University Strengthens Safety with Streamlined Fire Protection Approach
Nestled in the shadows of the Appalachian Mountains, the University of North Georgia’s main campus in the town of Dahlonega is home to approximately 6,700 students and consists of 35 buildings, including academic and dormitory facilities as well as dining halls and student centers.

Having people spread out across such an expansive campus complex meant that the university needed to streamline their fire alarm systems to be able to respond quickly and effectively in the event of an emergency. The job of overhauling the campus’ fire alarm systems was no easy task, however, and fell to Kim Harris, the university’s Electronic Systems Technician.
The campus’ fire alarm system was in complete disarray when Harris came onboard nine years ago. “When I first arrived, there were fire alarms from just about every vendor on the planet, and there had not been any type of maintenance or inspections done on them,” Harris said.

Recurring nuisance alarms was a whole other issue hampering campus safety. “The false alarm rate was very high. We probably averaged two or three false alarms per week,” said Harris.

In 2013, the Dahlonega campus (previously known as the North Georgia College & State University) merged with Gainesville State College located about 20 miles to the southeast in Gainesville, Ga. This marriage created the University of North Georgia and added another layer of complexity in regards to fire alarm monitoring.

All campuses’ fire alarm systems are monitored 24/7 by a central station located on the Dahlonega campus. This monitoring center, which Harris said is a NFPA 72-compliant central station, will play an even larger role moving forward given the university’s merger.

“We monitor close to 5,000 points or devices on the Dahlonega campus and with the addition of the other campus, we’re going to be monitoring in excess of 10,000 points,” said Harris.

Considering these issues, Harris made it his goal to provide the university with a single fire alarm solution that would be easy to use, monitor and maintain. However, educating the administration and other stakeholders about what it means to have a truly robust fire and life safety system was perhaps the greatest challenge.
Acquiring stakeholder buy-in was a large part of the solution. “Once we informed them of the value of an integrated solution, the ‘sell’ became easier,” said Harris. “In a university system, budgeting is always the biggest hurdle. But once they realized this system is designed to enhance life safety for our students and faculty, their wallets were a lot easier to open.”

Moving forward, Harris tackled the Dahlonega campus to standardize its systems across all buildings using Fire-Lite Alarms equipment. This lofty goal was accomplished with the help of life safety systems integration experts, Southeastern Security Professionals (SSP).

The Fire-Lite solutions installed on the main campus include a combination of 35 9200UDLS, 9600UD and 9050UD fire alarm control panels; 73 FCPS248 and FCPS246 fire alarm power supplies; 15 ACC-25/50 and ECC-50/100 voice evacuation panels; 575 H355 heat detectors; 90 H355 heat detectors with B501 intelligent sounder bases; 437 BG-12LX manual pull stations; 1,466 SD355 smoke detectors; and 1082 SD355 smoke detectors with B501 intelligent sounder bases.

Although there were some buildings where work began from scratch, Harris said that it was important that wiring for the installation be run in a way that was aesthetically pleasing because the Dahlonega campus is the second oldest in the entire University System of Georgia. “We wanted to make sure that the systems were functional, but also didn’t take away from the beauty or historic nature of the buildings,” explained Harris.
The complete fire alarm solution brought about by Harris has benefited the University’s emergency response. According to Harris, training public safety officers was simple with the use of remote annunciators throughout the campus, which have proven easy to use when identifying the location of alarms.

False alarms are another issue that no more inhibits response. “When we switched over to the Fire-Lite solution, our false alarms became non-existent,” said Harris.

Harris also knows a strong emergency response many times leans on the information first provided by the central station. “We implemented this enterprise-class system from Fire-Lite to increase operator capabilities, allowing them to monitor all four campuses at the same time.”

Having been a part of the fire alarm industry for more than 30 years, Harris said the quality of products made by Fire-Lite Alarms combined with the level of technical support they provide is unmatched.

Looking forward, David English, Vice President of Business Development for SSP is tasked with migrating the other campuses to Fire-Lite solutions. “Our plan is to standardize those campuses on Fire-Lite and change those systems out as budget allows,” said English. “We have a three-year plan to accomplish his goal.”

Speed and ease-of-use are key features of the new solution. “Last year, we had a major lightning strike on one of our dorms and it took out the fire alarm panel, blowing out peripheral devices and everything else,” said Harris. “By having all of these Fire-Lite panels uploaded onto my laptop, I was able to put in a new panel and upload everything so I could start troubleshooting out in the field — all within an hour.”
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