



Bucknell

UNIVERSITY

Dear Students, Faculty and Staff,

On September 7 I shared with you a report presented to me by the Campus Climate Task Force. I charged this task force last October to report to the University and me in response to concerns I had during my first semester about how some students treat one another, the support we provide as a University for positive experiences among our students, and the role of University policies and practices in strengthening our community. The report has initiated an important campus dialogue, and I write to lay out our plans from here and where I hope they can lead.

Background

A bit of background may be helpful. Early last fall, in my first semester as Bucknell's president, I learned of incidents that would give anyone pause – including several of our students being admitted to the emergency room for life-threatening blood-alcohol levels, and several alleged assaults. Two students nearly died from alcohol poisoning as they were in full cardiac arrest. Anyone who has been in higher education for years, as I have, knows that problems like these occur on most campuses. But the occurrence of these incidents in such close succession, and with such intensity, was greatly troubling.

Meanwhile, something else seemed to be going on as well. Based on campus police reports I was receiving nightly, and based on conversations I was having with many students, it sometimes seemed as if a different student community emerged when classes were out. Some students seemed to become cavalier about their own well-being, deeply disrespectful of others and University property, and uninterested in the intellectual pursuits that are a university's reason for being. Criminal action, even including felony arrests, was being necessitated for various types of student misconduct. Although such behavior was evidenced in a clear minority of the student body, I did not and do not believe that I could look away.

This behavior was especially troubling to me because it was so starkly at odds with what I was otherwise learning – daily – about our students. Day after day, I get to see them at their best, and to feel again and again such great hopes for their futures. I have talked with them one on one, in small groups, and in large formal settings. I have talked to them in the classroom, seen them perform as artists and lead poster sessions, watched them work together in intramurals and varsity sports, and experienced in numerous settings how articulate and thoughtful they are as leaders of numerous student organizations. They possess all the intelligence, conscientiousness, and idealism for which any university could hope. I was reminded, again and again, about why I have spent my life in education.

In short, I was confused by this dichotomy, I needed a clearer sense of what was going on, and I needed to initiate a conversation about us as a community and what we want to be – that is, as I asked at my inaugural address, who are we becoming?

The Task Force

I therefore appointed a President's Task Force on Campus Climate to examine our campus climate thoroughly and candidly. I know the problems we face are no different than they are anywhere else. But I care about our school – Bucknell. I have no interest in pretending problems don't exist simply because they are difficult to face head on. I deeply believe that the best institutions are those that are not afraid to look at their flaws, and that they only become better by being honest about where they can improve.

I therefore asked 12 faculty and staff to take on this work with urgency and frankness. I chose not to name students as members of the task force because I knew the material it was going to be gathering would include sensitive and private information from and about students. I could not morally and legally justify placing students in that position. It was also on my mind that the task force's work might extend through the summer, when few students would be here, which is ultimately what happened.

Over the ensuing 11 months, the task force did what I asked. They reviewed national surveys of students from first-year through senior year in which our students participated, surveys in which four straight classes of our seniors participated, other institutional data, and scholarly publications on topics related to campus climate. They held focus groups and meetings with students and student leaders and one-on-one and small-group meetings with many students, faculty and staff. They reviewed related surveys of students by Bucknell professors, and they gathered written anonymous input from individuals across the Bucknell community.

They met with me in April to give me an update on their work. In August I received their final report. Once the report was presented to me, I shared it with everyone on campus because each of us has a stake in our campus community. This is our community, and our responsibility.

I am deeply grateful to the members of the task force for the extraordinary time and energy they gave to this report, for the open and direct way they have raised the issues their analysis brought to the fore, and for the leadership they have shown individually and as a group in representing the University in initiating this important community dialogue.

The task force's report covers several major areas, including:

- Student intellectual engagement outside the classroom
- Student social life, including the role of Greek-letter organizations
- Student alcohol consumption
- Social space on campus for non-Greek activities
- The dynamics of male and female student experiences
- Sexual assault
- Student and campus diversity

If you have not read it yet, I urge you to do so. It is in myBucknell, as are audio-recordings of the first two forums held last week. I especially urge those who may have focused on one part or another of the report to consider, carefully, all of it. Such studies are never perfect, never complete, but the data presented are real, and demand our attention.

Other Steps

The dialogue that this report has begun is, however, not the only step we are taking to try and live up to our values as a community. These other steps include the following:

- This spring, we joined Dartmouth College and 31 other universities in a new collaborative effort to understand and address high-risk drinking on college campuses.
- As of last year, in the summer before they arrive on campus, first-year students participate in an online alcohol-awareness program called AlcoholEdu. This program educates students about the risks associated with overconsumption.
- This summer, I created a high-level position in the Office of the Provost to focus on diversity, and re-introduced a position in the Office of Student Affairs dedicated to diversity.
- I am forming a campus-wide President's Council on Diversity to recommend, monitor, assess and report on campus-wide programs, personnel organizations, and policies that could support our diversity objectives and initiatives for students, staff, and faculty.
- We will be investing new resources in our Office of Institutional Research, including adding another research staff member, so we can increase the information we have readily available about our University and its performance.

The Challenge

The report, meanwhile, presents important questions for us all – for the administration and staff, for the faculty, for students individually, for student organizations, and for me. Bucknell is home for all our students, and all of us have a role in making it the best home possible.

Some students at last week's forums, and elsewhere, have expressed concern that the report is targeted at the Greek-letter system. But this campus discussion is not about getting rid of anything; it is about building the best university possible – the best Bucknell possible.

Yes, the report calls on our Greek-letter organizations, along with all of us, to reflect seriously on its findings and recommendations and to become leaders in achieving a healthier campus climate. But far from believing this report threatens the future of our Greek system, I believe it can help make the system stronger, which is as important for individual fraternities and sororities as it is for Bucknell.

At the first forum I was asked if I had considered the positive leadership development opportunities that are part of Greek life. The reality is, I embrace them fully, in part because of the role such opportunities played in my own life as an undergraduate, but also because I have already seen at Bucknell how these opportunities can and do play out in positive ways. What I want to do is summon those same leadership qualities, and ask those involved to take a leading role in saying, for example, that alcohol-related violence is always and completely wrong; that standing by and not intervening when someone else is endangering themselves and others is always and completely wrong; and that sex with someone who is intoxicated, and who therefore cannot give legal or moral consent, is always and completely wrong. These, and scores of other commitments we can discuss over time, would be markers of distinctive leadership, the type of leadership that is hard, not easy, and that would strengthen the Greek system and every student organization, and as a result, strengthen Bucknell.

The report presents 10 overarching recommendations on how we can move ahead, and more than 80 specific ideas for consideration. The challenge before us as a campus community is to reflect on and discuss them, and, ultimately, act where possible to make Bucknell better. So where do we go from here?

Next Steps

Here are the steps I am initiating to keep this discussion going:

1. I have charged Provost Mick Smyer and Dean of Students Susan Lantz to lead a broad campus dialogue about the task force report and to present to me in April a range of promising initiatives to strengthen our campus community. These initiatives may include ideas that the report has assembled and put forward, but also may include new ideas that emerge in the small and large discussions ahead. Provost Smyer and Dean Lantz will be contacting individuals and organizations across campus to participate in these conversations and will hold other campus forums as well.
2. I will be holding a series of discussions with various groups over the course of the year.
3. I am asking the faculty leadership to organize discussions as it believes appropriate among faculty, whether in large or small groups, about the task force's report. Faculty committees and the provost's office are sponsoring the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Engagement, which builds upon the earlier work of the faculty's Student Engagement Working Group. We will look to the Ad Hoc Committee to provide Provost Smyer and Dean Lantz ideas to include in the April report.
4. I am asking Bucknell Student Government to continue gathering student input about our campus climate through its Committee on Student Engagement and to share the insights BSG gathers with Provost Smyer and Dean Lantz as they put together their April report to me.
5. I am asking the Interfraternity Council and Pan-Hellenic Council to encourage discussion among fraternity and sorority members about the report and how the Greek-letter system can help address the problems outlined in the report's findings, and to share suggestions with Provost Smyer and Dean Lantz as they develop their April report to me.
6. I am asking all faculty, staff and students to provide their feedback on the report and campus climate to us. Personnel can do so anonymously through the Our Bucknell Suggestion Box at <http://my.bucknell.edu/ourbucknell.html>, and students can do so anonymously at the Student Suggestion Box at <http://my.bucknell.edu/studentuggestions>. Anyone can reach Provost Smyer and Dean Lantz on this subject via campusclimate@bucknell.edu

I also am taking one immediate step that I have concluded is important now. I have transferred funds to Dean Lantz so that she can provide additional support for immediate new initiatives dedicated to improving Bucknell's campus climate. Student organizations interested in creating intellectual, cultural and social events should contact Dean Lantz for details. We particularly encourage events co-sponsored by multiple student groups. Providing multiple venues through which students can gather together is important, and I am hopeful that this new support will help give all students new opportunities to share meaningful time together.

After last week's campus forums, a student wrote me the following note,

I love Bucknell, but I honestly had been telling myself for a long time that I just wasn't cut out to be a college student because I didn't fit in with the social norms of drinking and partying to excess. But...we're all college students, including me. I am sincerely looking forward to the changes on campus and I hope to get involved in them.

This note, and the many like it, is a reminder that Bucknell is for all of our students, and all of us have a role in building a community where all feel welcome, everyone feels safe, and everyone can become the best self they aspire to be. As this conversation about our future together unfolds, I will be grateful for the ideas and energies that come from within our own community to make it better. It is, truly, up to us.

We can make our great university better, together.

Thank you.

John Bravman
President