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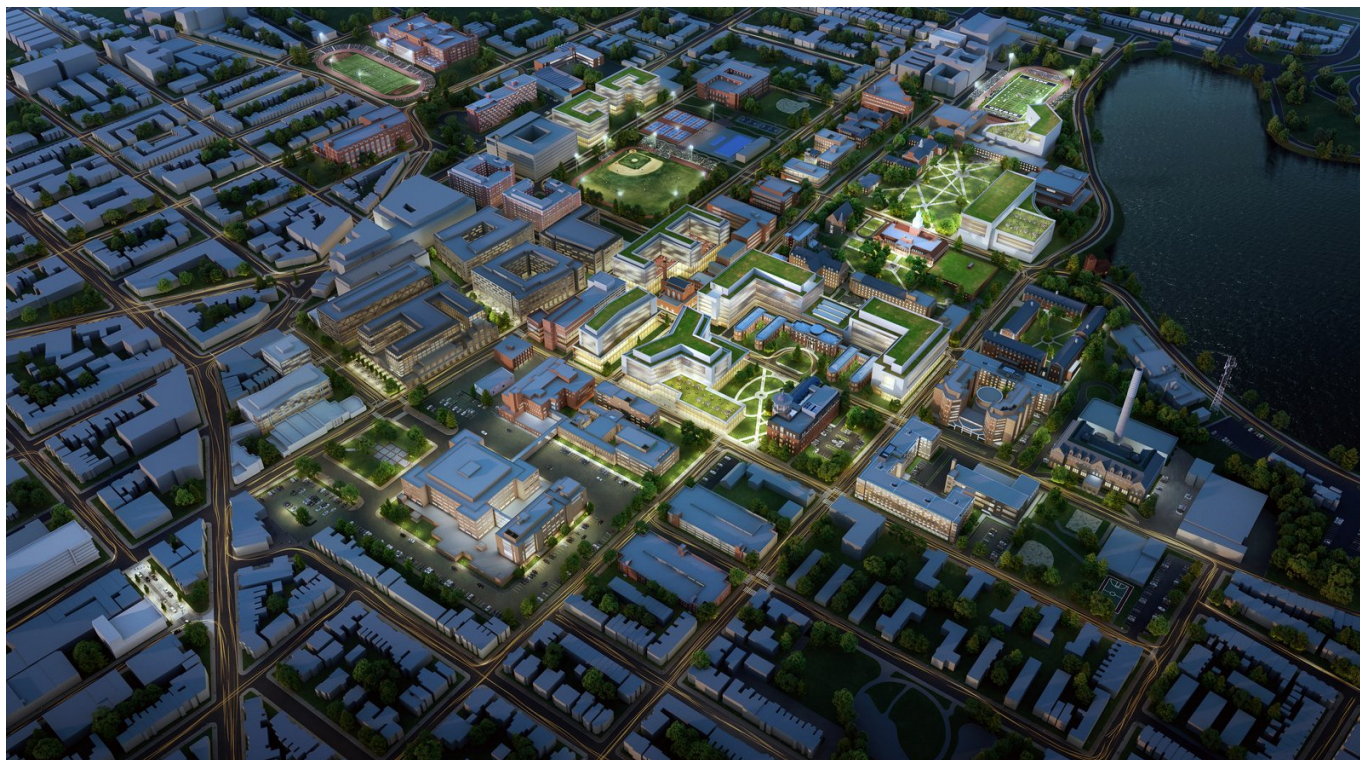
# **Blurring boundaries: How universities can redefine the edge of campus for lasting community impact**

by [Beth Foster](#) and [Ryan Losch](#) with additional collaborator Amy Coburn

Across the country, college and university campuses are undergoing a quiet but powerful transformation. In some instances, physically and philosophically distinct from the communities around them, these institutions are increasingly interwoven into the broader fabric of their towns, cities, and regions.

In this era of blurred campus edges, a question emerges: How can universities leverage their physical footprint, planning processes, and partnerships to better serve students and the community at large?

The answer exists within thoughtful, inclusive, and future-focused campus planning. It's not simply about extending physical infrastructure; it's about reimagining the role of the campus as a shared resource, an innovation engine, and a powerful cultural connector.



## The campus as a community anchor

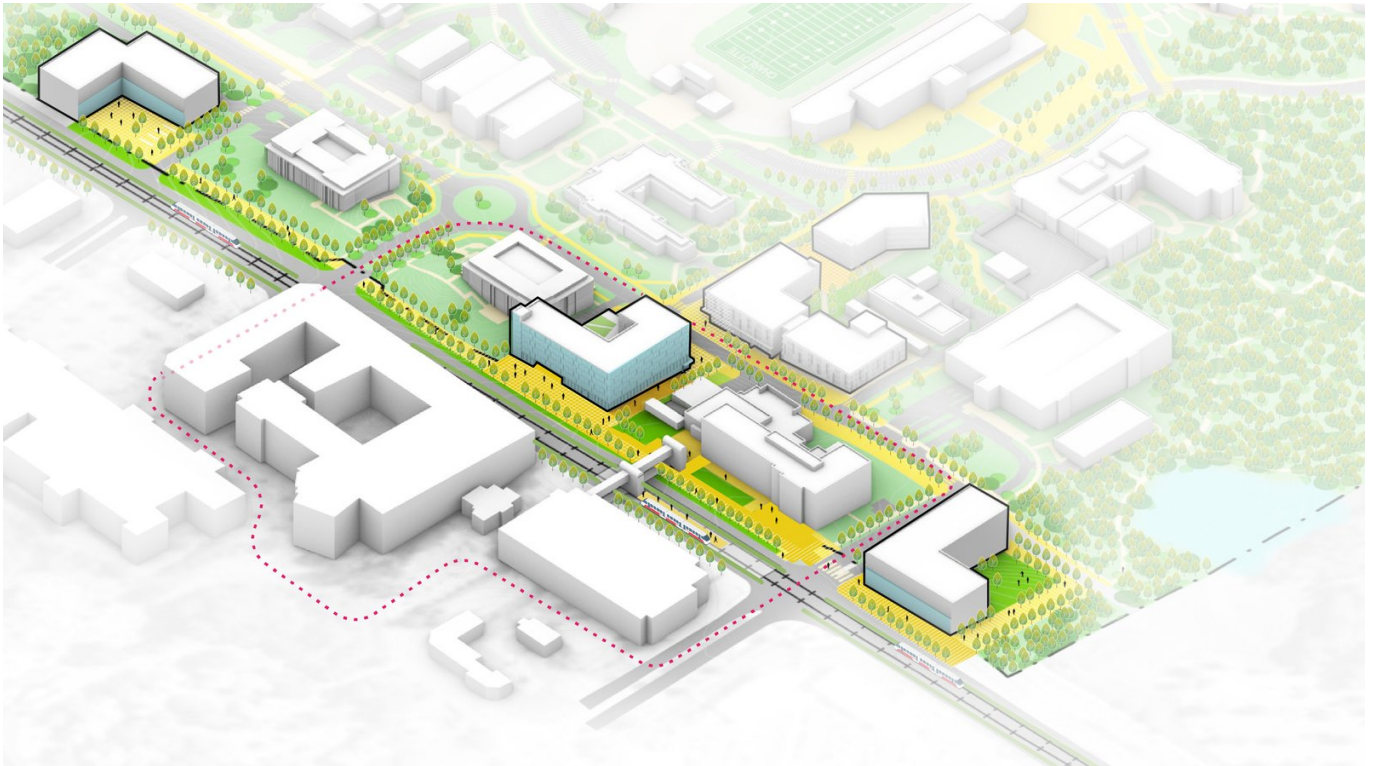
Historically, universities were designed as inward-facing environments—safe, self-contained, and purpose-built for learning. Today, that paradigm is shifting. Institutions are actively engaging with their local communities to advance shared goals in education, culture, healthcare, economic development, and environmental resilience.

This evolution is visible in many ways:

- Student housing development, often in the form of third-party developed housing (public-private partnership, P3) located on or adjacent to campus, offers students a variety of options while activating surrounding neighborhoods. These developments can designate a portion of the units at a specified affordable cost that creates equitable access for the full spectrum of the student population. These may also provide options for faculty and staff to live closer to the institution.
- Innovation hubs or districts co-locate research facilities, private companies, and academic institutions to accelerate discovery, job creation, and real-world learning opportunities for students.
- Health Science campuses promote learning through teaching hospitals or medical clinics that widen access to services offered within communities. Academic programming and health services establish a connection to the local population.
- Amenities—including wellness centers, recreational trails, daycare facilities, athletic fields,

event spaces, and others available to students, faculty, and residents create a campus that reflects the needs of its broader community. For example, senior living neighborhoods leverage proximity to campus amenities and student engagement, creating a unique intergenerational experience and promoting year-round campus utilization. Additionally, food banks are increasingly prominent services both internally and externally on campuses.

- Many institutions offer continuing education and extension services that draw the community onto campus and offer lower-cost academic access for a broader population.



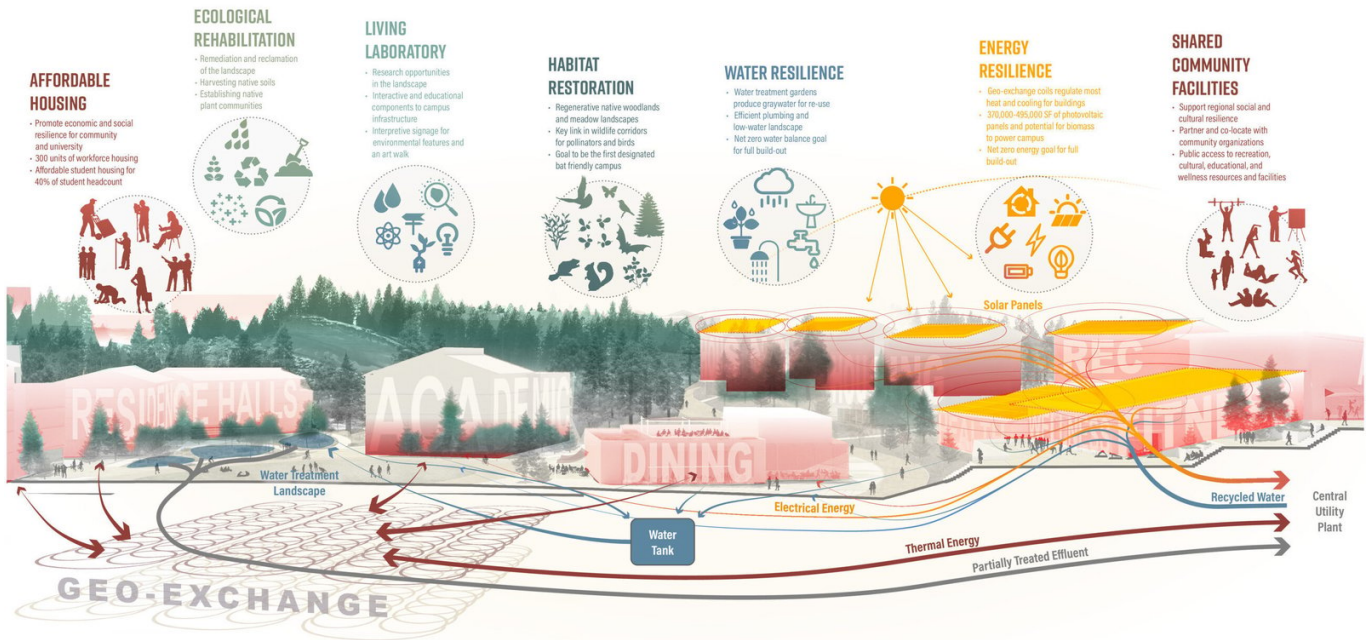
## Drivers of change

Economic pressures have prompted institutions to seek new revenue streams and funding models to make better strategic use of their land and resources. Institutional land frequently supports non-academic uses and facilities, blurring the perceived campus boundary.

The shift toward hybrid learning and working models introduced more flexible patterns of engagement. Students aren't always tied to the classroom. They live, study, and work across varied geographies. Campuses must respond with hybrid-friendly infrastructure, distributed support services, additional touch-down and informal gathering spaces, and a variety of inter-disciplinary engagement.

The public, as well as students, expect institutions to be good neighbors and active civic partners. The university's role in promoting health, equity, and sustainability is expanding. Institutions have the opportunity, particularly in underserved areas, to contribute to regional well-being through access to

education programs, green infrastructure, and workforce development programs. A tangible goal for sustainability and resiliency through carbon reduction or renewable energy sources shows a commitment to the health of the community.



## Planning for blurred edges

Broadening an institution’s goals and commitments may expand the institution’s physical boundary. As planners and campus designers, it means letting go of the idea of the campus “edge” as a hard boundary. Instead, campuses should be seen as a place of interaction, exchange, and shared value, a place that allows for:

- Open spaces that invite, not exclude: Trail systems, wellness parks, pollinator gardens, and outdoor learning environments that enhance health and environmental stewardship for everyone.
- Connected infrastructure: Thoughtful transit planning (bikeways, bus routes, micro-mobility networks) that make it easy to move between campus and community.
- Distributed student support: Placing services and amenities where students are. This approach is especially important for commuter populations or satellite campuses—reaching students where they are.

Because the needs of the institution and its surrounding region will evolve, the campus boundary requires a phased, flexible approach to development. A good campus plan doesn’t lock a campus into one trajectory, but provides a framework that enables adaptation, prioritization, and continuous dialogue.

Finally, the development of campus boundaries requires engagement with regional goals. Whether an institution is located in a dense urban core, a growing suburb, or a rural town, aligning planning efforts with municipal, economic, and community priorities ensures that campus development has lasting, reciprocal value.



## **A tapestry of possibilities**

Every campus-community relationship is unique. At a public research university, this might mean developing life sciences corridors or adjacent innovation hubs that bridge academic labs with private R&D spaces. At a small liberal arts college, it could mean co-creating a cultural district that brings arts programming to residents. On an academic medical campus, the opportunity may lie in expanding access to health education and clinical services in underserved neighborhoods.

A multi-scale, multidisciplinary perspective to these questions will help institutions navigate the complexities of town-gown relations, rethink their campus identity, and design inclusive, welcoming environments that reflect the full spectrum of campus users: faculty, staff, and neighbors alike.

Student-centered design reaches beyond the classroom and into the lives of learners, wherever they may be. It plans for housing to reflect how students live, for public spaces that foster belonging, and for academic environments that foster real-world readiness.



## From edge to ecosystem

Forward-thinking planning models uncover opportunities and constraints to identify optimal sites and strategies that seamlessly merge academia, industry, and the community for long-term institutional success. Institutions are embracing market-driven planning and mixed-use innovation districts to reap the benefits of economic growth and community well-being through sustainable development. The opportunity within campus planning is to reimagine the edge between town and gown as a bridge, not a boundary.

The role of higher education in civic life is enriched with campuses that are open, connected, and resilient—campuses that not only serve their community but are an integral part of it.

