



"The Student Has a Gun!"

What Faculty and Staff Should Do When Encountering a Firearm

With panel contributions from

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Introduction: The Role of Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff occupy a unique position in campus safety. Faculty are often the first to observe concerning behavior in a classroom, yet they are not trained or expected to function as law enforcement. Their role is more limited and specific: to observe, communicate, and help maintain a safe environment without escalating risk. Staff are often involved in more personal aspects of the student's lives in their living and learning environments, during stressful conversations about financial aid or class registration, or when they are eating or on the road traveling for athletic or club events.

This distinction becomes especially important when a faculty or staff member believes they may have seen a firearm. The phrase "I saw a gun" does not describe a single type of event. It may refer to a brief and ambiguous glimpse of an object in a bag, an accidental exposure of a holstered weapon, a deliberate display intended to intimidate or test limits, or an immediate and dangerous threat. Each situation carries different implications, and responding requires judgment grounded in observable behavior rather than assumption.

This guide provides faculty and staff with a practical framework for navigating that uncertainty.¹ It does not ask faculty or staff to determine whether a weapon is legal, nor does it expect them to intervene physically. Instead, it offers guidance on interpreting observations, avoiding escalation, activating help, and responding appropriately if the situation becomes dangerous. Faculty and staff observe and assess behavior; they do not determine whether weapons are legal under criminal law or campus policies.

Understanding the Spectrum of Risk

A useful way to approach firearm-related concerns in the classroom is to think in terms of a spectrum rather than a single category. Situations tend to fall into one of three general patterns.

- ❖ At the lowest level of clarity are ambiguous or accidental exposures. A faculty member might believe they saw part of a firearm inside a backpack or notice something briefly when a student shifts position. The object may not be a firearm at all, or the exposure may be unintentional. Common misattributions may include a phone, portable video game device, insulin pump, or other medical devices. In a state that allows concealed carry, it may clearly be a weapon, but context is needed to determine if it is lawful and in accordance with campus policies. Your role is to describe the object as observed and the corresponding behavior, not to characterize the person.
- ❖ A second category involves concerning or purposeful exposure. In these situations, the individual appears to intentionally reveal or signal the presence of a weapon, even if they make no direct threat. The behavior itself raises concern because it may be coercive, intimidating, grievance-driven, or preparatory.²

¹ This guidance is based on professional experience in law enforcement, threat assessment, and campus safety practice. It is intended for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or replace institutional policy or emergency procedures. Laws, regulations, and campus policies vary by jurisdiction and institution. Faculty and staff should follow their institution's official protocols and consult with campus leadership, local law enforcement, and legal counsel as appropriate. In any situation involving an immediate threat to safety, contact 911 or the appropriate emergency response system without delay.

² Some individuals intentionally carry firearms, often openly and while recording, into public spaces or around government facilities to test the limits of carry laws, observe law-enforcement reactions, and provoke discussion or legal challenges about constitutional rights (sometimes called "Second Amendment auditors"). For example, in 2026, open-carry activist Matthew Rankin entered Dallas Police Department headquarters while openly carrying a suppressed handgun as part of what he described as a compliance check; the encounter resulted in his arrest on an unrelated allegation, confiscation of the firearm, and a subsequent federal civil-rights lawsuit.

- ❖ The third category is an immediate threat. Here, the weapon is handled, displayed in a threatening way, referenced verbally, or paired with threats. The situation is no longer ambiguous and requires immediate protective action.

What distinguishes these categories is not intent, something faculty cannot reliably determine, but behavior. Movement from one level to another is often rapid. A situation that begins as uncertain can escalate within seconds. For that reason, faculty should avoid overanalyzing and instead focus on recognizing behavioral changes and responding accordingly.

The Influence of Institutional Context

Commuter college versus residential campus

A commuter college may have more open campus boundaries, more public foot traffic, more students arriving directly from work, more variable attachment to campus culture, and often fewer embedded staff in hallways or residence halls. That means classroom faculty may need especially clear tools for quick reporting, concise emergency messaging, and coordination with local police, since the campus may rely on non-sworn or unarmed safety staff and may not have the same density of student-affairs responders nearby.

A residential campus often has more layered infrastructure: residence life, student affairs, counseling, conduct staff, and sometimes a sworn campus police department with dedicated patrols. That can improve internal coordination, but it also adds complexity. Faculty and staff may need different guidance depending on whether the concern appears to involve a resident student in ongoing distress, a conduct issue, a known behavioral case, or an immediate violent threat. On a campus with a sworn police department, the response chain may stay mostly internal at first; on a campus with unarmed security, the response may depend more heavily on rapid liaison with municipal police. Sworn university police in Texas, for example, are licensed peace officers with law-enforcement authority, while some California college systems use non-sworn, unarmed safety officers focused on observation and reporting.

Firearm-friendly and unfriendly states

In some states, campus carry laws apply. Faculty and staff must distinguish between lawful concealed possession in some settings, a visible handgun that may violate concealment rules or campus policy, prohibited locations on campus, and purposeful display that raises threat concerns regardless of carry status. From a safety perspective, behavior matters more than legality. A lawfully possessed firearm can still be part of a threatening situation.

Texas Government Code section 411.2031 governs handgun carry by license holders on higher-education campuses, and public universities such as UT Austin state that licensed individuals may carry concealed handguns on campus except where prohibited by law or campus rules. UT Austin also states that if a handgun is visible, however briefly, law enforcement should be notified.

In California, the training message is cleaner. Firearms on college and university campuses are generally prohibited, absent limited statutory exceptions. That means faculty do not need to puzzle over whether a student might lawfully carry a weapon. The emphasis can be more direct: report immediately, avoid confrontation, and initiate the campus safety response. California Penal Code section 626.9 governs this area, and prior amendments required colleges and universities to post notices prohibiting firearms on covered property.

Texas and California should be seen as archetypes, not endpoints. As of August 2026, NCSL identified approximately 13 states permitting firearms on public college campuses in some form.³ Some states also leave the question to institutional policy, with no criminal penalties attached. As an outlier, Tennessee allows full-time employees holding carry permits to be armed on public campus property, while students may not.⁴ The armed person may therefore be a lawfully carrying colleague.

Sworn armed campus police versus unarmed campus security

Where a sworn, armed campus police force exists, faculty guidance can assume an internal law-enforcement response capacity with arrest authority, coordinated incident command, and an immediate armed response. That makes silent reporting tools, room numbers, suspect descriptions, direction of travel, and behavior details especially valuable.

Where there is an unarmed campus security force, the faculty guidance should place even more weight on:

- fast emergency notification
- clear call trees to local 911 dispatch
- preserving distance and cover
- rapid classroom protective actions
- staff training on what security can and cannot do

This is not a criticism of unarmed security. It is a planning reality. Non-sworn, unarmed officers may be excellent at observation, de-escalation, communication, evacuation support, and coordination, but they are not the same response asset as a sworn police department.

Core Principles for Faculty and Staff Response

Despite the variability of these situations, several principles remain constant.

- ❖ **Stay outwardly calm and do not challenge the person about the gun:** Faculty should avoid statements such as “Do you have a gun?” or “You need to hand that over now,” because direct confrontation can rapidly escalate uncertainty into a crisis. A calmer approach is to keep your tone steady, avoid sudden movements, and create time and distance while assessing whether you can summon help discreetly. Assess your location and the availability of cover (objects that hide you and provide protection from bullets) and concealment (objects that hide you but lack protection).
- ❖ **Use a non-accusatory pretext to pause or relocate when feasible:** If there is no immediate threat, faculty may have safer options than freezing in place. Examples include taking a short break, asking the class to transition to a nearby activity, inviting a colleague into the room, moving toward the door while keeping the class calm, and dismissing students in a controlled way if that can be done without drawing attention to the individual. This is most appropriate when the firearm exposure was accidental or uncertain, not when someone is actively displaying the weapon in a threatening way. Of note, moving thirty people through a corridor past a possibly armed person is a decision with a potential bottleneck cost, and should not be seen as a common de-escalation technique.

³ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2026). *Postsecondary Legislation Database: Campus Safety – Guns*. Updated July 24, 2026.

⁴ The underlying campus-carry provision was enacted as Public Chapter 1061 (2016), SB 2376, effective July 1, 2016. The Tennessee General Assembly describes it as permitting full-time employees of public colleges and universities who have the required carry permit to carry on their employing institution's property.

- ❖ **Avoid attempting to disarm, seize the backpack, or block the exit:** Faculty are educators, not tactical responders. Trying to grab the bag, touch the holster, shut the door on someone, or prevent them from leaving can sharply raise danger. On campuses with sworn police, the safer model is to notify and observe. On campuses with unarmed security, notification remains critical, but the expectation is often that security will coordinate observation, evacuation support, and rapid connection to local law enforcement rather than conduct an armed intervention themselves. A 2025 California community college procedure, for example, describes campus safety officers as non-sworn and unarmed, focusing on prevention, de-escalation, observation, and reporting.
- ❖ **Discreetly signal for help:** That can include fixed panic buttons, mobile duress buttons, classroom phones with one-touch emergency dialing, silent desktop alerts, prearranged text codes, and coded phrases to a front desk or nearby colleague, such as “Can you send the blue folder to Room 214?” Coded communication systems introduce risk if they are not universally understood or practiced. Misinterpretation or delay can occur if the receiving party is untrained or unavailable. Additionally, every coded system should have a backup pathway, such as direct 911 activation.

On campuses where lawful concealed carry may be permitted, a discreet signal is often preferable to a public accusation because it allows responders to assess legality, policy, behavior, and threat level without forcing a public showdown. UT Austin’s campus carry guidance specifically notes that if a handgun is visible, even briefly, law enforcement should be notified for assessment.

- ❖ **Report Every Firearm Sighting:** Faculty and staff sometimes hesitate to report a firearm because the individual did not make an explicit threat or because the weapon was seen only briefly. Others worry they may have misidentified what they saw or fear overreacting if the firearm ultimately proves to be lawfully possessed. These concerns should not prevent reporting. A faculty member is not expected to determine whether a firearm is legal, whether campus policy has been violated, or whether criminal intent exists. Law enforcement and campus safety professionals make those determinations.

Whenever you observe a firearm or a possible firearm, report it promptly in accordance with established campus procedures. Reporting does not presume wrongdoing; it ensures that trained responders can assess the situation before it escalates.

- ❖ **Shift immediately to active-threat protocols if the conduct becomes threatening:** If the person intentionally displays the gun, touches it in a threatening way, makes threatening statements, blocks exits, stalks someone in the room, or causes a reasonable fear of imminent harm, the faculty and staff role changes. The response should mirror the campus active assailant plan: call 911 or emergency dispatch immediately, use panic or duress systems, direct protective action, and follow lockdown or escape guidance as trained. Remember, “gun seen” and “active shooter” are not automatically the same event, but a purposeful threatening display can become an active violence event in seconds.

Administrative permission is no longer relevant at this stage. Whether a firearm may have been lawfully possessed in another context does not matter when it is being used in a threatening manner. The focus must be entirely on safety and survival.

- ❖ **Create Time and Distance:** Firearm-related situations are highly time-compressed. A situation can shift from ambiguous to life-threatening in seconds. Faculty should avoid overanalyzing and instead prioritize immediate reporting and positioning for safety. Faculty should note exits and barriers to exiting, track the individual’s movement and proximity, observe their hands (not just the weapon), and maintain awareness of student clustering and bottlenecks.

Faculty/Staff Decision Tree

Step 1: Is there an immediate threat?

Immediate threat means any of the following:

- the person is holding, touching, drawing, or handling the gun in a way that is beyond a minor adjustment for comfort or security
- the gun is being shown in a brandishing manner
- threats are being made
- the person is blocking exits, intimidating others, or acting in a way that suggests violence may be imminent

If yes, go to Path A. If no or not sure, go to Path B.

Path A: Immediate threat or possible imminent violence

1. Activate emergency help now. Use the fastest available option:

- panic button or duress alarm
- classroom phone emergency key
- silent alert app
- 911
- campus police dispatch

Regular training, testing, and practice are essential when operating signaling responses such as panic buttons, duress alarms, emergency alarms, computer alerts, or apps. If you are on a campus where concealed carry may be lawful in some settings, that does not change this step if the gun is being displayed, handled, or used in a threatening way. If you see a gun other than one carried by uniformed law enforcement, call 911, and visible handguns may violate law or university policy.

2. Follow your institution's Run-Hide-Fight protocol⁵

- evacuate if a safe escape route is available
- if escape is not safe, lock or barricade
- move out of sight
- silence phones
- take cover
- be prepared to respond to save lives if confronted directly
 - use only as a last resort when life is in imminent danger.
 - act decisively and aggressively against the attacker.
 - use available objects as improvised weapons or distractions.
 - throw objects, yell, move, and disrupt the attacker's ability to continue.
 - commit to the action once fighting becomes necessary.
 - work with others (when possible) to increase the ability to interrupt the attack.

⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Active Shooter: How to Respond. www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/active_shooter_booklet.pdf
Federal Bureau of Investigation. Active Shooter Attack Prevention and Preparedness (ASAPP): Run, Hide, Fight.
www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/active-shooter-safety-resources/active-shooter-attack-prevention-and-preparedness-asapp

Remember, fighting is the last-resort option when running or hiding is no longer possible, and you are in immediate danger. If escape or sheltering is not possible and the individual presents an imminent threat to life, faculty and staff should follow the institution's trained last-resort active-assailant response as outlined in their institution's policy.

3. Use calm, minimal language if you must speak. Keep words short and neutral:

- "Everyone step back."
- "Move with me."
- "Get out now."
- "Stay low and quiet."

Faculty and staff should anticipate that students may freeze, panic, and rush exits, and attempt to record the situation. Faculty direction should aim to reduce movement chaos and maintain control.

4. Do not try to solve the situation yourself. Do not:

- argue with the person
- demand the weapon
- move toward them
- try to disarm them unless there is no other way to stop immediate harm

Path B: No immediate threat, but a gun or a possible gun was seen

1. Stay visibly calm. Your job is to keep the room from tipping into panic or confrontation. Do not escalate the situation. Specifically, do not:

- shout
- accuse publicly
- ask "Do you have a gun?"
- demand to inspect a backpack or waistband

2. Identify what you saw. Which of these best fits?

a. You glimpsed a possible gun in a backpack or bag. This is an uncertain sighting. It may be a real firearm, a replica, or something misidentified. Action:

- discreetly notify campus police, security, or 911 per protocol
- note the student's location, clothing, bag, and direction of movement
- continue class calmly if that is safest, or create a natural pause if needed

Do not:

- search the bag
- grab the bag
- confront the student in front of others

b. A holstered gun was briefly exposed when clothing shifted. This may be accidental exposure, a policy violation, or unlawful possession, depending on the campus and state. Action:

- discreetly notify emergency or campus responders
- avoid public confrontation
- continue calm instruction or create a low-key pause while waiting for responders

On campuses covered by campus carry rules, handguns must remain concealed, and visible carry may violate law or campus policy, so you should still report it. On other campuses, firearms are generally prohibited except for limited statutory exceptions, so the threshold for notifying responders is even clearer.

- c. The person seems to be showing the gun on purpose. This is more serious than accidental exposure, even if no direct verbal threat has been made. Action:
- treat as an urgent safety situation
 - discreetly summon help immediately
 - increase distance if you can do so without drawing attention
 - prepare to shift into Path A if behavior escalates

Do not:

- challenge motive
- shame the person
- try to “talk tough”

- d. Another student reports seeing a gun, but you did not see it yourself. Action:

- take the report seriously
- ask only brief, quiet questions if needed: who, where, what was seen
- notify responders based on the report
- increase situational awareness without spotlighting the person

Do not:

- dismiss the report because you did not personally confirm it

Step 3: Decide whether to keep the class in place, pause, or move

Ask: Can I create safety without escalating the situation?

If yes: Use a neutral pretext:

- “Let’s take a five-minute break.”
- “Please check the course site while I step out for a moment.”
- “I need to confirm something before we continue.”

This can buy time for responders.

If no: Stay calm, remain observant, and keep your signal for help discreet. Sometimes the safest move is to avoid any visible change until trained responders arrive.

Step 4: Who should be contacted?

On campuses with sworn, armed campus police: Contact campus police or dispatch first if that is the campus standard. Sworn university police have law-enforcement authority and can assess legality, threat level, and immediate response needs. As mentioned earlier, there should be training, communication, and awareness of the ways sworn officers will respond (e.g., guns out, lights and sirens).

On campuses with unarmed or non-sworn security: Notify campus security immediately, but understand their role may be observation, coordination, and connection with local law enforcement rather than armed intervention. A 2025 California community college procedure, for example, states that campus safety officers are non-sworn and unarmed.

Step 5: Consider the campus setting

Commuter community college

Lean heavily on:

- exact room number
- building name
- direction of travel
- vehicle description if the person leaves
- fast coordination with local police

Open campuses can become fluid very quickly.

Four-year residential campus

Involve emergency response first, then bring in dean of students, residence life, or BIT/CARE only after immediate safety is stabilized.

Step 6: After the immediate situation

Once the danger window is over:

- document exactly what was seen
- document what was said
- record time, location, and who was notified
- avoid filling gaps with assumptions
- route documentation to a central office/department
- participate in follow-up review and support planning⁶

See [Appendix A](#) for a simplified Quick Reference Guide.

Managing the Classroom Environment

In any of these scenarios, faculty are responsible not only for their own actions but also for guiding the group's behavior. Students may respond unpredictably. Some may freeze, others may rush toward exits, and some may attempt to record the situation. Clear, simple direction is essential. Instructions should be brief and neutral, avoiding language that could increase panic. The goal is to reduce chaos and maintain as much control as possible over movement and attention.

In non-immediate-threat situations, faculty may be able to create a pause or transition that allows safer positioning or discreet communication. In emergency situations, direction must shift quickly to protective action, with clarity taking precedence over explanation.

⁶ Have each person document independently, and before comparing accounts with colleagues. Group discussion contaminates recollection, and the convergence between two faculty/staff statements is an important aspect of post-incident process.

Campus Familiarity as a Safety Skill

Faculty and staff preparedness extends beyond knowing emergency procedures. Effective emergency response also depends on understanding the physical environment in which those procedures occur.

Many instructors, particularly adjunct faculty who teach only a few courses each semester, become familiar only with the route between their parking area and assigned classroom. During an emergency, however, limited knowledge of the campus can delay responders, complicate evacuations, and reduce a faculty member's ability to guide students toward safety.

Faculty and staff should be encouraged to develop working familiarity with:

- building names and numbers⁷
- room numbering systems
- primary and secondary exits
- nearby stairwells and accessible routes
- major campus landmarks
- locations of emergency phones, panic buttons, AEDs, and first-aid equipment
- common gathering locations and evacuation points

This knowledge allows faculty to provide more useful information to dispatchers and responding officers. Rather than saying, "The student ran that way," faculty can report, "The individual exited the east door of Building C and was last seen heading toward the student union." Small details such as direction of travel, nearby landmarks, or likely destinations can significantly improve response speed and effectiveness.

Campus familiarity also improves a faculty and staff member's ability to make sound decisions under stress. Instructors and staff who understand the surrounding environment are better positioned to direct students toward safer exits, avoid bottlenecks, identify alternative routes, and adapt when normal evacuation paths are unavailable.

Likewise, consider having campus safety or other appropriate departments address what to expect on campus before an incident occurs. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and sharing state laws and talking through hypotheticals during faculty orientation can help with planning and preparation.

Institutional Systems That Support Effective Response

An effective institutional response to a firearm sighting in a college classroom depends not only on what an individual faculty member does in the moment, but also on whether the institution has built a reliable system of communication, training, and follow-up in advance. Faculty should not be forced to improvise emergency messaging, guess whether a panic button exists, or decide alone how to document a disturbing event after the fact. A sound policy framework should establish clear expectations to create a more predictable response, reduce hesitation, and improve coordination between faculty, dispatch, campus safety, student affairs, and institutional leadership.

These measures are not meant to turn faculty or staff into law enforcement or emergency managers. Rather, the goal is to give faculty a small set of practical tools that help them act quickly, calmly, and consistently under stress. Good policy in this area should emphasize life safety, low-escalation responses, and rapid connection to

⁷ Clear use of Wayfinder signage and creating clarity when offices and buildings may have secondary names or purposes should be clarified prior to an emergency response.

trained responders. It should also recognize that operational details may differ by campus type, state law, and whether the institution relies on sworn campus police or unarmed security personnel. Even with those differences, the institution can still create a common training framework that helps faculty know how to discreetly summon help, communicate without inflaming the situation, prepare students for emergencies in a measured way, and document the incident clearly afterward. Where appropriate, and consistent with institutional policy, behavioral intervention or CARE teams may be engaged when the circumstances indicate a behavioral, welfare, or threat-assessment concern.

Sample institutional policy language

Faculty or staff who observe a firearm or possible firearm should prioritize safety, avoid public confrontation when feasible, and immediately use established emergency notification procedures, including panic buttons, silent alerts, coded communication methods, or direct contact with campus safety or emergency dispatch. Faculty are not expected to investigate the weapon's legality, physically intervene, or independently resolve the situation unless immediate action is necessary to protect life. Following the incident, faculty and staff shall complete the institution's post-incident reporting process and participate in any requested follow-up review.

Syllabus Language and Classroom Preparedness

Syllabus language should not attempt to teach students tactical responses or create anxiety at the start of the semester. Instead, it should normalize the fact that the college has emergency procedures, that faculty may occasionally direct students during unexpected safety situations, and that students are expected to follow instructions quickly when asked. The goal is to create just enough familiarity that a brief faculty directive in an emergency does not feel confusing or random.

Institutions may wish to provide approved syllabus language that all faculty can use or adapt. This helps create consistency and avoids placing the burden of drafting emergency language on individual instructors. The wording should be short, calm, and broad enough to cover a range of safety events without focusing exclusively on firearms. Sample syllabus language:

Classroom Safety Statement

Our campus maintains emergency procedures for a variety of safety situations. If an urgent situation arises, I may ask the class to pause, remain in place, move, or exit quickly, depending on guidance from campus safety personnel and the circumstances. Please follow directions promptly and avoid speculation or sharing unconfirmed information during or immediately after an incident. Information about campus emergency procedures and alerts is available through official college resources.

A faculty guide that accompanies the syllabus language should explain that the syllabus is not the primary emergency tool. Its purpose is to create a small foundation of familiarity. Training should encourage faculty to briefly orient students, especially in the first weeks of class, to basics such as exits, classroom phones, and the expectation that they may need to follow immediate safety directions without a lengthy explanation. This is particularly useful in labs, clinics, and large lecture halls where movement can quickly become chaotic.

Panic Buttons and Silent Emergency Notification

Institutions should establish a consistent and well-publicized system for silent emergency notification in teaching spaces. Faculty and staff should know, before an incident occurs, whether classrooms have fixed panic buttons, duress alarms, one-touch emergency phones, mobile alert applications, or some other method of rapid emergency notification. The policy should make clear which tools are available in which spaces and how they

connect to campus police, campus security, 911, or another dispatch point. A panic button or silent alert is particularly important when a weapon is seen, but the person has not yet made an overt threat, because the faculty member may need to summon help without provoking confrontation or drawing attention to the report.

Training on panic buttons should go beyond simple awareness. Faculty should be shown the exact device or method, told what happens when it is activated, and given realistic examples of when to use it. Many people hesitate in emergencies because they are unsure whether a situation is “serious enough” to justify using an alarm. Institutions should reduce that hesitation by explicitly stating that a reported or observed firearm, a possible firearm, or a purposeful display of a weapon is sufficient reason to activate emergency notification. Training should also address the information responders need after activation, such as the building, room number, physical description, observed behavior, and whether the weapon was seen in a backpack, on a waistband, or in the person’s hand. Training should also include false-activation protocols, as institutions that do not plan for accidental activations will develop responders who discount them. Faculty and staff should also be trained on what to do if primary emergency systems fail, including direct 911 dialing and, if necessary, verbal notification.

Institutions should also consider environmental design issues. If panic buttons exist, they should be placed where a faculty member can access them without having to cross toward a threatening person. Mobile or wearable options may be especially valuable for labs, studios, large lecture halls, and nontraditional learning spaces. Community colleges and commuter campuses may also require a stronger emphasis on mobile tools, since instructional spaces may be more dispersed and less uniformly equipped. If a campus does not currently have panic buttons or silent alerts, that absence should be identified as a risk-management gap rather than a neutral condition.

Coded Communications and Discreet Requests for Help

In many firearm-related situations, a public call for help may increase danger. For that reason, institutions should establish coded communication options that allow a faculty member to discreetly alert others without directly confronting the individual or alarming the entire room. These codes may take the form of a prearranged phone phrase, a text shorthand, a desktop alert, a phrase used with a department assistant, or a message sent through a learning-space control panel or campus app. Whatever the format, the code must be simple, memorable, and tied to a clear response protocol.

A useful policy does not just authorize coded communication; it standardizes it. Faculty and staff should know exactly which phrase or signal to use, who should receive it, and what response should follow. For example, a coded call to a department office might prompt staff to contact campus police immediately and relay the faculty member’s room number and known details. A text code to a dean, dispatcher, or safety office might trigger the same response. The institution should avoid overly clever or complicated phrases that people may forget under stress. The best code systems are plain, short, and practiced regularly.

Training should also clarify the limits of coded communication. A coded phrase is not a substitute for calling 911 or activating an alarm when there is an immediate threat. Rather, it is most helpful in situations involving uncertainty, accidental exposure, or concerning behavior that has not yet become overtly violent. Faculty should understand that once a weapon is intentionally displayed, handled, or paired with threats, the response should move quickly from coded notification to an active emergency response.

Below are sample coded communication concepts that a campus could adapt:

- “Please send the blue folder to Room 214,” meaning immediate emergency assistance is needed.

- “I need technical support in this classroom right away,” meaning responders should come now without public explanation.
- A prearranged text such as “Code Red, Building C, Room 118” sent to dispatch or a designated office.
- A one-touch icon on a classroom computer that silently transmits room location and emergency status.

These examples are useful only if paired with practice and a shared response plan. A code without institutional understanding is just a sentence floating in the air.

After the Incident: Documentation, Support, and Learning

A firearm-related classroom incident can have lingering effects on faculty, students, and staff even when no shots are fired and no one is physically harmed. Institutions should therefore avoid treating the matter as closed once the immediate safety response ends. Policy should provide a structured post-incident review that examines what happened, what systems worked, what communication barriers emerged, and what support affected individuals may need. This review should include both operational learning and human support.

Faculty and staff may need immediate debriefing, reassurance about their actions, help with student communications, and guidance on resuming class. Students may need academic flexibility, counseling support, or clear follow-up messaging that addresses rumors without disclosing confidential information. Departments may need help communicating with parents, staff, or nearby offices if the event generated a visible disruption. A thoughtful after-action process can reduce confusion, improve future response, and prevent the institution from overlooking emotional or procedural fallout.

The review should ask questions such as:

- Was the faculty member able to summon help quickly and discreetly?
- Did the panic button, coded communication, or emergency call reach the right responders?
- Were roles clear between campus security, campus police, local police, and administrators?
- Did the classroom layout or technology create barriers?
- Did faculty know what to document afterward?
- Are additional training, equipment, or policy revisions needed?

These questions turn the incident into an opportunity for institutional learning rather than a closed file.

Training Implications

Policy is only as good as the training behind it. Faculty training should be brief enough to be sustainable and detailed enough to be useful. A reasonable institutional model would include annual or biennial training on classroom emergency response, with firearm-sighting scenarios included as one module among broader safety content. This training should focus on recognition, discretion, communication, and transition points, especially the moment when an uncertain situation becomes an immediate threat. Faculty may experience normalcy bias, the tendency to downplay unusual or threatening observations. Training and policy should reinforce that it is appropriate to act in the face of uncertainty rather than wait for confirmation.

Training should include scenario-based practice. For example, faculty could work through the difference between seeing a possible handgun inside a backpack, seeing a holstered weapon briefly exposed by accident, and seeing a student intentionally reveal a weapon to intimidate others. They should also rehearse using panic buttons, sample coded messages, brief classroom language, and post-incident documentation. Community colleges may want to place greater emphasis on open-campus conditions, coordination with local police, and non-sworn

security structures. Residential campuses may need additional training on how immediate emergency response interfaces with student conduct, behavioral intervention, residence life, and family communication.

Institutions should resist the temptation to make this training excessively tactical or law-enforcement driven. The primary audience is faculty, and the central learning goal is not to teach how to physically stop an armed person. It is about recognizing risk, avoiding escalation, summoning help discreetly, and preserving life while staying within the scope of the faculty role.

Conclusion: Clarity in an Uncertain Moment

When a faculty or staff member believes they have seen a firearm in the classroom, the situation is inherently uncertain. This guidance does not eliminate that uncertainty, but it provides a clear framework for responding within it.

Faculty are not expected to determine legality, resolve the situation independently, or take unnecessary risks. Their responsibility is narrower: remain calm, avoid escalation, activate help, and respond decisively when behavior indicates danger. Across all scenarios, the priorities remain consistent. Preserve life. Create space and time when possible. Engage trained responders. Adapt quickly as the situation changes.

Preparedness does not guarantee a predictable outcome, but it does provide a clearer path for action when judgment and timing matter most.

Appendix A: Quick Reference Guide

Is There an Immediate Threat?

YES

- Call emergency response immediately
- Follow your active assailant protocol
- Do not confront unless necessary to protect life

NO/NOT SURE

- Stay calm and avoid public confrontation
- Discreetly notify campus police, security, or 911
- Observe and remember key details
- Pause, hold, or reposition only if it can be done safely

What Did You Observe?

Possible gun in a backpack

- Report and observe

Brief or accidental exposure

- Report and avoid confrontation

Purposeful display

- Treat as urgent and prepare for possible escalation

Handling the firearm or making threats

- Activate emergency response immediately

Consider the Campus Context⁸

Campus Carry Permitted

- A visible firearm should still be reported immediately

Campus Carry Prohibited

- Firearms are generally prohibited; report immediately

Sworn Campus Police

- Contact campus police or dispatch

Unarmed/Non-Sworn Security

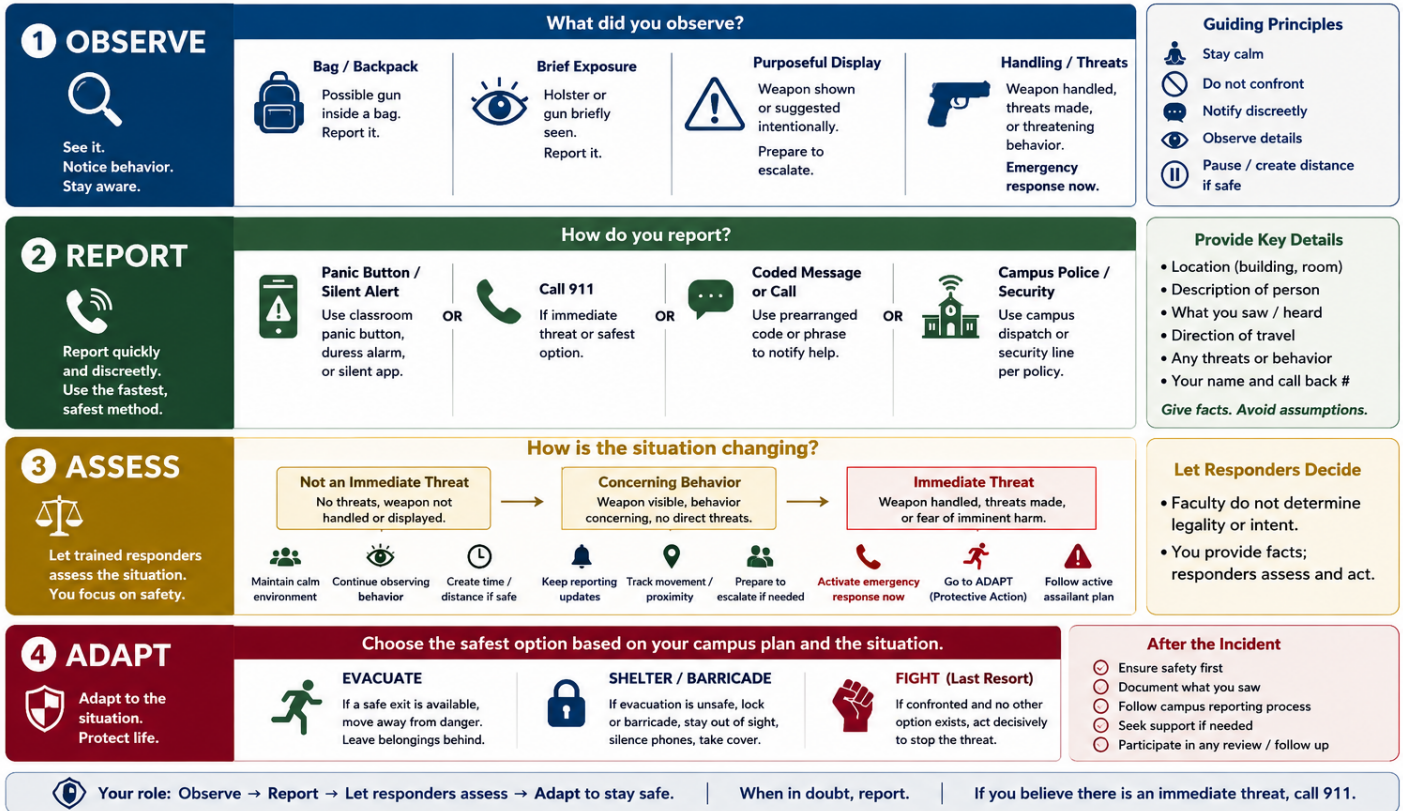
- Notify campus security and 911/local law enforcement as required

⁸ **Note:** The faculty member's priorities are to preserve life, avoid escalating the encounter, discreetly summon help, and shift quickly to emergency action if the behavior becomes threatening. The legal and operational backdrop matters: Texas public colleges may allow some concealed handguns under campus-carry rules, while California generally prohibits firearms on college campuses; some campuses have sworn police departments, while others rely on non-sworn or unarmed security and local law enforcement.

If You Saw a Gun

QUICK RESPONSE MAP

Your role is to observe behavior, report it, and help keep everyone safe. You are not expected to determine legality or intervene physically.



Appendix B: Sample Responses

What Faculty Observe	Likely Meaning	Do This	Don't Do This	Who to Notify
A possible gun is glimpsed inside an open backpack, bag, or case	A possible gun is glimpsed inside an open backpack, bag, or case	A possible gun is glimpsed inside an open backpack, bag, or case	Do not search the bag. Do not grab the bag. Do not accuse the student in front of the class.	Campus police, if available; if not, campus security and/or 911 per campus protocol.
A holstered handgun is briefly exposed when a shirt rides up or a jacket shifts	A holstered handgun is briefly exposed when a shirt rides up or a jacket shifts	A holstered handgun is briefly exposed when a shirt rides up or a jacket shifts	Do not announce "someone has a gun." Do not attempt to determine legality yourself. Do not demand that the person reveal or surrender it.	Campus police or dispatch. If only unarmed security is available, notify them and ensure 911/local police are engaged per campus procedure.
The person adjusts clothing or position repeatedly in a way that seems designed to make the gun visible	The person adjusts clothing or position repeatedly in a way that seems designed to make the gun visible	The person adjusts clothing or position repeatedly in a way that seems designed to make the gun visible	Do not challenge motives. Do not shame or threaten consequences in the moment. Do not move toward the person.	Campus police or 911 immediately; notify campus leadership per protocol once emergency contact is made.
The individual removes the weapon, places a hand on it, manipulates it, or sets it on a desk	Imminent threat / active violence precursor.	Treat it as an emergency. Call 911 or emergency dispatch now if not already. Activate panic/duress systems. Follow active assailant protocol: escape if safely possible; otherwise, barricade/lock down, silence phones, move to cover, and prepare to act to save lives if confronted.	Do not try to negotiate possession rules. Do not attempt to disarm unless there is no other option to stop imminent harm.	911 and campus police immediately.
The person references the weapon in a threatening way, such as "Don't make me use this" or "You all better listen"	Immediate threat.	Activate emergency response at once. Use plain language if speaking to dispatch. Direct students to protective action according to the room layout and campus plan.	Do not argue, debate, or try to "win" the conversation.	911 and campus police immediately.

What Faculty Observe	Likely Meaning	Do This	Don't Do This	Who to Notify
A student appears distressed, dysregulated, or angry, and a gun is seen, but no overt threat has been made	High concern, unstable context.	Avoid escalating language. Keep your voice slow and even. Do not corner the person. Quietly summon help. If you can create space and reduce audience pressure without provoking them, do so.	Do not switch into impromptu counseling if the weapon is present. Do not ask others to crowd around or "help."	Do not switch into impromptu counseling if the weapon is present. Do not ask others to crowd around or "help."
A student leaves the room after the sighting	Unknown, potentially escalating risk.	Notify emergency responders immediately with direction of travel, clothing, bag, vehicle, and last known location. Decide whether students should shelter or evacuate based on campus protocol and proximity risk.	Do not follow alone. Do not send students after the person.	Do not follow alone. Do not send students after the person.
Another student quietly reports, "I think that person has a gun," but the faculty did not see it directly	Indirect report/uncertain but serious.	Take the report seriously. Ask brief clarifying questions only if they can be asked discreetly: who, where, what was seen, and when. Notify responders based on the report. Increase your situational awareness without spotlighting the subject.	Do not dismiss it because you did not personally observe it. Do not loudly interrogate the reporting student.	Do not dismiss it because you did not personally observe it. Do not loudly interrogate the reporting student.
The classroom is on a campus with sworn armed police	Response-capable internal law-enforcement setting.	Use campus emergency systems quickly, and provide the exact room number, building, a description, and details of the behavior. Remain available for follow-up if safe.	Do not assume officers already know your exact location.	Residential campuses may have more internal support layers, but the first move is still safety, not case management.
The classroom is on a campus with sworn armed police	Observation/coordination-led internal safety setting.	Notify security immediately, but understand they may coordinate with local police rather than intervene directly. Faculty should prioritize cover, distance, and rapid protective action.	Do not overestimate the tactical role of unarmed staff.	Campus police if available; if not, campus security and/or 911 per campus protocol.

What Faculty Observe	Likely Meaning	Do This	Don't Do This	Who to Notify
The campus is a commuter community college with multiple exits, public access, and less embedded support nearby	More fluid environment.	Be ready to give concise identifiers, direction of travel, and vehicle information. If dismissal or movement is needed, do it in a controlled, non-panic way, following campus emergency guidance.	Do not assume the person will stay on campus or that nearby staff will automatically notice.	Campus police or dispatch. If only unarmed security is available, notify them and ensure 911/local police are engaged per campus procedure.
The campus is a residential four-year institution with more internal responders	More layered internal support system.	Use emergency systems first, then rely on campus police, residence life, student affairs, and behavioral intervention structures once immediate safety is stabilized.	Do not let familiarity with the student reduce the urgency of the safety response.	Campus police or 911 immediately; notify campus leadership per protocol once emergency contact is made.

Appendix C: Our Panel



Stuart Frisch has an extensive background as a security professional, with more than 20 years of experience planning, developing, and implementing diversified security programs across the military, corporate, and government sectors. He is a certified trainer through the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Stuart served with the Memphis Police Department, Office of Homeland Security, for more than a decade and previously served in a Special Operations capacity with the Israel Defense Forces.



Sylvia Chapa has a Master Peace Officer certification, served with the College of the Mainland Police Department as the chief of police for 9.5 years, and has 23 years of law enforcement experience in higher education. Sylvia graduated from the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas' New Chief School (Class 45) in 2014 and holds certifications as a mental health police officer, crime prevention specialist, sexual assault/family violence investigator, police instructor, CRASE instructor, ALICE instructor, Stop the Bleed instructor, and earned the respected FBI-LEEDA Trilogy award for police leadership and management. In addition to law enforcement, she has 19-plus years of supervisory security experience. She spent the last 12 years of her security career with Space Center Houston, where she specialized in safety, personal injury investigation, training development, security for visiting dignitaries/VIPs, and the security of governmental artifacts for the space industry.



Chris Usher has over 25 years of experience across law enforcement, federal service, and private sectors. Chris specializes in developing and implementing comprehensive security strategies. Currently serving as a Security Consultant and Trainer at DPREP Safety Division, he provides expert guidance on threat assessment, crisis response, and emergency preparedness for K-12 schools, higher education institutions, and private organizations. FEMA-certified and an active ASIS International member, he brings deep expertise in physical security and risk management principles.



Chris Taylor, PhD, is the President of the International Alliance for Care and Threat Teams (InterACTT) and a consultant with DPREP Safety. He formerly served as the Dean of Students and Chief Student Affairs Officer at Wright State University. Chris has over 30 years of experience in higher education, including residence life, Title IX investigation and adjudication, student conduct, threat assessment, and chairing behavioral intervention teams. His research interests include masculinity and gender, and he has authored a variety of publications.



Jeff Solomon is a former K-12 Chief of police and nationally recognized expert and consultant in school safety who retired from law enforcement after nearly three decades. Jeff currently serves as the Director of Safety & Security for the largest school district in Arizona. He formerly served on the Advisory Board of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NABITA) and was part of the organization's Threat Institute faculty. He worked for the California State University Police Department and the Grant School District Police Department, including six years as Chief of Police. Jeff also served as an Interim Chief of Police for a Central Valley California city for over a year. Jeff holds a B.A. degree in Criminal Justice Management and co-authored two books. He is a graduate of the Senior Management Institute for Police (SMIP) at the Police Executive Research Forum and the LAPD's West Point Leadership program. In 2002, he was named the "Law Enforcement Administrator of the Year" by the California School Resource Officers Association. In 1998, he received a Meritorious Commendation Award for Life Saving with the Grant School District Police Department.



Joseph Dooley recently retired after serving 41 years in law enforcement and took a position in the private sector with the company Mutualink. He serves as Director of Public Safety & Security Solutions and continues to focus on safety in K-12 and higher education environments. He most recently served as Chief of Police/Director of Public Safety at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Conn. Before joining Southern, Chief Dooley served 25 years with the Orange, Conn., Police Department. In 2002, he was elevated to Chief of Police, overseeing a department of 42 sworn and 12 civilian personnel for the next four years. He is a member of numerous law enforcement professional associations, including the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA). He is also a graduate of the 148th session of the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Va.



Charlie Taylor is the vice president of the Workplace Violence Prevention Association and an affiliated consultant at DPrep Safety. Charlie is certified in Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) and is a suicide prevention gatekeeper instructor through the Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR) program. Charlie has a long career history in personal management, interviewing, conflict resolution, hiring practices, performance improvement planning, and employee termination. He is certified in the Basic Incident Command System for Initial Response (100, 200) and the National Incident Management System (700, 800), and he is a firearm instructor and competitive shooter. Working in tandem with our DPrep Safety team members with expertise in psychology, law enforcement, and threat assessment, Charlie supports DPrep Safety with interviews, physical security data gathering, and assessments, as well as training in situational awareness and all-hazard response during natural and manmade disasters.