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.”

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