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Op-Ed: Universities Should Consider P3s to Meet Infrastructure Needs.

More colleges and universities should consider joining the slowly growing number of institutions that are using public-private partnerships to address infrastructure and other capital needs, argues the head of one nonprofit organization.

Many of these institutions no longer can rely on existing debt capacity, budget surpluses and reserves to maintain and expand their assets. As a result, they should look into allowing outside players to build and maintain some of their infrastructure to save money, free up funds for other priorities and improve their ability to pursue their academic mission, contends Brian Mitchell, director of the [Edvance Foundation](#) in an [April 25 op-ed](#) in the Huffington Post.

For example, colleges that use private financing and expertise to develop on-campus housing can improve students' quality of life, increase enrollment and graduation rates while freeing up money to maintain and add assets, he points out.

Student housing is not the only type of P3s schools are pursuing; others include [Ohio State University's energy P3](#) and the [University of Utah's installation of solar panels](#). Ohio State's project also includes an academic component. Bidders were asked to include in their proposals descriptions of educational opportunities they might offer, such as research projects and collaborative projects with faculty, scholarships, student internships and co-branded energy marketing opportunities.

Mitchell also sees value in P3s that are designed to serve, not only those who study or work on campus, but the surrounding community as well.

"In today's environment, American higher education — whether public or private — is beginning to use private investment to meet strategic needs that link real estate, student services, academic programs, facilities expansion and town/gown relations together in new and innovative ways," he explains.

New Jersey City University, for example, has moved beyond student housing P3s and is using [commercial development on school-owned property](#) as an engine for local business and residential growth. Miami Dade College is developing a [P3](#) that combines a multi-dimensional cultural arts center with private residential units, restaurants and retail space. Meanwhile, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh has asked area colleges and universities to build on-campus housing to make more off-campus housing available to local residents, Mitchell points out.

Tapping private financing for student housing and other non-academic projects can free up money for a school to spend on its educational mission, he adds, noting Northeastern University's plans to use a [P3 to build and manage student dorms](#), which will allow it to fund a new \$225 million science and engineering building.

"There is a growing understanding that the old college business models are insufficient to meet the rigors and demands of newer strategic thinking. The tired, archaic principles that govern the

cultural inertia that inhibited private investment are breaking down — especially among the more nimble institutions, those willing to experiment from a position of strength and those that have no choice,” Mitchell writes.

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