



PERSONA PACKAGE

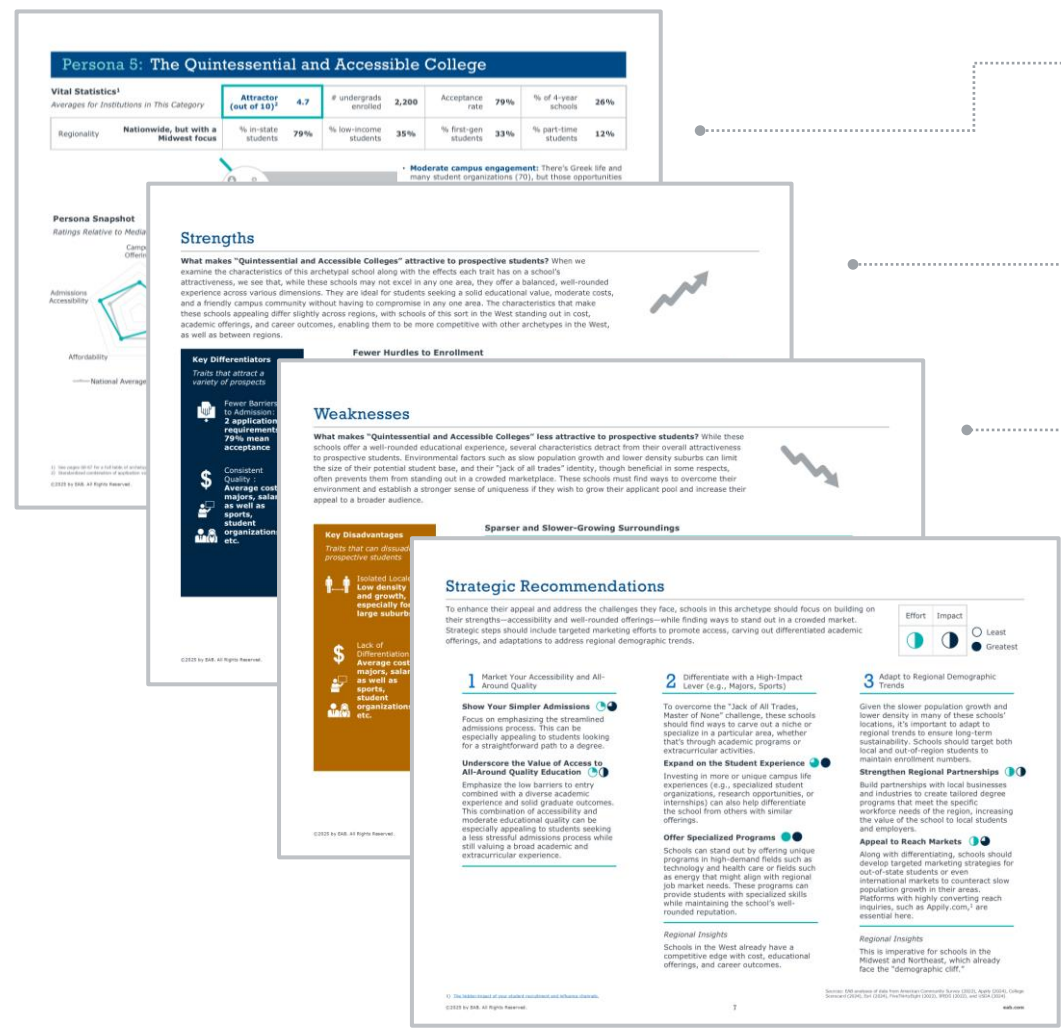
Persona 5: The Quintessential and Accessible College

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 “Quintessential and Accessible College” 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 5: The Quintessential and Accessible College

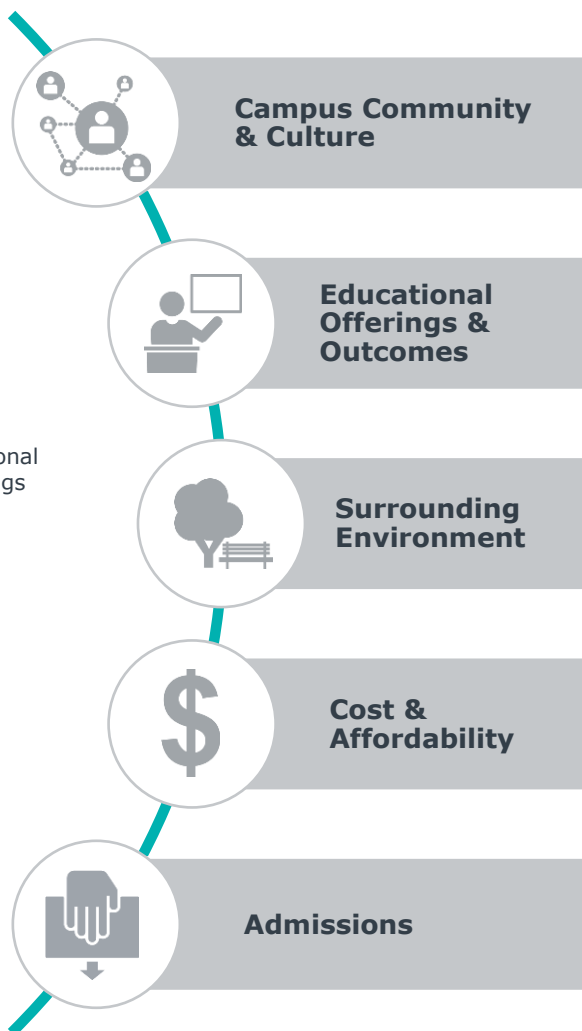
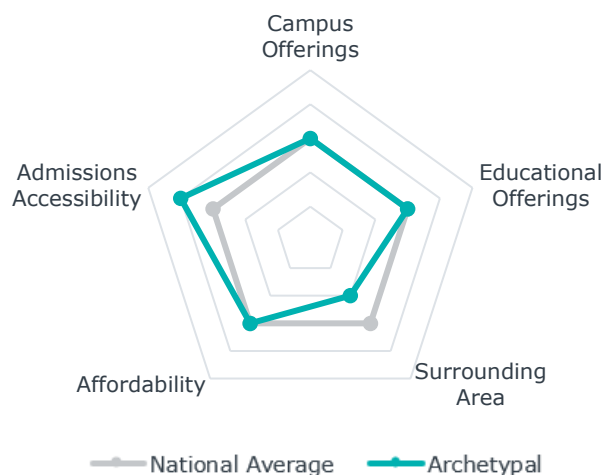
Vital Statistics¹

Averages for Institutions in This Category

		Attractor (out of 10)²	4.7	# undergrads enrolled	2,200	Acceptance rate	79%	% of 4-year schools	26%
Regionality	Nationwide, but with a Midwest focus	% in-state students	79%	% low-income students	35%	% first-gen students	33%	% part-time students	12%

Persona Snapshot

Ratings Relative to Median US School



- **Moderate campus engagement:** There's Greek life and many student organizations (70), but those opportunities are slightly lower than the national average (80).
- **Standard sports offerings:** With 16 sports teams and Division III membership, these schools provide a well-rounded athletic experience.
- **Solid academic offerings:** Slightly fewer majors than the average school (64 vs. 70), but the academic variety is still strong relative to their size.
- **Typical salary outcomes:** Graduates earn \$48,400 on average six years after leaving, which is in line with the average school nationwide.
- **Large suburban locations:** These schools offer students access to many amenities without the congestion or costs of major city living.
- **Slower population growth:** The areas surrounding these schools are growing at a slower rate than average, which may limit future enrollment growth opportunities.
- **Average net price:** The cost of \$19,741 to attend is slightly lower than the national average.
- **Higher Pell Grant participation:** An above-average percentage of students (35%) receive Pell Grants, reflecting their commitment to serving lower-income students.
- **Accessible admissions policies:** With two application requirements for admission and a mean acceptance rate of 79%, these schools are not very selective but still have rigorous academic standards with an average GPA of 3.5 for admitted students.

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 “Quintessential and Accessible Colleges” attractive to prospective students? When we examine the characteristics of this archetypal school along with the effects each trait has on a school’s attractiveness, we see that, while these schools may not excel in any one area, they offer a balanced, well-rounded experience across various dimensions. They are ideal for students seeking a solid educational value, moderate costs, and a friendly campus community without having to compromise in any one area. The characteristics that make these schools appealing differ slightly across regions, with schools of this sort in the West standing out in cost, academic offerings, and career outcomes, enabling them to be more competitive with other archetypes in the West, as well as between regions.



Key Differentiators

Traits that attract a variety of prospects



Fewer Barriers to Admission: **2 application requirements, 79% mean acceptance**



Consistent Quality : **Average costs, majors, salary, as well as sports, student organizations, etc.**



Fewer Hurdles to Enrollment

The characteristics that stand out the most for these schools are the relatively low admission barriers, including fewer application requirements and higher acceptance rates than a majority of schools. This makes them appealing to students who might be less competitive academically or are seeking a less stressful admission process.

This defines schools of this type in most regions. However, the application requirements for those in northeastern states tend to be somewhat higher, differentiating them less from the typical school nationwide.

Jack of All Trades

These schools excel in being well-rounded across multiple aspects. Important qualities, such as average salaries for graduates, a moderate selection of majors, and typical on-campus offerings such as sports and student organizations offer a solid but unspecialized experience.

Though there are fewer schools of this archetype in the West, they hold several key competitive advantages over their counterparts in other regions. Most importantly, the average cost is significantly lower in the West, which, when paired with the widest array of majors offered and the highest graduating salaries, confers a great deal of potential market power.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	West
Cost	\$21,172	\$20,002	\$19,056	\$15,327
Application Requirements	2	3	2	2
Majors	69	67	45	83
Salary	\$47,700	\$49,800	\$43,600	\$51,200

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Apply (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Weaknesses

What makes “Quintessential and Accessible Colleges” less attractive to prospective students? While these schools offer a well-rounded educational experience, several characteristics detract from their overall attractiveness to prospective students. Environmental factors such as slow population growth and lower density suburbs can limit the size of their potential student base, and their “jack of all trades” identity, though beneficial in some respects, often prevents them from standing out in a crowded marketplace. These schools must find ways to overcome their environment and establish a stronger sense of uniqueness if they wish to grow their applicant pool and increase their appeal to a broader audience.



Key Disadvantages

Traits that can dissuade prospective students



Isolated Locale :
Low density and growth, especially for large suburbs



Lack of Differentiation:
Average costs, majors, salary, as well as sports, student organizations, etc.



Sparser and Slower-Growing Surroundings

While these schools are located in suburban areas that would typically be expected to have a strong student population pipeline, they often face challenges related to their local environment. Their surrounding areas tend to have lower population density and slower growth compared to other schools of this size and sector. This can result in a smaller local applicant pool, making it harder to sustain high levels of interest over time.

This trend is especially true for schools in the Midwest, where lower population density and minimal growth are notable detractors. Schools in the West, by contrast, benefit from more robust growth and those in the Northeast benefit from higher density, which offers a slight counterbalance to the other challenges.

Jack of All Trades, Master of None

While these schools perform competently across a range of areas, they lack a standout feature that could significantly enhance their appeal to prospective students. Their all-around solid (yet unspecialized) offerings mean they struggle to differentiate themselves from competitors. Schools of this archetype can find it hard to attract students beyond their immediate vicinity, where prestigious, more convenient, or more affordable options may exist.

Regional Variations

Key Trait	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	West
Pop. Density	179	579	214	373
Pop. Growth	5%	<1%	17%	26%

Sources: EAB analyses of data from American Community Survey (2022), Apply (2024), College Scorecard (2024), Esri (2024), FiveThirtyEight (2022), IPEDS (2022), and USDA (2024).

Strategic Recommendations

To enhance their appeal and address the challenges they face, schools in this archetype should focus on building on their strengths—accessibility and well-rounded offerings—while finding ways to stand out in a crowded market. Strategic steps should include targeted marketing efforts to promote access, carving out differentiated academic offerings, and adaptations to address regional demographic trends.



1 Market Your Accessibility and All-Around Quality

Show Your Simpler Admissions

Focus on emphasizing the streamlined admissions process. This can be especially appealing to students looking for a straightforward path to a degree.

Underscore the Value of Access to All-Around Quality Education

Emphasize the low barriers to entry combined with a diverse academic experience and solid graduate outcomes. This combination of accessibility and moderate educational quality can be especially appealing to students seeking a less stressful admissions process while still valuing a broad academic and extracurricular experience.

2 Differentiate with a High-Impact Lever (e.g., Majors, Sports)

To overcome the “Jack of All Trades, Master of None” challenge, these schools should find ways to carve out a niche or specialize in a particular area, whether that’s through academic programs or extracurricular activities.

Expand on the Student Experience

Investing in more or unique campus life experiences (e.g., specialized student organizations, research opportunities, or internships) can also help differentiate the school from others with similar offerings.

Offer Specialized Programs

Schools can stand out by offering unique programs in high-demand fields such as technology and health care or fields such as energy that might align with regional job market needs. These programs can provide students with specialized skills while maintaining the school’s well-rounded reputation.

Regional Insights

Schools in the West already have a competitive edge with cost, educational offerings, and career outcomes.

3 Adapt to Regional Demographic Trends

Given the slower population growth and lower density in many of these schools’ locations, it’s important to adapt to regional trends to ensure long-term sustainability. Schools should target both local and out-of-region students to maintain enrollment numbers.

Strengthen Regional Partnerships

Build partnerships with local businesses and industries to create tailored degree programs that meet the specific workforce needs of the region, increasing the value of the school to local students and employers.

Appeal to Reach Markets

Along with differentiating, schools should develop targeted marketing strategies for out-of-state students or even international markets to counteract slow population growth in their areas. Platforms with highly converting reach inquiries, such as Appily.com,¹ are essential here.

Regional Insights

This is imperative for schools in the Midwest and Northeast, which already face the “demographic cliff.”

1) [The hidden impact of your student recruitment and influence channels.](#)



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).

Increasing
school size

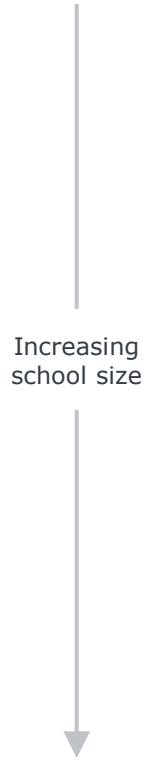
	Persona name	Size	Control	Selectivity	Regionality ¹	Pages
1	The Accessible Education Anchor	Very small	Private	–	Midwest, Southeast, West	20–23
2	The Mission-Driven Learning Community	Small	Private	--	Northeast, Midwest, Southeast	24–27
3	The Boutique Elite Institution	Small	Private	+	Northeast, Midwest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

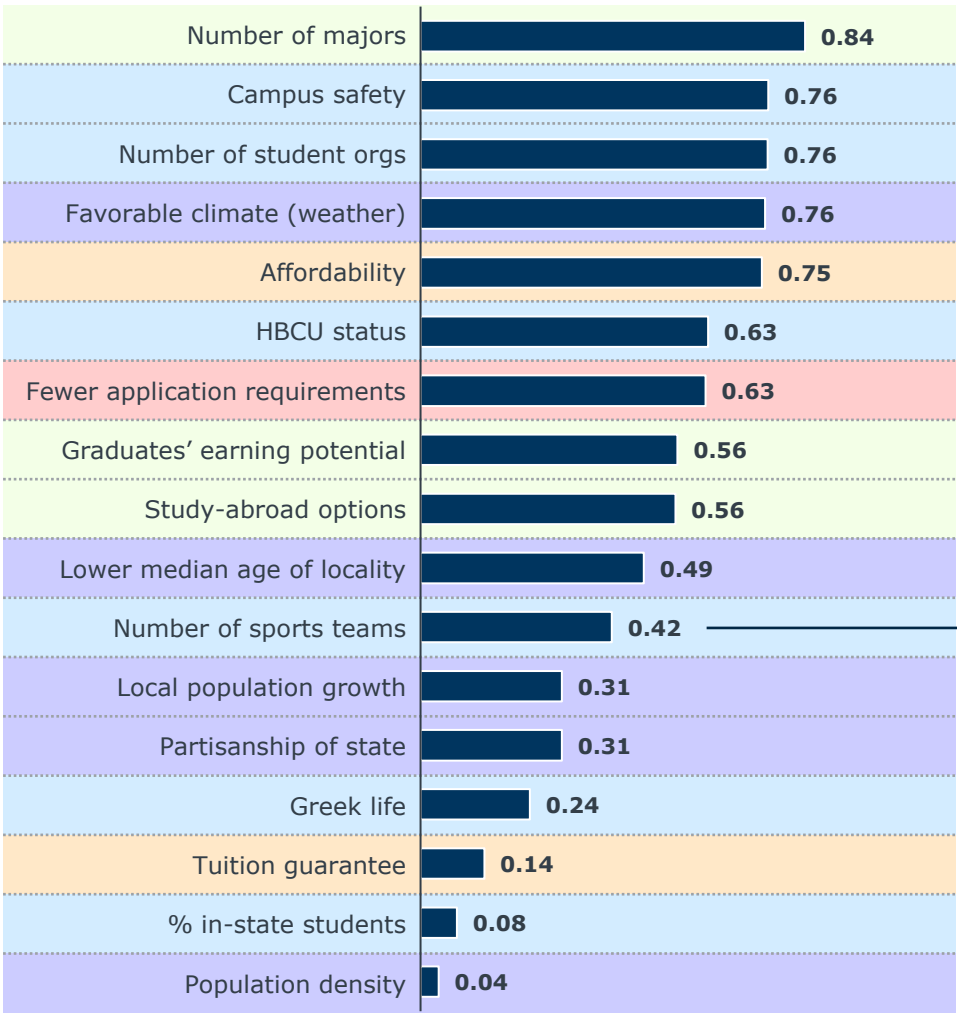
Which School Characteristics Matter Most?

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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