



PERSONA PACKAGE

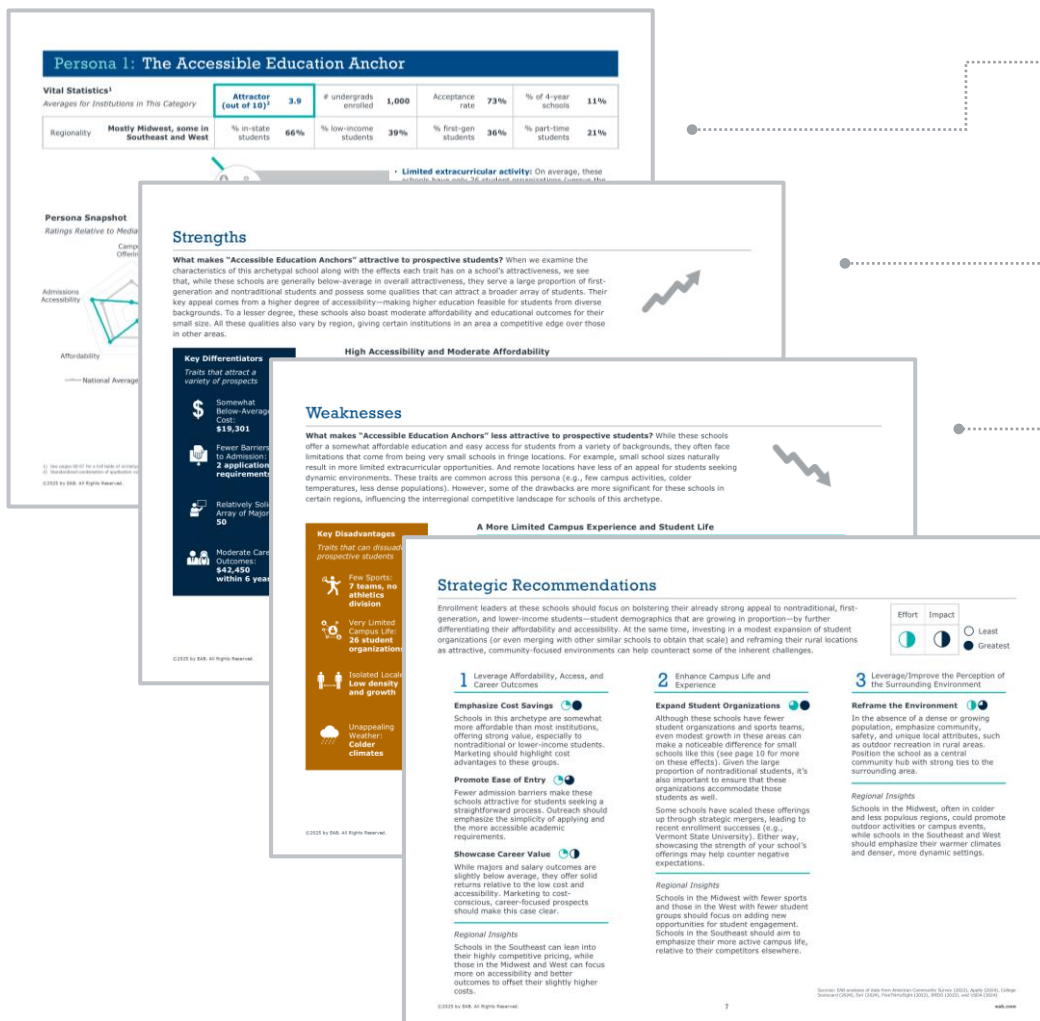
Persona 1: The Accessible Education Anchor

An Extract from "Why Students Pick the Schools They Do"



How To Use This Document

This is a focused slice of our full research paper, “Why Students Pick the Schools They Do—And How to Boost Your Odds of Making the Cut.” In it, you’ll find everything you need to know about the “Accessible Education Anchor” persona. We’ve also included some key pieces of context in the appendices. If you’d like access to the complete study—including all personas and overarching insights—please click [here](#).



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

> 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).

Persona 1: The Accessible Education Anchor

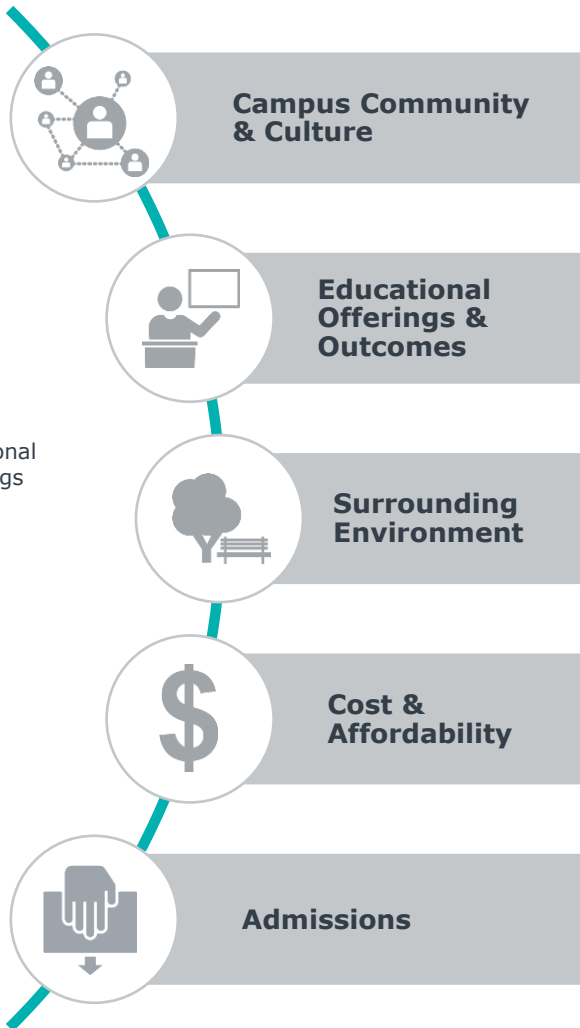
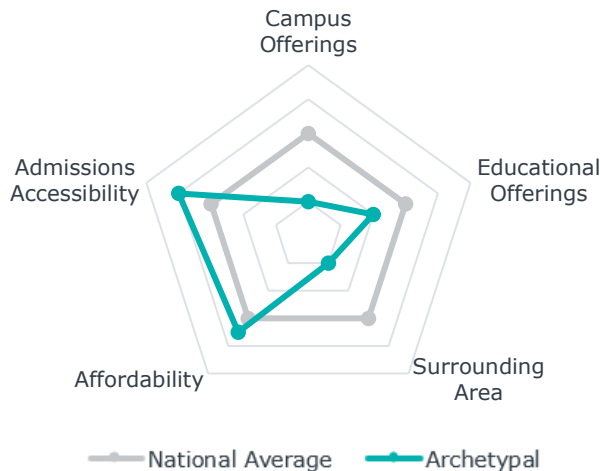
Vital Statistics¹

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



- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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), Apply (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

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).

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.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Midwest	Southeast	West
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), Appily (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.



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.



Appendices

APPENDIX

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).



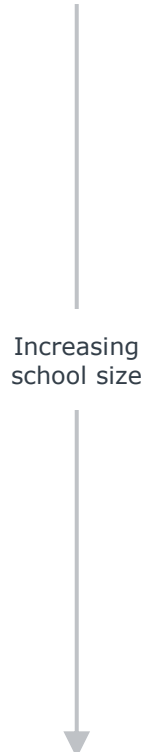
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality ¹	Pages
1	The Accessible Education Anchor	Very small	Private	-	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	The Mission-Driven Learning Community	Small	Private	--	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	The Boutique Elite Institution	Small	Private	+	Northeast, Midwest	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

“++” = 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.

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.

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.

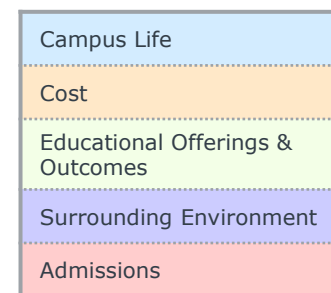
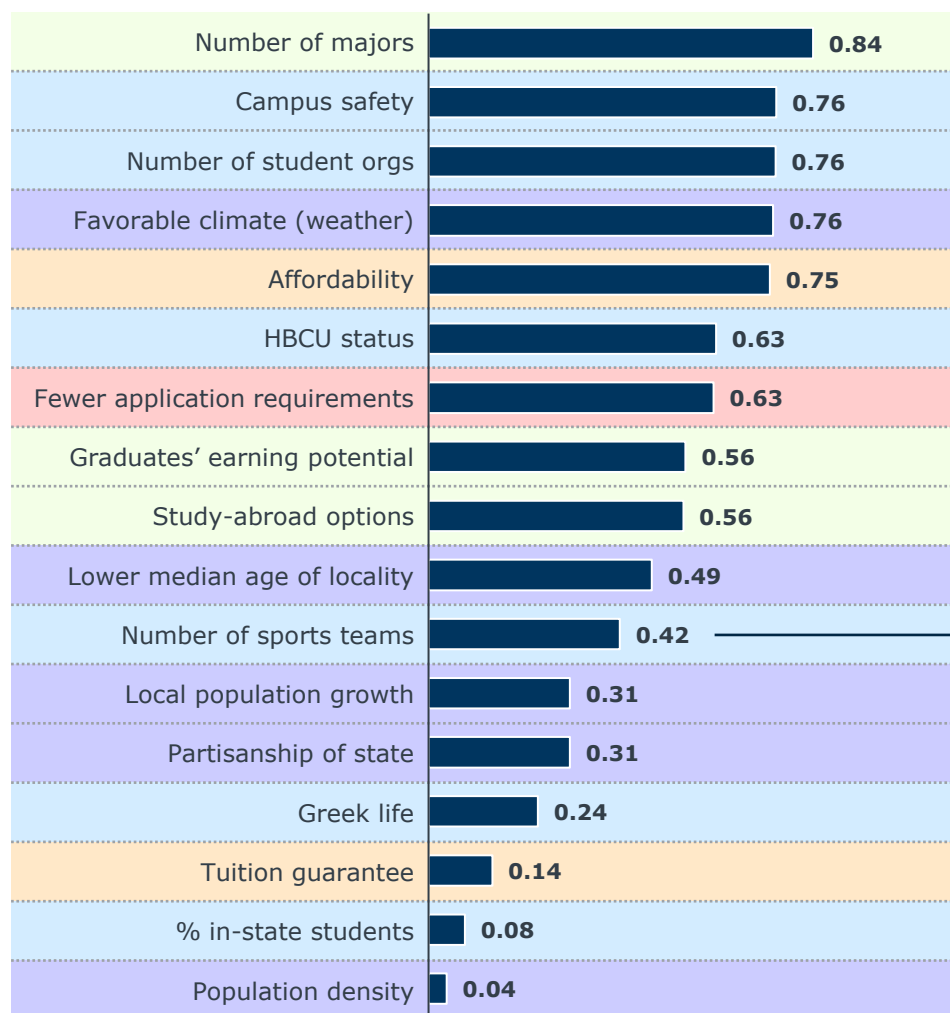
Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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.

Contribution¹ of Significant Traits to a School's Overall Student-Attractor Score

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



E.g., all other things being equal, a school with the most¹ 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.

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

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