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Persona 4: The Inclusive Path to Opportunity

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 "Inclusive Path to Opportunity" 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).

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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

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

— National Average — Archetypal

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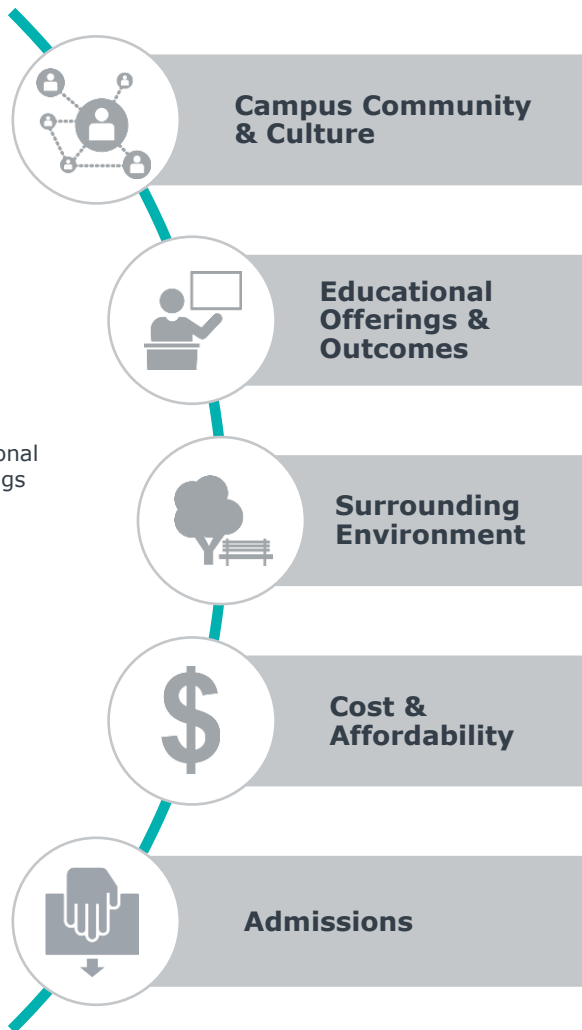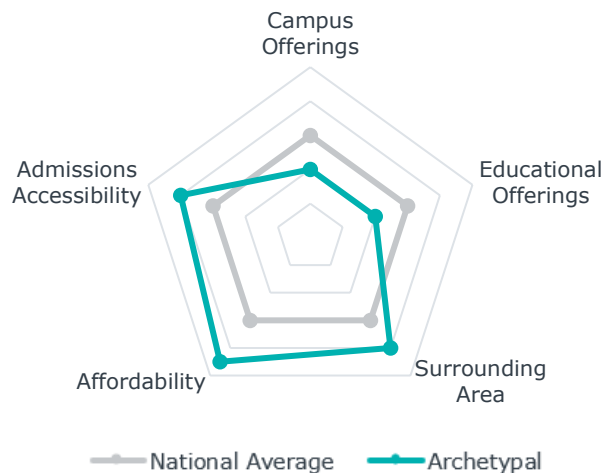
- **Less active extracurricular scene:** These schools offer fewer student organizations (about 50), though they typically have other offerings (e.g., Greek life).
- **Few sports, but high-profile:** They have only 8 sports teams, but they make them count in Division I.

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

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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).

Comparative Advantages

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

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.

Appendices

APPENDIX

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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).
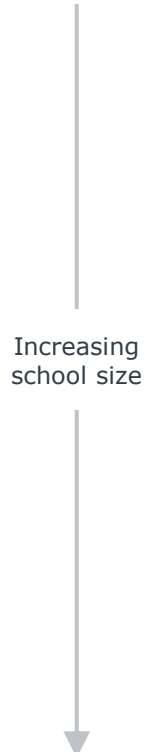
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality[1]	Pages
1	**The Accessible Education Anchor**	Very small	Private	–	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	**The Mission-Driven Learning Community**	Small	Private	– –	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	**The Boutique Elite Institution**	Small	Private	+	Northeast, 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.
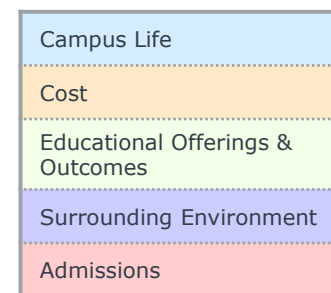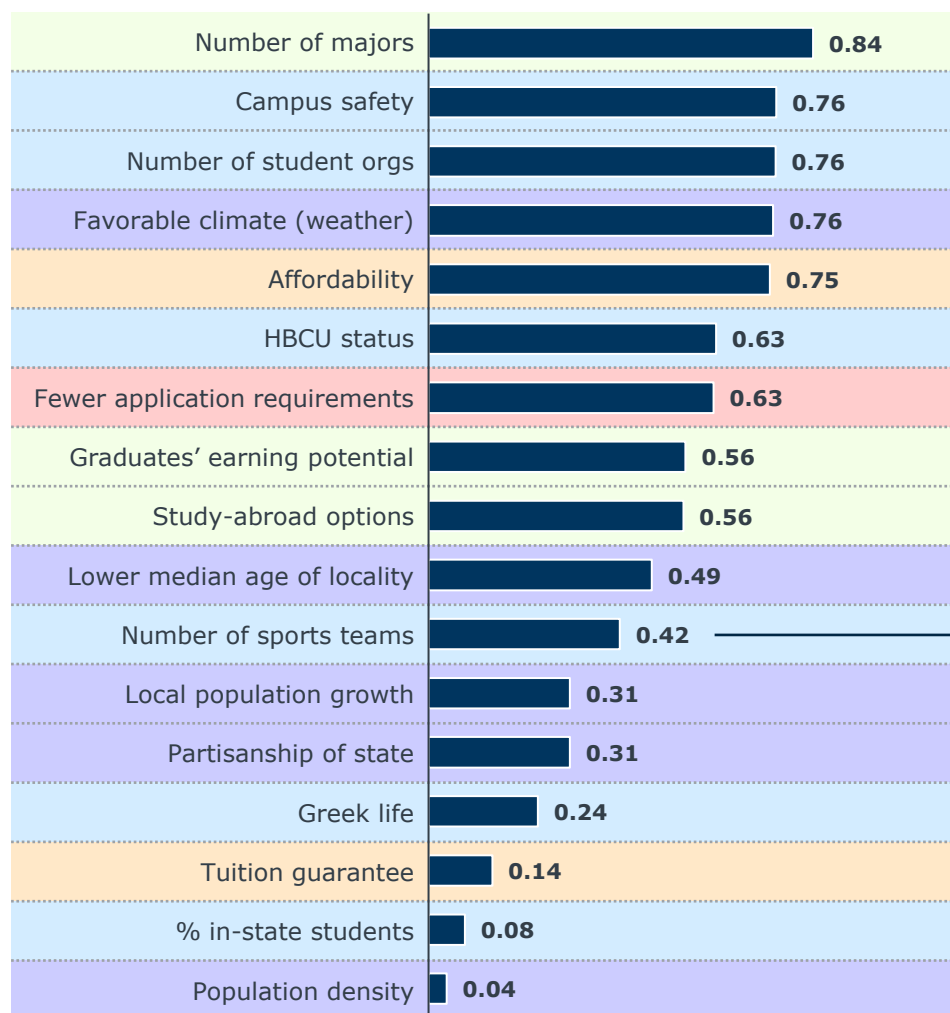
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Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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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