

CASE STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHWESTERN ENSURES 24/7 CAMPUS SAFETY WITHOUT ADDITIONAL HEADCOUNT



Industry

Higher Education

Facility Type

University Campus

Location

St. Paul, Minnesota

Sites

2 sites, 15 buildings

Cameras

135 Axis cameras

Use Cases

Weapons Detection,
Person Fallen Down,
Door Propped Open,
Loitering, Investigations

100+

incidents detected
per week

6-7

threat signatures
per stream

<3 MIN

response time to
alerts

THE CAMPUS

A Faith-Based University with a Real Security Obligation.

The University of Northwestern, St. Paul is a private Christian university in the Twin Cities metro, serving approximately 3,500 enrolled students across two sites and 15 buildings. On any given day, around 1,300 students, faculty, and staff are on the grounds, alongside a year-round calendar of external events including a nationwide debate competition and international soccer delegations tied to the 2026 World Cup, and the campus never fully goes quiet between them.

Bill Owen, Director of Public Safety, is the operator responsible for every security decision on the ground. He came to the role with nearly eight years of experience as a Minneapolis police officer. Dan Coughlin, Assistant Vice President, Facility Operations & Planning, is the executive who controls the budget and sets the strategic direction for the department. He spent 25 years as a city administrator overseeing police, fire, and emergency management organizations. Together they brought a clear sense of what effective campus security should look like, and a sharp assessment of how far the institution was from that standard.



THE PROBLEM

135 Cameras Spread Across Campus. None Had Intelligence.

Before Ambient.ai, the university's physical security operation was fundamentally constrained by its tools. One patrol officer covered the entire campus on most shifts. 135 cameras recorded everything, but the cameras were static and passive, which meant every time that single officer responded to a call, the rest of campus went dark.

“ We had 135 cameras across the entire campus. They're what you would call static or fixed cameras. They could record, but they offered no intelligence whatsoever.

BILL OWEN
Director of Public Safety

Doors propped open, after-hours loitering, vehicles in restricted areas: none of it generated an alarm or appeared in any log. Achieving real coverage through staffing alone would have required three to four additional full-time officers every day, a cost Coughlin estimated at \$60,000 to \$80,000 per person in wages and benefits. At a tuition-dependent institution, that math has direct consequences for the students the university serves.



THE DECISION

Ambient.ai Offered the Largest Breadth of Detection.

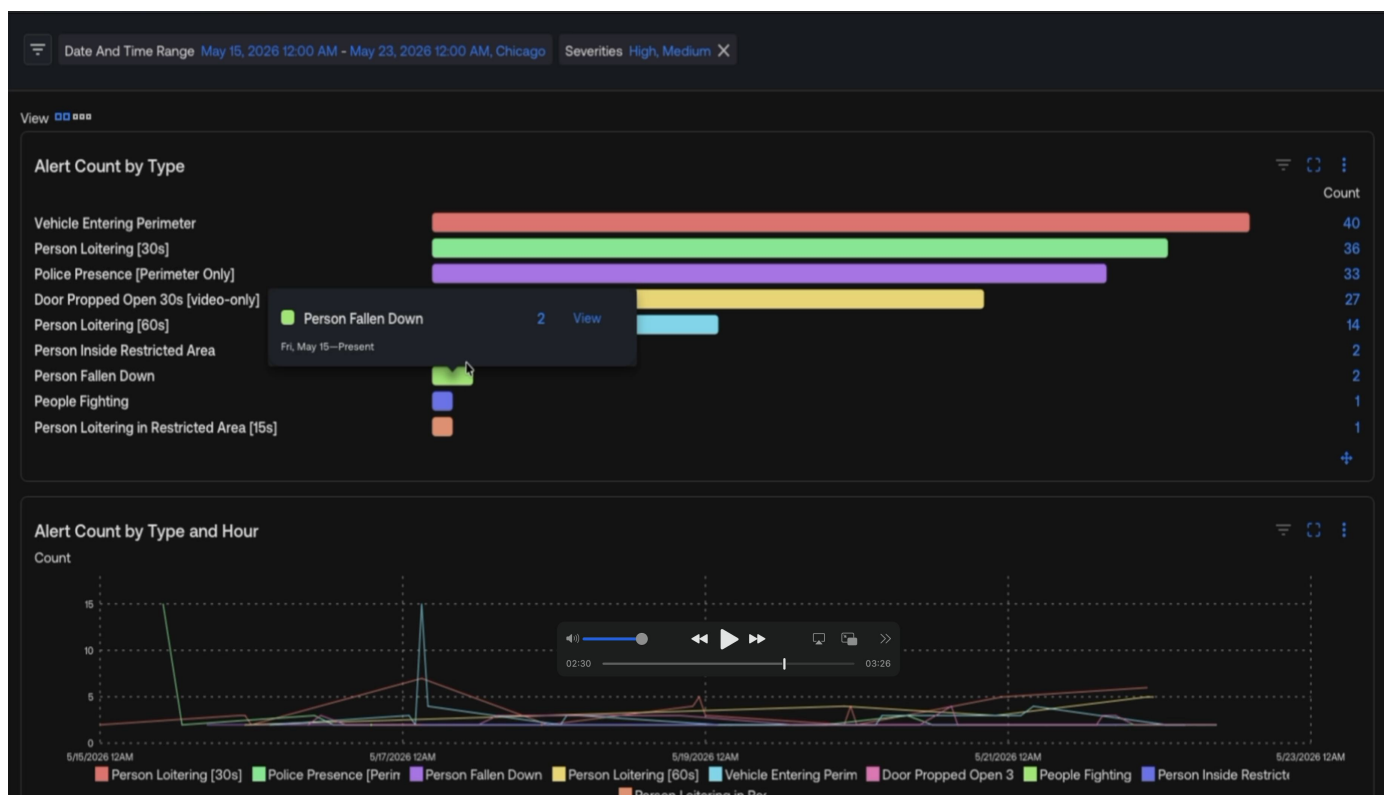
Owen's evaluation was driven by a single standard: what can you actually do when we turn it on, not just what you show us in a meeting. The market was crowded with AI claims, most of which fell short of delivering on their promises.

The differentiator came down to architecture: competing solutions were constrained by processing built into the camera hardware itself, capping detection at two or three detections per feed. Meanwhile, Ambient.ai offered a library of over 150 threat signatures without replacing a single device, which easily tipped the scales in Owen and his team's evaluation. So far, University of Northwestern has deployed six to seven signatures per stream across their existing camera infrastructure, already representing a fundamentally different level of coverage than anything else they had evaluated.

For a team operating with a single patrol officer per shift, that breadth is a hard requirement. A constrained security operation cannot afford gaps in detection coverage. Every threat type a trained human operator might catch in the field needs to be covered by the platform watching the cameras, and a system capped at two or three detections leaves entire categories of risk unmonitored. Ambient.ai's depth meant the platform could match the full range of what an experienced officer would recognize, at a scale no single officer ever could, and for a university with these constraints, that made the decision clear.

“ Ambient.ai is a force multiplier. You take a small team, leverage the assets and infrastructure you already have, and you multiply your capability many times over.

DAN COUGHLIN
AVP, Facility Operations & Planning





DAY ONE

Weapons Detection Was the Top Priority. Ambient.ai Proved Its Worth on Day One.

For any school security leader, weapons detection sits at the top of the priority list. It is the threat that keeps directors of public safety up at night, the scenario that parents ask about, and the one that no institution can afford to miss. For Owen's team, the Person Brandishing Firearm threat signature was not a nice-to-have. It was the capability the entire evaluation had been building toward.

Within six to ten hours of going live with the Ambient Platform, that signature triggered on an exterior camera stream. When Owen received the alert, his immediate assumption was that it had to be false: the university had no record of a weapon on campus in 20 years. Upon reviewing the alert, he quickly realized it was real. On the public street adjacent to campus, local law enforcement was conducting a high-risk vehicle stop and officers had drawn their firearms during the stop. Ambient.ai detected them from across the road, flagged the threat, and notified Owen's team within the same evening they had deployed the system. The incident was resolved safely and had no connection to the university, but Ambient.ai had done exactly what it was built to do on the first night it was ever turned on.

“ Within 6 to 10 hours of being deployed, the person brandishing firearm threat signature triggered. The capability we thought of as an insurance policy we'd never need? It activated on day one. That completely reframed how we thought about the Ambient system.

BILL OWEN
Director of Public Safety





THE RESULTS

The Team Discovered How Much Had Been Happening on Campus All Along.

The weapons detection story set the tone. But once the system was running, Ambient.ai surfaced something the team hadn't fully anticipated: just how much had been happening on campus that they never knew about. And the detections that changed daily operations most were not the dramatic ones.

“ Here's what I didn't expect. I went in focused on the high-stakes threat signatures: person brandishing a firearm, aggressive behavior. Those are the dramatic ones. But the two that have transformed how we function every single day are the ones that sound the most routine: doors being propped open and loitering.

BILL OWEN
Director of Public Safety

Over 100 incidents detected per week that were previously invisible. Doors propped open, after-hours loitering, vehicles in restricted areas: none of it had previously appeared in any log. Now every incident has a timestamp, a response, and a record. What changed was not the team or its resources, but the visibility they had into what was actually happening.

Access gaps closed in real time. Access control only works if doors are actually closed. Before Ambient.ai, a propped door could go undetected for an entire shift. Now the patrol officer receives a mobile alert mid-response, calls the building RA, and the door is closed within minutes. Access control is now operating as it was designed to.

Investigations reduced from hours to minutes. When a student asked how long his borrowed car had been off campus, Owen pulled departure and return timestamps within minutes. What would previously have required hours of manual footage review was resolved in a single interaction.

Medical emergencies detected before anyone calls for help. The person falling detection has become one of the most demonstrated capabilities on campus. Owen shows clips of students diving for spikeball to parents and prospective students to illustrate what the system does when a real emergency, not a game, demands a response.

“ If it catches a spikeball dive, think about what happens if a student is alone at 2 in the morning and collapses from a cardiac event. The response time goes from minutes to immediate. That is what this means in practice.

BILL OWEN
Director of Public Safety

Campus safety transformed into a recruiting advantage. Admissions and marketing teams have begun citing Ambient.ai as a competitive differentiator, unprompted. The lobby display screen, showing the Ambient.ai interface live to anyone who walks in, has become a deliberate part of the university's posture toward prospective students and families.



Response time to actionable alerts under three minutes. University of Northwestern still operates with a single officer patrolling campus on most shifts. What has changed is what that officer can see and act on. Ambient.ai monitors, triages, and alerts around the clock, so the officer on patrol can prioritize and respond to what matters most. That benchmark did not exist before because there was nothing to measure against.

“ If you gave me a choice right now: Ambient.ai or five additional staff members. It is an easy, easy decision. We choose Ambient.

DAN COUGHLIN
AVP, Facility Operations & Planning

WHAT'S NEXT

They Got Here by Getting Smarter.

University of Northwestern has identified additional locations across campus for expansion and the internal case is already made. For Owen and Coughlin, the question is no longer whether Ambient.ai belongs at the center of how this campus protects its people, but how far they can take it.

“ Today, the people who control the budget and plan the future of this university are putting Ambient on the mountaintop. That shift happened because the product worked.

DAN COUGHLIN
AVP, Facility Operations & Planning

