

Town/gown committee discusses enforcing student code on and off-campus

Kimberly Armstrong
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

Disciplinary action for violating the student code on or off-campus cannot be taken against students without substantial evidence, Catherine Cocks said, Director of Community Standards, at a meeting of the Town/University Relations Committee Tuesday afternoon.

The University of Connecticut's office of Community Standards uses a preponderance of the evidence standard in its investigations of student behavior, meaning that the evidence must suggest "it is more likely than not that the student code was violated," Cocks said. This means that referrals from Off-Campus Student Services, community members and the police must include the time, date, location, an objective summary of events and a list of the specific individuals involved for the university to justify taking further action.

"We work under a concept of fundamental fairness, that we're not just punitive and we don't just take a small amount of information without giving people a chance to respond," Cocks said during a presentation to the committee. "The code is built around the concept that we are an educational process meant to help students understand how their behavior affects others and

how they can positively contribute the community."

The student code's jurisdiction was first expanded to include off-campus behavior when it was rewritten in 2000, Cocks said.

In the 2015-2016 academic year, there were 1,681 incidents involving 2,764 students referred to Community Standards, Cocks said. Of those, 194 occurred off-campus throughout the state, 25 of which involved student parties. The most common complaints involve disruptive behavior and violations of UConn's drug and alcohol policies, Cocks said.

Community Standards plays an important role in Mansfield because many students are more concerned about university sanctions than legal issues, said committee member Elizabeth Patterson.

"In my previous life as mayor and my long time experience with town/gown relations, students are much more threatened by university relations than they are by going to court and paying a fine. They don't want to lose their place at the university or be put on probation," Patterson said.

UConn currently offers students the option to self report where they are living off-campus using PeopleSoft, but even if it mandated the collection of this information it would be protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, said John Armstrong,

director of Off-Campus Student Services. This means that it would not be accessible to law enforcement or the towns in which students are living.

"It's a student's right to live where they want to live," Armstrong said. "Neighbors should engage with those students the same way they would with anyone else, and that is through the police."

OCSS engages with off-campus students by visiting known rentals and meeting directly with those who have generated complaints, but landlords should also take a proactive role in managing the behavior of student renters, Armstrong said.

"When a student signs on the dotted line of that lease, there is no reason that the landlord shouldn't be communicating what it means to be a good citizen," Armstrong said.

While there are concerns among Mansfield residents about absentee landlords neglecting to maintain their properties and follow up on

disruptive student behavior, Armstrong said several property owners have approached him about how to better educate their tenants.

The Planning and Zoning Commission has been meeting weekly to rewrite regulations during Mansfield's nine month moratorium on multi-family housing development, said enforcement officer Janell Mullen. The revisions are intended to bring regulations in line with the town's plan of conservation and development in anticipation of high density development close to UConn, Mullen said.

The commission is likely to maintain or tighten Mansfield's ban on registered fraternity and sorority activities, including float building and parties, in residential areas, Mullen said. These violations can be difficult to pursue because property owners are currently given 10 days to come into compliance after receiving a letter of warning, at which point disruptive activities have long since ceased.

"When a student signs on the dotted line of that lease, there is no reason that the landlord shouldn't be communicating what it means to be a good citizen,"
- John Armstrong