An email from Chancellor Joe Gow to the UW-L Community
11:30 a.m., Thursday, Feb. 2, 2012

Dear students and colleagues:

As you may recall from my last note, over the past few days a team of environmental safety and engineering experts has been assessing the condition of Drake Hall in order to determine when it will be possible for our Drake residents to return to their building. I regret to let you know that these consultants have told us that it now will be at least two to three months until Drake is safe to occupy again. Therefore, our university leadership team and I have decided to keep the building closed for the rest of the spring semester.

I know this news will come as another disappointment to the 271 Drake residents who were forced to evacuate their rooms when a fire broke out in the basement of their building early Sunday morning. But because of the information we have been receiving from our safety and engineering experts we believe it is important to make long-term alternative housing arrangements for our Drake residents, rather than to continue to view their current situation as being only temporary. Consequently, the staff of our Residence Life Office is working with all our Drake residents to ensure they have places to stay for the rest of our spring semester. So far, we have been able to get many of these students into vacant rooms and overflow situations in other UW-L residence halls. And still other Drake residents have been able to find space in off-campus apartments and homes. We are particularly grateful to the faculty and staff who have volunteered space in their homes, and if anyone else would like to do so I encourage you to call our Residence Life Office at 785-8075.

In light of our new timetable, as well as the need for all the rooms in Drake to be thoroughly sanitized by a professional fire cleaning service, our Drake residents soon will need to remove all of their belongings from the building. This Friday through Sunday (February 3-5) our Drake "move-out" will begin, and we'll hold a similar session next weekend (Feb. 10-12) to complete the process. The move-outs will be held from noon to 6 p.m. on Fridays, and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. I know our Drake residents will be very grateful for help moving their belongings out of the building, so if anyone would like to volunteer to assist them please come by the building anytime during the move-out hours. We have a wonderful tradition of helping new UW-L students move in to their residence halls at the start of each academic year, so I know that if enough of us come by Drake during the move-out sessions we can make this process as smooth as possible for the students and hall staff who have been terribly inconvenienced by an unforeseen calamity.

And I hope we'll all remember how worse this calamity could have been. On Tuesday morning I received a very thoughtful call from La Crosse Fire Department Chief Gregg Cleveland, who wanted to say how pleased he and his firefighter colleagues were to arrive at the fire scene on Sunday morning and find that everyone inside Drake had done the right thing by quickly evacuating the building. The brave and selfless men and women of the La Crosse Fire Department have far too much experience with just how deadly fires like the one in Drake can be, and Chief Cleveland told me to commend our students for taking fire safety so seriously. He also indicated how eager the La Crosse Fire Department is to continue collaborating with UW-L on fire safety education. Too often, it takes a tragedy to teach us about the dangerous realities of fire—a fact that some of us know first-hand from experiences at other universities—so we have been very, very fortunate to learn an important lesson with no injuries here on our own campus. Thanks so much to our Drake residents for setting such an outstanding example for all of us to follow. We'll continue to do our best for you as we work through the challenges associated with the prolonged closure of your building.

Best wishes,
Joe Gow, Chancellor
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse