Space Heaters, Open Windows and Your Comfort

With the new space heater policy in effect and the push to save energy, I would like to share with you information regarding how the heating/cooling systems on campus operate and why such policies are necessary.

In the buildings controlled by a digital (computerized) system, we are able to better control the heating and cooling. In most cases, several offices or rooms are lumped into one zone which is controlled by a single air supply. In order to make temperatures the most comfortable for everyone within that zone, there is a temperature sensor in each room or office. The system reads all of the sensors in the zone and gets an average, supplying the appropriate air to raise or lower the average temperature. If there is a space heater in one office, the average will reflect that. For example, if one office with the space heater is at 80 degrees, another is at 70 degrees, the average would be 75. If the thermostat is set at 70 degrees, the system will supply 55 degree air to both offices so that the average temperature is roughly 70 degrees. This has the space heater working against itself and results in the second office simply being cooled.

Open windows can create the same effect, especially in the cold weather. If windows are left open, the system will pump in heat or cold air trying to maintain temperatures. If this is a digital averaging system, we will be overcooling or overheating the rest of the spaces (as with the space heaters). More serious damage can occur if the heating system cannot keep up. For example, we have had radiators below windows freeze and burst.

We have a limited capacity to control heating/cooling systems in buildings without digital controls, and they also require more maintenance. For this reason, older systems are being updated wherever possible.

In summary, if you do open windows, please be sure to close them when you leave the room so they don't stay open all night. If you find a need to open windows or if the temperature in your room/office is too cold, please call Physical Plant so that we can verify the system is working properly. We rely on the residents of the buildings to inform us of issues so they can be repaired, and we thank you in advance for your help. Together we can keep the buildings comfortable and help control energy costs.

Gary Jorgensen

Building and Facilities Manager