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Expanding the university's reach: How innovation hubs are redefining campus planning

by [Beth Foster](#), [Ryan Losch](#), and [Robert McClure](#)

Universities are leading a shift in how campuses engage with the world—actively shaping the rise of innovation hubs that extend their impact beyond traditional boundaries. These mixed-use districts bring academic, commercial, residential, and civic spaces together, blurring the lines between education and industry, campus and community.

As universities expand both their physical and intellectual footprints, innovation hubs offer powerful opportunities to extend institutional influence, foster job creation, and deepen regional partnerships. But realizing this potential requires more than traditional campus planning—it calls for market-savvy, multi-sector collaboration, and a long view on community impact.



The new campus edge: A mixed-use opportunity

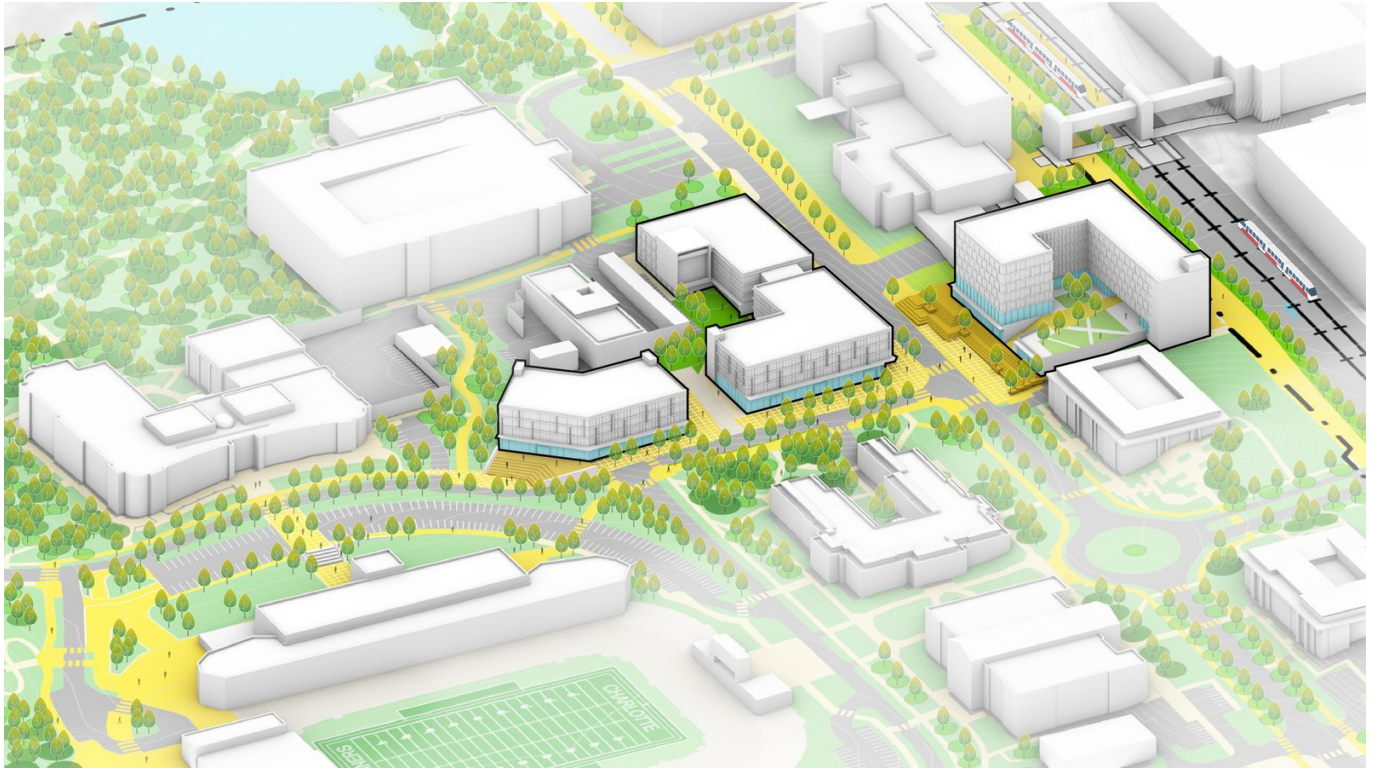
Innovation districts are intentional ecosystems designed to support research, workforce development, housing, entrepreneurship, and cultural connections. These mixed-use developments near universities require more comprehensive knowledge than just campus planning. They need to stay attuned to local market trends and understand what types of office, research, or housing spaces will be in demand in those markets. While the context varies, the goal remains consistent: to create vibrant, integrated hubs that reflect institutional strengths while enhancing community value.



Leveraging institutional identity and strengths

A successful innovation district isn't generic; it's grounded in the university's existing strengths. "The key question is," says Beth Foster, principal and director of campus planning at Page, now Stantec, "What areas of the university's expertise are already aligned with potential workforce demand?"

These districts should extend, not dilute, the university's mission. When aligned with institutional strengths such as life sciences, advanced manufacturing, or entrepreneurship, they become incubators for opportunity, connecting students and faculty to regional industries while attracting investment and talent.

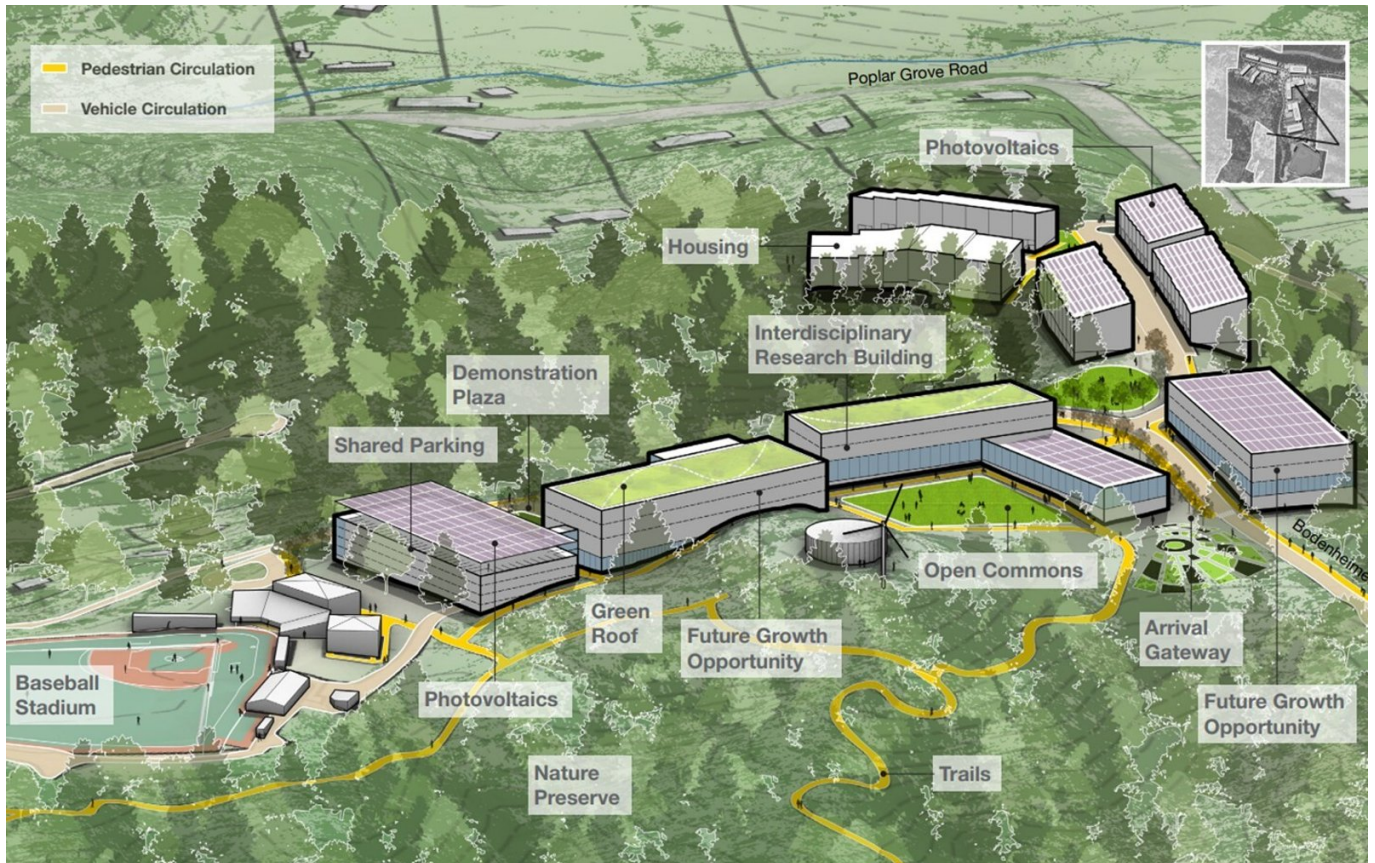


Designing for density, diversity, and daily life

Too often, universities risk replicating the single-use suburban office park or apartment complex that fails to generate long-term activity. The focus should be on layered, diverse environments that encourage vibrancy across hours and user groups.

“You want it to be visible, you want it to be accessible, and you want a range of amenities around, so you don’t have to start from scratch,” says Foster. “You also want it to be a place where the university and business partners truly come together.”

By integrating office, residential, retail, and public spaces, designed for both the campus and the surrounding neighborhood, innovation hubs foster street life, engagement, and economic dynamism. “We don’t want a neighborhood that just goes dark at 5 p.m.,” Foster adds.



Programming as the glue

“Design alone doesn’t make a place successful—programming is essential to activate these spaces over time,” explains Robert McClure, design director at Page. Innovation hubs need to offer more than square footage; they should cultivate culture, foster collisions, and create value.

Imagine the trajectory: what will unfold on Day One, and how will it evolve over five or ten years? Programming, such as entrepreneurial incubators, co-working memberships, public events, and mentorship opportunities, must be curated with care to ensure that spaces stay relevant and welcoming.

These elements also play a critical role in making equity tangible: open workshops, training partnerships, job fairs, and community programs are just a few examples of how programming can connect local residents with new opportunities.

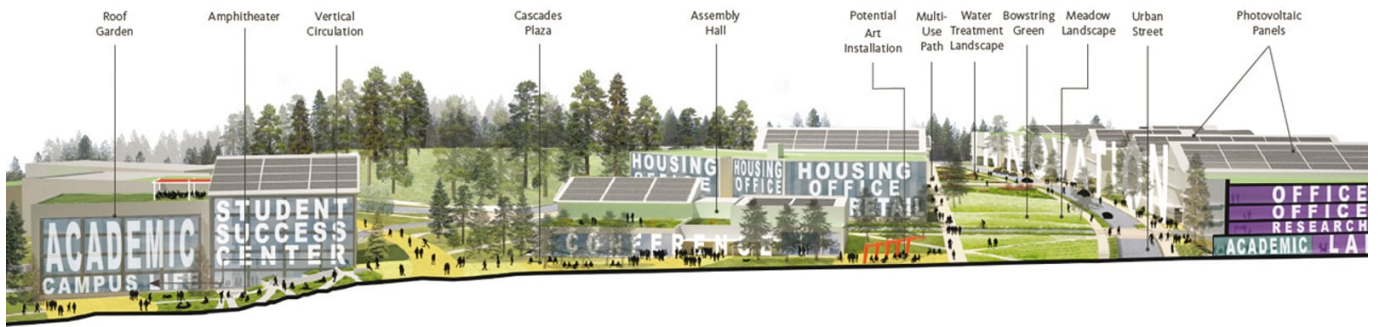


Rethinking core and periphery

Innovation districts also challenge traditional assumptions about what functions belong at the campus core. Foster notes that part of the planning effort involves rebalancing what must remain close to students versus what can be shifted outward into the community.

“We’re always talking to campuses about what’s essential in your most precious real estate and what can be located farther out,” she says. “Outlying functions can be drawn in, and administrative uses moved out, freeing up land for housing and mixed-use programs that benefit students and the community alike.”

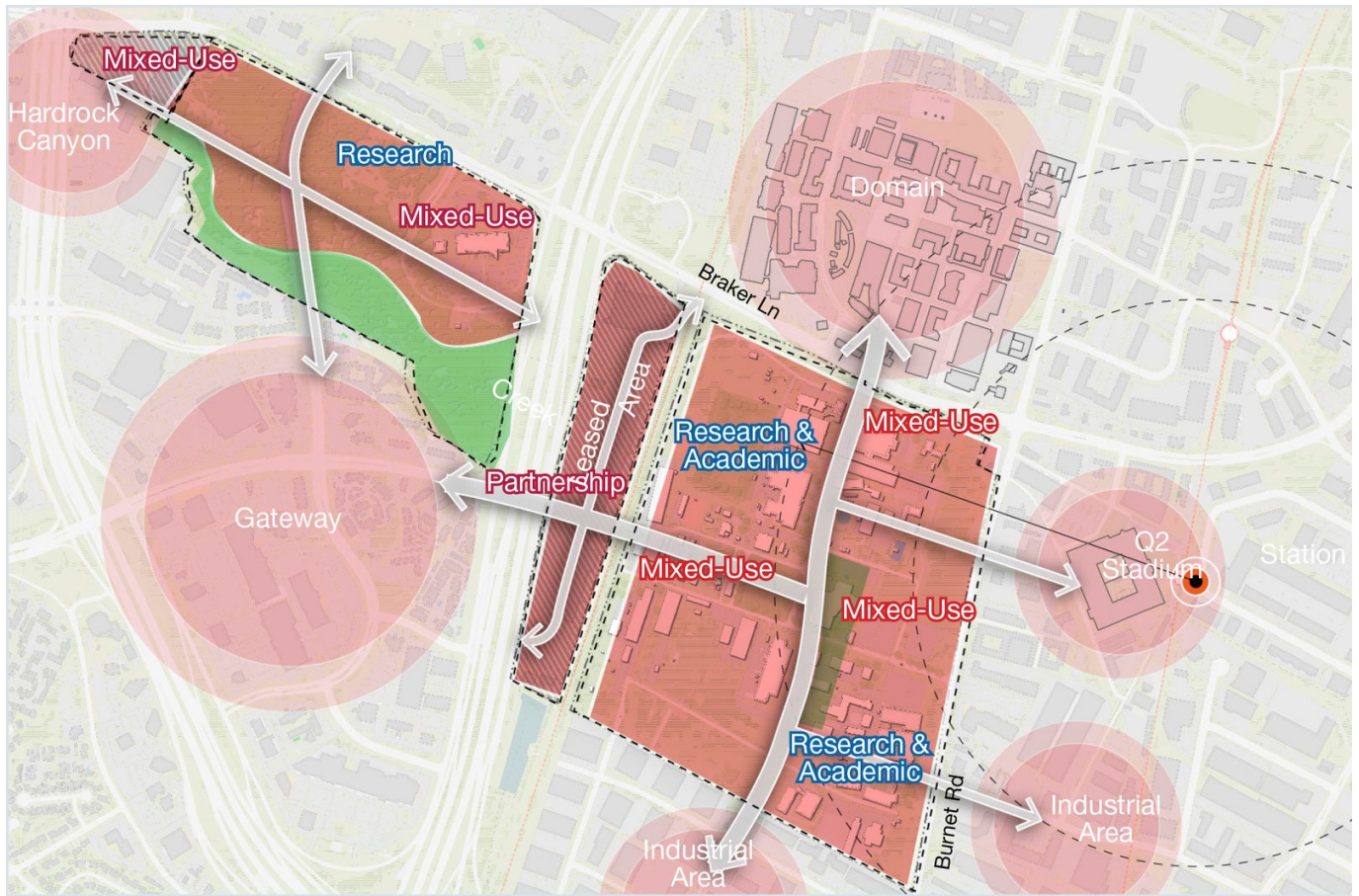
This reallocation of campus uses is a strategic act—making way for growth without sprawl. It involves creating the best possible space for students, faculty, and the community, with a focus on planning efforts that enhance their well-being and sense of belonging.



Equity and community investment

These projects are not just about real estate. They're also about expanding access—to education, to jobs, to opportunity. "Our responsibility to the community," says Foster, "is to connect people, especially those who haven't historically had access, to growing areas of employment. By creating innovation hubs, we give employers access to students, and students access to employers. It's a win-win."

This sense of shared value is especially critical as universities face growing scrutiny over gentrification and housing costs. Many institutions are incorporating workforce or affordable housing into their district plans - both to serve their community and to provide affordable options for graduate students, staff, and essential workers.



Planning for phasing and flexibility

Creating a new district takes time and vision. “Phasing is one of the biggest tasks, but it is a distinct and exciting challenge,” says Ryan Losch, principal and urban design director at Page. “It’s tempting to only think about the end-state, but it’s critical to understand the incremental steps required to get there.”

Phased development allows for course correction based on performance, shifting needs, and new opportunities. But it also requires careful attention to placemaking from day one. “Creating a sense of place can be a challenge,” Losch adds. “We lean into placemaking within the public realm to avoid generic developments that lack intrigue and excitement.”



Beyond the campus: A regional catalyst

Universities play a pivotal role in shaping urban landscapes, but successful mixed-use development requires market awareness and strategic planning. When done right, these projects enhance economic vitality, community engagement, and institutional resilience. As universities expand their footprint, they must move beyond conventional campus planning and embrace integrated, market-sensitive development strategies.

Innovation hubs are more than just development projects—they are expressions of the university's evolving role as a civic anchor, economic catalyst, and cultural bridge. They require bold vision, but also humility and collaboration. When thoughtfully planned, they allow universities to extend their mission into the public realm, generating shared value and long-term resilience.

This kind of integrated planning, place-based, program-rich, and people-centered, isn't just the future of campus development. It's how institutions stay relevant, responsive, and rooted in the communities they serve.