



PERSONA PACKAGE

Persona 2: The Mission-Driven Learning Community

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 “Mission-Driven Learning Community” 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](#).

Persona 2: The Mission-Driven Learning Community

Vital Statistics¹
Averages for Institutions in This Category

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

Persona Snapshot
Ratings Relative to Median Camp Officers

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 requirement
- Solid Array of Majors for Sm Schools: 66
- Moderate Card Outcomes: \$47,500 within 6 years
- Richer Athletic: 14 teams, Division III
- Denser Local Populations: 548/sq. mile

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 Organizations and no Greek life
- Slowing Local Low population growth
- Less Appealing Weather: Colder climates

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.

- 1 Emphasize Accessible and Valuable Education
- 2 Enhance (and Showcase) Campus Life and Experience
- 3 Leverage (or Adapt) to the Local Population Dynamics

Effort Impact
Least Greatest

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.

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.

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.

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 2: The Mission-Driven Learning Community

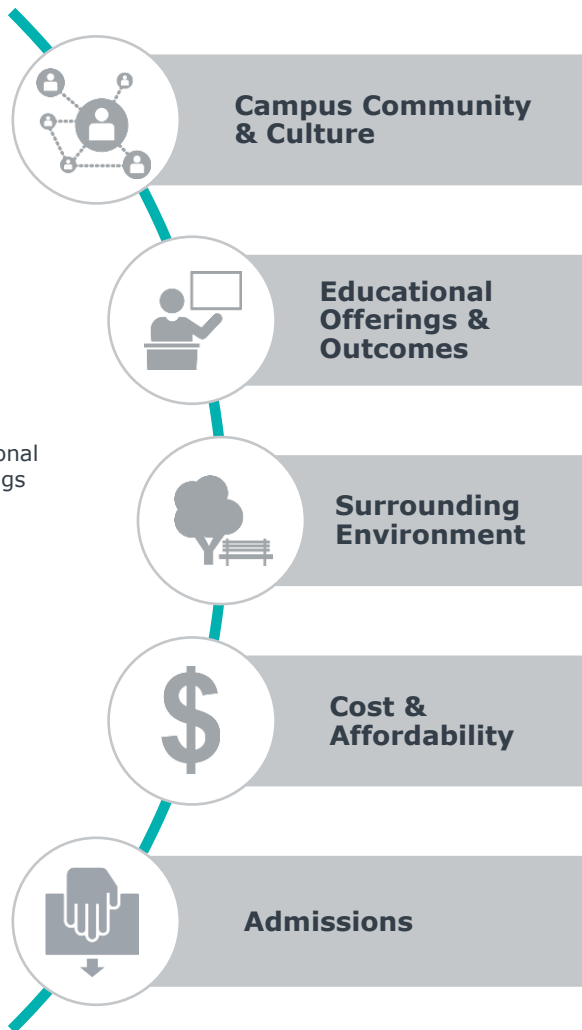
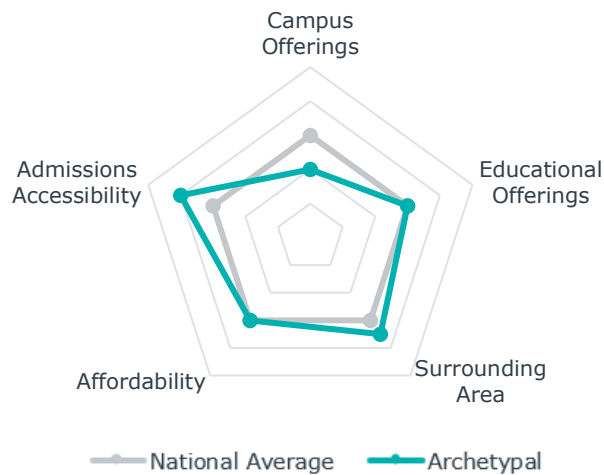
Vital Statistics¹

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



- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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%).
- **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).

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.

Regional Variations

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

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

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.

Regional Variations

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

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 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.



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.



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).



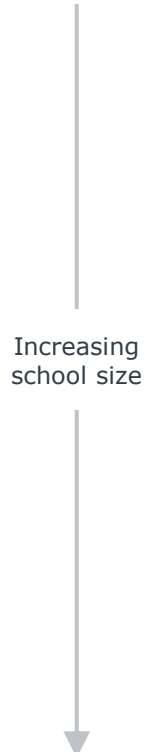
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality ¹	Pages
1	The Accessible Education Anchor	Very small	Private	-	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	The Mission-Driven Learning Community	Small	Private	--	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	The Boutique Elite Institution	Small	Private	+	Northeast, Midwest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

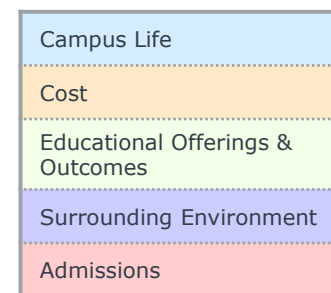
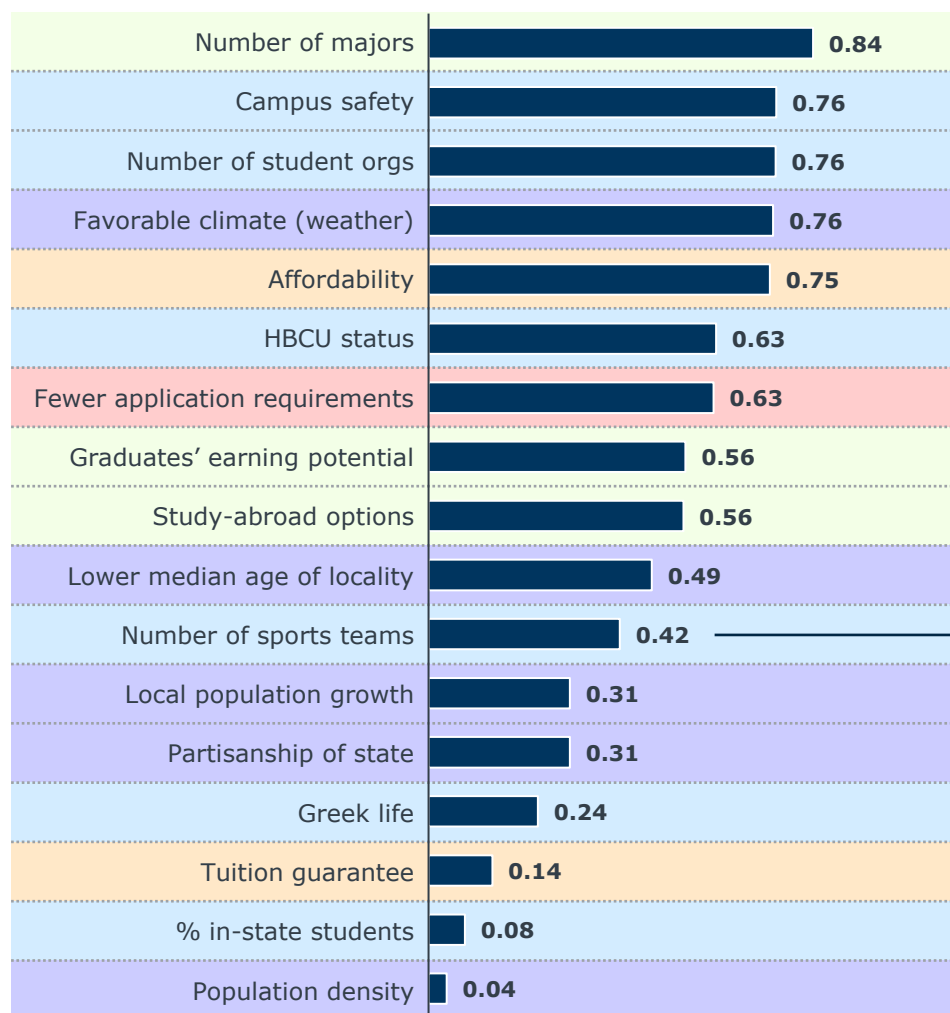
Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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).

Attract and Enroll Today's Students with Enroll360

enroll ³⁶⁰
by EAB



The Enroll360 Difference:

Higher Education's
Largest Student Dataset



Insights and Campaigns
Driven by Enterprise-wide AI



A Team of Experts Ready to
Help You Make the Right Calls

To get started, email eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com or visit eab.com/Enroll360.



202-747-1000 | eab.com

 @eab  @eab_  @WeAreEAB  @eab.life

ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.