



PERSONA PACKAGE

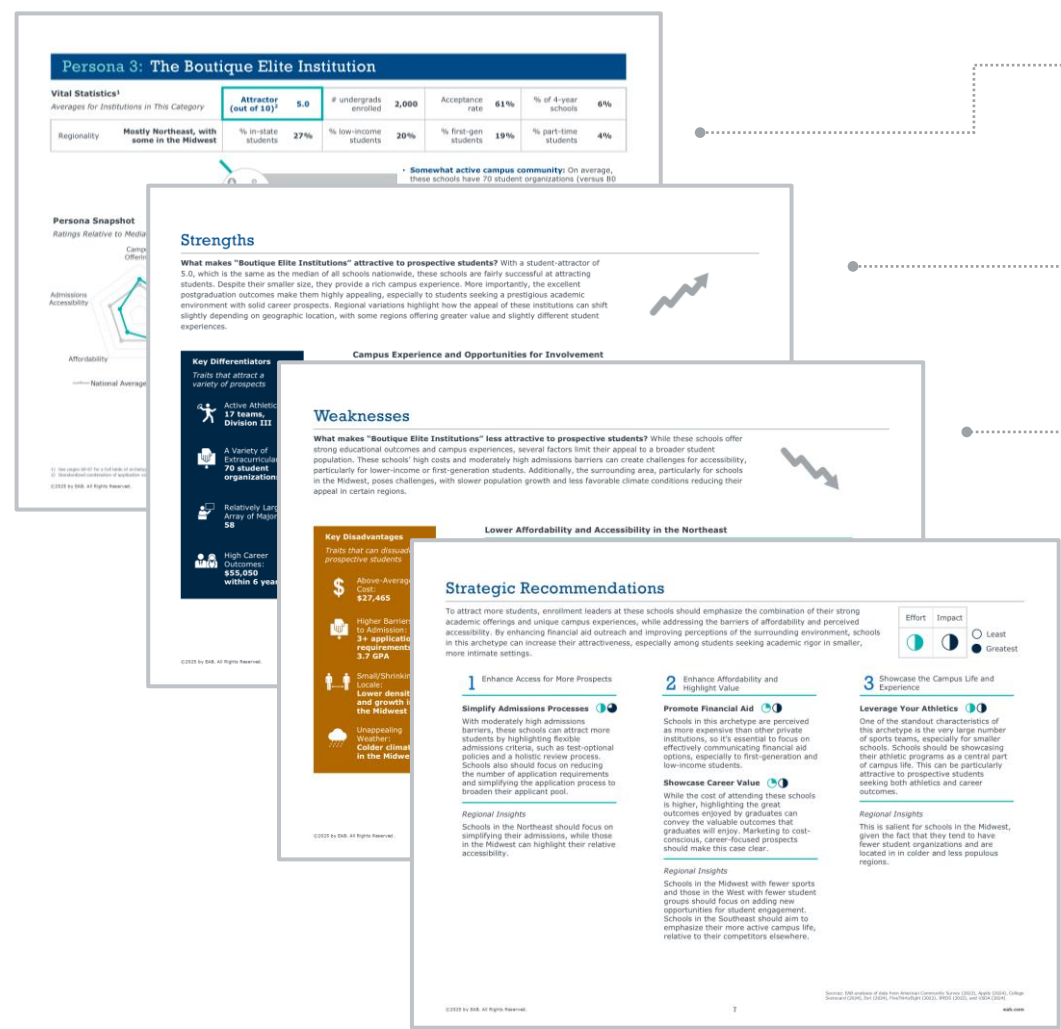
Persona 3: The Boutique Elite Institution

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 “Boutique Elite Institution” 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 3: The Boutique Elite Institution

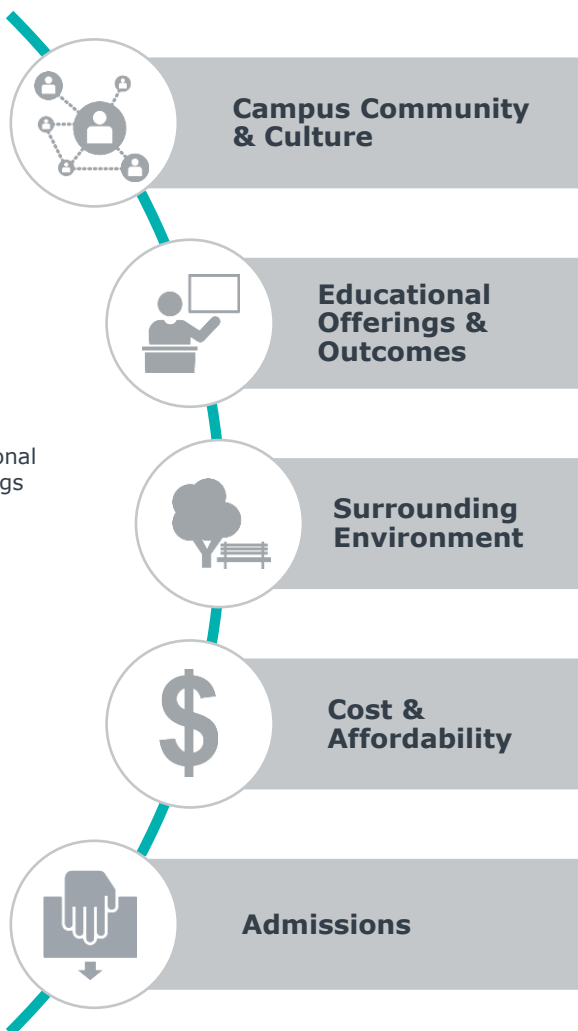
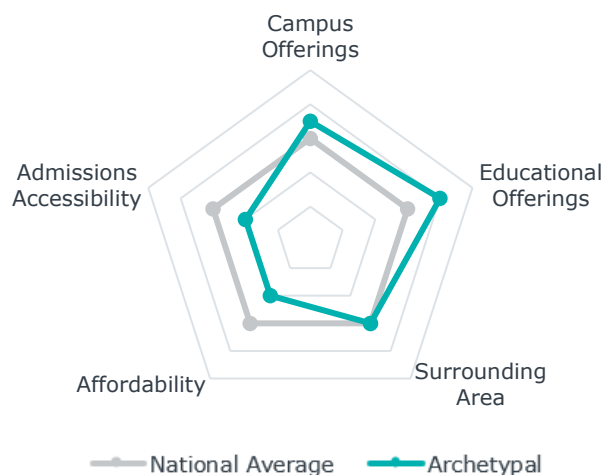
Vital Statistics¹

Averages for Institutions in This Category

		Attractor (out of 10)²	5.0	# undergrads enrolled	2,000	Acceptance rate	61%	% of 4-year schools	6%
Regionality	Mostly Northeast, with some in the Midwest	% in-state students	27%	% low-income students	20%	% first-gen students	19%	% part-time students	4%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School



- **Somewhat active campus community:** On average, these schools have 70 student organizations (versus 80 nationally), which is fairly high for this persona's size.
- **Bigger sports scene:** There's a larger sports presence, especially for their size, with 17 teams on average (compared to 16 nationally) and Division III membership.
- **Somewhat narrow program options:** The median number of majors offered is 58 (versus 70 overall), though it is broad for a school of this size.
- **High postgraduation earnings:** Students earn an average of \$55,050 six years after graduating, much higher than the \$48,700 overall average.
- **Primarily suburban:** Usually located in larger, growing, and politically progressive suburban areas.
- **Cold climates:** These schools are typically found in colder climate zones in the Northeast.
- **Higher net price:** These schools are more expensive than the average US school (\$27,465 versus \$20,036).
- **High financial support, though fewer in need:** These schools meet 83% of financial need on average (versus 71%), though only 20% of students receive Pell Grants.
- **Higher bar for admission:** Though these schools have an average number of application requirements, the bar to get in is higher with a 3.7 GPA on average (versus 3.5 nationwide) and 61% accepted (versus 72% nationwide).

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 “Boutique Elite Institutions” attractive to prospective students? With a student-attractor of 5.0, which is the same as the median of all schools nationwide, these schools are fairly successful at attracting students. Despite their smaller size, they provide a rich campus experience. More importantly, the excellent postgraduation outcomes make them highly appealing, especially to students seeking a prestigious academic environment with solid career prospects. Regional variations highlight how the appeal of these institutions can shift slightly depending on geographic location, with some regions offering greater value and slightly different student experiences.



Key Differentiators
Traits that attract a variety of prospects

Active Athletics:
17 teams, Division III

A Variety of Extracurriculars:
70 student organizations

Relatively Large Array of Majors:
58

High Career Outcomes:
\$55,050 within 6 years

Campus Experience and Opportunities for Involvement

While these schools are small, they punch above their weight when it comes to extracurricular opportunities. The combination of a robust athletics program (with 17 sports teams on average) and a high number of student organizations for the number of undergraduates enrolled creates a well-rounded and attractive student experience.

Schools in the Northeast tend to offer many more student organizations to attendees than schools of this archetype in the Midwest (see the table below), creating a more vibrant and campus atmosphere in the former region that is more inviting to prospective students.

Solid Educational Offerings and Great Outcomes

These schools offer a broad academic experience for their smaller size, which can appeal to a wide range of academic interests. Couple that with the fact that alumni earn significantly higher salaries than the average graduate and you get a high value proposition that burnishes these schools’ prestige.

This value proposition is strongest for those schools in the Northeast, though, where the salary outcomes stand out much more than those of their counterparts in the Midwest (see below).

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest
Sports Teams	17	16
Student Organizations	79	42
Majors	57	55
Salary	\$57,700	\$46,050

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 “Boutique Elite Institutions” less attractive to prospective students? While these schools offer strong educational outcomes and campus experiences, several factors limit their appeal to a broader student population. These schools’ high costs and moderately high admissions barriers can create challenges for accessibility, particularly for lower-income or first-generation students. Additionally, the surrounding area, particularly for schools in the Midwest, poses challenges, with slower population growth and less favorable climate conditions reducing their appeal in certain regions.



Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students



Above-Average Cost:
\$27,465



Higher Barriers to Admission:
3+ application requirements, 3.7 GPA



Small/Shrinking Locale:
Lower density and growth in the Midwest



Unappealing Weather:
Colder climates in the Midwest

Lower Affordability and Accessibility in the Northeast

One of the biggest factors detracting from the attractiveness of this archetype is its cost. With a net price of \$27,465 (and even higher in the Northeast; see the table below), these schools are out of reach for many students, especially those who rely on substantial financial aid. While they meet a high percentage of demonstrated financial need, the overall cost still limits their accessibility. The schools also tend to serve fewer Pell Grant recipients and have higher admissions barriers (especially in the Northeast), making them less attractive to underserved populations.

Slowing Population Growth and Colder Weather in the Midwest

While the general location of these schools—suburban areas with moderate population density—doesn’t appear to be a major detractor overall, regional variations create noticeable disadvantages for schools in the Midwest. Lower population growth and less favorable climate conditions may make these schools less attractive to prospective students, especially compared to institutions in regions with better growth and more temperate climates.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Northeast	Midwest
Cost	\$29,325	\$22,473
Admissions Requirements	4	2
Pop. Growth	28%	1%
Climate	Cold	Extremely Cold

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

To attract more students, enrollment leaders at these schools should emphasize the combination of their strong academic offerings and unique campus experiences, while addressing the barriers of affordability and perceived accessibility. By enhancing financial aid outreach and improving perceptions of the surrounding environment, schools in this archetype can increase their attractiveness, especially among students seeking academic rigor in smaller, more intimate settings.



1 Enhance Access for More Prospects

Simplify Admissions Processes

With moderately high 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 should focus on reducing the number of application requirements and simplifying the application process to broaden their applicant pool.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Northeast should focus on simplifying their admissions, while those in the Midwest can highlight their relative accessibility.

2 Enhance Affordability and Highlight Value

Promote Financial Aid

Schools in this archetype are perceived as more expensive than other private institutions, so it's essential to focus on effectively communicating financial aid options, especially to first-generation and low-income students.

Showcase Career Value

While the cost of attending these schools is higher, highlighting the great outcomes enjoyed by graduates can convey the valuable outcomes that graduates will enjoy. Marketing to cost-conscious, career-focused prospects should make this case clear.

Regional Insights

Schools in the Midwest with fewer sports and those in the West with fewer student groups should focus on adding new opportunities for student engagement. Schools in the Southeast should aim to emphasize their more active campus life, relative to their competitors elsewhere.

3 Showcase the Campus Life and Experience

Leverage Your Athletics

One of the standout characteristics of this archetype is the very large number of sports teams, especially for smaller schools. Schools should be showcasing their athletic programs as a central part of campus life. This can be particularly attractive to prospective students seeking both athletics and career outcomes.

Regional Insights

This is salient for schools in the Midwest, given the fact that they tend to have fewer student organizations and are located in colder and less populous regions.

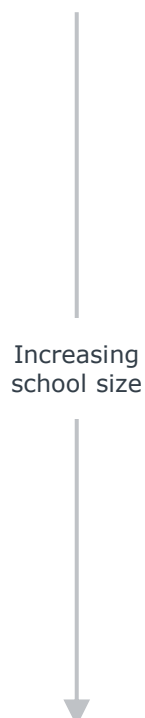


Appendices

APPENDIX

Which One of the Nine Institutional Personas Best Fits Your School?

This page offers an overview of nine distinct school segments, or “institutional personas,” revealed through our analysis. The pages that follow examine each in terms of key factors that drive students’ school selection—admission requirements, net cost, campus life, educational quality, school setting, etc. Find the persona in the table below that most closely resembles your institution; the corresponding pages listed in the last column will offer guidance most pertinent to your situation. Note that you may not find a perfect fit; choose whichever is the closest match. As you continue to explore this report, you will likely find insights of direct relevance to you under more than one persona, with adjacent personas typically overlapping most (e.g., 1 and 2, 7 and 8).



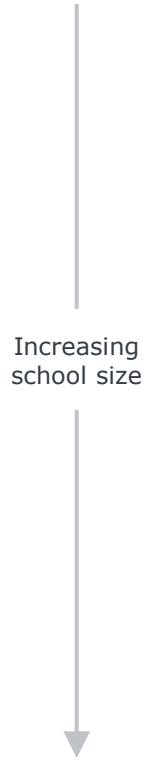
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality ¹	Pages
1	The Accessible Education Anchor	Very small	Private	–	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	The Mission-Driven Learning Community	Small	Private	--	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	The Boutique Elite Institution	Small	Private	+	Northeast, Midwest	28–31
4	The Inclusive Path to Opportunity	Small	Mixed	–	Southeast	32–35
5	The Quintessential and Accessible College	Small	Private	--	National, Midwest emphasis	36–39
6	The Selective Academic Enclave	Small, mid	Private	++	National, Northeast emphasis	40–43
7	The Well-Rounded Education Hub	Mid	Public	--	National, Southeast emphasis	44–47
8	The Outstanding Opportunity Engine	Large	Public	--	Southwest, Midwest, Southeast	48–51
9	The Rigorous Academic Giant	Large	Private	+	National, Northeast emphasis	52–55

“++” = most selective, “--” = least selective

1) As with the other columns in this table, regionality of any given archetype is based on generalizations; exceptions will exist in all cases.

At a Glance: What Broadly Defines Each Persona?

While the preceding page helps you locate your school’s persona using familiar dimensions such as size, sector, selectivity, and geographic region, this page offers a concise description of what defines each persona across the broader set of characteristics considered in this research—such as affordability, academic offerings, and campus environment. These summaries provide a snapshot of what makes each persona distinct, helping you understand how your school fits into the higher education landscape.



	Persona name	Description ¹
1	The Accessible Education Anchor	Typically rooted in rural areas, these very small and typically private schools serve as vital resources for local and nontraditional students.
2	The Mission-Driven Learning Community	These small colleges emphasize access and personalized attention, fostering supportive academic and social environments for a well-rounded education.
3	The Boutique Elite Institution	Private colleges providing a rigorous academic environment, distinguished career outcomes, and close faculty-student connections in smaller settings.
4	The Inclusive Path to Opportunity	Focused on accessibility, these community-centered institutions provide affordable education, particularly to low-income and first-generation students.
5	The Quintessential and Accessible College	“Jack of all trades” schools in suburban areas that offer a balanced, traditional college experience, blending accessibility with a strong sense of community.
6	The Selective Academic Enclave	Prestigious small to midsize institutions combine academic rigor, personalized support, and exceptional career outcomes in large and diverse locales.
7	The Well-Rounded Education Hub	Midsize public schools that excel in offering a variety of academic options and a dynamic campus life to students living in the region.
8	The Outstanding Opportunity Engine	Large, urban public schools with strong ties to their state that combine deep affordability with extensive academic options to provide transformative opportunities for a wide range of students.
9	The Rigorous Academic Giant	Very large, urban universities that combine selective admissions, extensive academic opportunities, and dynamic campus cultures to attract high-achieving students from across the nation.

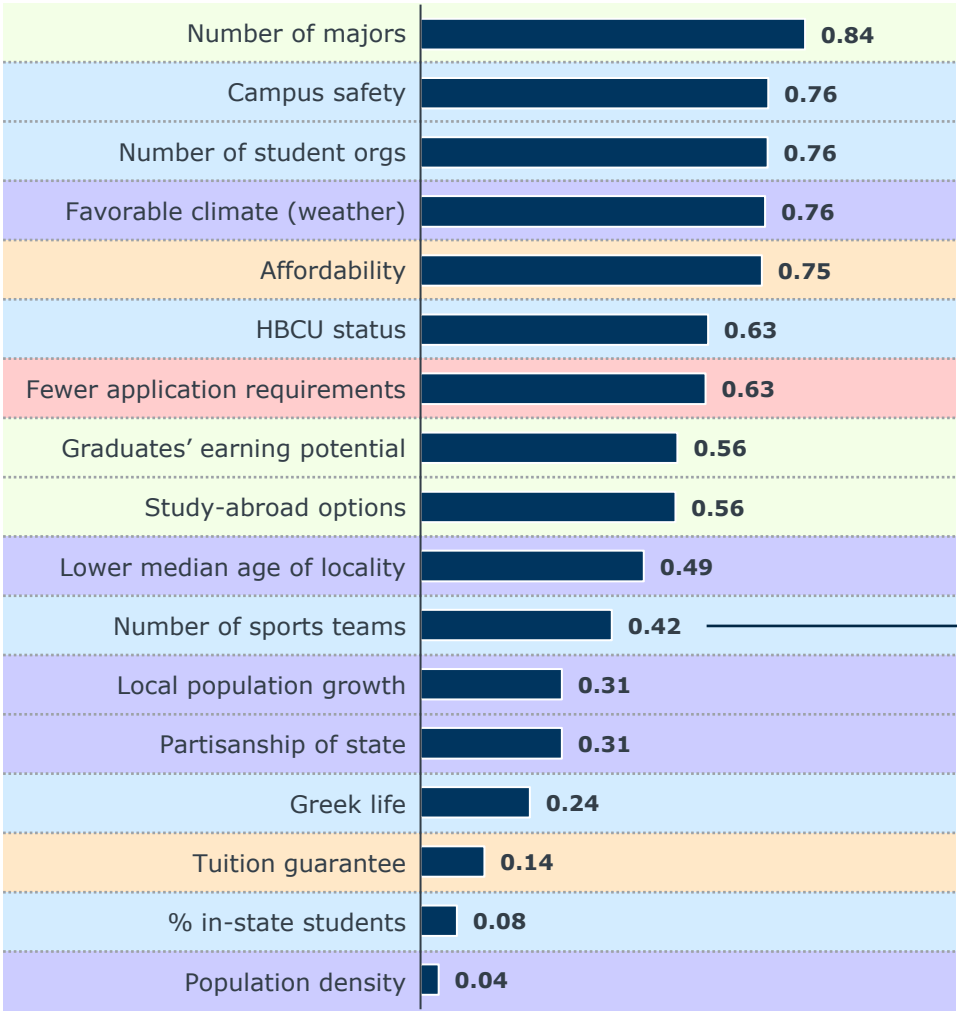
1) As with the other columns in this table, the characteristics of any given archetype are based on generalizations; exceptions will exist in all cases.

Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

This analysis examined over 80 variables to identify the factors that most strongly influence attraction across US four-year colleges. Out of these, 17 characteristics were statistically significant drivers of student attraction. Some effects are expected and intuitive, while others reveal new insights into how schools can differentiate themselves. For example, while traditional drivers such as affordability are indeed quite important, elements of campus life (e.g., the number of student organizations) and features of the surrounding environment (e.g., a favorable climate or population growth) also have a considerable impact on the student-attractor.

It's important to note that certain variables, such as institution size, selectivity, and student traits (e.g., percentage of first-generation students, average GPA of admitted students), do not appear in this chart. These elements serve as control variables and help segment the analysis across different types of schools, allowing us to isolate the effects of other characteristics. They will be discussed in more detail in the following pages, where we explore how the effects of these drivers shown on the right differ for specific types of institutions.

Contribution¹ of Significant Traits to a School's Overall Student-Attractor Score
Average for All Four-Year US Institutions, 10.0 = Maximum Student-Attractor Score



Campus Life
Cost
Educational Offerings & Outcomes
Surrounding Environment
Admissions

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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