The School Personas Shaping Students' College Choices
Four Steps to a Deeper Understanding of Your Competitive Positioning

▶ Step 1
Find your Persona Based on
Your Combination of Key Traits

Persona Snapshots
Ratings Relative to Median US School
— National Average — Archetypal

This research introduces a new, student-centered taxonomy of four-year colleges and universities, based on a statistical analysis correlating student search behaviors with more than 80 different school characteristics across five categories: campus offerings (e.g., the number of student organizations), educational offerings (e.g., the number of majors), surrounding area (e.g., the warmth of the weather), affordability, and admissions accessibility.

More granular than other established systems of classification and centered on the student perspective, this new framing of the higher education landscape helps admissions teams identify their true competitor set—schools that attract students in similar ways—and benchmark against them to uncover strengths, address limitations, and seize opportunities within their market and beyond.


The Accessible Education Anchor
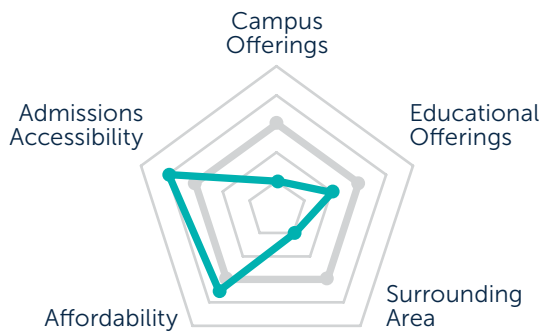
Typically rooted in rural areas, these very small and typically private schools serve as vital resources for local and nontraditional students.

The Mission-Driven Learning Community
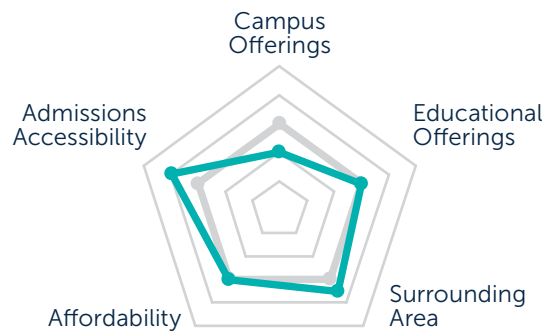
These small colleges emphasize access and personalized attention, fostering supportive academic and social environments for a well-rounded education.

#### The Boutique Elite Institution
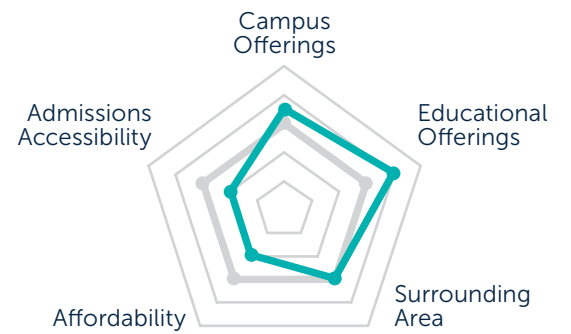
Private colleges providing a rigorous academic environment, distinguished career outcomes, and close faculty-student connections in smaller settings.


The Inclusive Path to Opportunity
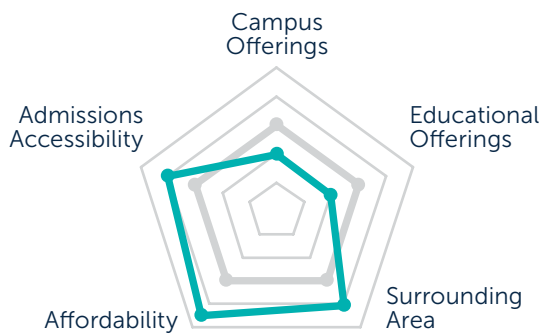
Focused on accessibility, these community-centered institutions provide affordable education, particularly to low-income and first-generation students.

#### The Quintessential and Accessible College
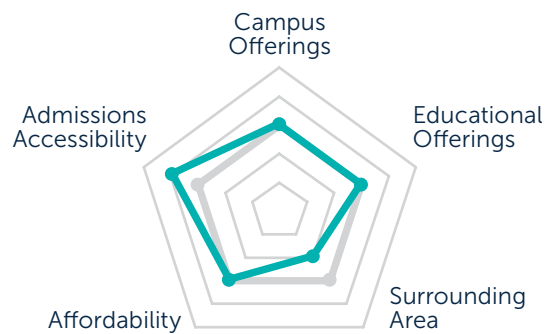
"Jack of all trades" schools in suburban areas that offer a balanced, traditional college experience, blending accessibility with a strong sense of community.

#### The Selective Academic Enclave
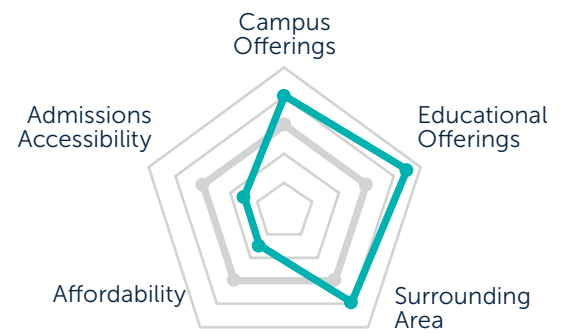
Prestigious small to midsize institutions combine academic rigor, personalized support, and exceptional career outcomes in large and diverse locales.


The Well-Rounded Education Hub
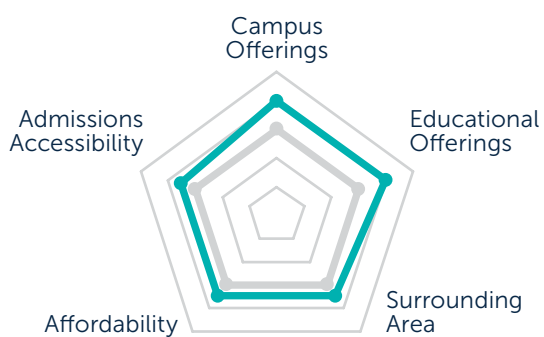
Midsize public schools that excel in offering a variety of academic options and a dynamic campus life to students living in the region.

The Outstanding Opportunity Engine
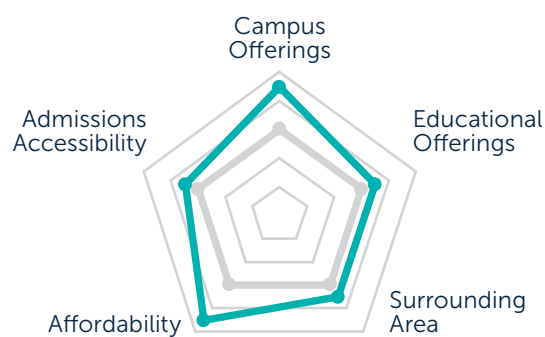
Large, urban public schools with strong ties to their state that combine deep affordability with extensive academic options to provide transformative opportunities for a wide range of students.

The Rigorous Academic Giant
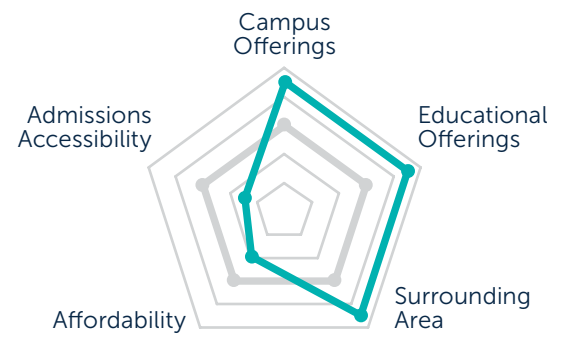
Very large, urban universities that combine selective admissions, extensive academic opportunities, and dynamic campus cultures to attract high-achieving students from across the nation.

▶ Step 2:
Benchmark Against
Your Persona Peers

Once you've identified your persona, compare your institution's traits to the persona averages to uncover competitive strengths and limitations.

Do your graduates earn more than those at peer institutions? Do you offer fewer majors? Use these insights to refine your recruitment strategy.

▶ Step 3
Identify Regional Risks
and Opportunities

Expand your benchmarking to consider regional differences.

How does your school compare to persona peers in different regions? Are there shared challenges or advantages that shape competition locally and beyond?

▶ Step 4
Assess Risks and Opportunities
in Adjacent Personas

Some personas are more similar to yours than others, making them potential competitors.

Do other personas outperform yours in ways that could erode your appeal? E.g., if affordability is your key draw, are competing personas offering affordability along with stronger campus life or academics?

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Explore the full insight paper to dive deeper into these personas, benchmark your institution, and uncover actionable strategies to enhance your competitive edge.

eab.com/resources/whitepaper/why-students-pick-schools