Leveraging Student Housing and Dining to Advance Institutional Strategy

A Case Study: Morgan State University

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HCM

INTRODUCTION

Student housing is no longer just a campus necessity. It has become a strategic tool that institutions can use to shape enrollment, strengthen student experience, and support long term financial performance.

Colleges and universities use these residential assets to drive steady revenue through occupancy, dining, and campus services, while also strengthening the long-term performance and value of their real estate portfolios. At the same time, well-designed residential communities strengthen students' sense of belonging, support academic success, and create meaningful day-to-day connections that deepen loyalty to the institution. When students truly feel at home on campus, they are more likely to stay, graduate, and remain connected as engaged alumni long after they leave. Across the country, residence halls sit at the intersection of enrollment strategy, financial performance, student wellbeing, and campus identity. Institutions navigating demographic shifts, funding pressures, and rising student expectations are increasingly treating housing as a core asset, essential to long term competitiveness and institutional strength.

Morgan State University offers a compelling example of this shift. By combining phased residential redevelopment, public-private partnerships (P3), integrated dining through a Live-Dine-Learn model, and flexible design, Morgan has modernized its housing portfolio and aligned its facilities with enrollment growth and student success priorities.



01 THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Beginning in 2025, the widely projected enrollment cliff, driven by the post-2008 decline in birth rates, is expected to reduce the traditional college-aged population by roughly 15% nationally. This demographic shift intensifies existing pressures on colleges and universities creating enrollment volatility, which is complicated by debt sensitivity, capital constraints, and mounting deferred maintenance across aging campus buildings. As competition for students intensifies, expectations are rising alongside it. Privacy, inclusiveness, and intentionally designed wellness spaces have become expected rather than optional, functioning as key differentiators and core aspects of the residential experience.

Leading institutions are intentionally shaping environments that reinforce identity, strengthen student connection, and create long-term institutional value. As a result, student housing has increasingly evolved from an operational necessity into a key driver of enrollment, retention, community building, campus identity, and sustained financial performance.

Compounding these challenges, public universities receive limited capital appropriations for auxiliary enterprises. Because student housing is funded primarily through room and board revenue rather than state allocations, it must be self-supporting. This financial structure has accelerated the adoption of P3s and alternative project delivery methods, enabling institutions to modernize their housing stock, expand capacity, and preserve institutional borrowing power for academic priorities. When thoughtfully planned, student housing becomes one of the few capital investments capable of generating predictable, enrollment-linked revenue while simultaneously strengthening recruitment, retention, and campus identity. In today's constrained environment, residential strategy is not just about beds. It is about institutional resilience.





02 MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Strategic Renewal Through Residential Investment

Morgan State University is a public historically black research university in Baltimore, Maryland. It is the third largest among all Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States. Morgan undertook a phased redevelopment of its residential portfolio to address aging facilities and support enrollment growth. They chose to replace their older, low-rise residence halls with higher-density tower structures that were designed to reinforce the campus edges, strengthen gateway identity, optimize land utilization, provide spaces to promote student success, and increase bed capacity within a constrained campus footprint.

"Make no mistake about it, there is a monumental transformation taking place on and near the campus of Morgan State University. The growth that we're experiencing has come to be known as Morgan Momentum, and to sustain that growth we'll need modern facilities that are equipped to address the work of the future and the future of work."

DAVID K. WILSON
MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
PRESIDENT



Thurgood Marshall Hall and the adjacent Legacy Hall now function as a consolidated residence life hub, integrating living, dining, learning spaces, and student support services into a unified campus precinct. A third tower, O'Connell Hall, is currently under construction on Morgan's campus. At the far northeast corner of the university, this building must stand alone, providing students with educational and support services, dining, and residences under one roof. It will contain the only dining hall on the north campus, making O'Connell Hall an anchor for all the newly renovated campus housing in the vicinity. This densification strategy reflects a broader evolution in campus planning that prioritizes the strategic use of campus land, operational efficiency, and the long-term performance of institutional assets.

Morgan's three housing towers were delivered in partnership with the Maryland Economic Development Corporation through a P3 development structure. From a planning perspective, P3 delivery enables institutions to accelerate construction timelines, transfer certain development and operational risks, reduce balance-sheet exposure, preserve debt capacity for academic facilities, and align long-term asset performance with operational oversight.

Nationally, P3 housing models have evolved over the past decade into proactive portfolio management tools rather than last resort financing mechanisms[1].

"The Thurgood Marshal and Legacy Hall projects highlight the benefits that alternative project delivery models, such as MEDCO's, can bring to a public partner, such as Morgan State University; leveraging the University's enrollment growth and demand to substantiate an investment grade, public municipal bond offering to the capital markets for financing the project (rather than the University using its own capital); implementing expeditious means to studying the original site, assembling a design and construction team, entitling and delivering the development of the project and speeding up overall project delivery; as well as operating and maintaining the facility post-construction."

JOHN GENAKOS
MEDCO
REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION
VICE PRESIDENT

For campuses facing enrollment growth and limited capital funding, P3 delivery offers a practical path to modernizing housing while preserving institutional flexibility and financial discipline.

At Morgan, the P3 model supported the University's goal to bring students back from market-rate off-campus apartments and strengthen on-campus community by adding new beds in a high-quality residential environment. The new housing stock also created critical swing space, allowing the University to take aging residence halls offline for renovation as part of a broader, phased approach to both modernize and ultimately increase capacity.

That said, P3 partnerships require careful consideration. While construction costs remain off the University's balance sheet, so too does the associated housing revenue for the duration of the agreement, often 30 years, requiring long-term alignment between financial strategy and student life operations.



03 THE “LIVE-DINE-LEARN” FRAMEWORK

Contemporary student housing approaches extend far beyond the provision of bedrooms. National best practices increasingly center on an integrated live-dine-learn concept that intentionally connect residential life with social engagement and academic experiences. At Morgan State University, Thurgood Marshall Hall and Legacy Hall share a 40,000 SF dining facility which serves a total of 1,274 beds between the two towers. Together, these buildings form a dense, activated residential precinct. Rather than functioning as a standalone dining hall, the Thurgood Marshall dining venue serves as the social anchor of the community, welcoming both residents and the broader campus population.

By embedding campus-wide dining within the residential environment, Morgan aligns with a key planning principle supported by national research: students who feel included are more motivated academically which leads to higher levels of retention, persistence, and overall student success[2]. Integrated dining environments promote informal peer interaction, extend daily activity beyond the classroom, create spaces for academic spillover, and strengthen first-year transition experiences. In this framework, the residence hall operates as a community for belonging and student success rather than simply as housing.



04 STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Privacy and Wellness as Planning Drivers

Following completion of Thurgood Marshall and Legacy Halls, HCM gathered feedback from Residence Life staff and had conversations with students to understand how the new residential environments were performing. The input was consistent: students expressed a clear preference for semi-private, compartmentalized bathroom configurations over traditional shared suite-access layouts. The 4:1 resident-to-bathroom semi-suite model was especially well received and aligned with current national student housing trends.

Much of the feedback also focused on the student-centered amenities integrated throughout each floor and across the building, including social lounges, academic commons, fitness studios, tutoring spaces, and an on-site mental health counseling center. These responses mirror broader national trends, with student expectations increasingly shaped by a desire for privacy, acoustic control, and convenient access to wellness and academic support spaces.

In response, targeted design refinements were implemented in each development to improve the design. These post-occupancy findings reinforce a national trend to move away from large communal restroom blocks toward hybrid models that balance density with personal autonomy. Wellness has become a foundational planning driver in contemporary student housing rather than a secondary amenity.





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05 MODULAR PLANNING AND INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE

In planning the third residential tower with Morgan State University, HCM developed a modular planning framework intentionally structured for long term adaptability. At O'Connell Hall, HCM organized the building around a disciplined 13-foot structural module that can accommodate multiple unit typologies, including quads, doubles, and singles, without requiring major structural rework. The design flexibility allows Morgan to adjust the room mix over time at a lower cost, responding to enrollment shifts, changing student expectations, and evolving demand. In a climate shaped by demographic contraction and the enrollment cliff, buildings designed around rigid occupancy models quickly become limiting. A modular framework gives institutions the ability to recalibrate density and unit mix in response to market conditions without significant capital reinvestment. From a campus planning standpoint, flexibility is not simply an efficiency measure, it is a deliberate approach managing risk and protecting long-term institutional strength.

Morgan's new residential development coincides with record enrollment growth and significant philanthropic investment, including major unrestricted gifts that strengthened the university's institutional capacity. Campus development reinforces confidence and signals institutional momentum. Furthermore, modern housing sends a visible signal to prospective students and stakeholders that the institution is investing in the student experience and thus the institution has long-term vitality. For colleges and universities competing nationally, housing quality is increasingly a differentiator.

The Morgan State case study underscores several important lessons for institutions navigating today's higher education landscape. Housing should be viewed as a core institutional asset, one that generates reliable auxiliary revenue while supporting enrollment stability and the effective use of campus resources. P3s can enable responsible growth when guided by clear oversight and defined performance expectations. Integrating dining within residential environments strengthens community and reinforces daily student connection.

At both the unit and building scale, privacy, wellness, and flexibility are no longer optional. They reflect an institution's attentiveness to how students live, study, and build relationships. Modular planning frameworks that allow interchangeable unit configurations position campuses to respond to demographic shifts, evolving preferences, and financial uncertainty without significant reinvestment. Equally important, investment in housing sends a visible message of institutional commitment. Thoughtfully planned residential environments demonstrate confidence in the future and a clear dedication to student success. When aligned with enrollment strategy, financial planning, student affairs, and master planning, housing becomes more than an auxiliary enterprise. It becomes a tangible expression of an institution's promise to its students.

SOURCES

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MEET THE AUTHORS



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Lisa is a Senior Associate in HCM's Higher Education studio. She has worked on a wide variety of projects across several markets. Lisa is passionate about how architecture shapes the way people live, move, and interact with the world and in turn how people shape and change the built environment through the way they use it. Through her volunteer work around the world she has also become passionate about providing safe, affordable, and environmentally conscious housing that allows people to thrive in their communities.

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