EAB

Why Students Pick the Schools They Do

And How to Boost Your Odds of Making the Cut

Enroll360

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Executive Summary

This Research in Three Questions

1

What institutional traits attract—or deter—students from schools today?

This research provides a fresh perspective for enrollment leaders, highlighting how both obvious and overlooked traits shape a school's ability to attract students. By quantifying factors ranging from educational offerings to the social and political context of a school's locale, it reveals what prospective students value in today's competitive landscape. These insights can help align your institution's strategy with the characteristics of a school that matter most to students.

2

Which institutional persona best fits my school, and what does it reveal about our strengths and weaknesses?

This research identifies institutional personas—archetypes representing distinct clusters of schools based on the many traits that matter to prospective students. Consider how your institution aligns with or deviates from the typical traits of your persona and identify opportunities to enhance your appeal relative to your peers. Explore regional and competitive dynamics: Are nearby schools leveraging their strengths effectively or do you have advantages they lack? Could schools in other regions with similar personas attract students away from your market—or vice versa?

3

What can other personas teach us in this competitive landscape?

The enrollment landscape is increasingly shaped by schools competing across traditional segment lines. Compare your institution's persona to other personas, especially those representing your competitors, to discover gaps you can exploit or strengths you should account for. Identify ways to uniquely position your school in the eyes of prospective students by understanding how other personas excel or fall short.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

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Introduction

An Overview of the Analysis on Which This Report Is Based

SECTION **1**

A Comprehensive and Rigorous Analysis of School Attractiveness

For enrollment management teams, understanding what attracts students to a particular school is essential. While specific programs, missions, or sports teams may influence individual decisions, this research focuses on the broader traits that define how students perceive schools in general. In other words, it's about the types of schools students see when they look at the higher education landscape early in their search.

We used two complementary analytical methods: regression analysis and hierarchical cluster analysis. Together, the output of these statistical methods form a comprehensive picture of what influences students' decisions when choosing a school.

As we will explore, not all variables have an equal impact on attractiveness, and their effects can vary widely depending on a school's size, selectivity, and student demographics. Understanding these nuances is essential for tailoring strategies that maximize enrollment success.

Three Main Aspects of the Analysis That Underpin this Report

1	**Purpose** To help colleges and universities better understand how numerous characteristics shape their appeal to prospective students. By quantifying what broadly influences college-bound students, this research explores how different institutional traits influence their ability to attract—or deter—future enrollees.
2	**Methodology** Statistical analysis of large national datasets, from average net cost and the number of majors offered to aspects of the surrounding environment. Regression analysis was used to gauge the impact of more than 80 school characteristics. Hierarchical cluster analysis was used to identify groups of schools with similar significant characteristics.
3	**Interpretive framework** The project developed a summary attractiveness score—the "student-attractor" metric—to facilitate comparison of institutions. It also developed a set of nine institutional personas, using the cluster-analysis approach described above, to reveal the key differences between the school segments prospective students really see when exploring today's higher education landscape.

A Note on Correlation and Causation

Our analysis reveals correlations between school characteristics and student attraction, but it doesn't prove that one factor directly causes another. That said, we've accounted for confounding factors as thoroughly as possible by examining different combinations of traits. In many cases, fortunately, the direction of the relationships makes a causal link easier to infer. For instance, it's unlikely that a higher student-attractor score would alter a school's environment or its HBCU status. Instead, these characteristics likely contribute directly to a school's appeal to prospective students.

Measuring Schools' Ability to Attract Students

The ability to both attract applications and convert admitted students into enrollments is a useful metric for measuring a school's success in attracting students. So, we quantify the *student-attractor* by multiplying the number of applications a school receives by its yield rate. This combined measure captures both the initial appeal a school generates and its ability to turn that into student commitment.

We also consider the standardized and publicly available info students can use to evaluate schools—such as data from College Scorecard and platforms such as Appily or general knowledge about a school's locale. By examining the factors available to all prospective students, we can better understand what makes certain types of school stand out.

The regression model we used uncovers how individual variables contribute to the *student-attractor*, highlighting which factors lead to the most substantial changes. This analysis helps us answer a range of questions, such as these: Which traits have the greatest influence on student attraction? How much does the surrounding environment impact the student-attractor? What is the effect of an increase in average net cost on the student-attractor?

The Attractor Score Is a Balanced Measure of An Institution's Attractiveness to Prospective Students

Application volume ✕ Yield rate ＝ **Student-attractor score[1]**

Tells us how strong a school's brand awareness and reputation are within the broader landscape of competing institutions

Shows a school's ability to emerge favorably from the closer scrutiny that admitted students give the short list of institutions they are considering
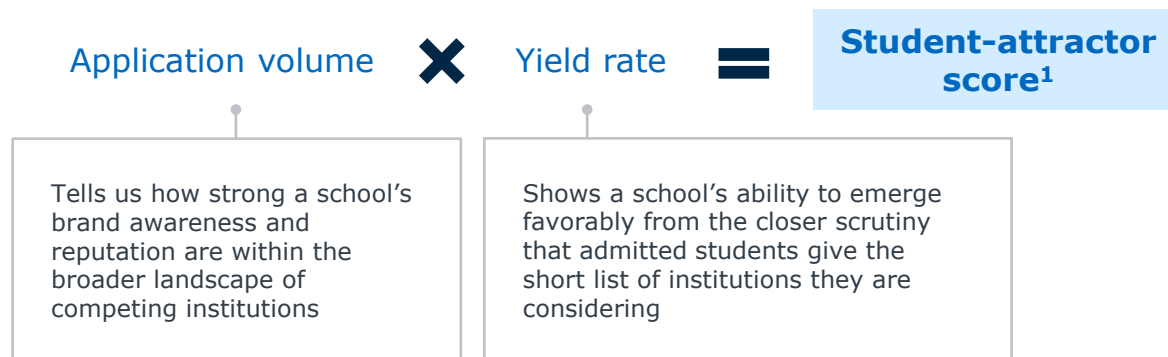
Determining What Sets High-Attractor Schools Apart

Regression analysis

More than 80 school characteristics analyzed

- Net price
- Majors
- Sports programs
- Academic programs
- Climate
- Urbanicity
- Greek life
- Campus safety
- Educational outcomes
- Natural amenities
- Political partisanship
- Etc.

1) The student-attractor score presented throughout this paper is a log-transformed and standardized form of this calculation, resulting in a normal distribution of scores from 1 to 10.

Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

This analysis examined over 80 variables to identify the factors that most strongly influence attraction across US four-year colleges. Out of these, 17 characteristics were statistically significant drivers of student attraction. Some effects are expected and intuitive, while others reveal new insights into how schools can differentiate themselves. For example, while traditional drivers such as affordability are indeed quite important, elements of campus life (e.g., the number of student organizations) and features of the surrounding environment (e.g., a favorable climate or population growth) also have a considerable impact on the student-attractor.

It's important to note that certain variables, such as institution size, selectivity, and student traits (e.g., percentage of first-generation students, average GPA of admitted students), do not appear in this chart. These elements serve as control variables and help segment the analysis across different types of schools, allowing us to isolate the effects of other characteristics. They will be discussed in more detail in the following pages, where we explore how the effects of these drivers shown on the right differ for specific types of institutions.

Contribution[1] of Significant Traits to a School's Overall Student-Attractor Score

Average for All Four-Year US Institutions, 10.0 = Maximum Student-Attractor Score

Trait	Score
Number of majors	0.84
Campus safety	0.76
Number of student orgs	0.76
Favorable climate (weather)	0.76
Affordability	0.75
HBCU status	0.63
Fewer application requirements	0.63
Graduates' earning potential	0.56
Study-abroad options	0.56
Lower median age of locality	0.49
Number of sports teams	0.42
Local population growth	0.31
Partisanship of state	0.31
Greek life	0.24
Tuition guarantee	0.14
% in-state students	0.08
Population density	0.04

Legend:
- Campus Life
- Cost
- Educational Offerings & Outcomes
- Surrounding Environment
- Admissions

E.g., all other things being equal, a school with the most[1] sports teams will have a score that's 0.42 higher than those with the least.

1) Each factor's impact on the student draw score is measured by taking the difference in draw between the largest and smallest values of that factor, excluding outliers (i.e., extreme cases like a school with 500 majors or 10 application requirements) that are rare and distort the magnitude of these effects.

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Differences Between Major School Segments

In addition to specific campus and environmental characteristics, three overarching factors that we typically use to segment schools—size, selectivity, and student demographics—were also found to play a substantial role in moderating a school's ability to attract students.

Including these control variables, along with their interactions with other traits, allows us to account for over 90% of the variation observed in the student-attractor score across all four-year schools. This high explanatory power helps us understand how different institutional traits resonate with specific student populations.

In the following pages, we'll explore how the effects of specific characteristics—such as affordability, campus life, and surrounding environment—differ depending on a school's size, selectivity, and student demographics. These interactions reveal valuable insights that can help institutions tailor their strategies based on their unique profiles.

Three Characteristics That Moderate the Factors Driving Student Attraction

Differences Between School Segments

Size
Institutional size emerges as a significant driver, with larger schools generally attracting more applications and yielding a higher student-attractor score. The scale of larger institutions often means greater resources, broader program offerings, and a more dynamic campus life, all of which contribute to their appeal.

Selectivity
Selectivity also strongly influences the student-attractor score, with lower acceptance rates typically indicating higher desirability. Schools with more competitive admissions tend to attract applicants who perceive them as more prestigious or offering a higher-quality education. This makes selectivity a critical factor for many institutions, though its impact can vary depending on other characteristics.

Student demographics
Demographic variables, such as the proportion of nontraditional students, Pell recipients, and first-generation students, play a more nuanced role in shaping the student-attractor score. Generally, schools with a higher percentage of nontraditional students (e.g., older students, part-time students) tend to see lower attraction, reflecting a unique set of challenges in appealing to this group. Demographic composition helps us understand the specific needs and preferences of a school's student body, which can amplify or mitigate the effects of other factors such as cost or campus life.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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A Closer Look at the Implications of School Size

Institutional size merits special mention because it is so tied up with school attractiveness. All other things being equal, larger schools have a higher attractor score than smaller ones. However, the effects of factors such as the number of student organizations or majors can vary significantly between schools of different sizes. The chart on the right uses the number of student organizations as an example, but the same fundamental relationship applies to sports and majors.

The impact on smaller institutions

Overall, smaller schools gain more from incremental improvements in campus amenities and academic offerings, as these features help them compete with larger schools that naturally benefit from scale. Consequently, strategic investments in majors, sports, and student organizations can provide a significant boost in attractiveness.

The impact on larger institutions

For larger schools, attractiveness is less tied to incremental gains in these areas. Enhancing the student experience through signature programs or unique offerings may yield better results than simply adding more options to an already extensive list.

Smaller Institutions Stand to Gain Far More than Their Larger Counterparts from Beefing Up Student Attractors

Example: How a Doubling in the Number of Student Organizations Relates to Student-Attractor Score, by School Size

0.6% increase in attraction at the largest institutions

4.4% increase in attraction at the smallest institutions

# of Enrolled Undergraduates
- 25,000
- 15,000
- 10,000
- 5,000
- 3,000
- 1,000

Student-Attractor Score[1]

# of Student Organizations
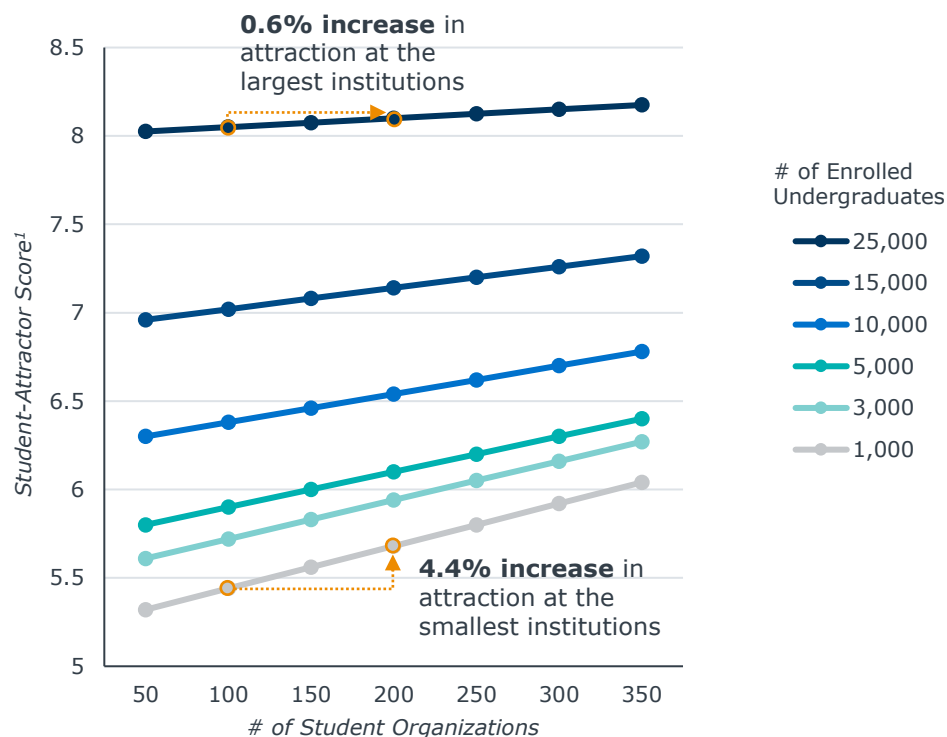
>7x **Larger increase in the student-attractor score for the smallest schools versus the largest**

1) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

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A Closer Look at the Implications of School Selectivity

Institution selectivity merits special mention because it is also tied up with school attractiveness, although usually to a lesser degree than size. Again, all things being equal, schools with lower acceptance rates have a higher student-attractor. The precise effects of certain factors do vary depending on the school's acceptance rate. For example, as was the case with smaller schools, those with higher acceptance rates benefit much more from incremental additions to sports, majors, and student organizations.

Affordability

The finding that price has almost no effect on schools with the lowest acceptance rates could be related to higher financial aid offerings, as well as a high-income audience. But, for schools with high acceptance rates, price is a strong deterrent.

Graduates' earning potential

The salary interaction is also telling, as it suggests that students at more selective schools place more value on extremely high postgraduate earnings, whereas students at less selective schools may prioritize other factors, such as cost and access. This could have implications for how schools market outcomes to different prospects.

Less-Selective Institutions Stand to Lose Far More than Their More-Selective Counterparts from Increasing Costs—and Gain Less from Higher Graduate Earnings

Example: How a Doubling of (1) the Average Net Cost or (2) the Average Salary of Graduates Relates to Student-Attractor Score, by School Selectivity
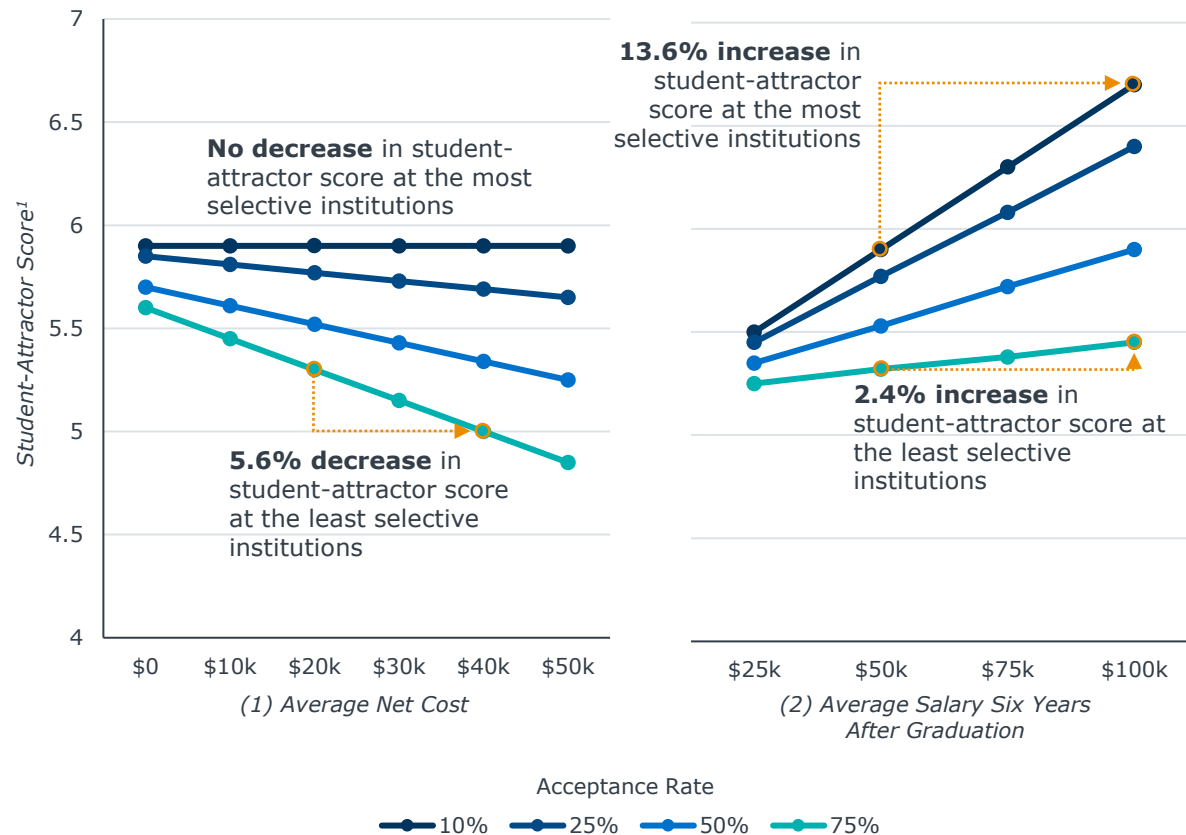
No decrease in student-attractor score at the most selective institutions

5.6% decrease in student-attractor score at the least selective institutions

13.6% increase in student-attractor score at the most selective institutions

2.4% increase in student-attractor score at the least selective institutions

Student-Attractor Score[1]

(1) Average Net Cost

(2) Average Salary Six Years After Graduation

Acceptance Rate
— 10% — 25% — 50% — 75%

1) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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A Closer Look at the Implications of Student Demographics (1 of 2)

Student demographics—such as the percentages of Pell Grant recipients, first-generation students, and part-time students, as well as older students—significantly shape how different factors influence a school's ability to attract students.

Price sensitivity

Price sensitivity is especially pronounced among these groups, with higher costs disproportionately reducing the attractiveness of schools that enroll larger percentages of Pell Grant recipients, first-generation students, part-time students, and those over the age of 25. This trend underscores the growing importance of affordability, particularly as these are the student populations that have expanded in recent years.

Salary expectations

Relatedly, though not visualized here, expected salary outcomes play a less prominent role in driving school choice for these groups. While salary potential generally enhances a school's appeal, it seems to be a secondary concern for students in these demographics, who may prioritize immediate affordability and access to flexible program options over long-term earnings potential.

Institutions Serving More First-Generation Students Stand to Lose Far More from Increasing Costs

Example: How a Doubling of the Average Net Cost Relates to Student-Attractor Score, by Percentage of First-Generation Students

9.0% decrease in attraction at institutions serving more first-gen students

1.1% decrease in attraction at institutions serving less first-gen students

% of First-Generation Students
- 60%
- 40%
- 20%

Student-Attractor Score[1]

Average Net Cost
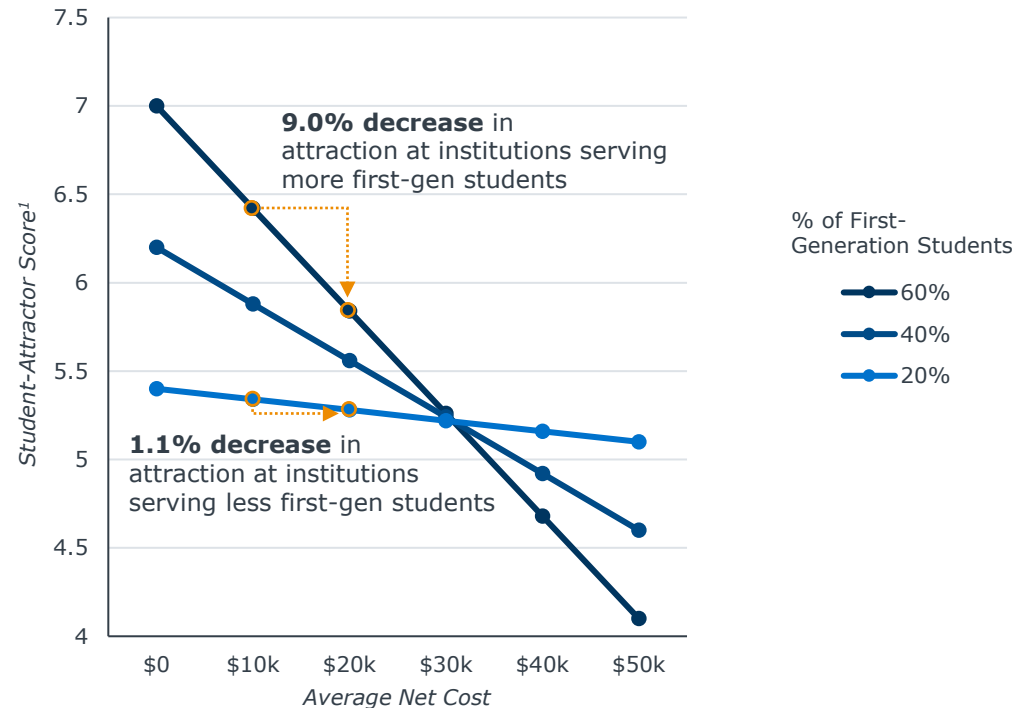
>8x **Larger decrease in the student-attractor score for schools serving more first-generation students**

1) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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A Closer Look at the Implications of Student Demographics (2 of 2)

Additionally, factors such as the number of majors and sports offered significantly boost attractiveness, which suggests that first-gen, low-income, and many nontraditional students may prioritize community and campus engagement over financial outcomes.

Educational offerings

The number of majors a school offers is especially influential for schools with higher proportions of Pell Grant recipients. While an increase in majors improves attractiveness for all student segments, the effect is much stronger with low-income students, who may prioritize access to a diverse array of practical and career-focused academic programs.

Campus life & student experience

Though not illustrated here, factors such as sports and student organizations have a much larger impact on schools with higher percentages of first-generation students. This suggests that offering vibrant campus experiences can significantly boost the student-attractor score and help offset some of the disadvantages related to cost or other factors that greatly impact first-gen students.

Institutions Serving More Pell Recipients Stand to Gain Far More from Increasing the Range of Academic Offerings

Example: How a Doubling of the Number of Majors Offered Relates to Student-Attractor Score, by Percentage of Pell Recipients

2.2% increase in attraction at institutions serving more Pell recipients

13.5% increase in attraction at institutions serving more Pell recipients

% of Pell Recipients
— 25%
— 33%
— 50%
— 75%
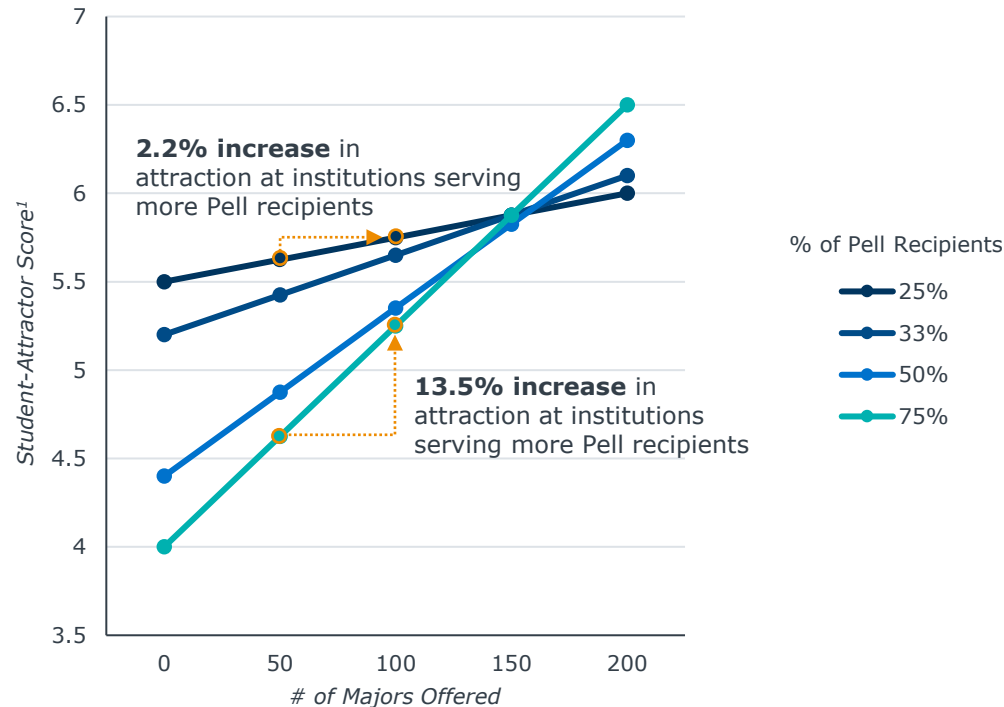
>6x **Larger increase in the student-attractor score for schools serving the most Pell recipients**

1) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Influencing Key Drivers of Attractiveness

More controllable levers

As schools look to attract more students in an increasingly competitive environment, it's crucial to focus on the factors they can both control and that can significantly enhance their attractiveness to prospective students. By identifying the levers with the greatest potential for influence, such as admissions processes and aspects of student life, schools can focus their efforts on the areas that matter most.

Less controllable levers

While many factors contributing to a school's attractiveness can be influenced by strategic decisions, there are some variables that schools have limited control over. These harder-to-influence variables often stem from the surrounding environment or broader economic and demographic realities, making them harder to change or influence directly. These can benefit you, but they can also make you appear less attractive. However, by understanding these variables and finding creative ways to frame or mitigate them, schools can still manage their appeal.

Easier to influence

1	**Admissions processes** Schools that make it as easy as possible for students to receive and accept offers of admission are highly attractive to prospective college-goers. Related tactics available to admissions teams include reducing application requirements and adopting direct admission.
2	**Student life** Key considerations include the number of student organizations and sports teams you have, the robustness of your Greek life, and the steps you take to ensure student safety. A vibrant and inclusive campus with a rich culture and strong sense of community is highly attractive to students.
3	**Academic offerings** A wide variety of majors is a powerful draw for students, who are, as a rule, highly motivated by their academic interests. Tying your academic offerings to positive career outcomes reinforces this effect.

Harder to influence but also important to tackle

1	**Cost** Cost is one of the most powerful determinants of a school's appeal. While it may be impossible for most schools to meaningfully move the dial on their affordability, optimal communication with families on related issues can do much to mitigate their cost-related concerns.
2	**Local context** Various factors related to a school's location, including climate, political leanings, and urbanicity, greatly influence its appeal. While these things can't be changed, effective audience segmentation and thoughtful messaging can ensure that you are optimally positioned for your key audiences.

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Nine Institutional Personas

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Strategic Opportunities

2

Institutional Personas in Brief

In this section, we introduce nine distinct institutional personas that emerged from our analyses, offering a prospective student's view of the higher education landscape. These personas reflect the most common groupings of four-year institutions in the United States, each representing a unique blend of characteristics that shape its appeal to prospective students. By understanding these personas, schools can better position themselves in a competitive market, highlighting key strengths and identifying opportunities for growth.

These personas were identified through a data-driven analysis of publicly visible characteristics that students commonly encounter during their college search, such as admissions requirements, net cost, campus life, educational quality, and the surrounding environment. Unlike traditional segmentation based solely on attributes such as size or sector, these personas reflect how the landscape of schools is seen through the eyes of prospective students. By combining multiple dimensions that are influential in shaping student choices, this approach provides a fresh view on what makes institutions more or less appealing during the search process.

Statistical Analysis Identifies Groups of Schools Between Which Apples-to-Apples Comparisons May Be Made

Full Universe of Four-Year Colleges and Universities

Hierarchical cluster analysis
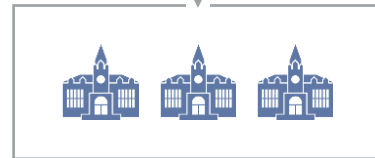
Institutions that resemble each other more than they resemble any other college or university

Similar in terms of:
- Cost
- Local politics
- Campus life
- Academic programs
- Educational outcomes
- Urbanicity
- Student demographics
- Etc.

Which One of the Nine Institutional Personas Best Fits Your School?

This page offers an overview of nine distinct school segments, or "institutional personas," revealed through our analysis. The pages that follow examine each in terms of key factors that drive students' school selection—admission requirements, net cost, campus life, educational quality, school setting, etc. Find the persona in the table below that most closely resembles your institution; the corresponding pages listed in the last column will offer guidance most pertinent to your situation. Note that you may not find a perfect fit; choose whichever is the closest match. As you continue to explore this report, you will likely find insights of direct relevance to you under more than one persona, with adjacent personas typically overlapping most (e.g., 1 and 2, 7 and 8).

	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality[1]	Pages
1	**The Accessible Education Anchor**	Very small	Private	–	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	**The Mission-Driven Learning Community**	Small	Private	––	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	**The Boutique Elite Institution**	Small	Private	+	Northeast, Midwest	28–31
4	**The Inclusive Path to Opportunity**	Small	Mixed	–	Southeast	32–35
5	**The Quintessential and Accessible College**	Small	Private	––	National, Midwest emphasis	36–39
6	**The Selective Academic Enclave**	Small, mid	Private	++	National, Northeast emphasis	40–43
7	**The Well-Rounded Education Hub**	Mid	Public	––	National, Southeast emphasis	44–47
8	**The Outstanding Opportunity Engine**	Large	Public	––	Southwest, Midwest, Southeast	48–51
9	**The Rigorous Academic Giant**	Large	Private	+	National, Northeast emphasis	52–55

Increasing school size →

"**++**" = most selective, "**––**" = least selective

1) As with the other columns in this table, regionality of any given archetype is based on generalizations; exceptions will exist in all cases.

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At a Glance: What Broadly Defines Each Persona?

While the preceding page helps you locate your school's persona using familiar dimensions such as size, sector, selectivity, and geographic region, this page offers a concise description of what defines each persona across the broader set of characteristics considered in this research—such as affordability, academic offerings, and campus environment. These summaries provide a snapshot of what makes each persona distinct, helping you understand how your school fits into the higher education landscape.

	Persona name	Description[1]
1	**The Accessible Education Anchor**	Typically rooted in rural areas, these very small and typically private schools serve as vital resources for local and nontraditional students.
2	**The Mission-Driven Learning Community**	These small colleges emphasize access and personalized attention, fostering supportive academic and social environments for a well-rounded education.
3	**The Boutique Elite Institution**	Private colleges providing a rigorous academic environment, distinguished career outcomes, and close faculty-student connections in smaller settings.
4	**The Inclusive Path to Opportunity**	Focused on accessibility, these community-centered institutions provide affordable education, particularly to low-income and first-generation students.
5	**The Quintessential and Accessible College**	"Jack of all trades" schools in suburban areas that offer a balanced, traditional college experience, blending accessibility with a strong sense of community.
6	**The Selective Academic Enclave**	Prestigious small to midsize institutions combine academic rigor, personalized support, and exceptional career outcomes in large and diverse locales.
7	**The Well-Rounded Education Hub**	Midsize public schools that excel in offering a variety of academic options and a dynamic campus life to students living in the region.
8	**The Outstanding Opportunity Engine**	Large, urban public schools with strong ties to their state that combine deep affordability with extensive academic options to provide transformative opportunities for a wide range of students.
9	**The Rigorous Academic Giant**	Very large, urban universities that combine selective admissions, extensive academic opportunities, and dynamic campus cultures to attract high-achieving students from across the nation.

Increasing school size

1) As with the other columns in this table, the characteristics of any given archetype are based on generalizations; exceptions will exist in all cases.

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Ample Grounds for Competition Within Personas

The chart below reveals how student-attractor scores vary within each persona, demonstrating that even schools in the same archetype face notable differences in their ability to attract applicants and enrollees. This underscores the importance of understanding both your persona and your position within it to compete effectively. For clarity, two examples below are annotated to highlight the key elements of the box plots.

A Detailed Look at the Spread of Student-Attractor Scores by Institutional Persona
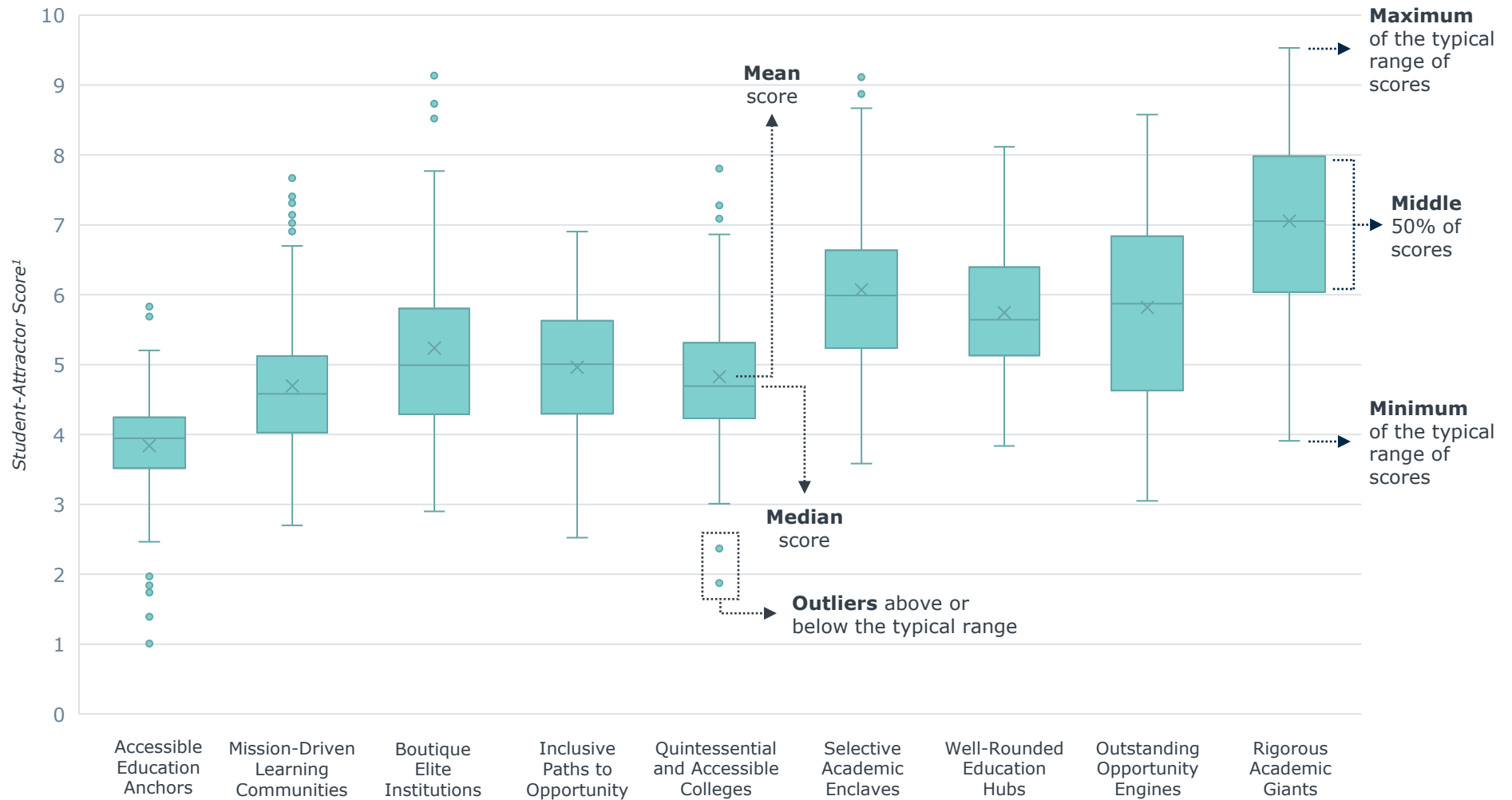
1) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

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A Recurring Structure for the Persona Profiles in This Section

Four Pages for Each of the Nine Institutional Personas

*Page 1: **Persona overview***

- Average school size, selectivity, and student demographics versus national averages
- Median student-attractor score
- Summary assessment of student attractors

*Page 2: **Strengths***

- Traits that boost the persona's student-attractor score
- Differentiators examined include campus life, academic variety, affordability, and location

*Page 3: **Weaknesses***

- Traits that limit a persona's appeal, negatively impacting its student-attractor score
- Common challenges include high costs, limited campus amenities, and location-based factors

*Page 4: **Strategic recommendations***

- Persona-specific strategies for leveraging strengths and mitigating weaknesses
- Strategies are assessed on their potential to impact the student-attractor and their difficulty

Understanding Your School's Positioning

Three Steps to Gain a Better Grasp of Your Competitive Context

| 1) Align Within Your Persona | 2) Evaluate Regional Competitiveness | 3) Look Across Personas |

1) Align Within Your Persona

› Compare key traits

How does your institution compare to the persona's typical characteristics?

- *Example:* Is your school in line with most of your persona's traits, or does it differ in one or more dimensions?

› Leverage strengths

In which areas do you outperform others in your persona?

- Explore how to emphasize these in your messaging and outreach strategies.
- *Example:* Does your school have lower costs than the typical school in your persona?

› Consider weaknesses

Which traits do you fall short on?

- Consider whether these are critical to your target market or manageable through strategic adjustments.
- *Example:* If your school has lower graduate earnings, is that important for the types of students you want to attract? (See page 11.)

2) Evaluate Regional Competitiveness

› Understand regional dynamics

How does your school compare to your persona's traits in your region?

- *Example:* Are there shared challenges or opportunities that define the competitive landscape?

› Identify regional differentiation

What unique qualities make your school stand out against similar schools in your area?

- Pay special attention to traits that are particularly valued by the students you serve.
- *Example:* Affordability or academic offerings are key for Pell recipients.

› Assess interregional positioning

How does your school differ from those of your persona in other regions?

- Use this analysis to refine your strategy for cross-regional recruitment.
- *Example:* Are there traits that could attract students from outside your area—or risks that could drive local students elsewhere?

3) Look Across Personas

› Evaluate cross-persona differences

What unique qualities set your persona apart from others?

- Given the importance of school size, pay special attention to the personas adjacent to yours in this report for the closest comparisons.
- *Example:* Is affordability the primary draw for students to your type of school versus adjacent personas?

› Identify competitive threats

Are there traits where schools in other personas outperform yours in ways that could erode your appeal?

- *Example:* If affordability is your primary draw, are other personas offering deeper affordability and/or better combining it with key traits, such as campus life or academics?

› Exploit relative advantages

Where does your persona outperform others?

- *Example:* Focus on strong attributes that can broadly differentiate your school from other personas, such as educational offerings (pages 8–13).

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Persona 1: The Accessible Education Anchor

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

		Attractor (out of 10)[2]	3.9	# undergrads enrolled	1,000	Acceptance rate	73%	% of 4-year schools	11%
Regionality	**Mostly Midwest, some in Southeast and West**	% in-state students	66%	% low-income students	39%	% first-gen students	36%	% part-time students	21%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Radar chart axes: Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility. Legend: National Average, Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture
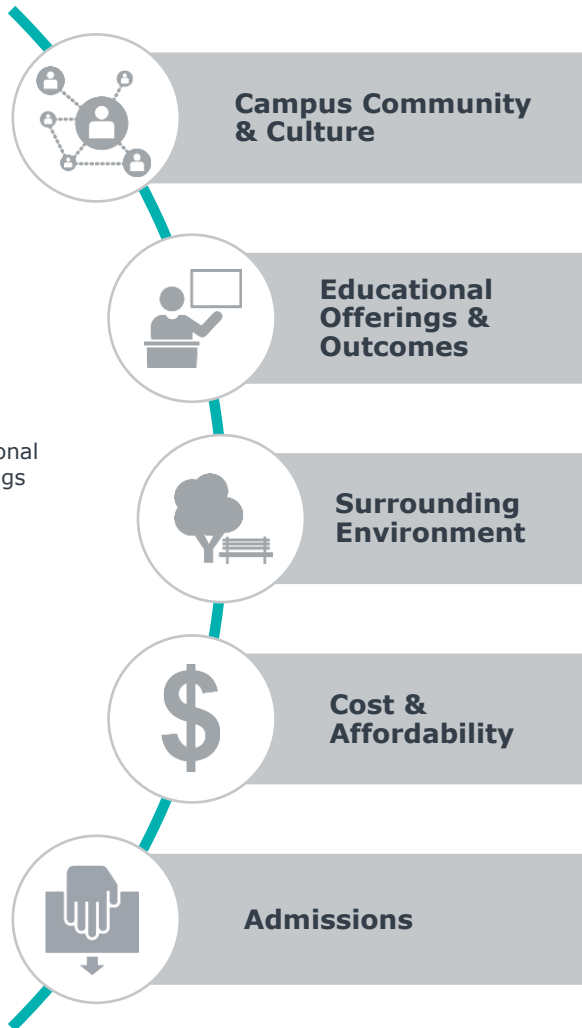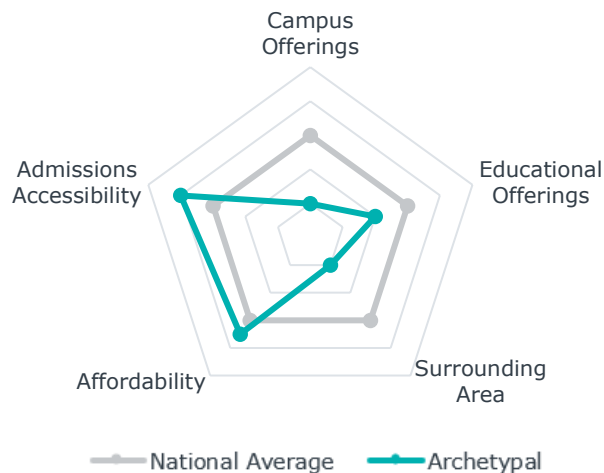
- **Limited extracurricular activity:** On average, these schools have only 26 student organizations (versus the national average of 80) and no Greek life.
- **Very few sports offerings:** They have only 7 sports teams and no NCAA conference membership.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Slightly fewer academic programs:** The median number of majors offered is 50 (versus 70 overall).
- **Lower postgraduation earnings:** Students earn an average of $42,450 six years after graduating, moderately lower than the $48,700 overall average.

Surrounding Environment

- **Primarily rural campuses:** Most of these schools are in politically conservative towns on the rural-urban fringe.
- **Cold climates:** These schools are typically found in colder climate zones in the Midwest.

Cost & Affordability

- **Below-average cost:** The average net price for these schools is $19,301, slightly below the average ($20,036).
- **A third of need left unmet:** Despite enrolling many students who receive Pell Grants (39%), a below-average portion of students here (67%) have all their financial need met.

Admissions

- **Less stringent application requirements:** Schools of this archetype typically require at most 2 application components, standardized tests remain optional, and the average GPA of admitted students is lower (3.3).

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strengths

What makes "Accessible Education Anchors" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that, while these schools are generally below-average in overall attractiveness, they serve a large proportion of first-generation and nontraditional students and possess some qualities that can attract a broader array of students. Their key appeal comes from a higher degree of accessibility—making higher education feasible for students from diverse backgrounds. To a lesser degree, these schools also boast moderate affordability and educational outcomes for their small size. All these qualities also vary by region, giving certain institutions in an area a competitive edge over those in other areas.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

$ Somewhat Below-Average Cost: **$19,301**

Fewer Barriers to Admission: **2 application requirements**

Relatively Solid Array of Majors: **50**

Moderate Career Outcomes: **$42,450 within 6 years**

High Accessibility and Moderate Affordability

These schools offer a somewhat more affordable option than the average school, making them more attractive, especially to nontraditional and lower-income students. This is enhanced by lower barriers to entry, as these schools typically have only 2 application requirements, lower required GPA, and so on—all of which allows these schools to serve a wider array of students.

The Southeast stands out as having the lowest costs in this archetype, making these schools even more appealing to price-sensitive students. In contrast, while schools in the Midwest are slightly more expensive, they benefit from more streamlined admissions processes (see the table below).

Decent Educational Offerings and Outcomes for Schools of This Size and Selectivity

Although slightly below average, these schools offer a broad academic experience for their smaller size, which can appeal to students with a wide range of academic interests. And while the career outcomes of graduates are also slightly below average, these schools are still valuable launching points for students seeking opportunity in a less competitive academic environment.

Schools in the Midwest tend to offer a larger number of majors compared to those in the West and Southeast. However, career outcomes are highest for graduates of these schools in the West (see below).

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Midwest	Southeast	West
Cost	$19,413	**$16,894**	$21,733
Application Requirements	**1**	2	2
Majors	**56**	41	39
Salary	$42,500	$38,700	**$45,700**

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Weaknesses

What makes "Accessible Education Anchors" less attractive to prospective students? While these schools offer a somewhat affordable education and easy access for students from a variety of backgrounds, they often face limitations that come from being very small schools in fringe locations. For example, small school sizes naturally result in more limited extracurricular opportunities. And remote locations have less of an appeal for students seeking dynamic environments. These traits are common across this persona (e.g., few campus activities, colder temperatures, less dense populations). However, some of the drawbacks are more significant for these schools in certain regions, influencing the interregional competitive landscape for schools of this archetype.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Few Sports:
7 teams, no athletics division

Very Limited Campus Life:
26 student organizations

Isolated Locale:
Low density and growth

Unappealing Weather:
Colder climates

A More Limited Campus Experience and Student Life

The small size of these schools leads to a more limited range of campus activities. The low number of student organizations, absence of both Greek life and athletics division membership, as well as few sports teams could make these schools less attractive to students who value a more active campus experience.

The table below also shows that schools of this archetype in the Midwest generally have fewer sports teams but also the most student organizations. The reverse is true in the West. Schools of this sort in the Southeast have more in both regards, creating a variety of competitive advantages (and disadvantages) between regions.

A Less Dynamic Surrounding Environment

These schools are frequently located in areas with low population density and lower growth, which translates to smaller primary markets and detracts from their overall attractiveness. They are also frequently situated in colder climates with harsher winters.

These disadvantages are not evenly spread across the country (see below). The schools in the Midwest are more likely to be in colder climates and sparsely populated areas, which could be a significant disadvantage for students seeking a more temperate environment or greater social opportunities.

	Key Trait	Midwest	Southeast	West
Regional Variations	**Sports Teams**	**6**	8	8
	Student Organizations	27	26	**21**
	Climate	**Very Cold**	Hot	Very Hot
	Pop. Growth	**5%**	15%	21%

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Apply (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Strategic Recommendations

Enrollment leaders at these schools should focus on bolstering their already strong appeal to nontraditional, first-generation, and lower-income students—student demographics that are growing in proportion—by further differentiating their affordability and accessibility. At the same time, investing in a modest expansion of student organizations (or even merging with other similar schools to obtain that scale) and reframing their rural locations as attractive, community-focused environments can help counteract some of the inherent challenges.

Effort	Impact	
◐	◑	○ Least
		● Greatest

1 Leverage Affordability, Access, and Career Outcomes

Emphasize Cost Savings ◕●

Schools in this archetype are somewhat more affordable than most institutions, offering strong value, especially to nontraditional or lower-income students. Marketing should highlight cost advantages to these groups.

Promote Ease of Entry ◕◑

Fewer admission barriers make these schools attractive for students seeking a straightforward process. Outreach should emphasize the simplicity of applying and the more accessible academic requirements.

Showcase Career Value ◕◑

While majors and salary outcomes are slightly below average, they offer solid returns relative to the low cost and accessibility. Marketing to cost-conscious, career-focused prospects should make this case clear.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Southeast can lean into their highly competitive pricing, while those in the Midwest and West can focus more on accessibility and better outcomes to offset their slightly higher costs.

2 Enhance Campus Life and Experience

Expand Student Organizations ◐●

Although these schools have fewer student organizations and sports teams, even modest growth in these areas can make a noticeable difference for small schools like this (see page 10 for more on these effects). Given the large proportion of nontraditional students, it's also important to ensure that these organizations accommodate those students as well.

Some schools have scaled these offerings up through strategic mergers, leading to recent enrollment successes (e.g., Vermont State University). Either way, showcasing the strength of your school's offerings may help counter negative expectations.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Midwest with fewer sports and those in the West with fewer student groups should focus on adding new opportunities for student engagement. Schools in the Southeast should aim to emphasize their more active campus life, relative to their competitors elsewhere.

3 Leverage/Improve the Perception of the Surrounding Environment

Reframe the Environment ◐◕

In the absence of a dense or growing population, emphasize community, safety, and unique local attributes, such as outdoor recreation in rural areas. Position the school as a central community hub with strong ties to the surrounding area.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Midwest, often in colder and less populous regions, could promote outdoor activities or campus events, while schools in the Southeast and West should emphasize their warmer climates and denser, more dynamic settings.

Persona 2: The Mission-Driven Learning Community

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

	Attractor (out of 10)[2]	4.6	# undergrads enrolled	1,900	Acceptance rate	78%	% of 4-year schools	18%
Regionality	**Mostly Northeast, Midwest and Southeast**		% in-state students	74%	% low-income students	36%	% first-gen students	33%	% part-time students	15%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Radar chart with axes: Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility. Legend: National Average, Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture
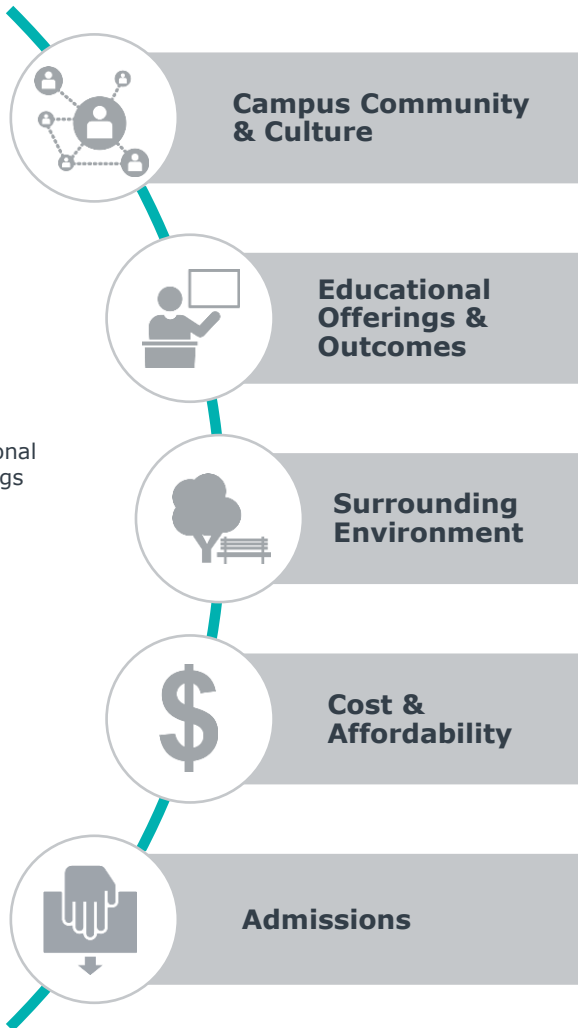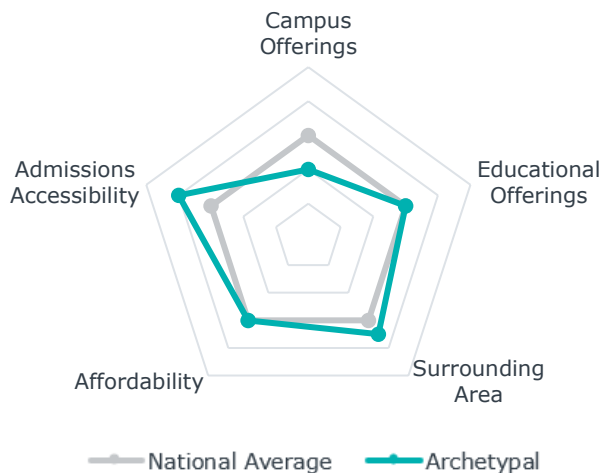
- **Narrower extracurricular scene:** These schools offer about 50 student organizations, which is decent for a smaller school but lower than the national average of 80.
- **Solid athletic engagement:** These schools have 14 sports teams with Division III membership, providing students with solid athletic options for a small school.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Average array of academic programs:** They typically offer 66 majors, right around the national median of 70.
- **Average postgraduation earnings:** Students from these schools generally earn $47,500 six years after graduating, near the national average of $48,700.

Surrounding Environment

- **Primarily suburban:** Usually located in large, denser, politically left-of-center suburban areas.
- **Moderate climates:** Most of these schools are situated in the temperate climate zones of their respective regions, appealing to the median student who is averse to the cold.

Cost & Affordability

- **Average net price:** The average net price for these schools is $20,066, nearly identical to the national average of $20,036.
- **Solid access to financial aid:** These schools meet 73% of financial need on average, slightly more than the national average (71%).

Admissions

- **Less stringent application requirements:** Schools of this archetype typically require at most 2 application components, standardized tests remain optional, and the average GPA of admitted students is somewhat lower (3.4 vs. 3.5 overall).

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strengths

What makes "Mission-Driven Learning Communities" attractive to prospective students? They serve a large proportion of in-state, first-generation, and nontraditional students. When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school, in many ways we see the median four-year school. However, examining the effects each trait has on a school's ability to attract students reveals certain standout qualities. The key appeal comes from a balance of higher accessibility and moderate educational value, along with a relatively strong sports scene and dynamic surrounding locale. As with most of these archetypes, regional characteristics shape their appeal, creating unique advantages for institutions across different parts of the country.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Few Barriers to Admission:
2 application requirements

Solid Array of Majors for Small Schools: 66

Moderate Career Outcomes:
$47,500 within 6 years

Richer Athletics:
14 teams, Division III

Denser Local Populations:
548/sq. mile

High Accessibility That Leads to Solid Success for a Broad Range of Students

Relaxed admissions requirements are paired with a solid selection of academic programs relative to the school's size, as well as moderately good career outcomes. This combination of attractive traits means this archetype excels at providing a valuable education that is accessible to a broad range of students.

Schools in the Midwest lead in academic offerings, with an average of 74 majors, well above the average for this archetype or size. Schools in the Northeast stand out in salary outcomes, with graduates earning $48,100 on average, followed closely by Midwestern graduates at $47,000.

A Richer Sports Scene and a More Dynamic Surrounding Environment

Sports play a significant role in attracting prospects and enriching student life. Despite their small size, these institutions have an average of 14 sports teams, and their students benefit from participation in NCAA Division III athletics.

Additionally, these schools tend to be located in densely populated suburban areas, particularly in the Northeast. This means a larger primary market while also providing students with access to a modest range of amenities and opportunities outside of campus life.

	Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest	Southeast
Regional Variations	**Application Requirements**	3	**2**	**2**
	Majors	60	**74**	53
	Salary	**$48,100**	$47,000	$42,600
	Pop. Density	**1,114**	487	362

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Weaknesses

What makes "Mission-Driven Learning Communities" less attractive to prospective students? While these schools excel in accessibility, several factors limit their overall appeal. Primarily, their small size and limited extracurricular options (aside from sports) can deter students seeking a more diverse and dynamic campus experience. In addition, their surrounding environments—though currently dense in some regions—are experiencing low population growth, which presents long-term challenges both for maintaining a strong student pipeline and attracting prospects from farther away. These drawbacks vary by region, with some regions facing greater limitations than others, creating an uneven competitive landscape across the archetype.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Limited Campus Activities:
50 student organizations and no Greek life

Shrinking Locale:
Low population growth

Less Appealing Weather:
Colder climates

A Somewhat Limited Campus Experience and Student Life Outside of Athletics

Though these schools often offer a robust number of sports teams compared to their size, the number of student organizations is well below the national average. Students may have fewer opportunities to find niche communities or pursue diverse extracurricular interests, which could lessen the appeal for those seeking a more vibrant student life. The absence of Greek life further limits campus engagement, especially for students interested in that social avenue.

The table below shows that these are limitations that are consistent with schools of this type in every region.

Slowing Population Growth and Colder Weather

One of the biggest challenges for these schools is the slow population growth in their surrounding areas. While the Midwest and Northeast are currently more densely populated than the Southeast, these regions are growing at significantly slower rates.

This slow growth presents two major problems for small schools like this. First, the areas they serve are becoming less dynamic and may lose appeal for students who want to live in thriving, rapidly changing environments. Second, as the number of prospective students in their primary markets stagnates or declines, these schools—especially those that rely heavily on in-state students—could struggle to attract new applicants.

	Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest	Southeast
Regional Variations	**Student Organizations**	50	52	50
	Greek Life	None	None	None
	Pop. Growth	4%	5%	36%

Strategic Opportunities

Enrollment leaders at these schools should capitalize on the accessibility and value that define this archetype. These schools have a strong foundation in offering an education with a relatively wide range of majors and solid career outcomes for a broad array of students. The goal is to build on these strengths while addressing challenges such as limited student engagement and the declining growth of their primary markets. With thoughtful investment in campus life and strategic adjustments in marketing, these schools can grow their appeal to prospective students.

Effort	Impact
◐	◐

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Emphasize Accessible and Valuable Education

Highlight Academic Variety ◔ ●

While these schools are smaller, they offer a robust number of academic programs relative to their size, providing students with a diversity of options that rivals those of some larger schools.

Promote Ease of Entry ◔ ◑

Fewer admission barriers make these schools attractive for students seeking a straightforward process. Outreach should emphasize the simplicity of applying and the more accessible academic requirements.

Showcase Career Value ◔ ◑

Accessibility, when paired with solid salary outcomes for graduates, makes these schools an attractive option for students seeking good returns on their educational investment. Marketing materials should focus on this accessible yet high-value education.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Midwest can lean into their strong academic offerings, while schools in the Northeast should highlight their stronger salary outcomes to appeal to career-focused students.

2 Enhance (and Showcase) Campus Life and Experience

Leverage Your Athletics ◑ ◑

One of the standout characteristics of this archetype is the relatively large number of sports teams for smaller schools. Schools should be showcasing their athletic programs as a central part of campus life. This can be particularly attractive to prospective students seeking both academics and athletics.

Expand Student Organizations ◔ ●

The lack of student organizations remains a limitation. Even a small increase in student organizations at a school of this size can significantly enhance the campus experience (see page 10 for more on these effects). Some schools have scaled these offerings up through strategic mergers, leading to recent enrollment successes (e.g., Vermont State University, which falls under this archetype).

Regional Insights

Campus life offerings are similarly low across regions, meaning any school that expands its activities might attract students from other regions interested in a richer campus experience.

3 Leverage (or Adapt to) the Local Population Dynamics

Leverage Dense Environments ◔ ◔

Typically located in denser suburbs, these schools should position themselves as hubs of opportunity, showcasing the proximity to internships, job markets, and cultural experiences.

Adapt to Slowing Growth ◔ ◑

However, many of these areas are experiencing slower population growth, which can limit the available pool of prospective students. Schools should emphasize their accessibility to surrounding populations while also developing strategies to attract students from farther away.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Northeast and Midwest benefit from higher population density but face the slower population growth. They should focus on retaining their local student base while expanding outreach to faster-growing regions.

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Persona 3: The Boutique Elite Institution
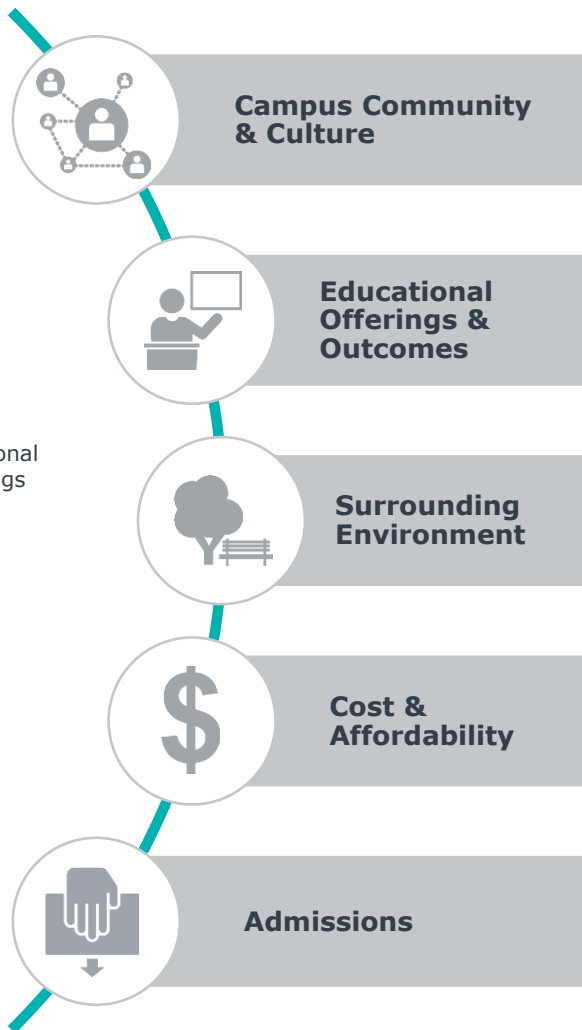
Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

	Attractor (out of 10)[2]	**5.0**	# undergrads enrolled	**2,000**	Acceptance rate	**61%**	% of 4-year schools	**6%**

Regionality	**Mostly Northeast, with some in the Midwest**	% in-state students	**27%**	% low-income students	**20%**	% first-gen students	**19%**	% part-time students	**4%**

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Radar chart axes: Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility. Legend: National Average, Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture
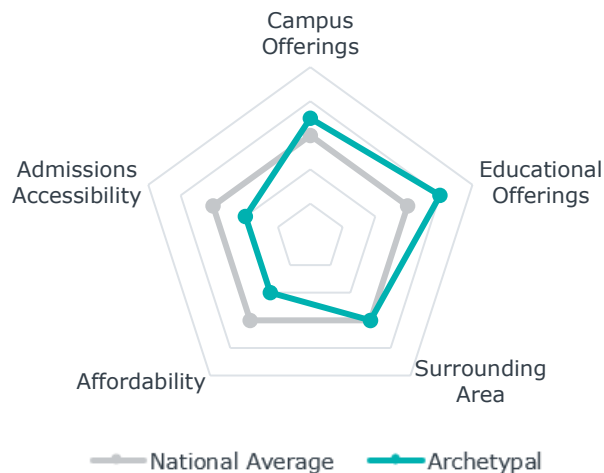
- **Somewhat active campus community:** On average, these schools have 70 student organizations (versus 80 nationally), which is fairly high for this persona's size.
- **Bigger sports scene:** There's a larger sports presence, especially for their size, with 17 teams on average (compared to 16 nationally) and Division III membership.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Somewhat narrow program options:** The median number of majors offered is 58 (versus 70 overall), though it is broad for a school of this size.
- **High postgraduation earnings:** Students earn an average of $55,050 six years after graduating, much higher than the $48,700 overall average.

Surrounding Environment

- **Primarily suburban:** Usually located in larger, growing, and politically progressive suburban areas.
- **Cold climates:** These schools are typically found in colder climate zones in the Northeast.

Cost & Affordability

- **Higher net price:** These schools are more expensive than the average US school ($27,465 versus $20,036).
- **High financial support, though fewer in need:** These schools meet 83% of financial need on average (versus 71%), though only 20% of students receive Pell Grants.

Admissions

- **Higher bar for admission:** Though these schools have an average number of application requirements, the bar to get in is higher with a 3.7 GPA on average (versus 3.5 nationwide) and 61% accepted (versus 72% nationwide).

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strengths

What makes "Boutique Elite Institutions" attractive to prospective students? With a student-attractor of 5.0, which is the same as the median of all schools nationwide, these schools are fairly successful at attracting students. Despite their smaller size, they provide a rich campus experience. More importantly, the excellent postgraduation outcomes make them highly appealing, especially to students seeking a prestigious academic environment with solid career prospects. Regional variations highlight how the appeal of these institutions can shift slightly depending on geographic location, with some regions offering greater value and slightly different student experiences.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Active Athletics:
17 teams, Division III

A Variety of Extracurriculars:
70 student organizations

Relatively Large Array of Majors:
58

High Career Outcomes:
$55,050 within 6 years

Campus Experience and Opportunities for Involvement

While these schools are small, they punch above their weight when it comes to extracurricular opportunities. The combination of a robust athletics program (with 17 sports teams on average) and a high number of student organizations for the number of undergraduates enrolled creates a well-rounded and attractive student experience.

Schools in the Northeast tend to offer many more student organizations to attendees than schools of this archetype in the Midwest (see the table below), creating a more vibrant and campus atmosphere in the former region that is more inviting to prospective students.

Solid Educational Offerings and Great Outcomes

These schools offer a broad academic experience for their smaller size, which can appeal to a wide range of academic interests. Couple that with the fact that alumni earn significantly higher salaries than the average graduate and you get a high value proposition that burnishes these schools' prestige.

This value proposition is strongest for those schools in the Northeast, though, where the salary outcomes stand out much more than those of their counterparts in the Midwest (see below).

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest
Sports Teams	17	16
Student Organizations	**79**	42
Majors	57	55
Salary	**$57,700**	$46,050

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Weaknesses

What makes "Boutique Elite Institutions" less attractive to prospective students? While these schools offer strong educational outcomes and campus experiences, several factors limit their appeal to a broader student population. These schools' high costs and moderately high admissions barriers can create challenges for accessibility, particularly for lower-income or first-generation students. Additionally, the surrounding area, particularly for schools in the Midwest, poses challenges, with slower population growth and less favorable climate conditions reducing their appeal in certain regions.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

$ Above-Average Cost: **$27,465**

Higher Barriers to Admission: **3+ application requirements, 3.7 GPA**

Small/Shrinking Locale: **Lower density and growth in the Midwest**

Unappealing Weather: **Colder climates in the Midwest**

Lower Affordability and Accessibility in the Northeast

One of the biggest factors detracting from the attractiveness of this archetype is its cost. With a net price of $27,465 (and even higher in the Northeast; see the table below), these schools are out of reach for many students, especially those who rely on substantial financial aid. While they meet a high percentage of demonstrated financial need, the overall cost still limits their accessibility. The schools also tend to serve fewer Pell Grant recipients and have higher admissions barriers (especially in the Northeast), making them less attractive to underserved populations.

Slowing Population Growth and Colder Weather in the Midwest

While the general location of these schools—suburban areas with moderate population density—doesn't appear to be a major detractor overall, regional variations create noticeable disadvantages for schools in the Midwest. Lower population growth and less favorable climate conditions may make these schools less attractive to prospective students, especially compared to institutions in regions with better growth and more temperate climates.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest
Cost	**$29,325**	$22,473
Admissions Requirements	**4**	2
Pop. Growth	28%	**1%**
Climate	Cold	**Extremely Cold**

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strategic Recommendations

To attract more students, enrollment leaders at these schools should emphasize the combination of their strong academic offerings and unique campus experiences, while addressing the barriers of affordability and perceived accessibility. By enhancing financial aid outreach and improving perceptions of the surrounding environment, schools in this archetype can increase their attractiveness, especially among students seeking academic rigor in smaller, more intimate settings.

Effort	Impact
◐	◐

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Enhance Access for More Prospects

Simplify Admissions Processes ◐●

With moderately high admissions barriers, these schools can attract more students by highlighting flexible admissions criteria, such as test-optional policies and a holistic review process. Schools also should focus on reducing the number of application requirements and simplifying the application process to broaden their applicant pool.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Northeast should focus on simplifying their admissions, while those in the Midwest can highlight their relative accessibility.

2 Enhance Affordability and Highlight Value

Promote Financial Aid ◔◐

Schools in this archetype are perceived as more expensive than other private institutions, so it's essential to focus on effectively communicating financial aid options, especially to first-generation and low-income students.

Showcase Career Value ◐◐

While the cost of attending these schools is higher, highlighting the great outcomes enjoyed by graduates can convey the valuable outcomes that graduates will enjoy. Marketing to cost-conscious, career-focused prospects should make this case clear.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Midwest with fewer sports and those in the West with fewer student groups should focus on adding new opportunities for student engagement. Schools in the Southeast should aim to emphasize their more active campus life, relative to their competitors elsewhere.

3 Showcase the Campus Life and Experience

Leverage Your Athletics ◐◐

One of the standout characteristics of this archetype is the very large number of sports teams, especially for smaller schools. Schools should be showcasing their athletic programs as a central part of campus life. This can be particularly attractive to prospective students seeking both athletics and career outcomes.

Regional Insights

This is salient for schools in the Midwest, given the fact that they tend to have fewer student organizations and are located in in colder and less populous regions.

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Persona 4: The Inclusive Path to Opportunity

Vital Statistics[1]
Averages for Institutions in This Category

Attractor (out of 10)[2]	**5.0**	# undergrads enrolled	**2,200**	Acceptance rate	**68%**	% of 4-year schools	**5%**
Regionality	**Predominantly in the Southeast**	% in-state students	**63%**	% low-income students	**70%**	% first-gen students	**37%**	% part-time students	**13%**

Persona Snapshot
Ratings Relative to Median US School

Campus Offerings
Admissions Accessibility
Educational Offerings
Affordability
Surrounding Area

National Average — Archetypal
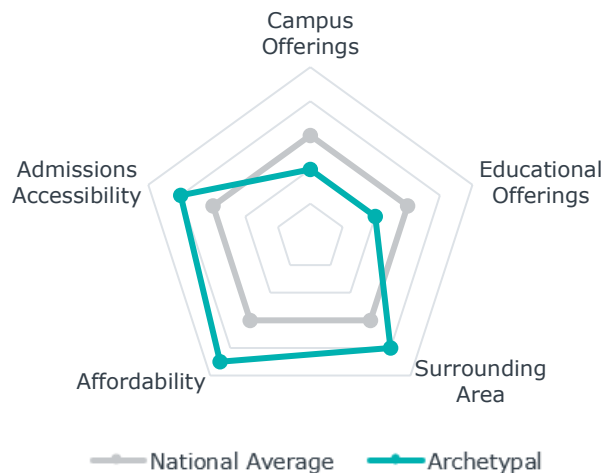
Campus Community & Culture
- **Less active extracurricular scene:** These schools offer fewer student organizations (about 50), though they typically have other offerings (e.g., Greek life).
- **Few sports, but high-profile:** They have only 8 sports teams, but they make them count in Division I.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes
- **Fewer academic programs:** The range of majors is narrower with a median of 46 (versus 70 overall).
- **Low postgraduation earnings:** Students earn an average of $34,400 six years after graduating, much lower than the $48,700 overall average.

Surrounding Environment
- **Located in growing midsize cities:** They are typically found in midsize urban areas (population density of 686) and benefit from stronger growth rates.
- **Hot climates:** These schools typically occupy the warmest parts of the southeastern United States.

Cost & Affordability
- **Very affordable:** With an average net price of $15,529, these are one of the least expensive types of schools.
- **Over a third of need left unmet:** Despite enrolling many Pell recipients (70%), a below-average portion of students here have all their financial need met (62%).

Admissions
- **Low barriers to entry:** With a moderately high acceptance rate (68%), fewer application requirements (2), and a lower average admitted GPA (3.0), these schools offer accessible options for students seeking fewer hurdles in the admission process.

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strengths

What makes "Inclusive Paths to Opportunity" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that, while these schools are solidly average in overall attractiveness, they serve a large proportion of first-generation and nontraditional students and possess qualities that can attract more and more among a broader array of students. Their key appeal comes from a combination of deep affordability, access, and warmer locales—making higher education feasible for students from diverse backgrounds at a time when cost is increasingly prominent in prospects' mind.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

$ Very Low Cost:
$15,529

Few Barriers to Admission:
2 application requirements, 3.0 GPA

Cultural Focus:
HBCU status

Hot Climate:
The warmest areas of the Southeast

Denser and Growing Local Populations:
686/sq. mile

Mission-Driven Affordability and Accessibility

Many of these schools stand out for their historical focus on serving Black and underrepresented communities, giving them a strong, mission-oriented identity. They also have the lowest average net price, and they make higher education financially accessible—particularly for their high share of low-income students. With fewer application requirements and lower academic thresholds, these schools provide easier access to students from diverse academic backgrounds.

Though found primarily in the Southeast, their affordability and focus on underserved students give them a competitive edge over similar archetypes, such as the "Accessible Education Anchors" in the rural Midwest (see the table below, and pages 24–27).

Very Warm, Denser, and Growing Locales

Located in midsize cities with denser, faster-growing populations, these schools benefit from their warm, attractive climates. A growing population not only makes these schools appealing to prospective students seeking dynamic environments but also provides a built-in audience advantage, as more students are likely to come from the surrounding area.

This contrasts sharply with the "Accessible Education Anchors" of the rural Midwest, where shrinking populations and colder weather present challenges (see the table below, and pages 24–27).

Comparative Advantages	Key Trait	Affordable Paths to Opportunity	Accessible Education Anchors
	Cost	**$15,529**	$19,301
	Application Requirements	2	2
	Climate	**Hot**	Cold
	Pop. Density	**686**	179

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Weaknesses

What makes "Inclusive Paths to Opportunity" less attractive to prospective students? While these Southeast-based institutions benefit from strong affordability and access, there are certain areas where they fall short. Similar to the "Accessible Education Anchors" of the rural Midwest, these schools offer fewer campus activities and more limited academic offerings, which can make them less appealing to students seeking a broader range of experiences or stronger postgraduation outcomes. However, the challenges here are somewhat distinct—in addition to fewer extracurricular options are limited academic pathways coupled with lower graduate salaries. These factors can influence the competitive landscape for schools with similar missions, especially when compared with their peers in other regions.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

**Fewer Sports:
8 teams**

**Slightly Limited Extracurriculars:
55 student organizations**

**Below-Average Array of Majors:
46**

**Lower Career Outcomes:
$34,400 within 6 years**

A More Limited Campus Experience and Student Life

As with most smaller schools, their limited size leads to a more limited range of campus activities. The low number of sports teams and student organizations—while counterbalanced somewhat by Division I membership, Greek life, and warmer locales—could make these schools less attractive to students who value a more active campus experience.

If we compare these schools to the even smaller "Accessible Education Anchors" in the Midwest, which similarly cater to first-generation and cost-conscious students, both personas face these scale-based disadvantages. However, "Inclusive Paths to Opportunity" schools have an edge with the quality of their sports and the richer array of campus offerings (see below).

Fewer Academic Options and Lower Career Outcomes

These schools also tend to offer fewer academic majors than the average school, as well as the lowest average salaries for graduates six years after completion. While salary has less of an effect on attracting first-generation students or those receiving Pell Grants, a lower salary after graduation does depress a school's ability to attract students more broadly.

When we compare these schools to "Accessible Education Anchors," the weaker post-graduation outcomes present a significant challenge where the latter persona has an advantage (see below).

	Key Trait	Affordable Paths to Opportunity	Accessible Education Anchors
Comparative Advantages	**Sports Teams**	8	7
	Student Organizations	55	**26**
	Majors	46	50
	Salary	**$34,400**	$42,450

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strategic Recommendations

These schools already stand out for their affordability and accessibility, especially in serving underrepresented communities, and are located in appealing, growing urban areas. However, there are opportunities to enhance their competitiveness by better marketing these strengths and addressing gaps in campus life and academic outcomes. The following recommendations aim to broaden the schools' appeal while leveraging their strongest features to overcome competitive challenges.

Effort	Impact
◐	◑

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Market Affordability & Accessibility on a National Scale

Underscore Cost Savings ◔●

Schools in this archetype are more affordable than most public or private institutions. Make it known that students can access a four-year education with minimal financial risk.

To counterbalance fewer program options and lower graduate salaries, it's important to frame the value proposition around cost savings and relative ROI.

Promote Ease of Entry ◔◑

Few admission barriers make these schools attractive for students seeking a straightforward process. Outreach should emphasize the simplicity of applying and the more accessible academic requirements.

Competitive Insights

Compared to the "Accessible Education Anchors" in the Midwest, which offer similar affordability, these schools have the advantage of warmer, growing urban environments, positioning them as a more appealing option for students seeking both accessibility and dynamic surroundings.

2 Leverage the Appeal of Your Locale

Showcase the Year-Round Warmth ◔●

Warm weather isn't just a climate advantage—it's a lifestyle perk that can attract students from colder, more rural regions who are looking for an energetic, sunny environment to complement their college experience. Market the idea that students will enjoy year-round outdoor activities, boosting their overall quality of life during their college years.

Publicize Your Dynamic Locale ◔◑

Emphasize the growth, employment opportunities, and cultural vibrancy of your city—showing that students can enjoy a dynamic lifestyle, even with fewer on-campus amenities.

Competitive Insights

Unlike the colder, shrinking locales of the somewhat similar "Accessible Education Anchors," these schools benefit from cities that are actively growing and creating opportunities. This is a strong advantage that can help attract students seeking better off-campus opportunities.

3 Counterbalance the Disadvantages of Fewer Campus Offerings

Market the Quality of Existing Organizations ◔◔

While increasing the number of student organizations and activities could improve on-campus life, a more affordable alternative is to focus on better marketing your strengths, particularly the quality of your sports programs and existing student organizations.

The profile of HBCUs also continues to rise, pulling more students toward their inclusive campuses and mission-driven programs. Lean into this aspect, which has both broad and specific appeal.

Persona 5: The Quintessential and Accessible College

Vital Statistics[1]
Averages for Institutions in This Category

	Attractor (out of 10)[2]	4.7	# undergrads enrolled	2,200	Acceptance rate	79%	% of 4-year schools	26%
Regionality	**Nationwide, but with a Midwest focus**		% in-state students	79%	% low-income students	35%	% first-gen students	33%	% part-time students	12%

Persona Snapshot
Ratings Relative to Median US School

Radar chart axes: Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility. Legend: National Average, Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

Surrounding Environment

Cost & Affordability

Admissions
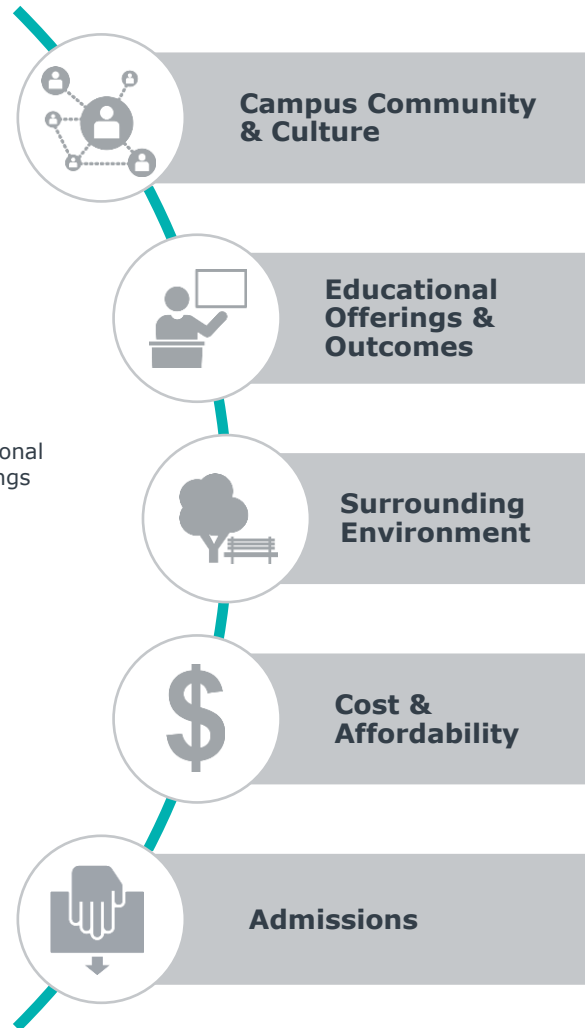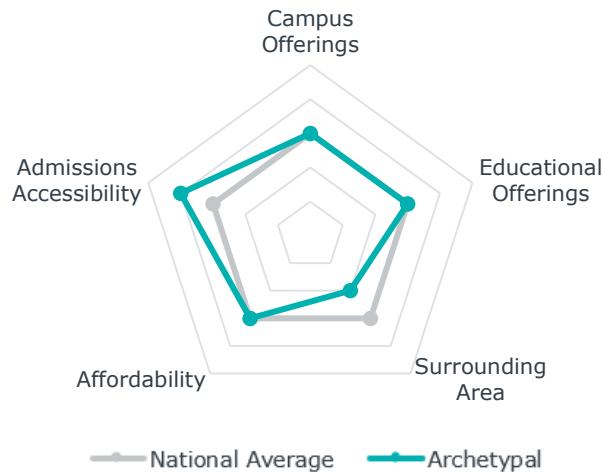
- **Moderate campus engagement:** There's Greek life and many student organizations (70), but those opportunities are slightly lower than the national average (80).
- **Standard sports offerings:** With 16 sports teams and Division III membership, these schools provide a well-rounded athletic experience.

- **Solid academic offerings:** Slightly fewer majors than the average school (64 vs. 70), but the academic variety is still strong relative to their size.
- **Typical salary outcomes:** Graduates earn $48,400 on average six years after leaving, which is in line with the average school nationwide.

- **Large suburban locations:** These schools offer students access to many amenities without the congestion or costs of major city living.
- **Slower population growth:** The areas surrounding these schools are growing at a slower rate than average, which may limit future enrollment growth opportunities.

- **Average net price:** The cost of $19,741 to attend is slightly lower than the national average.
- **Higher Pell Grant participation:** An above-average percentage of students (35%) receive Pell Grants, reflecting their commitment to serving lower-income students.

- **Accessible admissions policies:** With two application requirements for admission and a mean acceptance rate of 79%, these schools are not very selective but still have rigorous academic standards with an average GPA of 3.5 for admitted students.

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Strengths

What makes "Quintessential and Accessible Colleges" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that, while these schools may not excel in any one area, they offer a balanced, well-rounded experience across various dimensions. They are ideal for students seeking a solid educational value, moderate costs, and a friendly campus community without having to compromise in any one area. The characteristics that make these schools appealing differ slightly across regions, with schools of this sort in the West standing out in cost, academic offerings, and career outcomes, enabling them to be more competitive with other archetypes in the West, as well as between regions.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Fewer Barriers to Admission: 2 application requirements, 79% mean acceptance

Consistent Quality : Average costs, majors, salary, as well as sports, student organizations, etc.

Fewer Hurdles to Enrollment

The characteristics that stand out the most for these schools are the relatively low admission barriers, including fewer application requirements and higher acceptance rates than a majority of schools. This makes them appealing to students who might be less competitive academically or are seeking a less stressful admission process.

This defines schools of this type in most regions. However, the application requirements for those in northeastern states tend to be somewhat higher, differentiating them less from the typical school nationwide.

Jack of All Trades

These schools excel in being well-rounded across multiple aspects. Important qualities, such as average salaries for graduates, a moderate selection of majors, and typical on-campus offerings such as sports and student organizations offer a solid but unspecialized experience.

Though there are fewer schools of this archetype in the West, they hold several key competitive advantages over their counterparts in other regions. Most importantly, the average cost is significantly lower in the West, which, when paired with the widest array of majors offered and the highest graduating salaries, confers a great deal of potential market power.

	Key Trait	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	West
Regional Variations	**Cost**	$21,172	$20,002	$19,056	**$15,327**
	Application Requirements	**2**	3	**2**	**2**
	Majors	69	67	45	**83**
	Salary	$47,700	$49,800	$43,600	**$51,200**

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Weaknesses

What makes "Quintessential and Accessible Colleges" less attractive to prospective students? While these schools offer a well-rounded educational experience, several characteristics detract from their overall attractiveness to prospective students. Environmental factors such as slow population growth and lower density suburbs can limit the size of their potential student base, and their "jack of all trades" identity, though beneficial in some respects, often prevents them from standing out in a crowded marketplace. These schools must find ways to overcome their environment and establish a stronger sense of uniqueness if they wish to grow their applicant pool and increase their appeal to a broader audience.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Isolated Locale :
Low density and growth, especially for large suburbs

Lack of Differentiation:
Average costs, majors, salary, as well as sports, student organizations, etc.

Sparser and Slower-Growing Surroundings

While these schools are located in suburban areas that would typically be expected to have a strong student population pipeline, they often face challenges related to their local environment. Their surrounding areas tend to have lower population density and slower growth compared to other schools of this size and sector. This can result in a smaller local applicant pool, making it harder to sustain high levels of interest over time.

This trend is especially true for schools in the Midwest, where lower population density and minimal growth are notable detractors. Schools in the West, by contrast, benefit from more robust growth and those in the Northeast benefit from higher density, which offers a slight counterbalance to the other challenges.

Jack of All Trades, Master of None

While these schools perform competently across a range of areas, they lack a standout feature that could significantly enhance their appeal to prospective students. Their all-around solid (yet unspecialized) offerings mean they struggle to differentiate themselves from competitors. Schools of this archetype can find it hard to attract students beyond their immediate vicinity, where prestigious, more convenient, or more affordable options may exist.

	Key Trait	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	West
Regional Variations	**Pop. Density**	**179**	579	**214**	373
	Pop. Growth	**5%**	**<1%**	17%	26%

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strategic Recommendations

To enhance their appeal and address the challenges they face, schools in this archetype should focus on building on their strengths—accessibility and well-rounded offerings—while finding ways to stand out in a crowded market. Strategic steps should include targeted marketing efforts to promote access, carving out differentiated academic offerings, and adaptations to address regional demographic trends.

Effort	Impact
◐	◑

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Market Your Accessibility and All-Around Quality

Show Your Simpler Admissions ◐ ●

Focus on emphasizing the streamlined admissions process. This can be especially appealing to students looking for a straightforward path to a degree.

Underscore the Value of Access to All-Around Quality Education ◐ ◑

Emphasize the low barriers to entry combined with a diverse academic experience and solid graduate outcomes. This combination of accessibility and moderate educational quality can be especially appealing to students seeking a less stressful admissions process while still valuing a broad academic and extracurricular experience.

2 Differentiate with a High-Impact Lever (e.g., Majors, Sports)

To overcome the "Jack of All Trades, Master of None" challenge, these schools should find ways to carve out a niche or specialize in a particular area, whether that's through academic programs or extracurricular activities.

Expand on the Student Experience ◐ ●

Investing in more or unique campus life experiences (e.g., specialized student organizations, research opportunities, or internships) can also help differentiate the school from others with similar offerings.

Offer Specialized Programs ● ●

Schools can stand out by offering unique programs in high-demand fields such as technology and health care or fields such as energy that might align with regional job market needs. These programs can provide students with specialized skills while maintaining the school's well-rounded reputation.

Regional Insights

Schools in the West already have a competitive edge with cost, educational offerings, and career outcomes.

3 Adapt to Regional Demographic Trends

Given the slower population growth and lower density in many of these schools' locations, it's important to adapt to regional trends to ensure long-term sustainability. Schools should target both local and out-of-region students to maintain enrollment numbers.

Strengthen Regional Partnerships ◐ ◑

Build partnerships with local businesses and industries to create tailored degree programs that meet the specific workforce needs of the region, increasing the value of the school to local students and employers.

Appeal to Reach Markets ◐ ●

Along with differentiating, schools should develop targeted marketing strategies for out-of-state students or even international markets to counteract slow population growth in their areas. Platforms with highly converting reach inquiries, such as Appily.com,[1] are essential here.

Regional Insights

This is imperative for schools in the Midwest and Northeast, which already face the "demographic cliff."

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Persona 6: The Selective Academic Enclave

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

	Attractor (out of 10)[2]	**6.0**	# undergrads enrolled	**2,300**	Acceptance rate	**42%**	% of 4-year schools	**6%**
Regionality	**Nationwide, but mostly in the Northeast**		% in-state students	**25%**	% low-income students	**18%**	% first-gen students	**16%**	% part-time students	**2%**

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Radar chart axes: Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility

— National Average — Archetypal
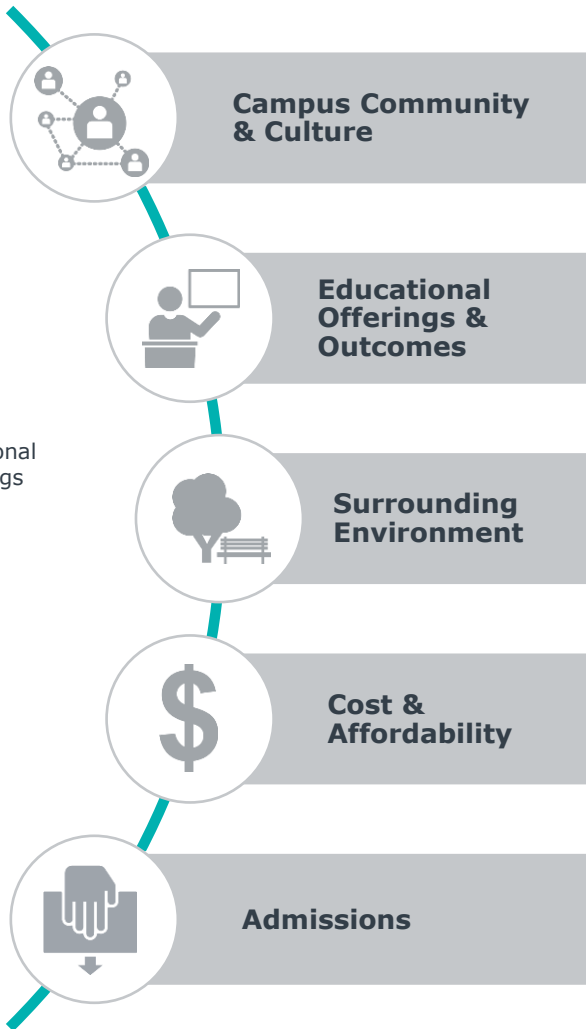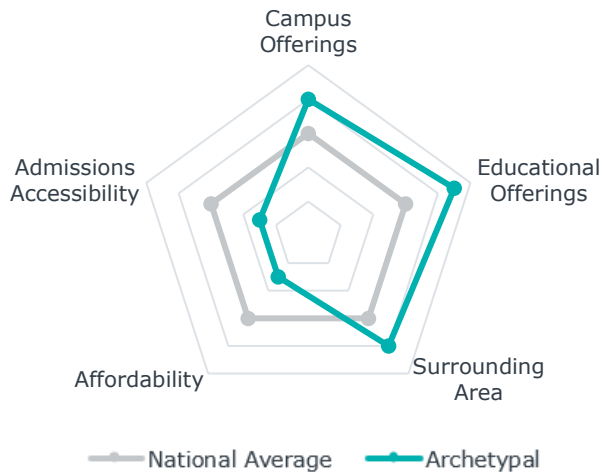
Campus Community & Culture
- **Very high extracurricular activity:** On average, these schools have 140 student organizations—double the national average—as well as aspects such as Greek life.
- **Many sports offerings:** They typically have 19 sports teams and Division III conference membership.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes
- **High graduation rates:** Though partially due to their selectivity, these schools outperform others with 84% of students graduating within six years.
- **The highest postgraduation earnings:** Graduates of these enjoy above-average starting salaries, earning around $64,100 six years after graduation.

Surrounding Environment
- **Located in large cities:** These schools are typically located in large and progressive cities, offering students access to diverse cultural and professional opportunities.
- **Temperate climates:** These schools are typically found in the relatively temperate climate zones of the Northeast.

Cost & Affordability
- **Significantly higher net price:** With an average net price of $32,091, these schools are the most expensive options on the market (versus $20,036 on average).
- **More financial need met:** These schools meet 94% of students' financial need, but this support is likely targeted toward a smaller group of students (18% Pell recipients).

Admissions
- **High barriers to admission:** With 4 application requirements, below a 42% acceptance rate, and an average admitted GPA of 3.8, these schools have a more competitive admission process. Their lack of need-blind admissions limits access for lower-income students too.

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strengths

What makes "Selective Academic Enclaves" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that these institutions combine a prestigious academic reputation with bountiful campus experiences in attractive locales. Although these schools are overwhelmingly found in the Northeast, some can be found in other regions, and the qualities that make these schools attractive can vary by region. For example, schools in the Northeast and Midwest provide a particularly strong academic and extracurricular offerings, while schools in the Southeast are more accessible and those in the West are in the most dynamic locales.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

High Prestige :
The most selective

Excellent Career Outcomes:
$64,100

Wide Array of Extracurriculars:
140 student organizations

Abundant Athletics:
19 teams, Division III

Dynamic Urban Locales:
1,101/sq. mile

Exceptional Educational Offerings and Career Outcomes

These schools distinguish themselves with strong academic offerings and postgraduation results. Students graduating from these schools tend to earn significantly higher salaries than graduates from other archetypal schools. These schools also have the lowest average acceptance rates, which limits accessibility but is also correlated with a greater student-attractor score. Thus, the more selective nature of these schools may be seen as an indicator of prestige.

While the Northeast leads in terms of average postgraduation salaries, schools in the other regions are on par with each other (see the table below). The degree of selectivity for the average school of this type varies greatly between regions, though, with the Midwest having the highest selectivity.

Rich Campus Life and Dynamic Surrounding Environments

In addition to their academic strengths, these schools offer vibrant campus communities and reside in dynamic, high-density urban areas. Students at these institutions benefit from a wealth of student organizations (147 in the Northeast), creating a strong sense of campus involvement. Similarly, athletic opportunities are abundant, further enhancing the sense of community.

Although schools in the Midwest are outliers, with low-density locales, they stand out with the most generous extracurricular activities on offer.

	Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest	Southeast	West
Regional Variations	**Acceptance**	47%	**30%**	57%	41%
	Salary	**$69,200**	$57,600	$55,100	$57,850
	Student Orgs.	147	**175**	110	103
	Sports Teams	20	**23**	18	15
	Pop. Density	1,059	267	1,213	**2,456**

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Weaknesses

What makes "Selective Academic Enclaves" less attractive to prospective students? Despite offering excellent academic and career opportunities, these schools face significant hurdles in terms of accessibility and affordability. Their stringent admission requirements and higher costs create significant barriers for students, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. As a result, despite their prestige, these institutions do have limits in their appeal to a broader range of students. These challenges vary slightly across regions but remain consistent in limiting access for a broad range of students, with schools of this sort in the Southeast providing the best choices in terms of access and affordability.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Highest Barriers to Admission:
4+ application requirements, 3.8 GPA

Need-Aware Admissions:
Financial status is considered

Highest Average Net Price:
$32,091

Limited Accessibility for Many Prospective Students

With an average of 4 application requirements—more than the typical school—and a higher admission GPA of 3.8, they are among the least accessible institutions for applicants. Additionally, the fact that these schools are usually not need-blind in their admissions processes can limit the potential for lower-income students to be admitted.

Accessibility issues are consistent across regions, though schools in the West tend to have slightly more stringent application requirements (see the table below).

High Costs and Limited Financial Support

Affordability is a significant drawback for this persona, as these schools tend to have higher-than-average tuition and fees, particularly in the West, where costs rise to an average of $34,139. While unmet financial need is relatively low at these institutions, the lack of need-blind admissions policies and the low proportion of Pell recipients (18%) suggests that schools may not be accepting a large proportion of students who require financial assistance.

Regional differences are modest in terms of financial accessibility, though the Southeast offers a slight advantage with lower tuition compared to other areas.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest	Southeast	West
Application Requirements	4	4	4	**5**
Need-Blind	**No**	**No**	Yes	**No**
Cost	$32,886	$30,843	$30,474	**$34,139**

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Strategic Recommendations

These schools have strong educational offerings and are recognized for high salaries postgraduation, but their selective admissions and high costs limit the number of students who can benefit from these advantages. To broaden their reach, especially to underserved populations, they can consider refining their marketing approach and financial aid strategies while building on their strengths. Here's how these schools can enhance their attractiveness in a more inclusive way.

Effort	Impact
◐	◑

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Streamline Admissions to Increase Accessibility

Reduce Application Barriers ◑ ●

These schools could decrease the number of required application components, making it easier to apply without diluting selectivity. Removing extra requirements such as additional essays or recommendation letters could broaden the applicant pool.

Make Financial Aid More Transparent in the Application Process ◑ ◑

Outreach should ease the process of applying (and highlight the more accessible application requirements, if implemented). Schools should also consider offering preliminary financial aid estimates earlier in the recruitment process, so students can make more informed decisions about applying without fearing the total cost.

Regional Insights

Admissions barriers are high in every region, but this issue is especially important for schools of this type in the West, where the barriers are highest.

2 Increase Financial Aid Offerings

Expand Need-Based Aid to Underrepresented Groups ◑ ●

Many of these schools are not need-blind and therefore could boost their appeal by significantly expanding need-based financial aid packages. This could help attract talented, lower-income students who are often deterred by high tuition prices.

Regional Insights

Costs are highest for these schools in the Northeast and West. Many local factors drive these differences, such as elevated costs of living, but addressing the issue is no less important at a time when schools must reach farther to fill their classes.

3 Further Promote Educational and Career Outcomes and Prestige

Showcase Career Value ◐ ◑

Schools can capitalize on the high salaries and job prospects of their graduates, which are the most exceptional across all personas. Marketing efforts should highlight successful alumni and the career services that help them achieve these outcomes, especially for majors with less direct career paths (e.g., humanities and social science majors).

Regional Insights

With the highest postgraduate salaries, schools in the West should heavily emphasize their ROI to make a compelling case for applicants who weigh career prospects as a top decision factor.

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Persona 7: The Well-Rounded Education Hub

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

		Attractor (out of 10)[2]	5.6	# undergrads enrolled	7,700	Acceptance rate	80%	% of 4-year schools	13%
Regionality	**Nationwide, but mostly in the Southeast**	% in-state students	76%	% low-income students	31%	% first-gen students	30%	% part-time students	17%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Radar chart axes: Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility

Legend: National Average — Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture
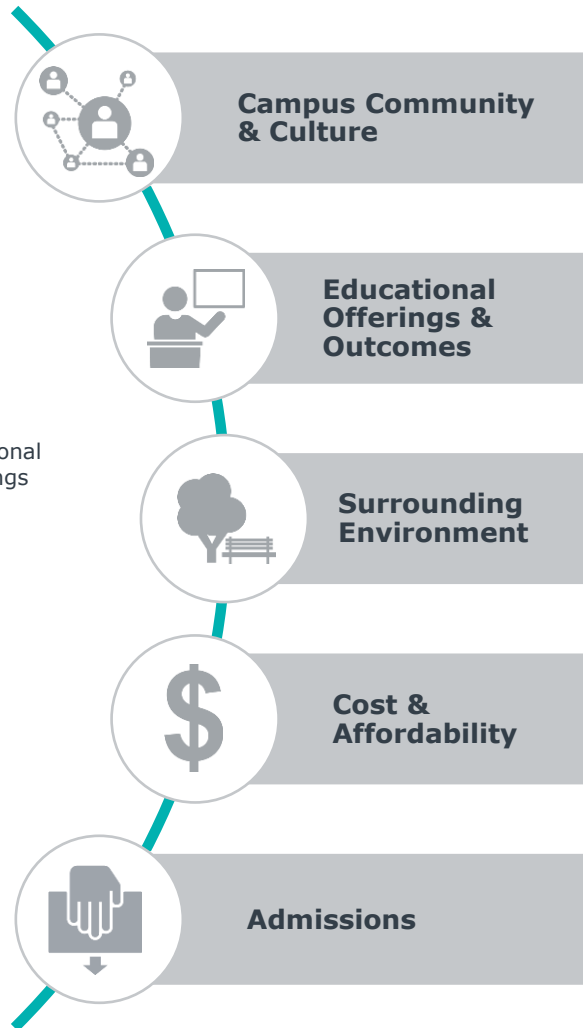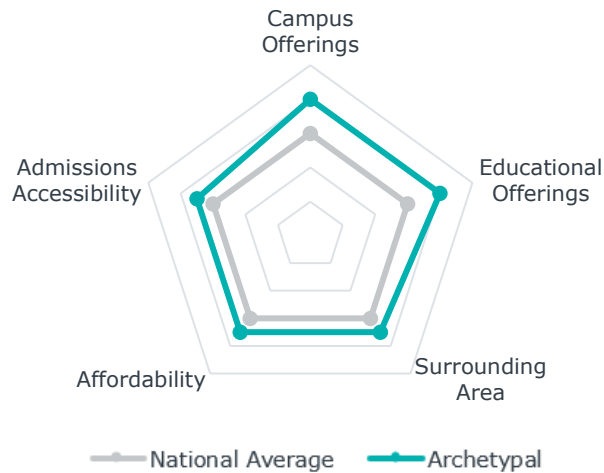
- **Large and vibrant campus life:** These schools typically have 150 student organizations—nearly double the overall average. Greek life also contributes to the social environment.
- **Division I sports:** These schools have 18 teams on average), adding to a dynamic and engaged student body.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Many majors offered:** A broad range of 115 majors offered, significantly higher than the average, catering to students with varied academic interests.
- **Above-average career earnings:** Competitive average salary of $49,700 for graduates six years after graduation, just above the overall benchmark.

Surrounding Environment

- **Primarily in small and growing cities:** Most of these schools are in small, politically conservative cities that are growing across the Southeast.
- **Warm climates:** These schools are typically located in the more temperate areas of the country.

Cost & Affordability

- **Below-average cost:** An average net price of $18,105, making these schools more affordable than the overall average ($20,036).
- **A third of need left unmet:** Despite serving many students who receive Pell Grants (31%), a below-average portion of students here (66%) have all their financial need met.

Admissions

- **Somewhat less stringent application requirements:** Schools of this archetype are not selective (80% acceptance), typically require at most 2 application components, and are test-optional. However, admissions are typically need-aware.

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Strengths

What makes "Well-Rounded Education Hubs" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that these midsize public schools stand out for their strong campus communities and diverse academic offerings. In addition to that, while not the most selective or affordable, these schools are above-average in those regards, all the while providing a solid all-around educational experience. Regional variations do play a significant role in enhancing their appeal, though, particularly in affordability and postgraduate outcomes.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Wide Array of Extracurriculars: **150 student organizations**

Abundant Athletics: **18 teams, Division I**

Many Majors Offered: **115**

Below-Average Cost: **$18,105**

Above-Average Salaries: **$49,700**

Plentiful Campus and Educational Offerings

The wide variety of student organizations and academic majors are key strengths of these schools, making them attractive to students who want a robust and varied college experience. These elements are particularly impactful in boosting overall attractiveness, helping these schools stand out.

Schools of this type in the Midwest lead with an exceptional median of 200 student organizations and 143 majors offered, greatly exceeding the average in other regions to provide the broadest range of options to prospective students (see the table below).

All-Around Quality in Every Respect

These schools perform well across the board, offering moderate affordability, accessible admissions, and solid postgraduate outcomes. While none of these areas individually stand out, the combination creates a well-rounded experience that appeals to a broad array of students.

However, schools in the Southeast are the most affordable at $15,860, followed closely by the Midwest at $16,804. When it comes to career outcomes, though, schools in the Northeast offer the highest average salary ($58,050)

	Key Trait	Southeast	Midwest	Northeast
Regional Variations	**Student Orgs.**	140	**200**	135
	Sports Teams	18	19	**20**
	Majors	96	**143**	111
	Cost	**$15,860**	$16,804	$25,265
	Salary	$46,300	$49,500	**$58,050**

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Weaknesses

What makes "Well-Rounded Education Hubs" less attractive to prospective students? These types of schools do not generally have any glaring issues that hold them back from attracting students. The few potential issues noted here, such as need-aware admissions or a lower proportion of financial need met, did not stand out in our analysis. However, while they offer a well-rounded college experience, the lack of any singular standout feature can make it difficult for these schools to differentiate themselves from competitors outside of their primary market. Regional differences in costs and opportunities further add to the complexity of their appeal.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Higher Costs
(Northeast):
$25,265

Shrinking Locale
(Northeast):
No pop. growth

Unappealing
Weather
(Midwest):
Very cold

Lack of
Differentiation:
**Well-rounded,
but no standout
qualities**

Specific Disadvantages in the Northeast and Midwest

Although these schools are predominantly found in the Southeast, a not insignificant number can also be found in the Northeast and Midwest (see the table below). It is the schools in these regions that face certain disadvantages. In the Northeast, this includes a significantly higher average net price, along with vanishingly small population growth rates in the surrounding area—both of which negatively impact a school's ability to attract students.

As for the schools located in the Midwest, these tend to occupy the coldest environments. Generally speaking, such environments are negatively associated with a school's ability to attract students to their campus.

A Less Dynamic Surrounding Environment

Though these schools have plenty to offer, they suffer from being "good, but not great" across the board, making it harder for them to differentiate themselves in the competitive higher education market. This will especially hold true when competing for students outside of their immediate area, where proximity comes into play. Their appeal lies in their balance of offerings, rather than excelling in any one area—from affordability to educational quality and campus experiences.

	Key Trait	Southeast	Midwest	Northeast
Regional Variations	**Cost**	$15,860	$16,804	**$25,265**
	Pop. Growth	64%	37%	**1%**
	Climate	Hot	**Very Cold**	Temperate

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Strategic Recommendations

While these schools already offer solid educational value, accessibility, and a well-rounded student experience, they can take additional steps to further enhance their attractiveness to prospective students. By marketing their strengths more effectively, finding a key trait with which they can differentiate themselves, and improving financial aid offerings, these schools can increase their appeal in a competitive higher education environment.

Effort	Impact
◐	◐

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Market Your Accessibility and All-Around Quality

Emphasize Accessibility ◔ ◑

Focus on the high acceptance rates, moderate academic requirements, and more streamlined application processes (e.g., fewer requirements) to attract a wide array of prospective students.

Underscore the Value of a Well-Rounded College Experience ◔ ◑

Promote the diverse academic offerings and extracurricular opportunities that students can enjoy at a mid-sized institution, positioning the school as a place where students get the best of both worlds—broad opportunities at a more intimate scale.

Market to nontraditional Groups ◔ ◑

Showcase how these schools cater to nontraditional students through affordability, flexible admissions processes, and solid career outcomes, creating a strong appeal to a broader audience.

2 Differentiate with a High-Impact Lever (e.g., Majors)

To overcome the "Jack of All Trades, Master of None" challenge, these schools should find ways to carve out a niche or specialize in a particular area, whether that's through academic programs or extracurricular activities.

Highlight the Student Experience ◐ ●

One of the major strengths of these schools is their exceptional array of extracurricular activities and academic programs. To differentiate themselves from other institutions, these schools should emphasize these strengths, particularly in markets where competition is fierce or where they want to attract students from out of state.

Regional Insights

These schools could focus more on differentiating themselves by marketing specific regional advantages. For example, schools in the Southeast could emphasize affordability and growth opportunities, while schools in the Northeast might market the access to higher postgraduate salaries, and those in the Midwest can highlight their wide array of majors and student organizations.

3 Improve Financial Aid Offerings

Expand Financial Aid Packages ◔ ●

Schools should aim to increase the percentage of financial need met for students. Meeting or exceeding the national average of 71% would be an effective strategy to attract more lower-income students and make the institution more competitive in terms of cost.

Reconsider Need-Aware Admissions ◐ ○

Revisiting admissions policies to either reduce or eliminate need-awareness can help broaden the applicant pool and attract more students who may have financial constraints but possess strong academic potential.

Regional Insights

Address the disparities in cost and financial aid by region. For example, schools in the Northeast, which have a higher net price, could develop specific scholarship programs aimed at mitigating these costs to better compete with the more affordable schools in the Southeast.

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Persona 8: The Outstanding Opportunity Engine

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

Attractor (out of 10)[2]	5.9	# undergrads enrolled	10,000	Acceptance rate	79%	% of 4-year schools	8%
Regionality	**Mostly Southwest, Midwest and Southeast**	% in-state students	86%	% low-income students	36%	% first-gen students	36%	% part-time students	19%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Campus Offerings, Educational Offerings, Surrounding Area, Affordability, Admissions Accessibility

— National Average — Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture

- **Active campus life:** These schools boast numerous student organizations (average of 181), offering a variety of extracurricular options for engagement.
- **Robust sports culture:** As Division I schools, they support extensive athletics with an average of 18 teams.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Wide range of academic programs:** With an average of 107 majors offered (versus 70 on average), students have access to diverse fields of study.
- **Solid, if average, career outcomes:** Graduates earn an average of $47,600 six years after graduation, which is slightly below the national average.

Surrounding Environment

- **Located in smaller urban settings:** These schools are situated in small and growing cities, providing a modest array of urban amenities without the overwhelming scale.
- **Warmer climates:** These schools are typically in warmer areas, which generally appeals to more students.

Cost & Affordability

- **Affordable tuition:** These schools stand out from a cost standpoint with the lowest average net price ($15,291) and tuition guarantees in most cases.
- **Moderate financial aid:** These schools meet 65% of students' financial need on average, slightly below national norms, but serve more Pell recipients (36%).

Admissions

- **Easier applications:** These schools typically require at most 2 application components, with standardized tests remaining optional.
- **Average academic requirements:** Despite lower selectivity, the average GPA of admitted students is 3.5.

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).
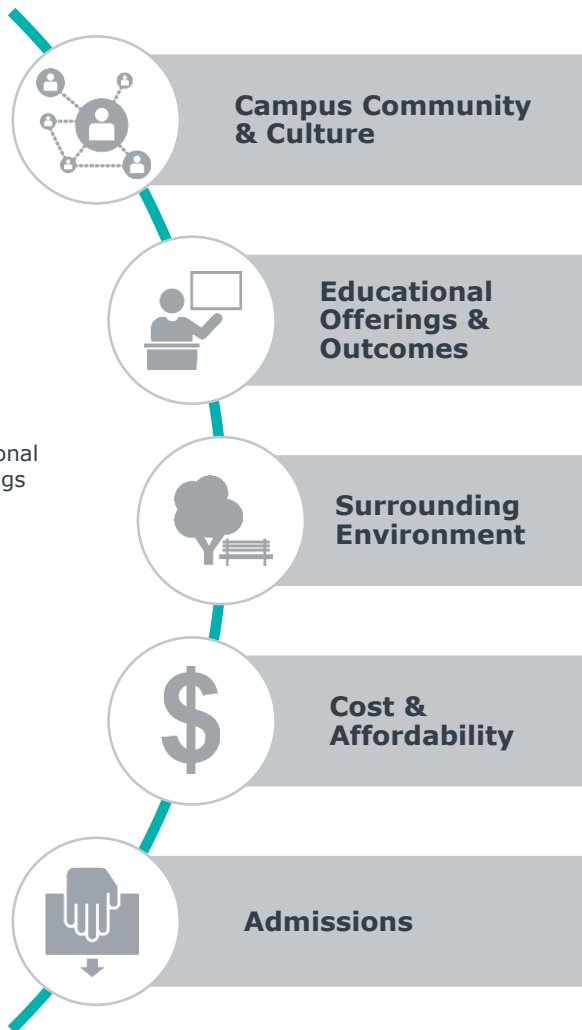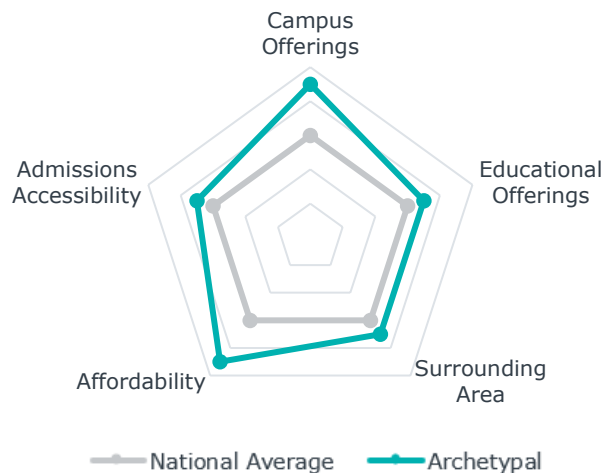
Strengths

What makes "Outstanding Opportunity Engines" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that they offer strong, consistent quality across a range of areas, making them reliable choices for a diverse group of students. However, it's their affordability and impressive campus offerings that truly set them apart, giving students a chance to access a wide array of academic and extracurricular experiences without significant financial strain. While these schools have consistent strengths across regions, certain areas stand out in unique ways, giving schools in specific states a competitive edge.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

$ **Lowest Costs: $15,291, with a tuition guarantee**

Large Array of Majors: 107

Wide Variety of Extracurriculars: 181

Competitive Sports Scene: 19 teams, Division I

Deep Affordability

These schools consistently stand out for their lower average net prices, offering quality education at a reduced cost compared to many national counterparts. This makes them attractive to students who prioritize financial accessibility. They also provide tuition guarantees, helping families plan for the full duration of a student's education. This certainty around costs adds to their appeal.

Schools in the Southwest region have the most affordable average net price at $13,302, significantly below other regions. This provides a strong financial incentive for students seeking an economical path to a degree (see the table below).

Wide-Ranging Educational and Extracurricular Offerings

These institutions are known for their diverse range of majors, catering to a variety of interests and career paths. The ample choices allow students to explore and refine their academic goals during their college journey. Also, a wealth of student organizations and sports teams contributes to a vibrant campus life, ensuring that students have ample opportunities for involvement and leadership. These rich extracurricular offerings help cultivate a strong sense of community.

Schools in the Southeast lead with an impressive 254 organizations, as well as 21 sports teams, reflecting a particularly strong extracurricular culture (see below).

	Key Trait	Southwest	Midwest	Southeast
Regional Variations	**Cost**	**$13,302**	$17,048	$14,600
	Student Orgs.	153	200	**254**
	Sports Teams	17	18	**21**

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Weaknesses

What makes "Outstanding Opportunity Engines" less attractive to prospective students? Because these schools are well-rounded—offering deep affordability and providing strong educational and extracurricular opportunities—there are few specific factors that create significant challenges for them when attracting students. It is no surprise that these large public schools have grown their enrollment at faster rates than most others. However, the postgraduate salaries enjoyed by graduates underperform relative to many other institutions. The political contexts most of these schools find themselves in also pose obstacles in all three regions. Additionally, the environmental conditions and population dynamics for schools of this type in the Midwest can also detract from their ability to attract more students.

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Slightly Below-Average Salaries: $47,600

Polarizing State Politics: Much more conservative

Shrinking Locale: -17% growth

Unappealing Weather: Colder climates

General Disadvantages: Career Outcomes and Local Politics

While graduates from these schools tend to have good starting salaries, they don't quite match the higher earning potential seen in some other educational segments. This may cause students who are highly salary-focused to consider other options.

Where the average school is located in a politically moderate state, most of these schools are situated in more politically conservative states. Our analyses indicate that this can limit their appeal for wide swaths of students. According to recent survey data, students have become more sensitive to state-level political climates, with factors such as restrictive abortion laws, limited gun policies, and other sociopolitical stances influencing their college choice.[1]

Regional Disadvantages: Colder Weather, Shrinking Populations, Higher Costs

Schools in the Midwest tend to be in colder climates, which may be less attractive to students seeking a more temperate environment (see the table below). Furthermore, many of these areas are experiencing population declines, limiting the pool of local students and complicating outreach.

Also mentioned on the previous page, Midwestern schools have higher average costs, with an average net price of $17,048, which is notably more expensive than similar schools in the Southwest ($13,302) and Southeast ($14,600). This can put them at a disadvantage for students seeking the most affordable education.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Southwest	Midwest	Southeast
Salary	$48,150	$48,300	**$43,900**
State Politics	**-12**	**-12**	-5
Pop. Growth	78%	**-17%**	71%
Climate	Very Hot	**Cold**	Hot

1) Survey finds students base college decisions on state politics.

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Strategic Recommendations

These schools have a strong foundation with their well-rounded offerings and affordability, which makes them appealing to a broad audience. To strengthen their position, they need to leverage their most distinctive traits, clearly convey the return on investment graduates enjoy, and navigate local politics effectively to reach prospective students. Below are three key strategies tailored to boost the appeal and competitiveness of these institutions.

Effort	Impact
◑	◑

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Show Prospects They Have a Wide Variety of Worthy Paths to Explore

Market Your All-Around Quality ◕○

These schools are above average in nearly every category, from academics to campus life. Marketing campaigns should emphasize the breadth and depth of what students can experience, ensuring prospective applicants see the wide variety of opportunities that await them.

Many students are still exploring their academic interests. The ability to offer diverse majors and experiences positions these schools as ideal for students who are looking for flexibility and a balanced college journey.

2 Differentiate with Affordability and Campus Offerings

Promote Deep Affordability (and ROI) ◕●

Make the case that these schools provide a more affordable education compared to many other institutions, with lower net prices and competitive financial aid packages. Highlight any tuition guarantees to reduce perceived financial risk for prospective students and their families.

Highlight the Breadth of Offerings ◑●

Differentiate these schools by showcasing their extensive academic programs, variety of student clubs, and wide array of sports options. This richness of opportunity can appeal to students who want flexibility in their studies and engagement options on campus.

Regional Insights

In areas where the cost is higher (e.g., the Midwest), schools should focus on how students can still receive a high-quality education, especially when compared with some other types of schools.

3 Proactively Address Local Political Contexts

Cultivate and Demonstrate an Inclusive Environment ◕○

For out-of-state students or those concerned about sociopolitical factors, schools can proactively shape their messaging to emphasize the diversity of thought on campus and the school's commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment, regardless of broader state-level policies.

Provide and Promote Campus Resources ◑◑

Highlighting campus groups, forums, and resources that empower students—from campus safety measures to mental health services—can reassure prospective students worried about the implications of the broader political landscape (e.g., gun violence, the right to choose).

Regional Insights

Highlight the strengths of each school's surrounding area, focusing on aspects that may align with the target market's preferences. For example, emphasize the warm climate and small-city feel in the Southwest.

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Persona 9: The Rigorous Academic Giant

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

	Attractor (out of 10)[2]	7.1	# undergrads enrolled	11,000	Acceptance rate	56%	% of 4-year schools	9%
Regionality	**Nationwide, with a Northeast focus**		% in-state students	43%	% low-income students	17%	% first-gen students	19%

	% part-time students	4%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Campus Offerings
Admissions Accessibility
Affordability
Surrounding Area
Educational Offerings

— National Average —●— Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture
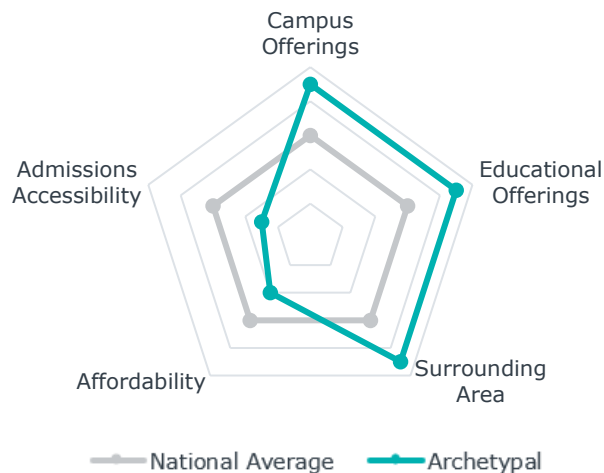
- **Rich campus life:** These schools boast an average of 393 student organizations—higher than any other archetype.
- **Incredibly active sports scene:** With an average of 25 sports teams and Division I membership, these schools usually offer the strongest athletic presence.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Broad array of majors:** Offering 194 majors, on average, these schools accommodate the widest range of academic interests.
- **Stellar graduation and salary outcomes:** These schools have an 82% 6-year graduation rate and an average salary of $67,400 six years post-graduation.

Surrounding Environment

- **Large urban locales:** These institutions are usually situated in quite densely populated cities, with easy access to diverse professional and cultural opportunities.
- **Concentrated in the Northeast:** The primary region is the Northeast, though these schools are also clustered in the Southeast, West, and Midwest.

Cost & Affordability

- **Above-average net price:** These are among the more expensive schools, with an average net price of $25,870.
- **Above-average financial aid coverage:** These schools meet an average of 77% of financial need (versus 71% average), though they enroll fewer Pell recipients (17%).

Admissions

- **Additional application requirements:** On average, these schools require 4 elements in their application, as well as an average GPA for admitted students of 3.8, reflecting a more thorough and demanding process.

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Strengths

What makes "Rigorous Academic Giants" attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school's attractiveness, we see that schools in this archetype distinguish themselves with their rich academic diversity and vibrant campus culture. These traits tend to go together with larger schools, whose scale naturally makes them ideal choices for students seeking a dynamic college experience. Coupled with strong early-career outcomes and urban advantages, these institutions provide an attractive launchpad for both personal and professional success.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Huge Array of Majors:
194

A Plethora of Extracurriculars:
393 student organizations

Moderate Career Outcomes:
$67,400 within 6 years

Dense Urban Locales:
1,108/sq. mile

An Idyllic Academic and Campus Life

These schools offer a wide range of academic options, with an average of 194 majors that cater to diverse interests. The Midwest is particularly noteworthy, with an impressive 274 academic programs, providing students with a wealth of educational paths (see the table below).

From highly competitive athletics to niche clubs, these institutions maintain a robust extracurricular environment. With 25 sports teams on average and a standout 393 student organizations—over five times the national average—these schools support students in their passions beyond the classroom. The Southeast and Midwest lead the pack, boasting over 460 student groups, fostering a tight-knit and active student body.

Solid Educational Offerings and Outcomes

Graduates from these institutions enjoy solid starting salaries, ranging from $59,400 in the Southeast to $72,100 in the Northeast. This points to a clear return on investment and strong career preparation for students.

Located in large urban centers, especially in the Northeast and West (see below), these schools give students access to cultural, professional, and networking opportunities. This urban setting not only enriches the college experience but also sets the stage for postgraduation success.

Key Trait	Northeast	Southeast	West	Midwest
Majors	172	212	181	**274**
Student Orgs.	256	**464**	393	**468**
Salary	**$72,100**	$59,400	**$71,100**	$62,700
Pop. Density	**1,630**	779	**1,532**	522

Regional Variations

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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Weaknesses

What makes "Rigorous Academic Giants" less attractive to prospective students? While these institutions excel in many areas, attracting a great many prospective students, they face a few notable challenges. First, the high costs of attendance and barriers to admission may deter some students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, the specific characteristics of the regions where these schools are located can present unique recruitment obstacles in some cases. This ranges from the weather (e.g., lower average temperatures) to the state politics. To the latter point, recent survey data indicate that students are now more sensitive to state-level political climates, with factors such as abortion laws, gun regulations, and other sociopolitical stances influencing their college choice.[1]

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

$ Higher Cost:
$25,870 overall average

Barriers to Admission:
4 application requirements

Unappealing Weather (Midwest):
Very cold

Polarizing State Politics:
From the right to the left

Higher Costs Coupled with Admissions Barriers

Compared to the average school—these schools are about 25% more expensive overall, and costs can vary sharply by region. For example, schools in the West and Northeast have the highest average costs (see the table below), while those in the Midwest are more affordable at $18,943.

These schools also tend to have more restrictive admissions requirements, including a higher average GPA for admitted students (3.8) and more application requirements than typical schools. Schools in the Northeast and West are particularly selective, with the highest application standards.

Regional Climate and Political Challenges

There are also challenges that these schools only face in specific regions. For example, the colder climates in the Midwest locales can be a deterrent for students who prefer milder weather.

State-level politics can also pose recruitment challenges. For example, while left-leaning state politics is associated with a higher student-attractor score, the Northeast's more progressive environment may not align with out-of-state students' expectations from conservative regions, while states with more conservative leanings in the Midwest and Southeast may dissuade many liberal-leaning students.

	Key Trait	Northeast	Southeast	West	Midwest
Regional Variations	**Cost**	**$29,126**	$21,865	**$32,780**	$18,943
	Application Requirements	**4**	3	**4**	3
	Climate	Temperate	Hot	Very Hot	**Very Cold**
	State Politics	20 L	**19 R**	25 L	**16 R**

1) Survey finds students base college decisions on state politics.

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Strategic Recommendations

To build on their strengths and mitigate challenges, these schools should leverage their outstanding academic and extracurricular offerings while addressing the higher costs, admissions barriers, and regional idiosyncrasies that may dissuade some students. By tailoring their messaging and recruitment strategies, these schools can broaden their appeal to a more diverse and wide-ranging applicant pool.

Effort	Impact
◖	◖

◯ Least
● Greatest

1 Emphasize the Wide-Ranging Educational and Campus Offerings

Showcase Variety and Quality ◕ ●

Emphasize the options for pursuing both academic rigor and personal growth by highlighting the extensive number of majors and extracurriculars, along with the schools' strong graduation rates and early-career outcomes.

Highlight Urban Advantages ◕ ◖

Use the appeal of large-city campuses and the surrounding area's urban amenities to attract students who value access to vibrant cultural, social, and professional opportunities.

Regional Insights

Schools in each region possess a competitive advantage over those in another with at least one of these characteristics, from higher salaries for graduates in the Northeast to more majors and student organizations in the Midwest.

2 Hone Your Value Proposition and Break Down Admissions Barriers

Make the Case for ROI ◕ ◖

Frame the higher tuition as an investment in future success by emphasizing the strong postgraduate salaries and robust educational outcomes. Messaging should also stress how the high number of academic and extracurricular offerings can provide a well-rounded education and competitive edge in the job market.

Simplify Admissions Processes ◖ ●

With higher admissions barriers, these schools can attract more students by highlighting flexible admissions criteria, such as test-optional policies and a holistic review process. Schools also might focus on reducing the number of application requirements and simplifying the application process to broaden their applicant pool.

Regional Insights

The schools of this type in the Midwest and Southeast have significant cost advantages over those in other regions, which they should underscore.

3 Navigate Regional and Political Considerations Thoughtfully

Tailor Messages to Your Audience ◕ ◔

For out-of-state recruitment, carefully navigate regional political leanings. Highlight aspects of the school that align with prospective students' values while being sensitive to state-level perceptions.

Regional Insights

Address climate and location as well. For schools in the Midwest, highlight campus-specific perks that offset the colder climate, such as strong on-campus communities, indoor facilities, etc. In warmer regions, emphasize how the mild weather enhances campus life year-round.

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Appendices

Full Variable List, Persona Characteristics Table,
and Geographic Region Reference

APPENDIX

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School Characteristics Evaluated in This Research

> Variables included in the final analytic models are **highlighted in blue**. Variables not highlighted were omitted from the final analytic models due to collinearity with included variables or weak correlation with the student-attractor score.

Predictors

Basic traits	Sector, State, Geographic Region, Geo-Location, Academic Calendar, Religious Affiliation, Gendered College
Cost	Average Net Price, Average Percentage of Financial Need Met, Average Student Loan Amount per Year, Average Student Loan Debt at Graduation, Average Monthly Loan Payment at Graduation, Loan Default Rate of Graduates, Tuition Guarantee
Campus life	HBCU Status, Number of Student Organizations, Number of Sports Teams, Varsity Athletics Division, Number of Campus Safety Features, Greek Life Presence, ROTC Options, Student Diversity Index, Female-to-Male Student Ratio, Geographic Diversity of Students, Percentage of Online Undergraduate Students, Percentage of Undergraduate Students Living on Campus
Admissions	Number of App Requirements, Accepts Generic App (e.g., Common App), Has Homegrown App, Test Optionality, Need-Blind Status, App Fee
Educational offerings and outcomes	Number of Majors Offered, Student-to-Faculty Ratio, Faculty Diversity Index, Study Abroad Options, Dual Degree Availability, Online Class Availability, Online Degree Availability (Undergrad), Percentage of Undergrads Who Graduate in 4 Years, Percentage of Undergrads Who Graduate in 6 Years, Percentage of Undergrads Who Graduate with Pell Grants, Average Salary 6 Years After Graduation, Best College List Score
Surrounding environment	Locale, Population Density of County, Population Growth Factor of County, Median Age of County, Wealth Index of County, Socioeconomic Index of County, Racial/Ethnic Diversity Index of County, Inequality (Gini) Index of County, Unemployment Rate of County, Economic Dependency Ratio of County, Housing Affordability Index of County, Average Annual Cost of Living of County, Social Mobility Index of State, Cook Political Report Partisan Voter Index of State, 538 Partisan Lean of State, Anti-DEI Legislation Count of State, Gun Regulation Strength of State, Gun Violence Rate of State, Abortion Access of State, Climate Zone, Number of Outdoor Amenities

Controls

Basic traits	School Size (Carnegie), Number of Undergraduate Students Enrolled, Number of Total Students Enrolled, Acceptance Rate
Student demographics	Percentage of Students Receiving Pell Grant, Percentage of Students Taking Out Student Loans, Percentage of First-Generation Undergraduate Students, Percentage of In-State Undergraduate Students, Percentage of Part-Time Undergraduate Students, Percentage of Undergraduate Students over the Age of 25, Average GPA of Admitted Students, Average ACT of Admitted Students, Average SAT of Admitted Students

United States: Regional Divisions

This Paper Explores Regional Variation According to the Categories Outlined Below

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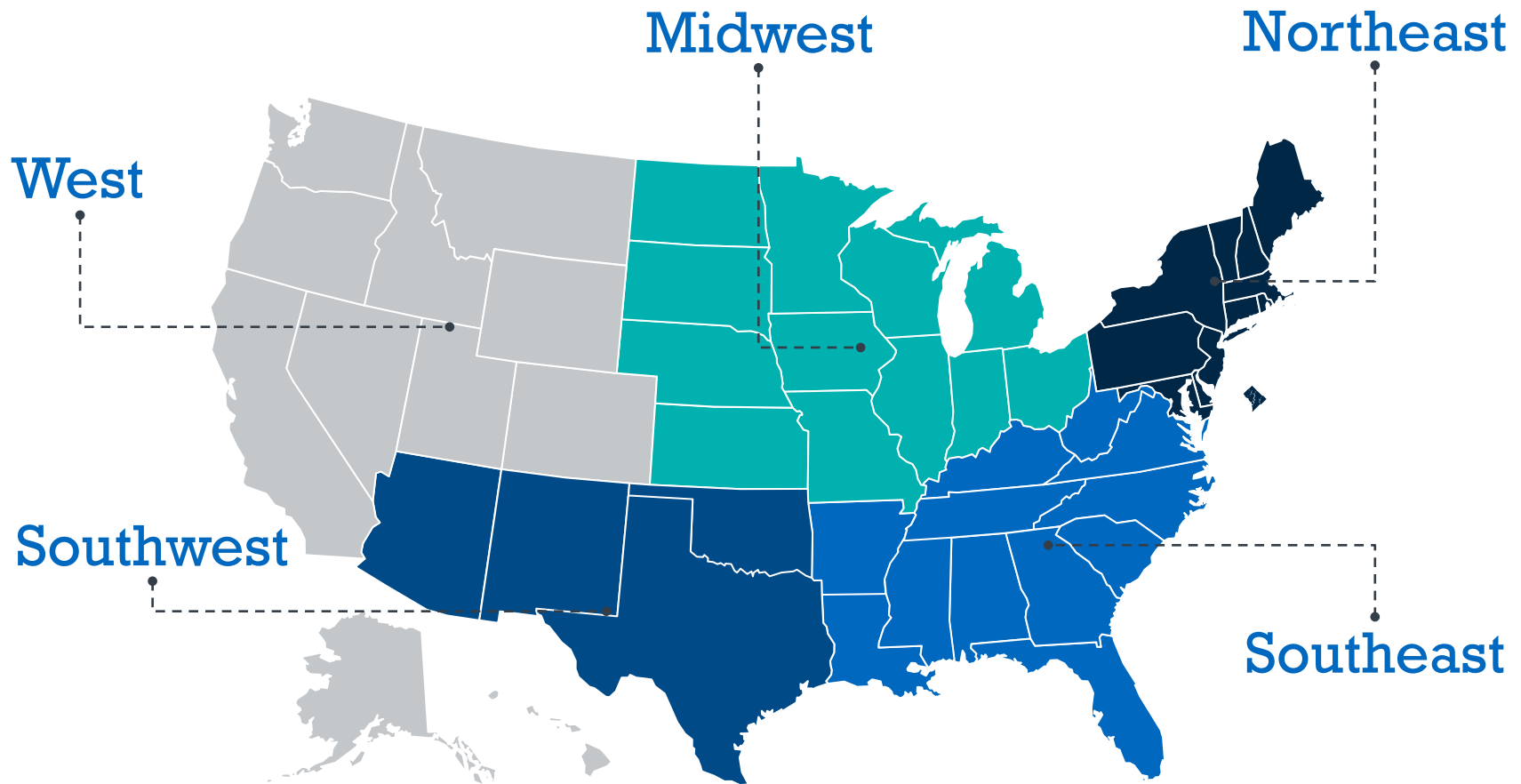
Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (1 of 7)

Basic Characteristics

Persona	Primary Geographic Region	Secondary Geographic Region(s)	School Sector	School Size	# of Undergraduate Students (Median)	# of Undergraduate Students (Mean)
Accessible Education Anchor	Midwest	Southeast, West	Private	Very Small	1,076	1,510
Mission-Driven Learning Community	Northeast	Midwest, Southeast	Private	Small	1,883	4,510
Boutique Elite Institution	Northeast	Midwest	Private	Small	1,971	2,579
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	Southeast	None	Public or Private	Small	2,160	2,994
Quintessential and Accessible College	Midwest	Northeast, Southeast, West	Private	Small	2,222	4,242
Selective Academic Enclave	Northeast	None	Private	Small	2,321	3,773
Well-Rounded Education Hub	Southeast	Midwest, Northeast	Public	Midsize	7,726	9,899
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	Southwest	Midwest	Public	Large	9,672	12,890
Rigorous Academic Giant	Northeast	Southeast, West	Private	Large	11,397	15,532
Average of All Schools	Northeast	Midwest, Southeast	Private	Small to Midsize	2,682	6,177

1) The characteristics of any given persona are based on generalizations (i.e., the mean, median, or modal value within that persona); exceptions will exist in all cases.

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (2 of 7)

Basic Characteristics

Persona	Acceptance Rate (Median)	Acceptance Rate (Mean)	% of All 4-Year Schools	% that Closed/Merged Since 2022	Attractor Score (Log of Applications x Yield)	Attractor Score (Standardized to 1-10)
Accessible Education Anchor	76%	73%	10.5%	3.9%	5.64	3.94
Mission-Driven Learning Community	79%	78%	17.7%	5.1%	6.28	4.58
Boutique Elite Institution	73%	61%	5.7%	1.4%	6.69	4.99
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	70%	68%	4.9%	0.0%	6.71	5.01
Quintessential and Accessible College	80%	79%	25.9%	1.6%	6.39	4.69
Selective Academic Enclave	45%	42%	6.2%	0.0%	7.69	5.99
Well-Rounded Education Hub	83%	80%	12.6%	0.0%	7.34	5.64
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	82%	79%	7.9%	0.0%	7.57	5.87
Rigorous Academic Giant	62%	56%	8.5%	0.0%	8.75	7.05
Average of All Schools	77%	72%	100.0%	1.8%	6.67	4.97

1) The characteristics of any given persona are based on generalizations (i.e., the mean, median, or modal value within that persona); exceptions will exist in all cases.

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (3 of 7)

Student Demographic Characteristics

Persona	% of Students Receiving a Pell Grant	% of First-Generation Undergrads	% of In-State Undergrads	% of Part-Time Undergrads	% of Undergrads over 25 Years Old	Average GPA of Admitted Students
Accessible Education Anchor	39%	36%	66%	21%	19%	3.3
Mission-Driven Learning Community	36%	33%	74%	15%	13%	3.4
Boutique Elite Institution	20%	19%	27%	4%	3%	3.7
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	70%	37%	63%	13%	11%	3.0
Quintessential and Accessible College	35%	33%	79%	12%	10%	3.5
Selective Academic Enclave	18%	16%	25%	2%	1%	3.8
Well-Rounded Education Hub	31%	30%	76%	17%	11%	3.6
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	36%	36%	86%	19%	13%	3.5
Rigorous Academic Giant	17%	19%	43%	4%	3%	3.8
Average of All Schools	32%	31%	70%	11%	9%	3.5

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (4 of 7)

Application and Cost Characteristics

Persona	# of Application Requirements	Are standardized tests optional?	Is school need-blind?	Average Net Price	Is there a tuition guarantee?	% of Financial Need Met
Accessible Education Anchor	2	No	Yes	$19,301	No	67%
Mission-Driven Learning Community	2	Yes	Yes	$20,066	No	73%
Boutique Elite Institution	3	Yes	Yes	$27,465	No	83%
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	2	No	Yes	$15,529	No	62%
Quintessential and Accessible College	2	Yes	Yes	$19,741	No	72%
Selective Academic Enclave	4	Yes	No	$32,091	No	94%
Well-Rounded Education Hub	2	Yes	No	$18,105	No	66%
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	2	Yes	No	$15,291	Yes	65%
Rigorous Academic Giant	4	Yes	No	$25,870	No	77%
Average of All Schools	3	Yes	Yes	$20,036	No	71%

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (5 of 7)

Campus Life Characteristics

Persona	# of Student Organizations	# of Student Organizations per Student (x100)	# of Sports Teams	# of Sports Teams per Student (x100)	Sports Division	HBCU Status	Is there Greek life on campus?
Accessible Education Anchor	26	2.4	7	0.65	NA	No	No
Mission-Driven Learning Community	50	2.7	14	0.74	D3	No	No
Boutique Elite Institution	70	3.6	17	0.86	D3	No	No
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	55	2.5	8	0.37	D1	Yes	Yes
Quintessential and Accessible College	70	3.1	16	0.72	D3	No	Yes
Selective Academic Enclave	140	6.0	19	0.82	D3	No	Yes
Well-Rounded Education Hub	150	1.9	18	0.23	D1	No	Yes
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	181	1.9	18	0.19	D1	No	Yes
Rigorous Academic Giant	393	3.4	25	0.22	D1	No	Yes
Average of All Schools	80	3.0	16	0.60	D3	No	Yes

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (6 of 7)

Educational Offerings and Outcomes

Persona	# of Majors Offered	# of Majors Offered per Student (x100)	% Of Undergrads Who Graduate Within 6 Years	Average Salary 6 Years After Graduating	Best College List Score
Accessible Education Anchor	50	4.6	47%	$42,450	0.48
Mission-Driven Learning Community	66	3.5	58%	$47,500	0.53
Boutique Elite Institution	58	2.9	74%	$55,050	0.60
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	46	2.1	35%	$34,400	0.44
Quintessential and Accessible College	64	2.9	57%	$48,400	0.54
Selective Academic Enclave	54	2.3	84%	$64,100	0.80
Well-Rounded Education Hub	115	1.5	60%	$49,700	0.53
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	107	1.1	53%	$47,600	0.50
Rigorous Academic Giant	194	1.7	82%	$67,400	0.72
Average of All Schools	70	2.6	59%	$48,700	0.55

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Institutional Persona (7 of 7)

Characteristics of the Surrounding Area

Persona	Urbanicity of Surrounding Area	Population Density of the Area	Population Growth Factor of the Area	Median Age of the Area	Political Partisan Lean in School's State (538)	Climate Zone of the Area
Accessible Education Anchor	Town: Fringe	179	0.14	40	Right 18.6	Cold
Mission-Driven Learning Community	Suburb: Large	548	0.17	40	Left 1.9	Temperate
Boutique Elite Institution	Suburb: Large	525	0.28	41	Left 12.8	Cold
Inclusive Path to Opportunity	City: Midsize	686	0.48	37	Right 9.8	Hot
Quintessential and Accessible College	Suburb: Large	268	0.09	40	Right 2.9	Temperate
Selective Academic Enclave	City: Large	1,101	0.09	40	Left 13.4	Temperate
Well-Rounded Education Hub	City: Small	558	0.32	38	Right 8.6	Warm
Outstanding Opportunity Engine	City: Small	376	0.40	38	Right 12.0	Warm
Rigorous Academic Giant	City: Large	1,108	0.43	37	Right 2.9	Warm
Average of All Schools	Suburb: Large	453	0.23	39	Right 2.9	Temperate

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Selected Characteristics[1] for Each Persona

Characteristics[1]	Accessible Education Anchor	Mission-Driven Learning Community	Boutique Elite Institution	Inclusive Path to Opportunity	Quintessential and Accessible College	Selective Academic Enclave	Well-Rounded Education Hub	Outstanding Opportunity Engine	Rigorous Academic Giant	Average of All Schools
Primary Geographic Region	Midwest	Northeast	Northeast	Southeast	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	Northeast	Northeast
Secondary Geographic Region(s)	Southeast, West	Midwest, Southeast	Midwest	None	Northeast, Southeast, West	None	Midwest, Northeast	Midwest	Southeast, West	Midwest, Southeast
School Sector	Private	Private	Private	Public or Private	Private	Private	Public	Public	Private	Private
School Size	Very Small	Small	Small	Small	Small	Small	Midsize	Large	Large	Small to Midsize
# of Undergraduate Students (Median)	1,076	1,883	1,971	2,160	2,222	2,321	7,726	9,672	11,397	2,682
# of Undergraduate Students (Mean)	1,510	4,510	2,579	2,994	4,242	3,773	9,899	12,890	15,532	6,177
Acceptance Rate (Median)	76%	79%	73%	70%	80%	45%	83%	82%	62%	77%
Acceptance Rate (Mean)	73%	78%	61%	68%	79%	42%	80%	79%	56%	72%
% of All 4-Year Schools	10.5%	17.7%	5.7%	4.9%	25.9%	6.2%	12.6%	7.9%	8.5%	100.0%
% of This Persona hat Closed/Merged Since 2022	3.9%	5.1%	1.4%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%
% of Students Receiving a Pell Grant	39%	36%	20%	70%	35%	18%	31%	36%	17%	32%
% of First-Generation Undergraduate Students	36%	33%	19%	37%	33%	16%	30%	36%	19%	31%
% of In-State Undergraduate Students	66%	74%	27%	63%	79%	25%	76%	86%	43%	70%
% of Part-Time Undergraduate Students	21%	15%	4%	13%	12%	2%	17%	19%	4%	11%
% of Undergraduate Students over 25 Years Old	19%	13%	3%	11%	10%	1%	11%	13%	3%	9%
Average GPA of Admitted Students	3.3	3.4	3.7	3.0	3.5	3.8	3.6	3.5	3.8	3.5
# of Application Requirements	2	2	3	2	2	4	2	2	4	3
Are standardized tests optional?	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is school need-blind?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Average Net Price	$19,301	$20,066	$27,465	$15,529	$19,741	$32,091	$18,105	$15,291	$25,870	$20,036
Is there a tuition guarantee?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
% of Financial Need Met	67%	73%	83%	62%	72%	94%	66%	65%	77%	71%
# of Student Organizations	26	50	70	55	70	140	150	181	393	80
# of Student Organizations per Student (x100)	2.4	2.7	3.6	2.5	3.1	6.0	1.9	1.9	3.4	3.0
# of Sports Teams	7	14	17	8	16	19	18	18	25	16
# of Sports Teams per Student (x100)	0.65	0.74	0.86	0.37	0.72	0.82	0.23	0.19	0.22	0.60
Sports Division	NA	D3	D3	D1	D3	D3	D1	D1	D1	D3
HBCU Status	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Is there Greek life on campus?	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
# of Majors Offered	50	66	58	46	64	54	115	107	194	70
# of Majors Offered per Student (x100)	4.6	3.5	2.9	2.1	2.9	2.3	1.5	1.1	1.7	2.6
% of Undergraduates Who Graduate Within 6 Years	47%	58%	74%	35%	57%	84%	60%	53%	82%	59%
Average Salary 6 Years After Graduating	$42,450	$47,500	$55,050	$34,400	$48,400	$64,100	$49,700	$47,600	$67,400	$48,700
Best College List Score	0.48	0.53	0.60	0.44	0.54	0.80	0.53	0.50	0.72	0.55
Urbanicity of Surrounding Area	Town: Fringe	Suburb: Large	Suburb: Large	City: Midsize	Suburb: Large	City: Large	City: Small	City: Small	City: Large	Suburb: Large
Population Density of Surrounding Area	179	548	525	686	268	1,101	558	376	1,108	453
Population Growth Factor of Surrounding Area	0.14	0.17	0.28	0.48	0.09	0.09	0.32	0.40	0.43	0.23
Median Age of Surrounding Area	40	40	41	37	40	40	38	38	37	39
Political Partisan Lean in School's State (538)	Right 18.6	Left 1.9	Left 12.8	Right 9.8	Right 2.9	Left 13.4	Right 8.6	Right 12.0	Right 2.9	Right 2.9
Climate Zone of the Area	12.0	13.0	12.0	15.5	12.5	13.0	14.0	14.0	14.0	13.0
Climate Zone of the Area (Categorical)	Cold	Temperate	Cold	Hot	Temperate	Temperate	Warm	Warm	Warm	Temperate
Student-Attractor Score (Log of Applications x Yield)	5.64	6.28	6.69	6.71	6.39	7.69	7.34	7.57	8.75	6.67
Student-Attractor Score (Standardized to 1-10)	3.94	4.58	4.99	5.01	4.69	5.99	5.64	5.87	7.05	4.97

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Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Appily (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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