Two small fires cause W.E.B. DuBois library evacuation, temporary closure

Matt Rocheleau and Joe Meloni, Collegian Staff

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Two small fires on separate floors caused an evacuation of the 26-story W.E.B. Du Bois library, which remained closed for about three-and-a-half hours Wednesday afternoon.

Both fires were short-lived, caused minimal damage and are under investigation, officials said. There were no injuries.

The fires began in green paper recycling bins on the 18th and 22nd floors, according to a University statement. Smoke triggered the fire alarms and lit emergency strobes around 12:38 p.m., forcing officials to evacuate the building and prevent others from entering until 4 p.m.

Terry Warner, assistant director of administrative service of the library, said this is the first time there has been a fire in the library since she began working there in 1985.

The fire on the 22nd floor was put out by a person riding the elevator down who smelled smoke when the elevator's doors opened. The person put out the smaller of the two fires using one of the library's emergency fire extinguishers, said Warner, who declined to disclose the person's name but did say that the person was not a library staff member. The other fire was put out by the Amherst Fire Department.

"We're pretty good about evacuating," said Warner. "Our main concern is getting everyone out safely - leave it to the professionals to take it from there."

The library's second priority, she said, is to make sure the building is "safe to occupy before we let anyone back in."

Initially, library workers had told students that they would be allowed back in the building within a half-hour.

However, officials later announced the library would not re-open until 4 p.m. because, "the building was cleared to contain the fire and clear the air of smoke," said responding UMass police officer Brian Green.

Junior Emily Ward said that she saw a small amount of smoke while studying on the 18th floor.

"We heard the alarm and everyone was like 'ah crap,'" said senior Alex Owens who was in room 767 of the library when the alarms sounded.

Owens, a journalism and anthropology double major, said people were directed away from the elevators and told to use the stairs.

"I was down in the basement and the alarm went off," said Keith Shannon a senior journalism major. "They were saying it was a drill."

Shannon was supposed to have a class in library room 720 at 1:25 p.m., which was cancelled due to library's closing.

"They told me that I needed to go away for a half hour," said Kristen Johnson, a sophomore sociology major who attempted to enter the building at 1 p.m. "They didn't tell us anything, but a firefighter went in and then another went in a little after."

The Fire Department, UMass Police and Environmental Health and Safety all responded to the scene.

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Past alarms and evacuations have been non-fire related, like those caused by dust from construction being done inside the building, or fire drills, Warner said.

Mike LaCrosse contributed to this report.

Matt Rocheleau and Joe Meloni can be reached at news@dailycollegian.com.

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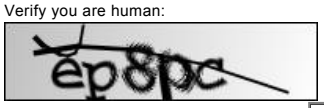

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