On Campus

How Many Columbians Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?

Actually one. But relamping the reading rooms can be a tall order.

By
Paul Hond
|
Spring 2019



Room 301 (Diane Bondareff)

Room 209 in Butler Library has “great bulbs.” This according to David Banker, assistant facilities coordinator, who came to Columbia three years ago but who has never, until recently, had to change a light bulb in the popular reading room, where

thirty-six long-stemmed, half-globed lamps hang from thirty-foot ceilings.

“One of my main responsibilities in Butler is making sure that we are fully lamped,” says Banker, “and the winter intersession is the best time to tackle the largest and tallest reading rooms.”

Relamping, as it’s called, is usually done at night. In 209, one of Butler’s twenty-four-hour reading rooms, the bulbs are changed en masse after several have burned out, which is more efficient than dealing with individual outages as they arise. Each bulb change requires two technicians and a mechanical lift. Occasionally, a single light malfunctions unexpectedly, prompting an ad hoc repair. “If a light is flickering, you have to change it immediately,” Banker says. “You can’t read with a flickering light.”

Each lamp in 209 contains eight twenty-six-watt compact-fluorescent bulbs. That’s 288 bulbs total, plus another eighteen to light the room’s other prominent feature, a stained-glass window of a plumed and scabbarded Peter Stuyvesant, director general of New Netherland, standing covetously, with wooden leg and walking stick, next to the Western Hemisphere.

For three days during winter break, Facilities closed 209 so that crews could change all the bulbs in the fixtures, which were installed during a renovation of Butler completed in 2010. A tall order, but relamping 209 is a breeze compared to 301, the stately Lawrence A. Wien Reference Room — and not on account of that room’s vintage triple-tiered chandeliers.

“In 301,” says Banker, “the other light fixtures are built into the ceiling, with the bulbs above the fixture. To get to them, you have to go to the sixth floor. There’s a door that you go through to get into a crawl space underneath. Mechanics go in there and lie belly-down on a dolly, and that’s how they relamp 301: from above.”

Banker has made his peace with Butler’s antiquated lighting system. “It’s preserved in time,” he says, “and that’s the way we work around here.”

Read more from ***Paul Hond***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from **Paul Hond***