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—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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Today's debate: Fire safety on college campuses

Seton Hall fire reveals reluctance to install sprinklers in dorms

OUR VIEW School officials cite cost. Saving student lives is worth expense.

A week after three students died and 62 were injured in a dormitory fire on Seton Hall's New Jersey campus, parents nationwide are questioning fire safety at their children's colleges. And the news isn't very reassuring.

Like Seton Hall's Boland Hall dorm, 72% of the dorms, fraternity houses and sorority houses that suffer fires are not equipped with life-saving sprinkler systems, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

And while the average number of college-residence fires dropped to 1,600 per year in the 1990s from 1,800 a decade earlier, an average of 66 students still are injured each year in dorm, sorority and fraternity fires. In the 11 deadly campus fires between 1990 and 1997, an average of two people died in each.

Given that parents pay an average \$5,000 a year for room and board—more than the average state-college tuition—they have reason to expect better. Yet many older dorms have no sprinklers, according to fire safety officials.

Colleges commonly counter that most new dorms are required to have sprinklers, that old dorms are both safe and legal without sprinklers, and that other campus safety measures such as good outdoor lighting often take priority over an expensive sprinkler retrofit.

Indeed, a retrofit runs upward of \$25,000 per 70-student floor. But sprinklers are proven to cut by up to two-thirds the risks of death and property damage in fires.

Despite that record, 16 states have yet to adopt the code of the National Fire Protection Association, which requires all dorms 7 stories or higher to have sprinklers. New Jersey is among the laggards.

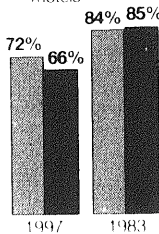
Colleges themselves show little inclination to act on their own. Despite their obligation to students, they lag sorely behind others in retrofitting buildings with sprinklers. Motels and hotels had fewer sprinklers than did dorms back in 1983, for instance, but there are now

Lukewarm response

Dorms, sorority houses and fraternity houses have done less to install sprinklers than low-rise hotels and motels.

Buildings with fires in which there were no sprinklers:

■ Dorms
■ Hotels and motels



States that have not adopted the National Fire Protection Association's "life safety" code, which requires sprinklers in old buildings of 7 stories or more:

Arkansas	Ohio
Arizona	Oregon
California	Pennsylvania
Colorado	South Carolina
Hawaii	South Dakota
Indiana	Virginia
Montana	Washington
New Jersey	Wisconsin

22% more low-rise hotels and motels with sprinklers than dorms with sprinklers, according to post-fire statistics.

Another solution is for state or federal education departments to adopt the tough line taken by Medicare and Medicaid. Those programs require nursing homes and hospitals to have sprinklers in order to be accredited. The result? Only 26% of nursing homes where there have been fires are found to lack sprinklers.

There's a sad postscript to the Seton Hall fire. When the National Fire Protection Association was drafting this year's fire code, some fire marshals suggested applying a sprinkler requirement to all dorms 3 stories and higher instead of those at least 7 stories tall. But the association voted to put off that stringent requirement. Association officials predict that because of the Seton Hall tragedy, the requirement for low-rise dorms will be part of the next code in 2003.

But why wait? Sprinkler retrofits may be expensive. But as Seton Hall is learning too late, they can save priceless lives.

Safety is a priority on campuses

OPPOSING VIEW Seton Hall fire will prompt review of policies.

By Stanley O. Ikenberry

Last week, students, faculty and staff at Seton Hall University experienced a tragic campus fire that claimed three young lives. Despite the fact that Seton Hall is only one of 3,500 U.S. colleges and universities, campuses nationwide are collecting names of grief-

access to state-of-the-art training and equipment. Fire safety is a part of every new student's orientation.

Not only must colleges and universities comply with all state and local fire-safety codes and regulations, many go far beyond what is required of them legally, in terms of lighting, escort services and training agreements with local fire and police officials.

As with any tragedy, the sorrow at Seton Hall will prompt every college and university president and campus safety official across the

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LETTERS

Lawyers dead wrong on death-penalty

One would have to look far and wide to find attorneys less knowledgeable of the appellate process than Bill Moffitt, president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, and Jay Jacobson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas ("Texas starts year at record pace of executions," News, Friday). Or perhaps both are intentionally misleading on the death penalty in Texas.

Moffitt suggests that "Texas judges seem all too willing to ignore defendants' rights and short-circuit the sometimes lengthy appeals process." Really?

The average time spent on death row in

Texas in 1999 was 13 years, or longer than the national average.

Texas judicial decisions are a through three separate levels of appellate courts, often involving separate reviews through dozens of judges. If Texas judges were puts it, "all too willing to ignore rights," possibly such would be the federal courts.

Nationally, the average for death penalty cases is 33%. (Harris County) that number is ton is the most prolific jurisdiction for sentencing murder

Prayers for and thanks to actor Michael J. Fox

Although I will miss the popular TV show *Spin City*, I am glad its star, actor Michael J. Fox, is putting his health before the show ("Fox says he'll quit 'Spin City' at end of season," Cites Parkinson's, time with family," Life, Jan. 19).

Over the years, Michael's talents have made the audience feel like a friend, not a fan, and as a friend, I care about this young man. In the world of instant fame, he has handled his celebrity beautifully.

Years ago I sent Michael letters on a weekly basis, when he was on the TV show *Family Ties*. Even at the height of his popularity, he always would find time to reply.

Ten years ago I had a letter printed in the *TV Guide* magazine saying that Michael was as likable and durable as Mickey Mouse and would be around for a long time. I am glad I was right. I hope researchers find a cure for Parkinson's disease quickly so I can see Michael J. Fox grow up on screen.

Until then, I'm glad Michael is taking good care of himself so he can see his children grow up in the real world.

My prayers are with you, Michael. Stay strong in spirit.

Chuck Pleasants
Rockville, Md.

Inconsistent to citizenship to E

This week Congress will vote on "Elian Bill," which would grant U.S. citizenship to the famous Cuban, Elian Gonzalez ("Bac different story emerges," News, Monday).

This concerns and confuses Elian came to this country and his father wants him home to Cuba. Nevertheless, our elected leaders are undermining federal law by ignoring criminal activity and keeping him from his legal guardian.

Where is the logic here? That these politicians are signing to the ever-increasing vote?

That would make sense if the inconsistent manner in which immigration policy is enforced across the border on shores, they might be all. Maybe, maybe not. If the cute little boy from Cuba, Elian, is welcome from exile, he'll probably be sent back to his father's home. One never knows.

That's why we have our problems: consistency, or a We cannot solve this problem