

PERSONA PACKAGE

Persona 8: The Outstanding Opportunity Engine

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 “Outstanding Opportunity Engine” 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 8: The Outstanding Opportunity Engine

Vital Statistics¹
Averages for Institutions in This Category

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--|------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
| Regionality | Midwest, Southwest, Midwest and Southwest | Attractor (out of 10) ² | 5.9 | # undergrads enrolled | 10,000 | Acceptance rate | 79% | % of 4-year schools | 8% |
| | | % in-state students | 86% | % low-income students | 36% | % first-gen students | 36% | % part-time students | 19% |

Persona Snapshot
Ratings Relative to Median Campuses

Strengths
What makes “Outstanding Opportunity Engines” 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 they offer strong, consistent quality across a range of areas, making them reliable choices for a diverse group of students. However, it’s their affordability and impressive campus offerings that truly set them apart, giving students a chance to access a wide array of academic and extracurricular experiences without significant financial strain. While these schools have consistent strengths across regions, certain areas stand out in unique ways, giving schools in specific states a competitive edge.

Weaknesses
What makes “Outstanding Opportunity Engines” less attractive to prospective students? Because these schools are well-rounded—offering deep affordability and providing strong educational and extracurricular opportunities—there are few specific factors that create significant challenges for them when attracting students. It is no surprise that these large public schools have grown their enrollment at faster rates than most others. However, the postgraduate salaries enjoyed by graduates underperform relative to many other institutions. The political contexts most of these schools find themselves in also pose obstacles in all three regions. Additionally, the environmental conditions and population dynamics for schools of this type in the Midwest can also detract from their ability to attract more students.

Strategic Recommendations
These schools have a strong foundation with their well-rounded offerings and affordability, which makes them appealing to a broad audience. To strengthen their position, they need to leverage their most distinctive traits clearly convey the return on investment graduates enjoy, and navigate local politics effectively to reach prospective students. Below are three key strategies tailored to boost the appeal and competitiveness of these institutions.

- Show Prospects They Have a Wide Variety of Worthy Paths to Explore
- Differentiate with Affordability and Campus Offerings
- Proactively Address Local Political Contexts

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 8: The Outstanding Opportunity Engine

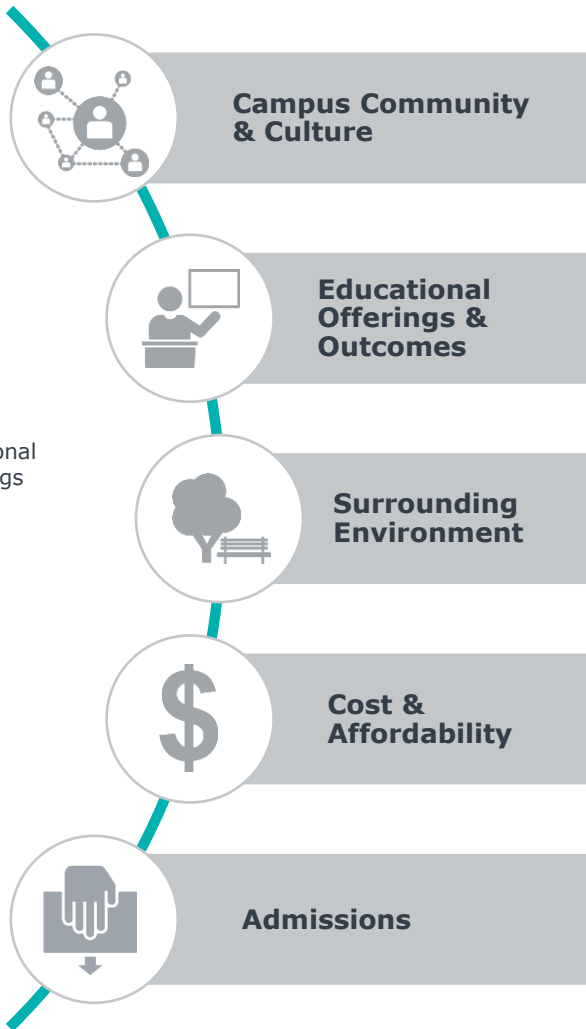
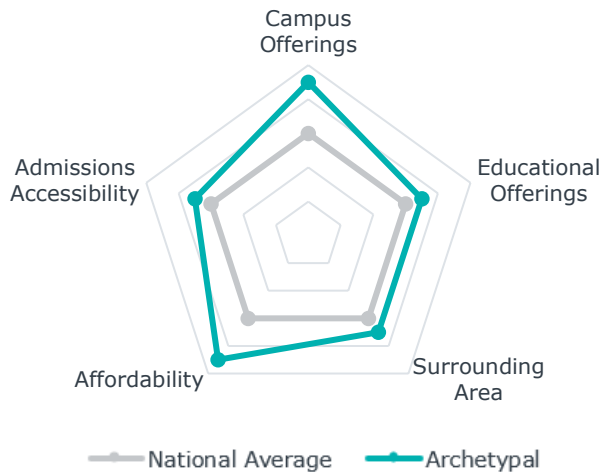
Vital Statistics¹

Averages for Institutions in This Category

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--|--|------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
| | | Attractor (out of 10)² | 5.9 | # undergrads enrolled | 10,000 | Acceptance rate | 79% | % of 4-year schools | 8% |
| Regionality | Mostly Southwest, Midwest and Southeast | % in-state students | 86% | % low-income students | 36% | % first-gen students | 36% | % part-time students | 19% |

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School



- **Active campus life:** These schools boast numerous student organizations (average of 181), offering a variety of extracurricular options for engagement.
- **Robust sports culture:** As Division I schools, they support extensive athletics with an average of 18 teams.
- **Wide range of academic programs:** With an average of 107 majors offered (versus 70 on average), students have access to diverse fields of study.
- **Solid, if average, career outcomes:** Graduates earn an average of \$47,600 six years after graduation, which is slightly below the national average.
- **Located in smaller urban settings:** These schools are situated in small and growing cities, providing a modest array of urban amenities without the overwhelming scale.
- **Warmer climates:** These schools are typically in warmer areas, which generally appeals to more students.
- **Affordable tuition:** These schools stand out from a cost standpoint with the lowest average net price (\$15,291) and tuition guarantees in most cases.
- **Moderate financial aid:** These schools meet 65% of students' financial need on average, slightly below national norms, but serve more Pell recipients (36%).
- **Easier applications:** These schools typically require at most 2 application components, with standardized tests remaining optional.
- **Average academic requirements:** Despite lower selectivity, the average GPA of admitted students is 3.5.

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 “Outstanding Opportunity Engines” 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 they offer strong, consistent quality across a range of areas, making them reliable choices for a diverse group of students. However, it’s their affordability and impressive campus offerings that truly set them apart, giving students a chance to access a wide array of academic and extracurricular experiences without significant financial strain. While these schools have consistent strengths across regions, certain areas stand out in unique ways, giving schools in specific states a competitive edge.




Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

 **Lowest Costs: \$15,291, with a tuition guarantee**

 **Large Array of Majors: 107**

 **Wide Variety of Extracurriculars: 181**

 **Competitive Sports Scene: 19 teams, Division I**

Deep Affordability

These schools consistently stand out for their lower average net prices, offering quality education at a reduced cost compared to many national counterparts. This makes them attractive to students who prioritize financial accessibility. They also provide tuition guarantees, helping families plan for the full duration of a student’s education. This certainty around costs adds to their appeal.

Schools in the Southwest region have the most affordable average net price at \$13,302, significantly below other regions. This provides a strong financial incentive for students seeking an economical path to a degree (see the table below).

Wide-Ranging Educational and Extracurricular Offerings

These institutions are known for their diverse range of majors, catering to a variety of interests and career paths. The ample choices allow students to explore and refine their academic goals during their college journey. Also, a wealth of student organizations and sports teams contributes to a vibrant campus life, ensuring that students have ample opportunities for involvement and leadership. These rich extracurricular offerings help cultivate a strong sense of community.

Schools in the Southeast lead with an impressive 254 organizations, as well as 21 sports teams, reflecting a particularly strong extracurricular culture (see below).

Regional Variations

| Key Trait | Southwest | Midwest | Southeast |
|---------------|-----------------|----------|------------|
| Cost | \$13,302 | \$17,048 | \$14,600 |
| Student Orgs. | 153 | 200 | 254 |
| Sports Teams | 17 | 18 | 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).

Weaknesses

What makes “Outstanding Opportunity Engines” less attractive to prospective students? Because these schools are well-rounded—offering deep affordability and providing strong educational and extracurricular opportunities—there are few specific factors that create significant challenges for them when attracting students. It is no surprise that these large public schools have grown their enrollment at faster rates than most others. However, the postgraduate salaries enjoyed by graduates underperform relative to many other institutions. The political contexts most of these schools find themselves in also pose obstacles in all three regions. Additionally, the environmental conditions and population dynamics for schools of this type in the Midwest can also detract from their ability to attract more students.



Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

Slightly Below-Average Salaries: **\$47,600**

Polarizing State Politics: **Much more conservative**

Shrinking Locale: **-17% growth**

Unappealing Weather: **Colder climates**

General Disadvantages: Career Outcomes and Local Politics

While graduates from these schools tend to have good starting salaries, they don't quite match the higher earning potential seen in some other educational segments. This may cause students who are highly salary-focused to consider other options.

Where the average school is located in a politically moderate state, most of these schools are situated in more politically conservative states. Our analyses indicate that this can limit their appeal for wide swaths of students. According to recent survey data, students have become more sensitive to state-level political climates, with factors such as restrictive abortion laws, limited gun policies, and other sociopolitical stances influencing their college choice.¹

Regional Disadvantages: Colder Weather, Shrinking Populations, Higher Costs

Schools in the Midwest tend to be in colder climates, which may be less attractive to students seeking a more temperate environment (see the table below). Furthermore, many of these areas are experiencing population declines, limiting the pool of local students and complicating outreach.

Also mentioned on the previous page, Midwestern schools have higher average costs, with an average net price of \$17,048, which is notably more expensive than similar schools in the Southwest (\$13,302) and Southeast (\$14,600). This can put them at a disadvantage for students seeking the most affordable education.

Regional Variations

| Key Trait | Southwest | Midwest | Southeast |
|----------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Salary | \$48,150 | \$48,300 | \$43,900 |
| State Politics | -12 | -12 | -5 |
| Pop. Growth | 78% | -17% | 71% |
| Climate | Very Hot | Cold | Hot |

1) [Survey finds students base college decisions on state politics.](#)

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 a strong foundation with their well-rounded offerings and affordability, which makes them appealing to a broad audience. To strengthen their position, they need to leverage their most distinctive traits, clearly convey the return on investment graduates enjoy, and navigate local politics effectively to reach prospective students. Below are three key strategies tailored to boost the appeal and competitiveness of these institutions.



1 Show Prospects They Have a Wide Variety of Worthy Paths to Explore

Market Your All-Around Quality

These schools are above average in nearly every category, from academics to campus life. Marketing campaigns should emphasize the breadth and depth of what students can experience, ensuring prospective applicants see the wide variety of opportunities that await them.

Many students are still exploring their academic interests. The ability to offer diverse majors and experiences positions these schools as ideal for students who are looking for flexibility and a balanced college journey.

2 Differentiate with Affordability and Campus Offerings

Promote Deep Affordability (and ROI)

Make the case that these schools provide a more affordable education compared to many other institutions, with lower net prices and competitive financial aid packages. Highlight any tuition guarantees to reduce perceived financial risk for prospective students and their families.

Highlight the Breadth of Offerings

Differentiate these schools by showcasing their extensive academic programs, variety of student clubs, and wide array of sports options. This richness of opportunity can appeal to students who want flexibility in their studies and engagement options on campus.

Regional Insights

In areas where the cost is higher (e.g., the Midwest), schools should focus on how students can still receive a high-quality education, especially when compared with some other types of schools.

3 Proactively Address Local Political Contexts

Cultivate and Demonstrate an Inclusive Environment

For out-of-state students or those concerned about sociopolitical factors, schools can proactively shape their messaging to emphasize the diversity of thought on campus and the school's commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment, regardless of broader state-level policies.

Provide and Promote Campus Resources

Highlighting campus groups, forums, and resources that empower students—from campus safety measures to mental health services—can reassure prospective students worried about the implications of the broader political landscape (e.g., gun violence, the right to choose).

Regional Insights

Highlight the strengths of each school's surrounding area, focusing on aspects that may align with the target market's preferences. For example, emphasize the warm climate and small-city feel in the Southwest.



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).



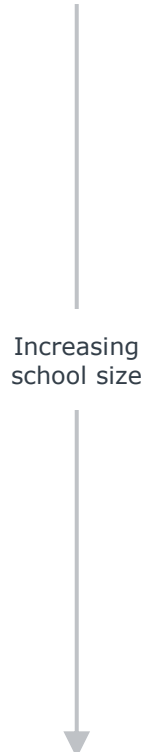
| | Persona name | Size | Control | Selectivity | Regionality ¹ | Pages |
|---|--|------------|---------|-------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | The Accessible Education Anchor | Very small | Private | - | Midwest, Southeast, West | 20–23 |
| 2 | The Mission-Driven Learning Community | 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.

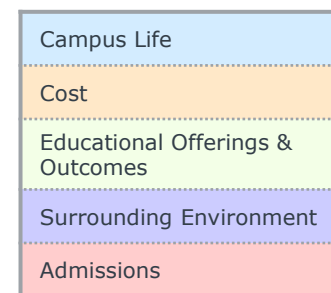
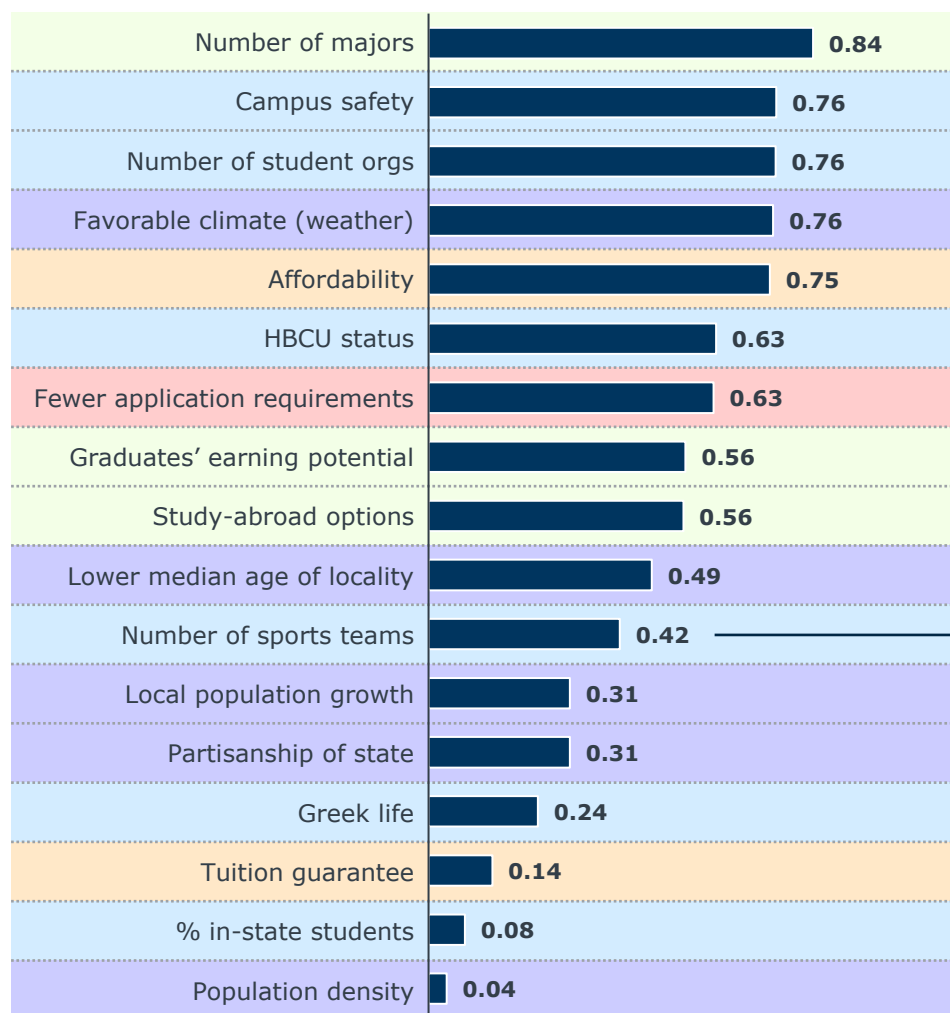
Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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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