When Seconds Matter

THE RISE OF PANIC BUTTONS ON CAMPUS

BY ALLISON TRAPANI

Campus safety has evolved beyond simple checklists. Today, it's about how quickly you can communicate when it matters most. Students and parents now expect a seamless safety net, and at the heart of that infrastructure are two essential tools: panic buttons and emergency phones. Together, these systems form the backbone of modern emergency communication strategies by bridging the gap between incident and response; ensuring that help is never more than a button press away.

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The Shift in Private Campus Security

Private universities operate in a unique space. Unlike large public campuses with extensive municipal integration, private institutions often rely more heavily on internal security teams and campus-managed infrastructure. This makes communication systems—especially those that provide instant alerts—essential.

Recent data shows that panic systems are already widely adopted across higher education, making them one of the most common emergency technologies on campuses. At the same time, mobile panic apps and wearable devices are growing in popularity, reflecting a shift toward more flexible, user-driven safety tools.

But the real story is why these systems are important.

What Panic Buttons Actually Do

At their core, panic buttons are designed for one purpose: get help fast.

In an emergency, even seconds matter. Panic buttons allow faculty, staff, or students to instantly alert campus security or local law enforcement without dialing a phone, explaining a situation, or navigating a system.

Depending on the implementation, panic buttons can:

- Instantly notify campus police or security teams
- Trigger lockdown protocols (such as door access restrictions)
- Provide real-time location data to responders
- Activate broader emergency communication systems

For example, some campus deployments automatically lock classroom doors and alert campus police simultaneously when a button is pressed. This kind of integration transforms a simple device into a powerful safety tool.

And importantly, panic buttons aren't only used for extreme events. Data shows that most activations relate to everyday incidents such as medical issues, behavioral concerns, or minor emergencies, rather than major threats. This reinforces their value as a daily resource, not just a last-resort solution.

Emergency Phones: The Fixed Foundation

While panic buttons are evolving rapidly, emergency phones remain a foundational element of campus safety.

Outdoor emergency phone towers, commonly referred to as "blue light" towers due to their bright blue strobe lights, can be strategically placed across campuses in areas such as:

- Parking lots and garages
- Walkways and open spaces
- Building entrances and remote areas

Indoor emergency phones are highly visible, providing instant access to emergency personnel in:

- Residence halls and common areas
- Stairwells and hallways
- Libraries and labs
- Any high-traffic student area

Unlike personal devices or apps, emergency phones offer guaranteed access—no batteries, no downloads, no connectivity issues. Anyone on campus, including visitors, can use them.

Call boxes and emergency phones are present in most higher education campuses, highlighting their continued importance in campus-wide safety strategies.

More importantly, they serve as both a functional and psychological tool. Their visibility alone can deter crime while reassuring students and staff that help is always nearby.

The Power of Integration

The real transformation in campus safety comes when panic buttons and emergency phones are not treated as standalone tools, but as part of an integrated communication system.

Modern campuses are increasingly connecting:

- Panic buttons
- Emergency phones
- Mass notification systems (email, SMS, PA systems)
- Video surveillance
- Access control systems

This integration allows a single action, like pressing a panic button, to trigger a coordinated response across multiple systems.

For example:

- A panic button alert can initiate a mass notification message
- An emergency phone call can automatically pull up camera feeds in that area
- A triggered alert can activate lockdown protocols or paging announcements

Real-World Impact: Faster Response Means Better Outcomes

The value of these systems becomes clear in real-world scenarios.

Case studies show that panic buttons significantly improve response times by removing communication barriers. In one example, campus staff equipped with panic buttons were able to quickly summon help in situations where using a phone was not possible, ensuring that security teams could respond faster and more effectively.

Even more telling is how often these systems are used. While high-profile incidents draw attention, most alerts are routine, but still important. In one large-scale system, tens of thousands of alerts were recorded in a single year, with the majority tied to behavioral or medical situations rather than major threats.

This underscores a key point: Panic buttons and emergency phones are not just for worst-case scenarios; they are everyday safety tools.

Why Campuses Are Prioritizing These Systems

Campuses are increasingly investing in panic buttons and emergency phones for several reasons:

1. **Duty of Care and Liability**
Schools are expected to provide a safe environment. Immediate communication tools demonstrate a proactive approach to risk management.

2. **Student and Parent Expectations**
Today's students and their families expect visible, modern safety measures. Panic buttons and emergency phones are tangible proof of that commitment.

3. **Campus Size and Complexity**
Even smaller private campuses can have complex layouts, multiple buildings, and varying levels of security coverage. These systems help bridge those gaps.

4. **Staff Empowerment**
Providing faculty and staff with panic buttons gives them confidence and control in uncertain situations, improving overall campus culture and morale.

Built for Reliability in Critical Moments

When it comes to implementing these systems, reliability is everything. Devices must work

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With over 55 years of experience designing and manufacturing communication equipment in the United States, Viking Electronics has developed a range of solutions specifically suited for campus environments.

Panic Button Solutions

Products like the **PB-3** (analog) and **PB-3-IP** (VoIP) panic buttons are designed for discreet, immediate activation. Mounted under desks or counters, they allow staff to silently contact emergency personnel and deliver pre-programmed alerts.

Key features include:

- One-touch dialing to multiple emergency contacts
- Handsfree communication capability
- Optional location identification via messaging or DTMF signaling
- PoE-powered VoIP options for simplified installation

These devices are particularly well-suited for administrative offices, classrooms, and high-risk areas where quick, discreet communication is essential.

Emergency Phones and Intercoms

Viking's emergency phone lineup provides durable, highly visible communication points across campus environments.
For example, the E-1600-IP phone offers:

- Handsfree communication over SIP VoIP systems
- Built-in relay for door or gate control
- PoE-powered operation
- Visual LED indicator for call status

Best Practices for Implementation

For campuses considering or expanding panic button and emergency phone deployments, several best practices stand out:

Layer the System
No single solution is enough. Combine panic buttons, emergency phones, and mass notification systems for comprehensive coverage.

Prioritize Coverage
Ensure that all key areas - classrooms, offices, outdoor spaces, and remote locations have access to at least one form of emergency communication.

Keep It Simple
In an emergency, systems must be intuitive. One-touch activation and clear functionality are essential.

Integrate Where Possible
Link systems together to enable coordinated responses and reduce manual intervention.

Train and Communicate
Technology is only effective if people know how and when to use it. Regular training and awareness campaigns are critical.

Looking Ahead: Smarter, Faster, More Connected

The future of campus safety lies in smarter integration and broader accessibility.

We are already seeing:

- Increased use of mobile panic apps with GPS location tracking
- Greater integration with video and access control systems
- Expansion of wearable panic devices for staff
- Continued reliance on fixed emergency phones for universal access

As these technologies evolve, the goal remains the same: reduce response time, improve communication, and enhance safety across every corner of campus.

For campuses, panic buttons and emergency phones are no longer optional, they are essential components of a modern safety strategy.

They provide:

- Immediate access to help
- Faster response times
- Greater confidence for students and staff
- A visible commitment to safety

When implemented as part of an integrated system, supported by reliable manufacturers, they become more than just devices. They become a lifeline.

Because in an emergency, every second counts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Allison Trapani is working as a Marketing Design Coordinator at Viking Electronics, Inc., a designer and manufacturer of over 500 security and communication products.

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