OPEN LETTER FROM THE BIOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENTS ON THE UNSAFE AND UNSATISFACTORY CONDITIONS OF BELL HALL

We, the current Biological Sciences graduate students in Bell Hall, are writing to express our concerns with the current state of the building and what it entails for our personal safety and research progress. Over the past couple of years alone, we had issues with black mold, unstable temperatures, asbestos, vermin (e.g., squirrels, cockroaches, mice, and wasps), and constant ceiling leaks. This year, two separate instances of malfunctioning windows on the same floor injured a student and a staff member, both of whom required immediate ER visits. These conditions would be unacceptable anywhere but are particularly egregious at GWU, a prestigious institution that claims to have "state-of-the-art research facilities" (Appendix 1).

One of the main issues in Bell Hall comes from its outdated HVAC system and the lack of insulation in the building, given its construction in 1935[1]. On one floor, we have separate rooms with temperatures reading anywhere from 59ºF to 89ºF (Appendices 2 and 3). Official OSHA documentation recommends temperatures in the 68-76°F range[2], well above and below the norm in Bell Hall. There have been countless tickets submitted for temperature issues in the building (Appendix 4), and even with Facilities staff diligently working to fulfill our requests, there is only so much they can do with the current building conditions. One of the most common explanations is that they cannot actually regulate the AC, but rather it must be done through an external person who remotely sets the temperature. We have also been informed that the upper floors of Bell Hall share a chiller with the Textiles Museum, meaning that whenever one of us requests changes, the other is also affected by it.

This issue is well beyond thermal comfort, as the disparate temperatures pose implications for research as well as the safety of Bell Hall users. The Scanning Electron Microscope room (Bell 301) required the installation of an AC unit to regulate high temperatures, as anything above 80ºF can destabilize and damage components. This microscope is available for use by the entire department and an undergraduate course free of charge, and a new machine would have cost around $120,000. Several of the faculty and their respective molecular labs work with chemicals and reagents that must be kept in specific conditions, and sharp deviations like extreme heating can render them unusable. These issues have amassed thousands of dollars in lost consumables, most of which come from research grants given to faculty by institutions such as the National Science Foundation. Furthermore, the only way to

[1] https://library.gwu.edu/select-chronology-george-washington-university

[2] https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/2003-02-24#:~:text=Air%20treatment%20is%20defined%20under,range%20of%2020%25%2D60%25

alleviate these working conditions had been to open windows to allow for air circulation and the cooling of the room. That was, until two separate instances of malfunctioning windows injured a student and a staff member.

In April 2023, a graduate student opened the window to cope with the heat in their molecular lab. As they opened the window, it promptly shut on their finger and broke the bone (Appendix 5). Most concerningly, this issue was raised to the university leadership, who claimed that her injury was not to be covered by GW as she was "not an employee". Her medical visits went from April to July and added up to over $2,500, roughly 10% of our yearly stipend from CCAS. Only after lengthy email exchanges did the university claim responsibility for the costs. Just last week, the poor condition of Bell Hall's windows caused another injury. On November 9th, a Facilities worker opened the window in the men's bathroom on the 4th floor to circulate air and reduce the strong smell, and the same thing happened. Her hand was crushed by the window, creating deep lacerations and, once again, breaking bones (Appendix 6). The students at the scene of the incident cleaned up most of the blood but pointed out to GWPD and one Facilities manager that it required additional cleaning, as it is a biohazard. Students were assured that the blood would be dealt with, but by November 29th there was still uncleaned blood on the wall and pipes of the men's bathroom (Appendix 7).

Woefully inadequate climate control is far from the only problem with Bell Hall. During the demolition of the 5th floor greenhouse in early September 2022, there were constant leaks of brown water and sludge onto the 4th floor. Ceiling tiles got so saturated with water that they began falling, hitting microscopes, lab equipment and benchtops (Appendix 8). Luckily, none of the faculty or graduate students had active experiments going on at that time, but incidents like these can cost thousands of dollars in research and set student progress back by months. This was not the case a couple of years ago, when leaks on the 3rd floor destroyed two thermal cyclers, costing the PI over $15,000 in lost equipment.

Many of the issues we face in Bell Hall also make it unsanitary according to DC's Department of Buildings[3]. There is a concerning amount of mouse (or rat, likely) droppings in Bell 404, which happens to be the same room in which asbestos removal was underway not long ago (Appendix 9). Mouse encounters are also common in the basement of the building, which houses many of the Geology classrooms and labs. Both of the Bell stairways show signs of structural damage and cracks (Appendix 10). Despite a more recent renovation, the side of the men's bathroom stall is corroded by urine. The women's bathroom has never been renovated. Leaks are abundant, even before and after the demolition of the greenhouse,

[3] https://dob.dc.gov/page/board-condemnation-insanitary-buildings-bcib

happening frequently on all floors and the basement. Just this past month, there was an active leak on the stairwell of the second floor, immediately next to the radiator and building lights (Appendix 10). Two weeks ago, a part of the ceiling next to the leak fell on the head of one of our TAs (Appendix 11). With this much water infiltrating the building and causing uncontrolled humidity, several outbreaks of black mold have been reported across Bell Hall. Constant exposure to black mold can not only lead to unpleasant symptoms (e.g., sneezing, coughing, congestion), but also worsen asthma and, for those with compromised immune symptoms, deadly fungal infections[4].

Lastly, the Active Shooter Training the department received in September 2023 advocated for the use of the Lockdown buttons installed in classrooms in emergency situations. The only classrooms in Bell which received the button are those maintained by CCAS, leaving our teaching labs with no tools for such an emergency. Upon inquiry, it was revealed that the doors in the labs are not compatible with the system. We urge for their replacement for our safety, as well as the safety of our students. This is particularly concerning given the sheer amount of undergraduates that come into Bell Hall for their Introductory Biology labs every week. Each semester, 35 different lab sections host a total of 840 students (roughly 10% of the entire undergraduate population at GW). Those same students are also in classrooms with extreme temperatures, as well as all of the other health hazards aforementioned in this letter.

We ask that GWU, CCAS, and all parties involved in the maintenance and upkeep of Bell Hall take our safety seriously. The conditions in Bell Hall have caused physical injuries, loss of thousands of dollars in research grants, and a generalized feeling of anxiety. We demand a meeting with CCAS leadership to discuss the unsafe and unsanitary state of Bell Hall and establish a plan along with a timeframe. Changes need to happen, and they need to happen soon.

Sincerely,

Biology Graduate Student Council (BGSC)

On behalf of:

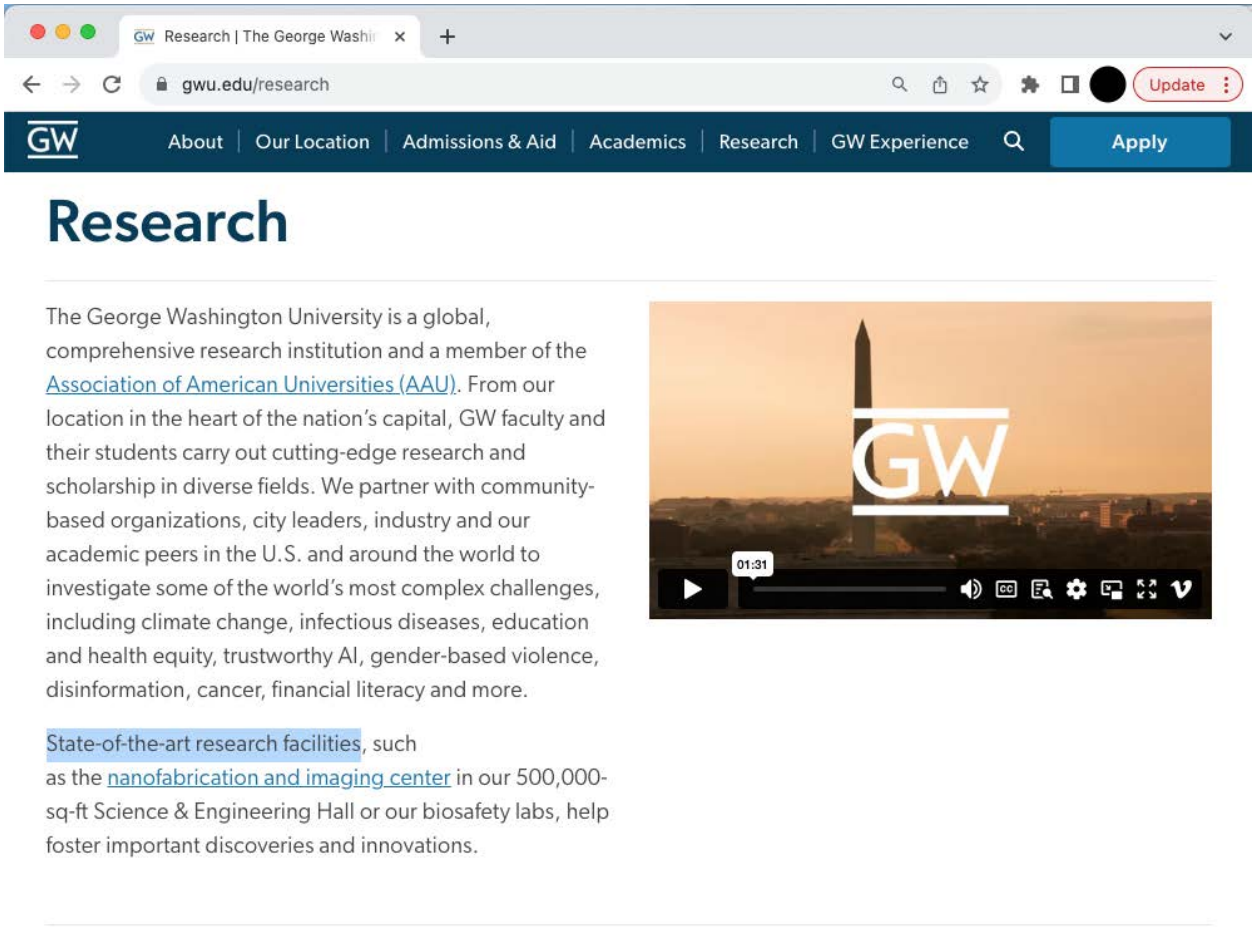
- Pietro Tardelli Canedo (PhD, 3rd year)
- Ian Wilenzik (PhD, 4th year)
- Ashley Bastin (PhD, 2nd year)

[4] https://www.cdc.gov/mold/default.htm

- Awanti Shastri (PhD, 3rd year)
- Jonathan Huie (PhD, 4th year)
- Jennie Brennan (PhD, 5th year)
- Ari Zakroff (PhD, 1st Year)
- Nureen Ghuznavi (PhD, 6th year)
- Matthew Burnett (PhD, 1st year)
- Pooja A. Anilkumar (PhD, 1st year)
- Kaaria Walker (PhD, 1st year)
- Maddie Byrne (Masters, 2nd year)
- Sarah Morris (PhD, 2nd year)
- Cal So (PhD, 5th year)
- Pia Sen (PhD, 2nd year)
- Lausanne Oliver (BS/MS)
- Kelsie Larkin (PhD, 5th year)
- Alex DeLong (Masters, 1st year)
- Laís Mizraim Souza Barros (PhD, 2nd year)

APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Screenshot taken from GWU's Research page on November 15th, 2023



Appendix 2. Temperature variation in Bell Hall 408, a molecular lab, between May (left) and June (right)

Appendix 3. Variation in temperature across Bell Hall teaching labs on November 15th, 2023. From left to right: Bell Hall 201, 205, and 207.

Appendix 4. List of FixIt ticket submissions for issues in Bell Hall

Temperature: 166740, 166930, 169093, 169421, 173997, 174167, 178937, 179856, 180994, 179841, 171630, 165583, 181950, 168813, 172568, 175381, 176294, 182541, 183403, 157936, 159434, 160451, 177318, 189281, 183408, 189406, 182153, 146708, 144966, 143074, 134791, 127960, 125179, 124355, 124256, 119244, 116056, 96023, 70724, 69691,

Mold: 142739, 181950, 186630, 174019, 96693, 191408

Bathroom and sinks: 143932, 135685, 166680, 152128, 148107, 78322, 76517

Window: 102330

Leaks: 100348, 94004, 186546, 175708, 148068, 141744, 130242, 115961, 112933, 101621, 94008, 75161, 67388, 127562

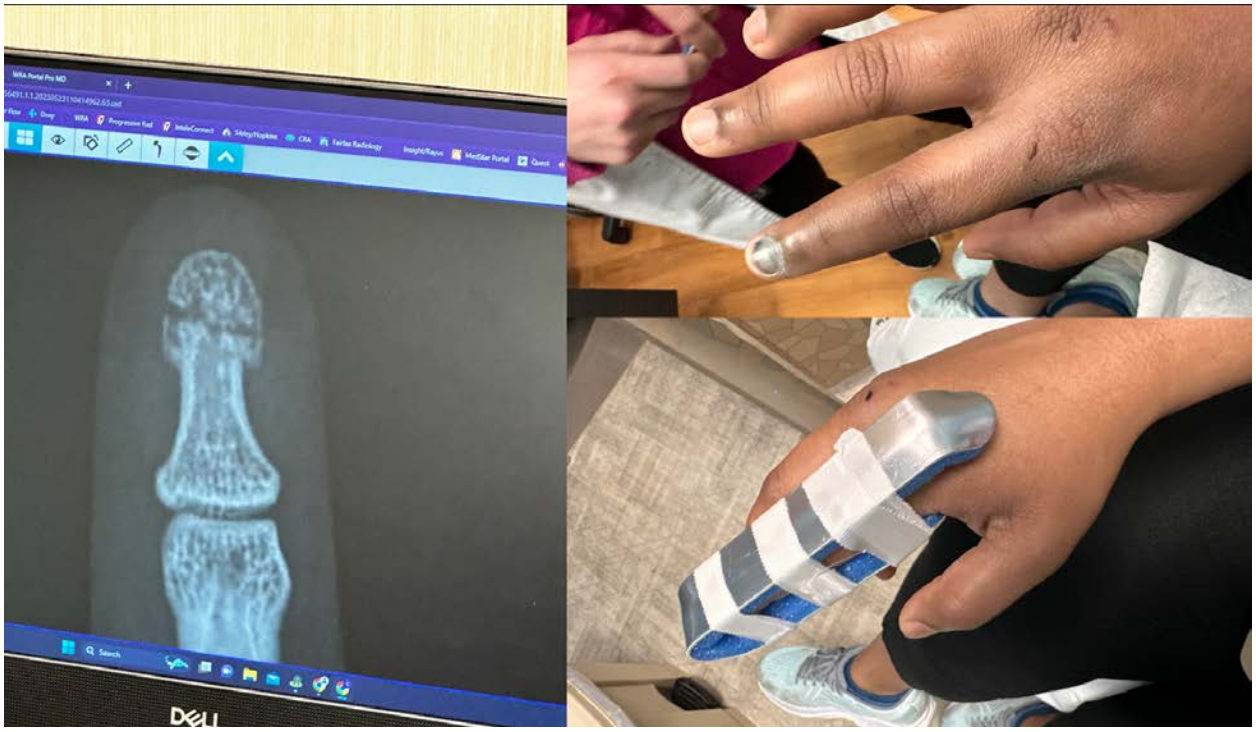
Power outage: 169873, 169497, 162018, 149147, 145851, 113871, 146209

Moth infestation: 134204

Wasps: 105008

Mice: 130502

Appendix 5. X-ray and photos from the broken bone of a graduate student caused by the 4th floor windows



Appendix 6. Report of the accident involving the men's bathroom window and a Facilities worker. Names were redacted to preserve the privacy of the involved parties.

On Fri, Nov 10, 2023 at 9:38 AM [redacted]@email.gwu.edu> wrote:

I also want to note that a similar incident occurred with one of our graduate students in April.
This is a dangerous and urgent issue that must be fixed ASAP.
Thank you,
~[redacted]

On Fri, Nov 10, 2023 at 9:25AM [redacted]@email.gwu.edu> wrote:

Hi [redacted]
Thank you so much for letting us know about this. This is extremely concerning! I fear that Bell Hall is quite a liability to the department, the university, and to those who inhabit the building.
I am copying in [redacted](we should take this to the faculty Senate or SOMETHING to get this fixed!), as well as [redacted]and the building supervisor.
I will let you know when we have updates.
Thank you!
~[redacted]

On Fri, Nov 10, 2023 at 9:21AM [redacted]> wrote:

Hello,
I want to report something that happened last night (11/09/2023). It was around 5:30 pm and I was sitting in the office (Bell 411) with two other students when we heard noises coming from the men's bathroom which is next to our office.

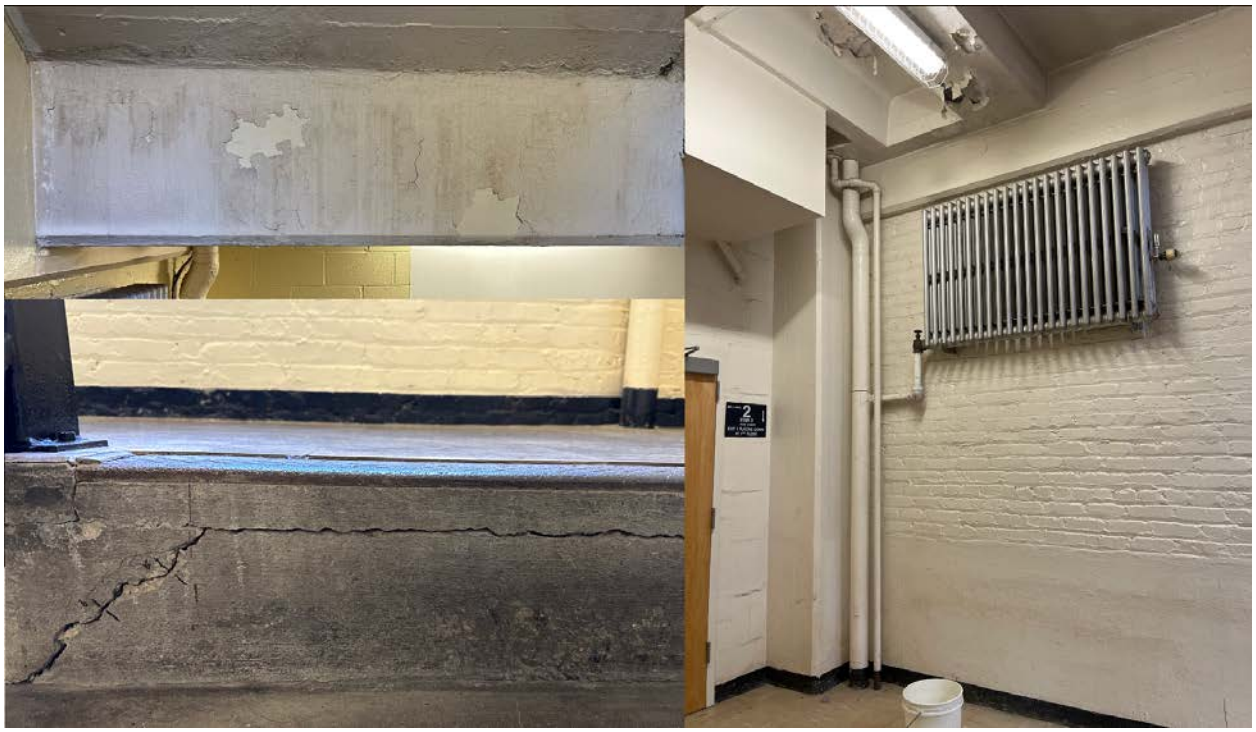
Someone came over saying they needed help and we went into the men's bathroom and saw a woman who was wearing a maintenance badge and her friend translated for us to let us know that she was cleaning the bathroom when she opened the window to air out the bathroom, as Bell is very hot now after they turned the radiator on and the smell is very bad.
She was reaching in to use the hook to stop the window so it stayed open, but as she put the window open with one hand, it came slamming down on her other hand vertically. It happened very fast, and at first we thought it had taken off part of finger because it was crushed entirely through the finger (we know this because it was physically flattened especially compared to the rest of that finger).
One graduate student who had EMR training grabbed her finger and held it up to elevate it, while another one of us ran to get the first aid kit we have in our laboratory which is on the other end of the hall (Bell 403).
Another student called the GW emergency line and they used cleaning supplies and gloves to clean up some of the excessive blood while I found gauze pads that were sterile and longer gauze than we had in our kit. The GW EMS came and we directed them to the bathroom, they informed us all that she would likely need stitches and they were taking her to the hospital.
This is very concerning to me because Bell Hall has had an incident before where a graduate student broke her finger this way, yet nothing was done regarding this unsafe window situation. As a graduate student in Bell Hall, I am concerned for the safety of myself and fellow students.
Thank you,
[redacted]

Appendix 7. Uncleaned dried blood from November 9th incident involving a Facilities staff. Photos taken a week later on November 17th.

Appendix 8. Fallen ceiling tiles and leaks due to demolition of the 5th floor greenhouse

Appendix 9. Mouse droppings and asbestos notice for Bell Hall 404

Appendix 10. Peeling paint with moisture streaks, cracks and leaks on Bell Hall stairwells.



Appendix 11. Report from graduate TA that was hit in the head by falling debris from the ceiling near the leak, as well as photos attached to the email.

From [redacted]@gwmail.gwu.edu>
Date: Fri, Nov 17, 2023 at 10:04 AM
Subject: Bell hall photos
To: [redacted]@gwu.edu>

Hi [redacted]

Per our conversation, I am a GTA and had a piece of the ceiling fall on me in Bell Hall. Here are some photos attached.

Thanks!
[redacted]