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MIT alert on chemical spill considered too strong by some

By **John R. Ellement** and **Matt Rocheleau**

| GLOBE STAFF AND GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | OCTOBER 07, 2014



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ARAM BOGHOSIAN/BOSTON GLOBE

Students and faculty waited outside MIT's Building 18, the Dreyfus Building, after being evacuated when a chemical spill was reported.

CAMBRIDGE — The campuswide security alert went out via text, e-mail, and automated phone message to the MIT community around 1:45 p.m. Tuesday: The university was investigating a report of a “serious emergency on campus. STAY ALERT.”

The incident was quickly declared to be relatively minor: a small chemical spill in a chemistry laboratory, which caused the building to be briefly evacuated. No injuries were reported.

But the wording of the initial alert rattled the campus, and prompted concern about what some felt was its unnecessarily alarmist tone.

MIT police, who had tweeted the initial university alert, responded to the concerns: “The [@MITPolice](#) rebroadcast MIT Alerts via Twitter as they are received. We do not write the alerts

and apologize for the confusion.”

Campus spokeswoman Kimberly Allen said: “As with any case of emergency communication, MIT emergency personnel will do an after-action review and take steps to ensure the process is optimal.”

Taylor Tracy, an administrative assistant at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, questioned what she called the vague message, which she received via text, e-mail, and automated call. She said others texted and called her wondering what was going on and fearful that the alert meant something more serious.

“Tensions are still high after the Marathon bombing and the shooting [of MIT police Officer Sean Collier], so it was worrisome to a lot of people,” she said. “We live in a panic era, so people are just really quick to think the worst.”

She said she stayed in her office fielding calls and texts until receiving the next alerts clarifying that it was a chemical spill.

The school has faced criticism over the use of the alert system before. In Feb. 2013, MIT came under fire for failing to notify students of reports of a gunman on campus for more than an hour. The report was later determined to be a hoax.

Assistant Chief Gerard Mahoney of the Cambridge Fire Department said Tuesday’s incident was sparked by the spill of about a gallon of hexane on the third floor of Building 18, also known as the Dreyfus Building. He said hexane is a flammable solvent.

Mahoney said firefighters ventilated the building, tested air quality, then deemed the area safe.

“The situation was under control rather quickly,” Mahoney said. People were allowed back inside the building about a half-hour after the evacuation.

Evan Allen of the Globe staff contributed to this report.



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