Drury Changes On-Campus Tobacco Policy

Michelle O’Dell, a 21 year old, marketing student at Drury University, has been training to run in a marathon since the beginning of this semester. She started out in January taking daily trips to Barber Fitness Center where she ran on the treadmill. As her training required more mileage, O’Dell took to the streets in and around campus where she discovered a problem that she hadn’t faced inside the fitness center. Soon after she made the switch from the treadmill to the outdoors, O’Dell noticed that at some point during most of her runs she would have to go around or between people smoking cigarettes on the sidewalks. As a student trying to stay in shape and do something healthy for her body O’Dell reported that such incidents became her “pet peeve.”

On March 4, 2011, Drury University announced that it would become an entirely smoke-free campus in the fall of 2012. Through much debate and discussion, the final decision was based on addressing the newly-added, wellness goal in Drury’s mission statement. Now that this policy has been passed, students, like O’Dell, can be happy in knowing that the University is in the process of creating a plan to enforce this new rule. In an interview with Mr. Matt Miller, Drury’s Director of Campus Wellness, Miller mapped out this policy from its early beginnings to the hopeful outcomes that Drury is seeking.

Miller’s key role in managing this initiative at Drury came along with his responsibilities as the wellness director, although, he says that the push for the smoke-free policy was started before he ever came on staff at Drury. He traced the beginnings back to about seven or eight years ago when a theater professor brought this issue to light after OTC became one of the first higher education facilities in the nation to be smoke-free. Even through the national buzz about the OTC’s implementation, Drury never settled on decision and the issue was disregarded until last spring. Drury’s President, Todd Parnell, addressed the reasoning behind the decision saying, “Last May [2010], the Board of Trustees added a strategic goal to Drury’s mission that addressed wellness. Drury should be a healthy, safe and clean environment for our students, visitors and for the Drury community. This policy will help us achieve that goal.”

In the time between now and the fall of 2012, when the policy will be in full effect, Miller mapped out a phasing-in of the policy. So that students and faculty that have smoked on campus in the past can be prepared and educated on the reasoning behind this initiative, a Tobacco-Free Task Force is being developed. Miller added that creating the group has been slowed down due to the fact that he has accepted a new job within the O’Reilly Family Event Center and is now looking to hire a new wellness director. Once the wellness director is hired, he or she will have the opportunity to recruit the new force. Miller defined the group that would be formed by saying, “It will be as diverse as possible. It can’t be just our security officers. It will be our faculty, people from facility services, RA’s, students, hopefully a very broad, cross section of people on campus. We need it to be community effort.”

When students come back to campus next fall, they can expect to see the task force spreading the word about the no smoking policy that will be starting the following school year. Miller explained that the force plans to actively seek compliance by starting conversations that allow them to ask smokers if they know about the new policy and that it will be implemented in the fall of 2012. The task force will also be trained on ways to help people understand the reasoning behind the initiative that aligns with the strategic goal of wellness.

Along with the task force, another way that Drury is making the transition to a tobacco-free campus is by make cessation programs available to students. Drury has already offered its employees access to cessation programs through its employees benefits program. Through a small budget held by the President’s Council on Wellness, Drury can offer these cessation programs for any student that chooses to be a part. Miller reported that programs like these usually cost in the hundreds of dollars per person, and also said that the President’s Council is prepared to invest thousands of dollars because the cause is important.

Miller says that the theory behind phasing in the initiative with the task force and cessation programs stems from the reasoning that the university doesn’t want to implement a tobacco-free policy without giving people enough time and resources to quit. Miller sees it as the right thing to do, if it means making a decision that doesn’t necessarily please everyone. Even in the city of Springfield, supporters narrowly passed the “Springfield Smokefree Air Act of 2011” showing that not everyone is on board with the new policies that are restricting smokers in public places. The group, Clean Air Springfield, was the ones to push this issue to the ballot in the first place, and they too backed their position with the argument that the policy was about health. While groups like Clean Air Springfield and Drury’s Tobacco-Free Task Force are working toward healthier environments, the tobacco-users are wondering if it will really make a difference at all for those around them. When asked what impact she thought the smoking ban would make around campus, Drury sophomore, Kaitlin Goetz, said that she wasn’t sure there would be a huge difference because she had never felt like there was a problem with people smoking in the first place. For Goetz it would be different if they were allowed to smoke inside, but even before this initiative was passed smokers were restricted to using tobacco outside of Drury buildings.

From the perspective of students like Michelle O’Dell, whose healthy habits were being affected by second-hand smoke, the smoking ban seems like it will make a huge difference in the quality of the Drury environment. On the other hand, students like Kaitlin Goetz, who may not have recognized as many students smoking on campus, may not see as big of change when the tobacco-free policy is finally implemented. Perspectives of each student can be shaped for a number of reasons, but ultimately, the Drury mission statement has made student and faculty wellness an important goal and is now implementing strategies to accomplish that it.