

PERSONA PACKAGE

Persona 6: The Selective Academic Enclave

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 “Selective Academic Enclave” 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 6: The Selective Academic Enclave

Vital Statistics¹
Averages for Institutions in This Category

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

Very high extracurricular activity: On average, these schools have 140 student organizations.

Persona Snapshot
Ratings Relative to Media Camp Officers

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 beautiful 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 Care Outcomes \$64,100
- Wide Array of Extracurricula 140 student organization
- Abundant Athletics 19 teams, Division III
- Dynamic Urban Location 1,101/sq. mi.

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

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.

- 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.
- Increase Financial Aid Offerings**
Expand Need-Based Aid to Underserved 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.
- 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.

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 6: The Selective Academic Enclave

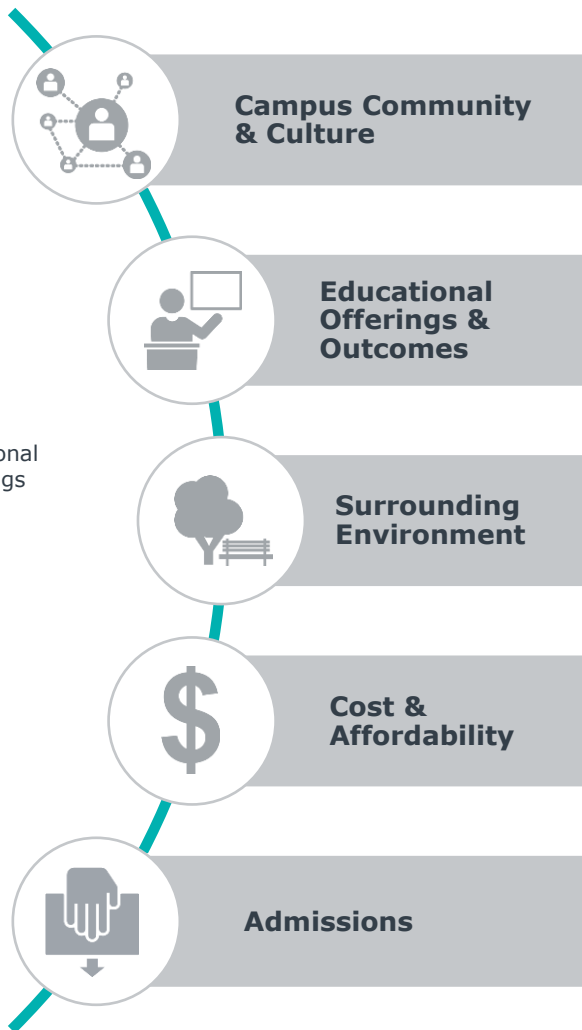
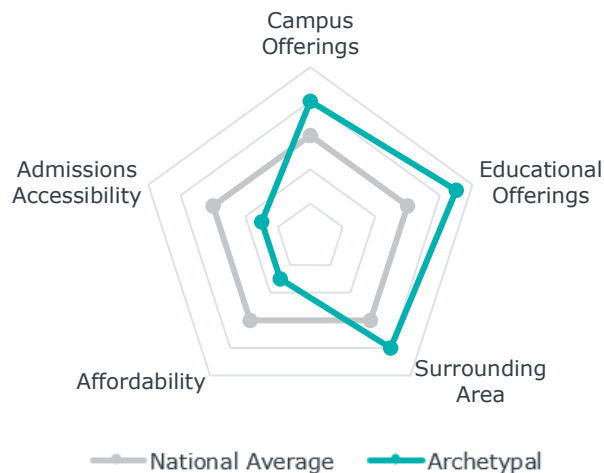
Vital Statistics¹

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%
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Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School



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

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.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest	Southeast	West
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

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 “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).

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.



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.



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).



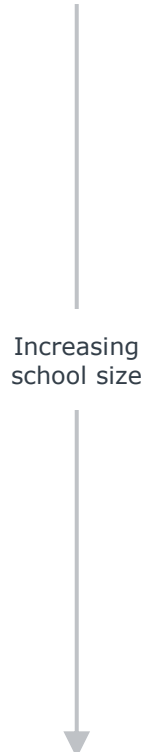
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality ¹	Pages
1	The Accessible Education Anchor	Very small	Private	-	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	The Mission-Driven Learning Community	Small	Private	--	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	The Boutique Elite Institution	Small	Private	+	Northeast, Midwest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

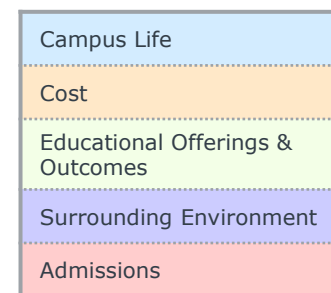
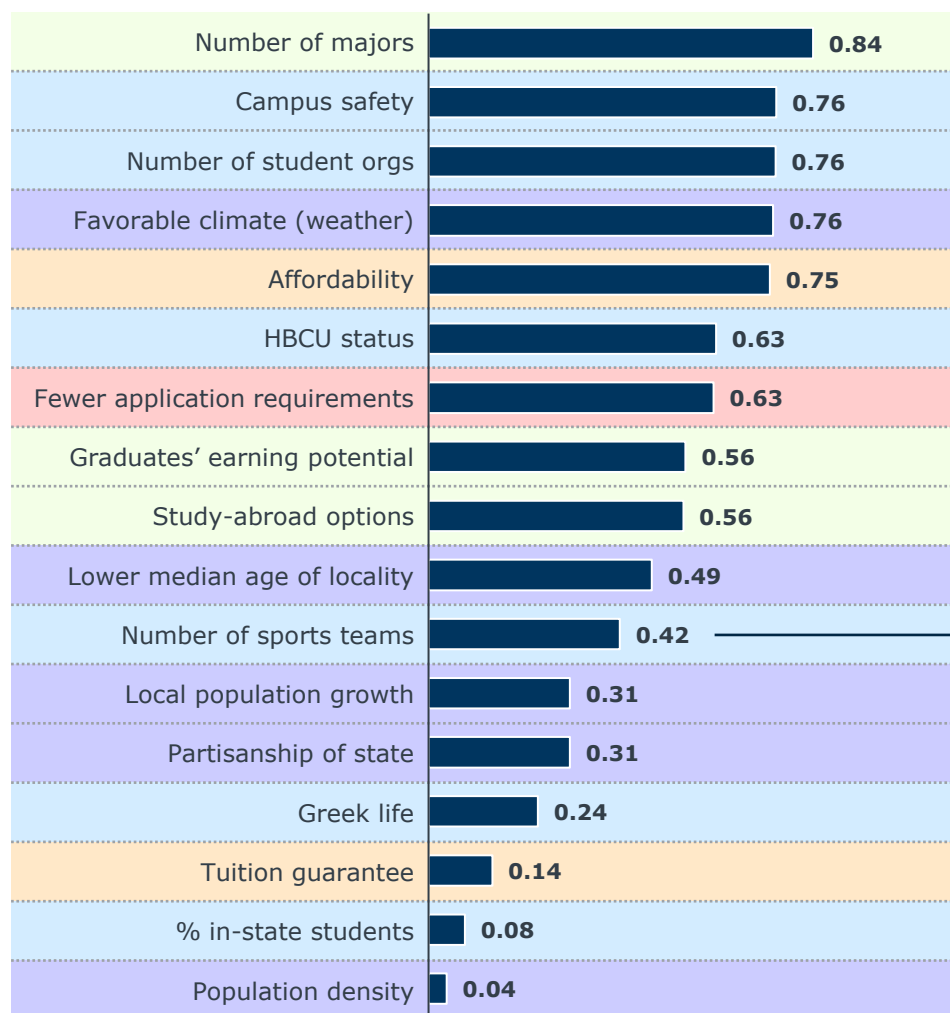
Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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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