

President Keohane's Update to the Board of Trustees

Feb. 25, 2000

As I mentioned in the final paragraphs of my written report, we have been doing a lot of soul-searching on campus in the past few weeks about the dangers of excessive drinking.

The Duke community is now aware that Raheem Bath, a sophomore in the Pratt School of Engineering, died late last fall from severe pneumonia, caused by aspiration of his own vomit after excessive drinking several days earlier. I want to make four points about this tragedy, in addition to those I have already made in my written report.

First, a death of any kind, particularly the unexpected death of a young person so full of life and promise, is a jarring, disorienting, deeply tragic experience for any community. The effects are felt, naturally enough, in direct proportion to how well someone knew the person; but the effects are felt by all of us. Raheem's family, especially, is still in the midst of a profound mourning, and we should keep this point in mind, even as we turn to other implications of his death. This was one of our students, one of us, and his death is and should remain a source of considerable grief for all of us, and deep sympathy for his family.

The second point: it was largely because of that respectful sympathy and our own sense of loss that none of us in leadership positions on campus immediately used this death as an "educable moment." The thoughts especially of those most directly concerned with student affairs, and of those who knew Raheem best, were understandably not on the lessons that could be learned from this death, but on the loss of a wonderful young man, a unique, individual, much-beloved human being.

I say this by way of explanation, not excuse. For my third point is that, in retrospect, we realize that we should have been more aggressive in our response at the outset, less sensitive to the immediate tragedy and more sensitive to the long-term implications of this student's death. We should have talked openly about this in December, bringing home the shocking import of this death as a cautionary tale for others, while the emotional wounds were still very fresh, if we wanted the death to have maximum impact as a lesson for others.

The "we" here is a number of different people, and I surely cannot speak for all of them; for myself, I believed that speaking about this death without naming Raheem by name, to groups of parents and alumni, would help raise the consciousness of these crucial constituencies about the profound dangers of binge drinking, without trespassing on his privacy or that of his family. They did not need, I thought, to know his name, only the circumstances of his death and the fact that this could happen to almost any one of our students, including their children. I still think that was the right approach.

I do not think, however, that we made the right decisions about speaking out on campus, to students who were hearing rumors and were uncertain and confused about the situation. I believe that I missed an opportunity to use my office as a "bully pulpit" for students who were seeking guidance and clarification, by reaching out, through meetings with students, information in the Chronicle, and other measures, to focus attention on this issue before the winter break, in partnership with student leaders and the administrators in student affairs.

The student affairs committee packet for your meeting includes an article that reprints a letter from six university presidents urging their colleagues to take a more direct personal stand in this area. Their counsel is to "be vocal, be visible, and be visionary." I intend to take that counsel to heart in the weeks ahead, and I will urge my colleagues in student affairs, as well as concerned faculty members and other members of the

administration, to do the same.

The fourth point, and in many ways the most important, is that we have a serious problem at Duke around binge drinking, and we need to do something serious about it. We are not unique in this, by any means, but that is not our concern here. We can learn from others about strategies that have worked to combat this profoundly troubling problem, but we cannot blame our situation on the fact that it is prevalent on other campuses. Our problem is a Duke problem, and we need to do everything we can to solve it.

The "we" here must include student leaders, especially student leaders who are regarded by their peers as the arbiters of what is "cool" in campus life. I had a good talk with a couple of fraternity leaders this week, and one message I tried urgently to share with them is that we need them to send signals about binge drinking. The men and women on campus who are looked up to by their peers need to say that they do not regard drinking yourself unconscious, vomiting all over the common room, and having to be taken to the emergency room to have your life saved, as cool behavior. They need to say that they don't want their friends, their classmates, their pledges, behaving in this way, and that they won't behave this way themselves. They need to say that binge drinking is not cool -- and more important, it is potentially lethal.

Alcohol counsellors, students affairs folks, medical experts, residence advisors, and the university president can and should also say these things loud and clear, in partnership with student leaders. I am optimistic that now is a time when we can do that at Duke. I have had several good conversations with Vice President Dickerson in which she has outlined several steps she and her colleagues will take to advance this dialogue aggressively in campus in the weeks ahead, and as the school year begins again in August. These are important steps, and more need to be conceived and implemented, in order to accomplish this crucial goal of education and cultural change at Duke.

Raheem's death did not happen yesterday. But it is still true that he died; this has not changed with the passage of time, and our memory of him should not be dulled so quickly. Now we need to use the memory of that death to help prevent the deaths of others in the future. Only in this way can there be some redeeming meaning to the tragic, senseless death of a vibrant, life-loving young man at Duke University.