If there is no other exit, phone for help and wait for fire fighters.

## FIRE SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

According to the USFA, practicing proven fire safety precautions increases the chances that people with mobility, sight and hearing disabilities will survive a fire:

- Get assistance from the resident advisor (RA), building manager, or a friend when making an escape plan
- Know at least two exits from every room
- Check to make sure any aids such as walkers or wheelchairs will fit through exit doorways
- Practice opening locked or barred doors and windows
- In case of fire, get out and stay out

Gail Minger founded The Michael H. Minger Foundation after her son died at Murray State University in Kentucky from arson. His non-verbal learning disability contributed to his death. The foundation has worked to advance fire safety awareness through education, legislation and research to ensure all students are safe.

The Minger Foundation advises that a fire safety plan may need to be tailored to students' specific needs, depending on the disability or disabilities.

- **Visual impairment.** Students with a visual impairment should keep a phone near the bed in case of an emergency. Smoke alarms should pause between beeps so they can hear instructions.
- **Hearing impairment.** Students with a hearing impairment may need a special device to alert them of a fire. There are smoke alarms with strobes and tactile devices like bed shakers on the market.
- **Mobility impairment.** Students with mobility impairments need a plan to evacuate the building that does not include the use of an elevator.

## **FIRE SAFETY AND EDUCATION RESOURCES**

### **National Institute of Fire and Safety Training**

NIFAST is a national company that assists residential and college environments in understanding standards, regulations, and codes for fire safety. The FLASHPOINT fire safety course for college students is available for purchase at the website.

### **US Fire Administration: Campus Fire Safety**

Fire safety tips for parents and students.

### **Campus-Firewatch**

A newsletter and organization working to improve fire safety at schools and in the communities, published since May 2000.

### **Live Safe Foundation**

Live Safe develops and sponsors programs to help groups find resources to advance community fire safety. The website's Research Library includes white papers, case studies, publications and resources.

### **Michael H. Minger Foundation**

Founded after the death of Michael Minger in a residence hall fire at Murray State University. It has focused on developing educational material and resources for all students, including those with disabilities.

### **Center for Campus Fire Safety**

Focuses exclusively on campus fire safety, and includes breaking news and a resource section for students and parents. CCFS offers an electronic newsletter.

### **National Fire Protection Association**

Safety information, research, and fire prevention resources from NFPA, an international nonprofit established in 1896 to reduce the worldwide burden of fire and other hazards on the quality of life.

### **Fall Fire Safety**

Article with guidelines and tips for preventing fires and staying safe in dorm rooms on-campus, prepared by Westchester University.

### **Fire Safety On Campus**

List of questions for parents and students to ask about campus fire safety, both on-campus and off-campus, and prepared by Campus Fire-watch.



### **List of Dorm Room Fire Hazards**

Article that includes potential fire hazards in residence halls published on seattlepi.com.

### **How to Prevent a College Dorm Fire**

Article that shares fire prevention safety tips for college students living on-campus.

### **Guide to Teaching Fire Safety to Students with Disabilities**

A series of videos that help teach fire safety to students with disabilities, developed by the Minger Foundation and Campus Firewatch.

### **Campus Fire Safety: A US Overview**

An article in Fire Protection Magazine about approaches to fire safety and legislative solutions by Ed Comeau of the Center for Campus Fire Safety, a nonprofit education and advocacy organization.

### **Campus Firewatch Radio**

Podcasts featured on Firehouse.com. Each episode features guests talking about timely and important topics relating to campus fire safety issues across the nation.

### **Topical Fire Report Series: University Housing Fires 2007-2009**

Report by the US Fire Administration that discusses causes of university housing fires.

### **College Fire Safety**

This is a college fire safety guide by the Center for Injury Research and Policy Child and the Injury Prevention Alliance.

### **Fire Safety Training Resources for Students**

List of free resources to be used when developing fire safety curriculum for students who live on-campus, off-campus, and students with disabilities.

### **Create an Escape Plan**

Guide for creating an escape plan by The People's Burn Foundation.

### **Live Burn**

Three-minute video demonstration of a rapidly escalating dorm fire created with footage from the September 2008 Live Burn at Western University.

### **Fire Safety Checklist for People with Disabilities**

Checklist of fire safety tips for people with disabilities, prepared by USFA.

### **How to Use a Portable Fire Extinguisher Training Video**

Video created by the Fire Equipment Manufacturers' Association to train viewers to learn how to assess a potential fire situation and use a portable fire extinguisher in the event of a fire emergency.