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Persona 9: The Rigorous Academic Giant

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 "Rigorous Academic Giant" persona. We've also included some key pieces of context in the appendices. If you'd like access to the complete study—including all personas and overarching insights—please click here.

Page 1: *Persona overview*

- Average school size, selectivity, and student demographics versus national averages
- Median student-attractor score
- Summary assessment of student attractors

Page 2: *Strengths*

- Traits that boost the persona's student-attractor score
- Differentiators examined include campus life, academic variety, affordability, and location

Page 3: *Weaknesses*

- Traits that limit a persona's appeal, negatively impacting its student-attractor score
- Common challenges include high costs, limited campus amenities, and location-based factors

Page 4: *Strategic recommendations*

- Persona-specific strategies for leveraging strengths and mitigating weaknesses
- Strategies are assessed on their potential to impact the student-attractor and their difficulty

Understanding Your School's Positioning

Three Steps to Gain a Better Grasp of Your Competitive Context

1) Align Within Your Persona

> **Compare key traits**

How does your institution compare to the persona's typical characteristics?

- *Example:* Is your school in line with most of your persona's traits, or does it differ in one or more dimensions?

> **Leverage strengths**

In which areas do you outperform others in your persona?

- Explore how to emphasize these in your messaging and outreach strategies.
- *Example:* Does your school have lower costs than the typical school in your persona?

> **Consider weaknesses**

Which traits do you fall short on?

- Consider whether these are critical to your target market or manageable through strategic adjustments.
- *Example:* If your school has lower graduate earnings, is that important for the types of students you want to attract? (See page 11.)

2) Evaluate Regional Competitiveness

> **Understand regional dynamics**

How does your school compare to your persona's traits in your region?

- *Example:* Are there shared challenges or opportunities that define the competitive landscape?

> **Identify regional differentiation**

What unique qualities make your school stand out against similar schools in your area?

- Pay special attention to traits that are particularly valued by the students you serve.
- *Example:* Affordability or academic offerings are key for Pell recipients.

> **Assess interregional positioning**

How does your school differ from those of your persona in other regions?

- Use this analysis to refine your strategy for cross-regional recruitment.
- *Example:* Are there traits that could attract students from outside your area—or risks that could drive local students elsewhere?

3) Look Across Personas

> **Evaluate cross-persona differences**

What unique qualities set your persona apart from others?

- Given the importance of school size, pay special attention to the personas adjacent to yours in this report for the closest comparisons.
- *Example:* Is affordability the primary draw for students to your type of school versus adjacent personas?

> **Identify competitive threats**

Are there traits where schools in other personas outperform yours in ways that could erode your appeal?

- *Example:* If affordability is your primary draw, are other personas offering deeper affordability and/or better combining it with key traits, such as campus life or academics?

> **Exploit relative advantages**

Where does your persona outperform others?

- *Example:* Focus on strong attributes that can broadly differentiate your school from other personas, such as educational offerings (pages 8–13).

Persona 9: The Rigorous Academic Giant

Vital Statistics[1]

Averages for Institutions in This Category

Attractor (out of 10)[2]	7.1	# undergrads enrolled	11,000	Acceptance rate	56%	% of 4-year schools	9%
Regionality	**Nationwide, with a Northeast focus**	% in-state students	43%	% low-income students	17%	% first-gen students	19%	% part-time students	4%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School

Campus Offerings · Educational Offerings · Surrounding Area · Affordability · Admissions Accessibility

— National Average   — Archetypal

Campus Community & Culture
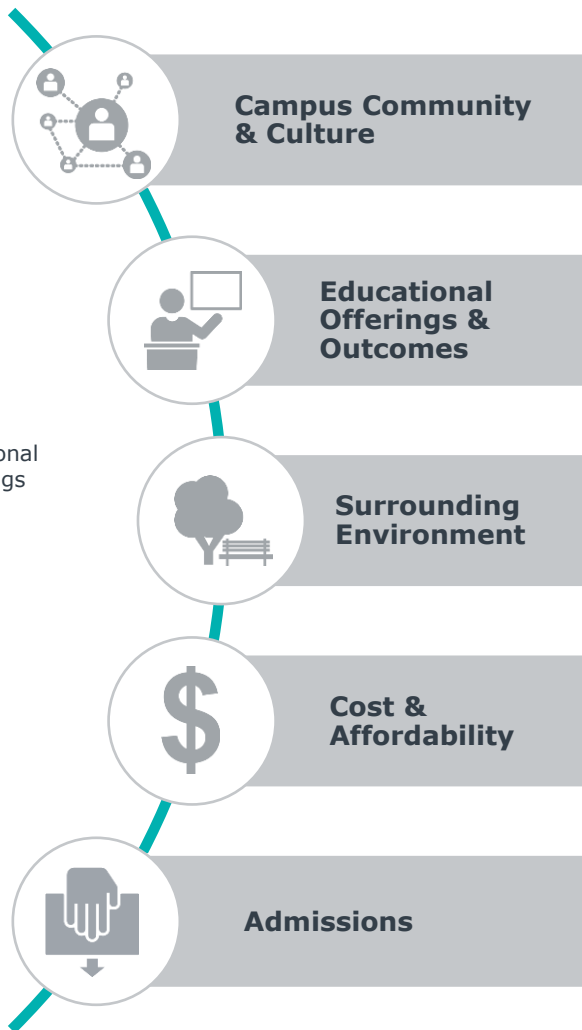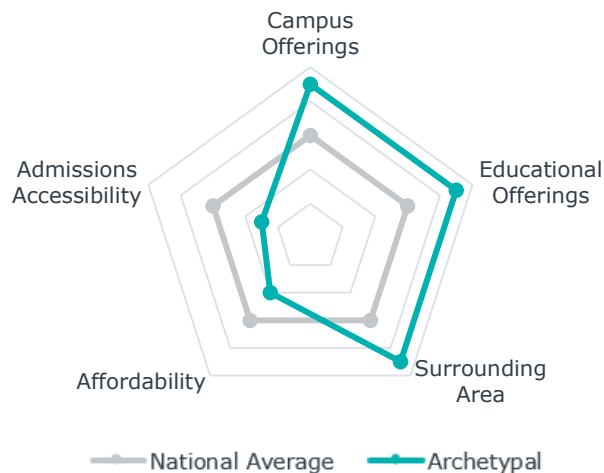
- **Rich campus life:** These schools boast an average of 393 student organizations—higher than any other archetype.
- **Incredibly active sports scene:** With an average of 25 sports teams and Division I membership, these schools usually offer the strongest athletic presence.

Educational Offerings & Outcomes

- **Broad array of majors:** Offering 194 majors, on average, these schools accommodate the widest range of academic interests.
- **Stellar graduation and salary outcomes:** These schools have an 82% 6-year graduation rate and an average salary of $67,400 six years post-graduation.

Surrounding Environment

- **Large urban locales:** These institutions are usually situated in quite densely populated cities, with easy access to diverse professional and cultural opportunities.
- **Concentrated in the Northeast:** The primary region is the Northeast, though these schools are also clustered in the Southeast, West, and Midwest.

Cost & Affordability

- **Above-average net price:** These are among the more expensive schools, with an average net price of $25,870.
- **Above-average financial aid coverage:** These schools meet an average of 77% of financial need (versus 71% average), though they enroll fewer Pell recipients (17%).

Admissions

- **Additional application requirements:** On average, these schools require 4 elements in their application, as well as an average GPA for admitted students of 3.8, reflecting a more thorough and demanding process.

1) See pages 60-67 for a full table of archetypal characteristics.
2) Standardized combination of application volume and yield rate.

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Strengths

What makes "Rigorous Academic Giants" 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 schools in this archetype distinguish themselves with their rich academic diversity and vibrant campus culture. These traits tend to go together with larger schools, whose scale naturally makes them ideal choices for students seeking a dynamic college experience. Coupled with strong early-career outcomes and urban advantages, these institutions provide an attractive launchpad for both personal and professional success.

Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Huge Array of Majors:
194

A Plethora of Extracurriculars:
393 student organizations

Moderate Career Outcomes:
$67,400 within 6 years

Dense Urban Locales:
1,108/sq. mile

An Idyllic Academic and Campus Life

These schools offer a wide range of academic options, with an average of 194 majors that cater to diverse interests. The Midwest is particularly noteworthy, with an impressive 274 academic programs, providing students with a wealth of educational paths (see the table below).

From highly competitive athletics to niche clubs, these institutions maintain a robust extracurricular environment. With 25 sports teams on average and a standout 393 student organizations—over five times the national average—these schools support students in their passions beyond the classroom. The Southeast and Midwest lead the pack, boasting over 460 student groups, fostering a tight-knit and active student body.

Solid Educational Offerings and Outcomes

Graduates from these institutions enjoy solid starting salaries, ranging from $59,400 in the Southeast to $72,100 in the Northeast. This points to a clear return on investment and strong career preparation for students.

Located in large urban centers, especially in the Northeast and West (see below), these schools give students access to cultural, professional, and networking opportunities. This urban setting not only enriches the college experience but also sets the stage for postgraduation success.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Southeast	West	Midwest
Majors	172	212	181	**274**
Student Orgs.	256	**464**	393	**468**
Salary	**$72,100**	$59,400	**$71,100**	$62,700
Pop. Density	**1,630**	779	**1,532**	522

Weaknesses

What makes "Rigorous Academic Giants" less attractive to prospective students? While these institutions excel in many areas, attracting a great many prospective students, they face a few notable challenges. First, the high costs of attendance and barriers to admission may deter some students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, the specific characteristics of the regions where these schools are located can present unique recruitment obstacles in some cases. This ranges from the weather (e.g., lower average temperatures) to the state politics. To the latter point, recent survey data indicate that students are now more sensitive to state-level political climates, with factors such as abortion laws, gun regulations, and other sociopolitical stances influencing their college choice.[1]

Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students

$ Higher Cost:
$25,870 overall average

Barriers to Admission:
4 application requirements

Unappealing Weather (Midwest):
Very cold

Polarizing State Politics:
From the right to the left

Higher Costs Coupled with Admissions Barriers

Compared to the average school—these schools are about 25% more expensive overall, and costs can vary sharply by region. For example, schools in the West and Northeast have the highest average costs (see the table below), while those in the Midwest are more affordable at $18,943.

These schools also tend to have more restrictive admissions requirements, including a higher average GPA for admitted students (3.8) and more application requirements than typical schools. Schools in the Northeast and West are particularly selective, with the highest application standards.

Regional Climate and Political Challenges

There are also challenges that these schools only face in specific regions. For example, the colder climates in the Midwest locales can be a deterrent for students who prefer milder weather.

State-level politics can also pose recruitment challenges. For example, while left-leaning state politics is associated with a higher student-attractor score, the Northeast's more progressive environment may not align with out-of-state students' expectations from conservative regions, while states with more conservative leanings in the Midwest and Southeast may dissuade many liberal-leaning students.

	Key Trait	Northeast	Southeast	West	Midwest
Regional Variations	**Cost**	**$29,126**	$21,865	**$32,780**	$18,943
	Application Requirements	**4**	3	**4**	3
	Climate	Temperate	Hot	Very Hot	**Very Cold**
	State Politics	20 L	**19 R**	25 L	**16 R**

1) Survey finds students base college decisions on state politics.

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Strategic Recommendations

To build on their strengths and mitigate challenges, these schools should leverage their outstanding academic and extracurricular offerings while addressing the higher costs, admissions barriers, and regional idiosyncrasies that may dissuade some students. By tailoring their messaging and recruitment strategies, these schools can broaden their appeal to a more diverse and wide-ranging applicant pool.

Effort	Impact
◑	◑

○ Least
● Greatest

1 Emphasize the Wide-Ranging Educational and Campus Offerings

Showcase Variety and Quality ◔ ●

Emphasize the options for pursuing both academic rigor and personal growth by highlighting the extensive number of majors and extracurriculars, along with the schools' strong graduation rates and early-career outcomes.

Highlight Urban Advantages ◔ ◑

Use the appeal of large-city campuses and the surrounding area's urban amenities to attract students who value access to vibrant cultural, social, and professional opportunities.

Regional Insights

Schools in each region possess a competitive advantage over those in another with at least one of these characteristics, from higher salaries for graduates in the Northeast to more majors and student organizations in the Midwest.

2 Hone Your Value Proposition and Break Down Admissions Barriers

Make the Case for ROI ◑ ◑

Frame the higher tuition as an investment in future success by emphasizing the strong postgraduate salaries and robust educational outcomes. Messaging should also stress how the high number of academic and extracurricular offerings can provide a well-rounded education and competitive edge in the job market.

Simplify Admissions Processes ◑ ●

With higher admissions barriers, these schools can attract more students by highlighting flexible admissions criteria, such as test-optional policies and a holistic review process. Schools also might focus on reducing the number of application requirements and simplifying the application process to broaden their applicant pool.

Regional Insights

The schools of this type in the Midwest and Southeast have significant cost advantages over those in other regions, which they should underscore.

3 Navigate Regional and Political Considerations Thoughtfully

Tailor Messages to Your Audience ◔ ◕

For out-of-state recruitment, carefully navigate regional political leanings. Highlight aspects of the school that align with prospective students' values while being sensitive to state-level perceptions.

Regional Insights

Address climate and location as well. For schools in the Midwest, highlight campus-specific perks that offset the colder climate, such as strong on-campus communities, indoor facilities, etc. In warmer regions, emphasize how the mild weather enhances campus life year-round.

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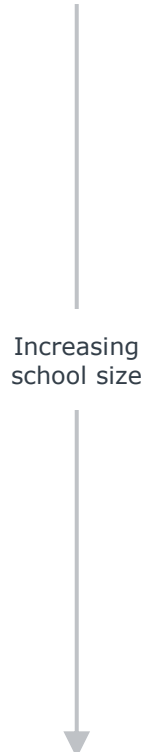
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality[1]	Pages
1	**The Accessible Education Anchor**	Very small	Private	–	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	**The Mission-Driven Learning Community**	Small	Private	– –	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	**The Boutique Elite Institution**	Small	Private	+	Northeast,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

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.
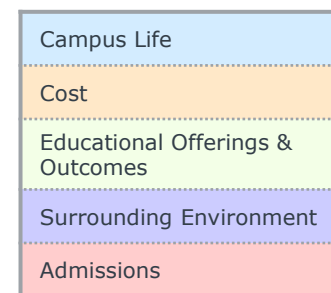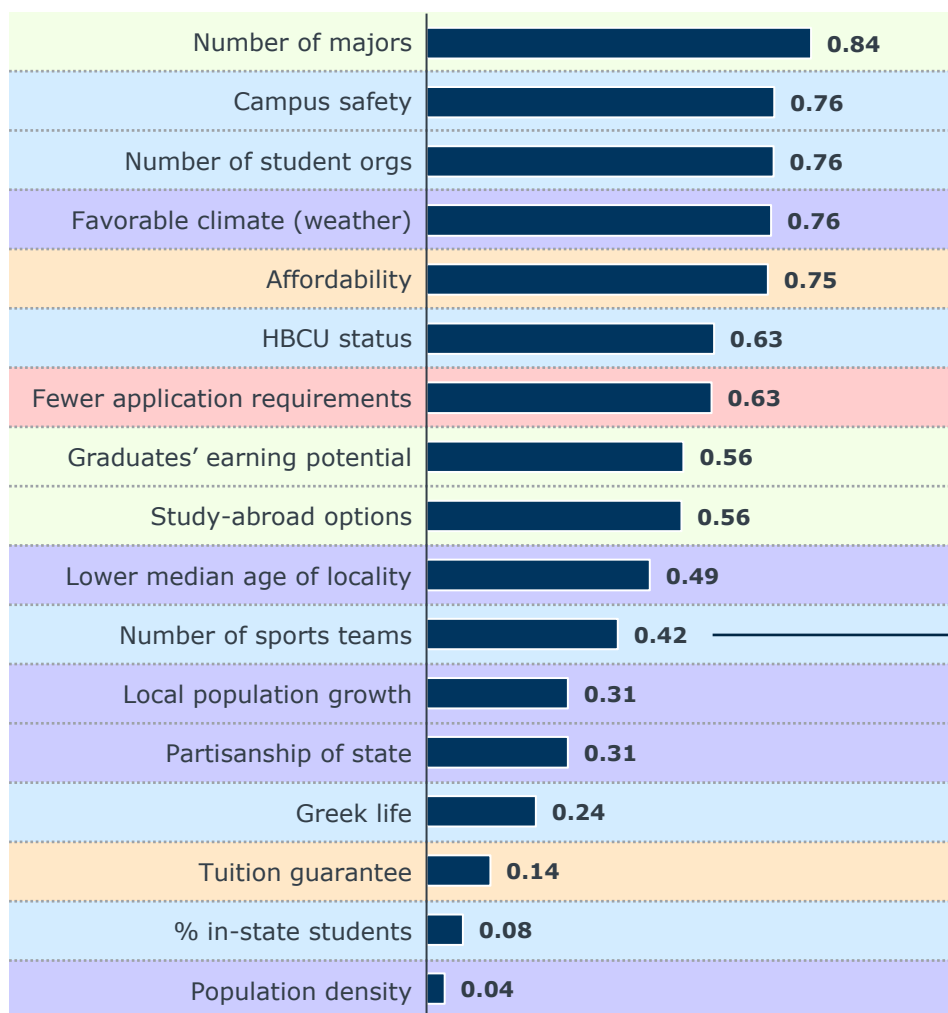
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Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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.

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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