False fire alarms have a negative impact on UW operations

False (or nuisance) alarms are very disruptive to UW operations. The alarms interrupt classes and lab experiments causing the occupants to stop work and evacuate the building(s). In some buildings the frequency of false alarms is so high; they have caused the occupants to become complacent towards emergency alarms. This type of reaction towards emergency alarms is detrimental to the individual. It could place them at risk in the event of a real emergency.

False alarms also have a negative impact on the community. Because police and fire departments are required to respond to all reports (false or real), a false alarm unnecessarily takes the emergency vehicles out of service. This negatively impacts the City’s ability to service their citizens.

False fire alarms are too common

Although the number of false alarms has decreased over the years (see bar graph) the UW Seattle campus had reported 161 false alarms in 2008. This was third highest number of alarms recorded by any single business/company within the city limits. Of those 161 alarms, 90 alarms (manual pull activation, smoke detectors, duct detectors, workflow) were reported during the second half of 2008. This is a serious matter. As a result of the excessive false alarms, the Seattle Fire Department issued a Notice of Violation (NOV). The NOV requires the UW to develop and implement a policy to reduce the number of false alarms. The policy includes prevention procedures for construction activities, re-programming some fire protection devices and upgrading old fire protection equipment with current technology.

How construction project can prevent false alarms

At least 19% of the false alarms at UW Seattle campus in 2008 were attributed to construction projects. Dust, steam and other airborne particles are the leading cause of false alarms at construction sites.

Contractors and construction managers can help prevent false alarms by taking the following measures prior to and during construction. A pre-construction meeting specifically for false alarms should be conducted to discuss the following preventative measures:

- **Temporary fire partitions and dust barriers** – Review bid documents and specifications to establish what types of temporary fire partition and dust barrier measures are necessary for the specific job site. Barriers should be erected and inspected prior to any demolition.
• **Temporary impairment/removal of fire alarm devices** – Confer with the University Fire Protection Engineer (206.543.0465) to identify which devices could be removed, bagged or otherwise disabled. Duct detectors and other devices that may be hidden can be identified through review of record drawings. For the Seattle campus, the removal, bagging or disabling of fire alarm devices shall only be completed by the University Fire Alarm Shop.

• **Fire watch requirements** - Confer with the University Fire Protection Engineer (206.543.0465) to determine if a fire watch will be required by the Fire Department while the fire alarm devices are impaired. The contractor may serve as fire watch in some cases.

• **Discuss project related false alarms** – If the project has caused a false alarm, the incident must be reviewed and measures taken to prevent reoccurrence. This discussion should take place at the regular project construction meeting.

• **Placing system in service** – The fire alarm system should not be placed in service until the building is cleaned (contractual “final clean”) - Once the fire alarm system has been accepted by the Fire Department, all smoke detector covers should be removed. Dust producing activities should not be permitted.