

Student preference for size of colleges and universities

Executive summary

Since 2011, most sectors of institutions of higher education have lost enrollment, with losses ranging from 9% to 35%, depending on overall size. The exception are the very large institutions, which have seen a growth in enrollment of more than three-quarters of a million students during that period. Exactly why students are gravitating to these larger institutions is less clear, although a simple preference for larger colleges and universities may be the driver. This report examines the results of a survey of nearly 1,500 prospective students carried out in July 2025 in partnership with Hanover Research regarding their preference for size of college or university. The results were segmented by age, region, education level, and degree type. Respondents were an even mix of traditional (expectant or recent high school graduates) and nontraditional (older students years removed from completing high school) and distributed equally across the four regions of the United States (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West) who were seeking either an undergraduate or a graduate degree, were 16–55 years old, and were interested in enrolling in a higher education institution within the following two years.

Ricardo Azziz
Center for Higher
Education Mergers and
Acquisitions (CHEMA),
Foundation for Research
and Education Excellence

Rich Katzman
CHEMA

Gary Stocker
CHEMA

Karla Leeper
CHEMA

When asked “How influential is institutional size (e.g., how many students are enrolled at the college/university) in your decision on where to apply?” 63% of all respondents reported that size was extremely to moderately influential on their decision and was a top 2 consideration for 26%. However, when asked which five of a series of listed factors were most important when deciding where to pursue your education, institution size was among the top 5 factors for only 12% of respondents. Regionally, the percentage of respondents reporting that university size was among the top 5 factors in deciding where to pursue their education was significantly higher in the Midwest than the South or West (16 versus 10% or 9%, respectively).

Of all respondents, 14% preferred to apply to an institution that was “Very Large” (20,000 or more students total), while another 42% preferred a “Large” college or university (between 10,000 and 19,999 students total). Regionally, there were no significant differences among those preferring a “Very Large” institution, although the percentage preferring a “Large” institution was lower in the Northeast than the West (37% versus 45%, respectively).

Twenty-five percent to 34% of those preferring a “Large” or “Very Large” institution over a smaller one chose this size of institution because of their greater program options, course options, job or internship opportunities, resources, social opportunities, diversity on campus, extracurricular activities, active social life on campus, financial aid opportunities, academic reputation, access to technology/resources, network opportunities, student clubs/groups, alignment with academic interests, and availability of larger campus events.

Approximately two-fifths of all respondents prioritized overall value for the cost (44%), financial aid packages (41%), flexible program formats (39%), and academic quality (39%) when choosing an educational institution. Additionally, one-third of respondents valued employment prospects after graduation (32%), highlighting a variety of important factors. These top factors were also considered highly influential in respondents’ choice of university or college by those who valued them, further underscoring their importance (84%–91%).

Among all respondents, 43% noted that the current political climate did not impact their choice of institution size. Another 47% noted that the political climate slightly influenced their interest in either larger or smaller institutions. Only 11% reported that the political climate strongly influenced them to prefer to apply to a larger or smaller institution (6% and 5%, respectively). Regionally, the only significant difference between those feeling that the current political climate strongly influenced their preference for larger institutions was between respondents in the Northeast and those in the South or West (9% versus 3% or 4%, respectively).

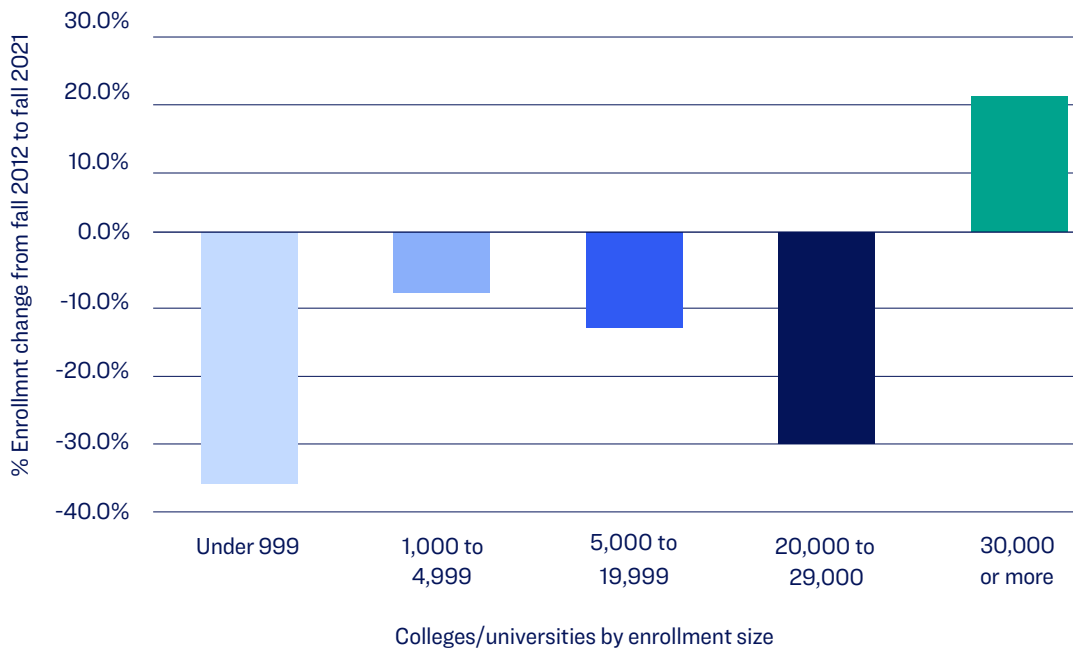
In summary, the above data indicate that institution size plays a moderate, but not dominant, role in the choice that prospective students make when deciding where to apply and enroll. Regionally, there were few differences. Traditional prospective students were more likely to prefer larger institutions than nontraditional students. Only about 15% prefer the very large institution when queried. This would indicate that the subsequent migration of students to these larger institutions likely stems from considerations beyond simple size. These data suggest that the continued enrollment growth of the very large college or university stems primarily from that institution’s ability to compete on many levels, rather than simple student preference for that size of institution. It’s a factor the smaller colleges and universities, especially those in close competition with larger institutions, need to recognize and potentially counter as they aim to survive in a future of declining demographics, increasing costs, and decreasing perceived value and, perhaps, need for higher education degrees, particularly bachelor’s degrees.

Introduction

All sectors of higher education institutions, when viewed by size, have experienced enrollment decreases (Figure 1). The one exception is the very large institutions, a sector that has experienced an enrollment increase of 19% in the past decade, gaining more than 0.75 million students between 2011 and 2021. While it's obvious that students have voted with their feet, gravitating to the very large institutions, the actual cause for this migration is less clear. Does it reflect the ability of the larger institution to provide a quality education at less cost? To offer greater social and student life opportunities? To produce more dominant brand and name recognition? And what's the role of student preference? Do students actually prefer the very large institution?

While there's been a great deal of potential student surveys regarding what drives them to select the college or university they ended up enrolling in, the preference of potential students by institutional size has not been assessed. To this end, we engaged Hanover Research to survey potential students, including individuals completing high school and individuals age 25 and older (see Appendix A for survey methodology and Appendix B for respondent characteristics). The key objectives of the survey were to determine a) what factors drive individuals' preference to enroll at larger or smaller higher education institutions, b) is the current political environment impacting decisions on institution size, and c) what are the demographics and prior education experiences associated with individuals preferring larger or smaller institutions?

FIGURE 1. CHANGE IN ENROLLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION FALL 2012 TO FALL 2021, BY SIZE OF INSTITUTION



Source: NCES Digest. Tables 317.40, fall 2013–2022

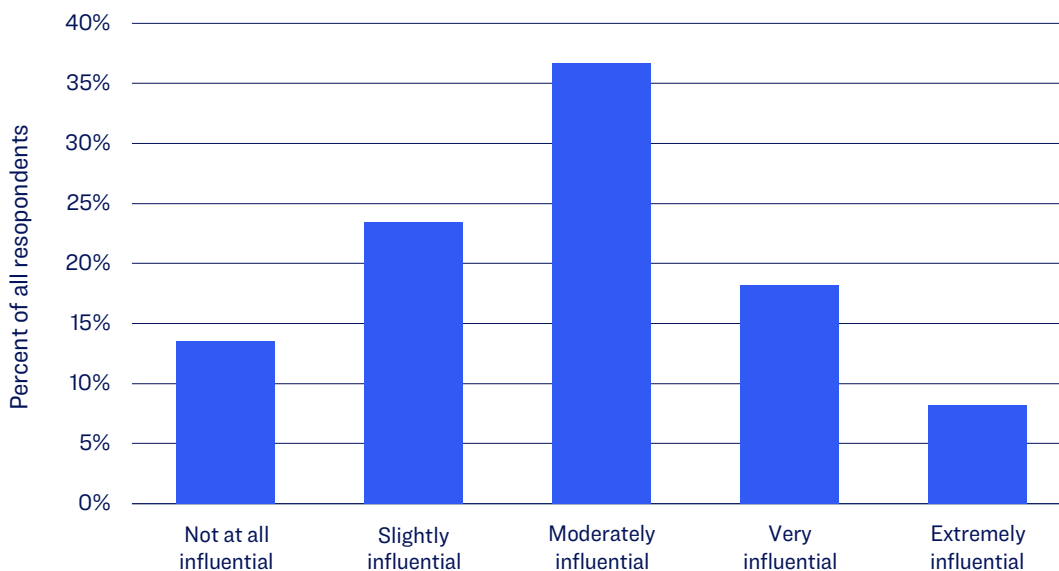
Key findings

Respondents found institution size to be only moderately influential in their decision on where to apply. Only a quarter of respondents (26%) considered institutional size to be very or extremely influential in their application decision (Figure 2), while more than one-third (37%) regarded it as moderately influential. This suggested that institutional size is somewhat influential in respondents' decisions on where to apply, but not the most critical factor. However, when asked which five of a list of factors provided¹ were most important to them when deciding where to pursue their education, institution size was among the top 5 factors for only 12% of respondents and only 6.3% considered size very or extremely influential (see also Figure 4). Regionally, there were few differences, with respondents in the West

considering size less frequently (9%) than those in the Midwest (16%) (see Appendix C).

Traditional undergraduate students (17%) were significantly more likely to value institution size compared with nontraditional undergraduates (9%). Respondents interested in an undergraduate degree considered size as a top 5 factor more frequently than those seeking a graduate degree (13% versus 8%, respectively). Finally, when considering the respondents' degree of education,² those with some high school (18%), a high school diploma or GED (14%), or a professional degree (14%) considered institution size as a top 5 factor influencing their decision of where to pursue their education more frequently than other subgroups (5%–11%).

FIGURE 2. RESPONSE TO “HOW INFLUENTIAL IS INSTITUTIONAL SIZE (E.G., HOW MANY STUDENTS ARE ENROLLED AT THE COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY) IN YOUR DECISION ON WHERE TO APPLY?”



Note: n=1490

- Factors including academic quality, amount of transfer credits accepted, availability of student services (e.g., tutoring, advising), campus atmosphere, cultural diversity, employment prospects after graduation, financial aid package, flexible program format (e.g., online courses, part-time study), frequency of available entry terms, institutional reputation, institution's financial stability, off-campus opportunities (e.g., internships, study abroad programs), offering of specific academic programs, outreach received from staff, faculty, or students of the institution, overall value for the cost, proximity to family/home, recommendation of a friend, religious affiliation, speed to degree, or university size.
- Either some high school, a high school diploma/GED, some college or postsecondary technical training, a 2-year degree, a 4-year degree, some graduate school, a master's degree, a professional degree, or a doctoral degree.

Respondents mostly prefer medium- to large-sized universities. Most respondents (67%) favored medium-sized colleges or universities with between 1,000 and 9,999 students, followed by those (42%) who preferred large-sized institutions with between 10,000 and 19,999 students (Figure 3). Of all respondents, 14% preferred to apply to an institution that was very large (20,000 or more students total), while another 18% preferred a small institution with less than 1,000 students. Regionally, there were no significant differences among those preferring a “Very Large” institution, although the percentage preferring a “Large” institution was lower in the Northeast than the West (37% versus 45%, respectively) (see Appendix C).

Prospective graduate and traditional undergraduate students were significantly more likely to choose a “Large” institution than nontraditional undergraduates (48% and 44% versus 35%, respectively). Nontraditional undergraduate students (26%) were significantly more likely to prefer small institutions compared with their counterparts (11% and 16%).

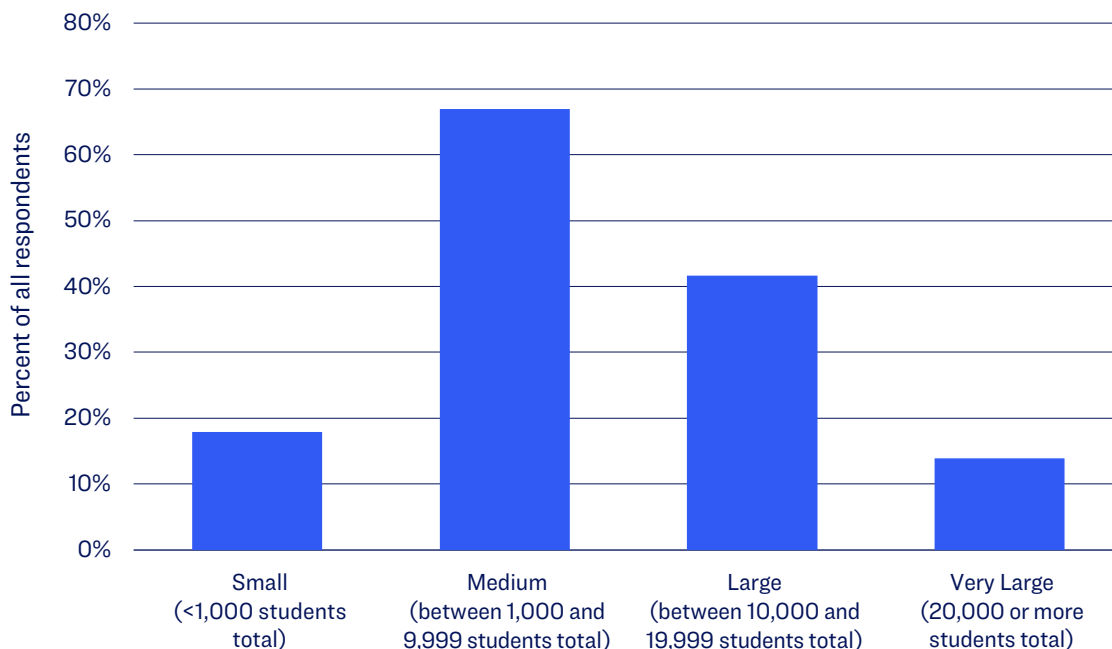
Respondents who primarily prefer small- to medium-sized institutions do so due to their smaller class sizes. More than half of respondents who favor small- or medium-sized institutions cited small class sizes (54%) as a key reason for their preference, highlighting this as one of the most important factors. Additionally, more than two-fifths noted closer relationships with professors/staff (45%), personalized attention (45%), and a less crowded campus (44%) as important in their decision.

Traditional undergraduate students were significantly more likely to prefer small or medium institutions because of their smaller class sizes (60%) and less crowded campuses (56%) compared with their counterparts.

Respondents who primarily prefer large or very large institutions do so for the variety of options available across courses, programs, and opportunities. More than one-third of respondents cited more program options (34%), course options (34%), and job or internship opportunities (34%) as reasons for preferring large or very large institutions. Additional respondents also mentioned more resources (31%), social opportunities (31%), greater diversity on campus (31%), and a more active social life on campus (31%), highlighting a range of factors across both academic and social dimensions. Traditional undergraduate students were significantly more likely to prefer large or very large schools for their job or internship opportunities (44%), social opportunities (43%), more active social life on campus (42%), and extracurricular activities (38%) compared with their counterparts.

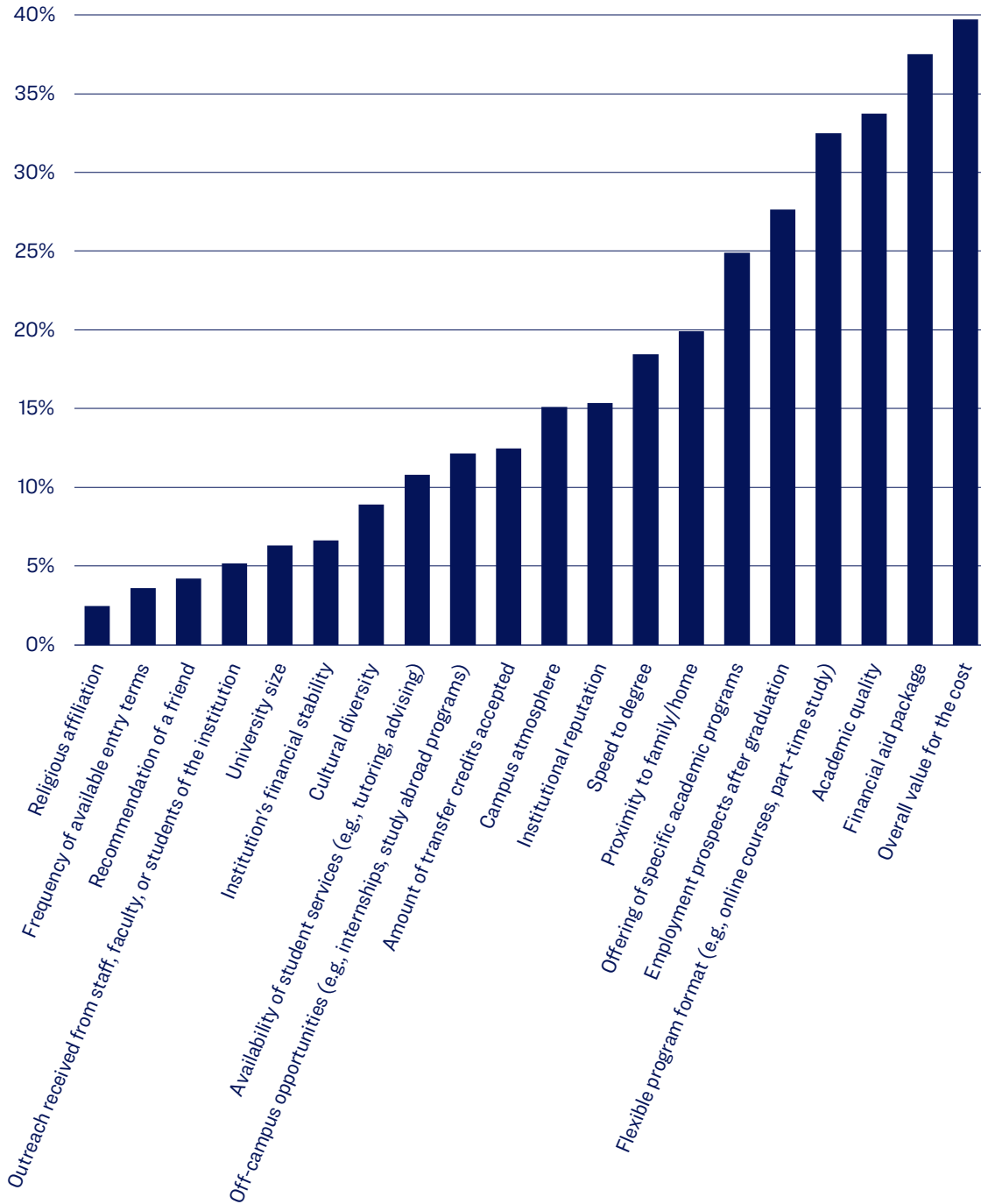
Overall, the above data indicate that institution size is moderately influential in determining a prospective student’s decision on where to apply. However, only a small fraction (~15%) prefer the very large institution when queried. This would indicate that the subsequent migration of students to very large institutions likely stems from considerations beyond simple size. Following, we report on our exploration of what some of those factors driving students may be.

FIGURE 3. RESPONSE TO “WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONAL SIZES WOULD YOU PREFER FOR A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY THAT YOU ARE APPLYING TO?”



Note: n=1288

FIGURE 4. THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE FOLLOWING FACTOR(S) VERY OR EXTREMELY INFLUENCED RESPONDENTS' CHOICE IN COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY.



Note: Percent of respondents choosing each factor. Respondents could choose multiple factors to respond to (n=1490). Factors presented for selection included religious affiliation, frequency of available entry terms, recommendation of a friend, outreach received from staff, faculty, or students of the institution, university size, institution's financial stability, cultural diversity, availability of student services (e.g., tutoring, advising), off-campus opportunities (e.g., internships, study abroad programs), amount of transfer credits accepted, campus atmosphere

Cost, program format, and future prospects were the most important factors to respondents when deciding where to pursue their education. Approximately two-fifths of respondents prioritized overall value for the cost (44%), financial aid packages (41%), flexible program formats (39%), and academic quality (39%) when choosing an educational institution (Figure 4). Additionally, one-third of respondents valued employment prospects after graduation (32%), highlighting a variety of important factors. These top factors were also considered highly influential in respondents' choice of university or college by those who valued them, further underscoring their importance (84%–91%).

Respondents primarily planned to enroll in public institutions. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (61%) intended to enroll in public institutions, highlighting this as the most preferred option. One-quarter (26%) were unsure about the type of institution they wanted to enroll in. Prospective graduate students (20%) were significantly more likely to plan to enroll in private institutions compared with their counterparts (15% and 9%). However, a significant proportion of those seeking a graduate degree still opted for public institutions (50%).

Respondents cited career advancement and financial stability as key motivations to continue their education. When asked about their motivations, career advancement opportunities and financial stability emerged as the most common themes, with verbatim responses such as *“I want to have more career opportunities,” “Promotions and higher salary potential,” “Higher pay and to secure my future,”* and *“The opportunity for earning potential.”* Additionally, respondents also cited personal growth and knowledge as motivations, with comments such as *“I always aspire to continue learning every single day”* and *“I want to continue my education because I always want to be learning.”*

Respondents considered the current political climate to be somewhat influential in their application decisions. Approximately one-quarter of respondents (28%) regarded the current political climate as very or extremely influential in their decision-making process regarding where and when to apply, while one-third (30%) found it to be moderately influential. Notably, graduate students (42%) were significantly more likely to find the current political climate highly influential in their application decisions compared with traditional (20%) and nontraditional undergraduates (28%).

Among all respondents, 43% noted that the current political climate did not impact their choice of size of institution they were interested in applying to. Another 47% noted that the political climate slightly influenced their interest in either larger or smaller institutions. Only 11% reported that the political climate strongly influenced them to prefer to apply to a larger or smaller institution (6% and 5%, respectively).

Regionally, the only significant difference was between those feeling that the current political climate strongly influenced their preference for larger institutions between respondents in the Northeast and those in the South or West (9% versus 3% or 4%, respectively) (see Appendix C).

Conclusions

Most sectors of institutions of higher education by size have experienced significant drops in enrollment since 2011. In contrast, most very large institutions have seen a growth in enrollment during that period of time. Exactly why students are gravitating to these larger institutions is less clear, although a simple preference for larger colleges and universities may be the driver. Our survey of almost 1,500 prospective students, evenly divided into traditional (high school students or recent graduates) and nontraditional (older) candidates, and across the four regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West) of the United States, noted that when choosing a prospective college or university, approximately two-fifths of respondents prioritized overall value for the cost, financial aid packages, flexible program formats, and academic quality, and one-third valued employment prospects after graduation.

Preference for a specific institution's size appears to play a moderate, but not dominant, role in the choice that prospective students make when deciding where to apply and enroll. Regionally, there were few differences. Traditional students were more likely to prefer larger institutions than nontraditional students. Graduate students were more likely than undergraduate students to consider institutional size highly influential in their decision-making on where to apply and to prefer a “Large” institution (between 10,000 and 19,999 students total), but not necessarily a “Very Large” college or university (20,000 or more students total) than did undergraduates. These data suggest that the increasing enrollment of the very large university stems primarily from that institution's ability to compete on a multitude of levels, rather than student preference for that size of institution. These data suggest that the competitive edge of colleges or universities with >30,000 students goes beyond simple student preference for institutional size—factors that smaller colleges and universities, especially those in close competition with larger institutions, need to recognize and potentially counter as they aim to survive in a future of declining demographics, increasing costs, and decreasing perceived value and, perhaps, need for higher education degrees, particularly bachelor's degrees.

Appendix A

Survey methodology

The survey was administered online by Hanover Research in July 2025 using the Qualtrics platform, and the results were segmented by age (relative to their role—Traditional Undergrad, Nontraditional Undergrad, and Graduate), region (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West), education level, and degree type. The respondent qualifications were prospective students (undergraduate and graduate); ages 16–55 years old (even mix of traditional and nontraditional); who were currently enrolled in high school, high school graduate, some college no degree, associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, doctorate; and who were interested in enrolling in higher education within the next ~2 years. The analysis included a total of 1,490 respondents who expressed some interest in enrolling in college or university within the next 2 years, following data cleaning. Overall, including those disqualified for any reason who were not at all likely to enroll/

pursue any degree, 50.4% of all respondents had some interest in enrolling in college and were included in the survey results. Statistically significant differences (95% confidence level) were calculated between groups.

We note that:

- Sample sizes vary across questions as some questions only pertain to a subset of respondents.
- After data collection, Hanover identified and removed low-quality respondents.
- “Don’t Know or Not Applicable” responses, and equivalent, were often excluded from the figures and analysis in order to focus on respondents who did express an opinion.
- Percentages may sum to over 100% for questions where respondents could select more than one answer option.

Appendix B

Institutional size preference survey

TABLE B1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS, ALL RESPONSES, AUGUST 2025

	Response count	Response percent
Type of prospective student	n=1490	
Traditional undergrad	588	39%
Nontraditional undergrad	589	40%
Graduate	313	21%
Age range: How old are you? Please enter a whole number.	n=1490	
Under 18	294	20%
18 to 24	406	27%
25 to 34	193	13%
35 to 44	358	24%
45 to 54	224	15%
55+	15	1%
In which country do you currently reside?	n=1490	
United States	1,490	100%
Region regrouped: In which state, district, or territory do you currently reside?	n=1490	
Northeast	366	25%
Midwest	382	26%
South	379	25%
West	363	24%
U.S. territory	0	0%
In which state, district, or territory do you currently reside?	n=1490	
Alabama	18	1%
Alaska	2	0%
Arizona	40	3%
Arkansas	7	0%
California	175	12%
Colorado	26	2%
Connecticut	26	2%
Delaware	4	0%
District of Columbia	5	0%
Florida	69	5%
Georgia	34	2%
Hawaii	4	0%
Idaho	8	1%
Illinois	71	5%
Indiana	41	3%
Iowa	11	1%

TABLE B1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS, ALL RESPONSES, AUGUST 2025 (CONTINUED)

	Response count	Response percent
In which state, district, or territory do you currently reside?	n=1490	
Kansas	18	1%
Kentucky	13	1%
Louisiana	16	1%
Maine	6	0%
Maryland	14	1%
Massachusetts	34	2%
Michigan	51	3%
Minnesota	27	2%
Mississippi	8	1%
Missouri	29	2%
Montana	5	0%
Nebraska	11	1%
Nevada	20	1%
New Hampshire	8	1%
New Jersey	60	4%
New Mexico	4	0%
New York	117	8%
North Carolina	27	2%
North Dakota	2	0%
Ohio	89	6%
Oklahoma	17	1%
Oregon	19	1%
Pennsylvania	109	7%
Rhode Island	4	0%
South Carolina	15	1%
South Dakota	3	0%
Tennessee	18	1%
Texas	88	6%
Utah	17	1%
Vermont	2	0%
Virginia	24	2%
Washington	42	3%
West Virginia	2	0%
Wisconsin	29	2%
Wyoming	1	0%

TABLE B1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS, ALL RESPONSES, AUGUST 2025 (CONTINUED)

	Response count	Response percent
What is the highest level of education you have completed?	n=1490	
Some high school	221	15%
High school diploma/GED	427	29%
Some college or postsecondary technical training (including if you are currently enrolled in a postsecondary program)	351	24%
2-year degree	140	9%
4-year degree	221	15%
Some graduate school	20	1%
Master's degree	77	5%
Professional degree (e.g., M.D., D.D.S., etc.)	14	1%
Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D.)	19	1%
How likely are you to do the following within the next 3 years?		
Enroll in a graduate degree program	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	268	18%
Slightly Likely	381	26%
Moderately Likely	357	24%
Very Likely	295	20%
Extremely Likely	189	13%
Top 2	484	32%
Enroll in a non-degree programs (e.g., micro credential, certificate program)	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	272	18%
Slightly Likely	393	26%
Moderately Likely	412	28%
Very Likely	284	19%
Extremely Likely	129	9%
Top 2	413	28%
Enroll in a bachelor's degree program	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	231	16%
Slightly Likely	313	21%
Moderately Likely	303	20%
Very Likely	300	20%
Extremely Likely	343	23%
Top 2	643	43%
Purchase a home	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	604	41%
Slightly Likely	259	17%
Moderately Likely	267	18%
Very Likely	206	14%
Extremely Likely	154	10%
Top 2	360	24%

TABLE B1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS, ALL RESPONSES, AUGUST 2025 (CONTINUED)

	Response count	Response percent
How likely are you to do the following within the next 3 years?		
Pursue a new career	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	197	13%
Slightly Likely	300	20%
Moderately Likely	343	23%
Very Likely	376	25%
Extremely Likely	274	18%
Top 2	650	44%
Pursue a promotion/advancement in your current career	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	246	17%
Slightly Likely	260	17%
Moderately Likely	320	21%
Very Likely	391	26%
Extremely Likely	273	18%
Top 2	664	45%
Relocate to a new city or state	n=1490	
Not at All Likely	390	26%
Slightly Likely	331	22%
Moderately Likely	338	23%
Very Likely	273	18%
Extremely Likely	158	11%
Top 2	431	29%
Which of the following programs are you most likely to pursue within the next 3 years?	n=1490	
Bachelor's degree	1,177	79%
Master's degree	264	18%
Doctoral degree	49	3%
None of the above	0	0%

Appendix C

Institutional size preference survey

TABLE C1. REGARDING PREFERENCE FOR INSTITUTION SIZE BY REGION, AUGUST 2025

	By region*									
	Total		Northeast		Midwest		South		West	
	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %
Which of the following factors are most important to you when deciding where to pursue your education? Please select up to five options.	n=1490		n=366		n=382		n=379		n=363	
University size	180	12%	49	13%	60	16%	39	10%	32	9%
Please rate the extent to which the following factor(s) influence your choice in college or university:										
University size	n=180		n=49		n=60		n=39		n=32	
Not at All Influential	4	2%	2	4%	1	2%	1	3%	0	0%
Slightly Influential	17	9%	4	8%	5	8%	3	8%	5	16%
Moderately Influential	65	36%	13	27% ^a	27	45% ^b	17	44%	8	25%
Very Influential	64	36%	20	41%	18	30%	12	31%	14	44%
Extremely Influential	30	17%	10	20%	9	15%	6	15%	5	16%
Top 2 (very or extremely influential)	94	52%	30	61%	27	45%	18	46%	19	59%
How influential is institutional size (e.g., how many students are enrolled at the college/university) in your decision on where to apply?	n=1490		n=366		n=382		n=379		n=363	
Not at All Influential	202	14%	46	13%	54	14%	44	12%	58	16%
Slightly Influential	349	23%	81	22%	101	26%	91	24%	76	21%
Moderately Influential	546	37%	136	37%	132	35%	150	40%	128	35%
Very Influential	271	18%	72	20%	65	17%	62	16%	72	20%
Extremely Influential	122	8%	31	8%	30	8%	32	8%	29	8%
Top 2 (very or extremely influential)	393	26%	103	28%	95	25%	94	25%	101	28%

TABLE C1. REGARDING PREFERENCE FOR INSTITUTION SIZE BY REGION, AUGUST 2025 (CONTINUED)

	By region*									
	Total		Northeast		Midwest		South		West	
	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %
Which of the following institutional sizes would you prefer for a college or university that you are applying to? Please select all that apply.	n=1288		n=320		n=328		n=335		n=305	
Medium (between 1,000 and 9,999 students total)	862	67%	225	70%	219	67%	220	66%	198	65%
Large (between 10,000 and 19,999 students total)	536	42%	117	37% ^c	131	40%	147	44%	141	46% ^d
Small (<1,000 students total)	231	18%	51	16%	57	17%	64	19%	59	19%
Very Large (20,000 or more students total)	179	14%	43	13%	39	12%	57	17%	40	13%
Which of the following sizes of schools would you prefer?	n=397		n=94		n=86		n=116		n=101	
Small (<1,000 students total)	46	12%	8	9%	12	14%	14	12%	12	12%
Medium (between 1,000 and 9,999 students total)	201	51%	53	56% ^e	34	40% ^f	56	48%	58	57% ^g
Large (between 10,000 and 19,999 students total)	117	29%	23	24%	27	31%	42	36%	25	25%
Very Large (20,000 or more students total)	33	8%	10	11% ^h	13	15% ⁱ	4	3% ^j	6	6% ^k
Why do you prefer an institution that is [large/very large] over one that is smaller? Please select all that apply.	n=442		n=98		n=114		n=120		n=110	
More program options	152	34%	28	29%	35	31%	46	38%	43	39%
More course options	152	34%	34	35%	44	39%	39	33%	35	32%
More job or internship opportunities	150	34%	35	36%	41	36%	35	29%	39	35%
More resources	139	31%	29	30%	32	28%	37	31%	41	37%

TABLE C1. REGARDING PREFERENCE FOR INSTITUTION SIZE BY REGION, AUGUST 2025 (CONTINUED)

	By region*									
	Total		Northeast		Midwest		South		West	
	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %
Why do you prefer an institution that is [large/very large] over one that is smaller? Please select all that apply.	n=442		n=98		n=114		n=120		n=110	
More social opportunities	139	31%	40	41% ^l	35	31%	31	26% ^m	33	30%
More diversity on campus	135	31%	28	29%	35	31%	35	29%	37	34%
More active social life on campus	135	31%	31	32%	47	41% ⁿ	28	23% ^o	29	26% ^p
Better financial aid opportunities	132	30%	26	27%	34	30%	38	32%	34	31%
Academic reputation	131	30%	33	34%	35	31%	36	30%	27	25%
Access to more technology/resources	128	29%	29	30%	32	28%	33	28%	34	31%
Diverse student body	125	28%	32	33%	33	29%	30	25%	30	27%
More extracurricular activities	121	27%	24	24%	35	31%	34	28%	28	25%
Additional network opportunities	121	27%	26	27%	31	27%	35	29%	29	26%
More student clubs/groups	120	27%	20	20% ^q	34	30%	29	24%	37	34% ^r
Better alignment with academic interests	120	27%	20	20%	28	25%	38	32%	34	31%
Availability of larger campus events	111	25%	36	37% ^s	19	17% ^t	31	26%	25	23% ^u
More housing options	82	19%	18	18%	17	15%	28	23%	19	17%
More athletic opportunities to participate as a fan	77	17%	18	18%	22	19%	20	17%	17	15%
Focus on research programs	75	17%	14	14%	15	13%	24	20%	22	20%
More opportunities to attend athletics events	65	15%	21	21% ^v	16	14%	11	9% ^w	17	15%
Interest in a specific institution of this size	59	13%	15	15%	17	15%	15	13%	12	11%

TABLE C1. REGARDING PREFERENCE FOR INSTITUTION SIZE BY REGION, AUGUST 2025 (CONTINUED)

	By region*									
	Total		Northeast		Midwest		South		West	
	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %	Response Count	Response %
Why do you prefer an institution that is [large/very large] over one that is smaller? Please select all that apply.	n=442		n=98		n=114		n=120		n=110	
More opportunities to participate in athletics	52	12%	16	16% ^x	17	15% ^y	6	5% ^z	13	12%
More athletic opportunities as an athlete	50	11%	13	13%	16	14%	12	10%	9	8%
Other	3	1%	2	2%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
How would you describe the influence of the current political climate on the size of the institution(s) that you are interested in applying to.	n=1141		n=276		n=291		n=289		n=285	
Strongly Toward Larger School(s)	63	6%	25	9% ^{aa}	17	6%	10	3% ^{bb}	11	4% ^{cc}
Slightly Toward Larger School(s)	234	21%	50	18%	69	24%	52	18%	63	22%
No Impact	490	43%	113	41%	115	40%	136	47%	126	44%
Slightly Toward Smaller School(s)	300	26%	73	26%	76	26%	79	27%	72	25%
Strongly Toward Smaller School(s)	54	5%	15	5%	14	5%	12	4%	13	5%

Note: *Figures highlighted in gray indicate significant differences.

^a Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^b Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^c Significant difference with West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^d Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^e Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^f Significant difference with Northeast and West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^g Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^h Significant difference with South using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

ⁱ Significant difference with South and West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^j Significant difference with Northeast and Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^k Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^l Significant difference with South using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^m Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

ⁿ Significant difference with South and West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^o Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^p Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^q Significant difference with West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^r Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^s Significant difference with Midwest and West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^t Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^u Significant difference with Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^v Significant difference with South using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^w Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^x Significant difference with South using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^y Significant difference with South using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^z Significant difference with Northeast and Midwest using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^{aa} Significant difference with South and West using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^{bb} Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

^{cc} Significant difference with Northeast using Z-test ($p < 0.05$).

About the authors

Ricardo Azziz serves as director of the Center for Higher Education Mergers and Acquisitions (CHEMA) at the Foundation for Research and Education Excellence (FREE Foundation), executive director of the FREE Foundation, and principal of SPH Consulting Group. He previously served as president of Georgia Health Sciences University (GHSU, formerly the Medical College of Georgia) and led the merger of GHSU and Augusta State University to form Georgia Regents University (now Augusta University), where he served as founding president. Among other positions, he also served as senior executive within the State University of New York (SUNY) system administration. He is lead author of *Mergers in Higher Education: A Proactive Strategy to a Better Future?* (TIAA Institute, 2017), *Strategic Mergers in Higher Education* (JHU Press, 2019), *Leading Big Scary Change: Major Institutional Restructuring in Higher Education* (TIAA Institute, 2023), and *Leading Existential Change in Higher Ed: Mergers, Closures and Other Major Institutional Restructuring* (JHU Press, 2025). He writes a regular column in Higher Ed Dive, “Merger Watch,” and he’s on the faculty of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Azziz earned his MD from the Pennsylvania State University and his MPH and MBAs from UAB.

Rich Katzman is a fellow at CHEMA. He previously served as senior assistant dean of business and operations at the UC Irvine School of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences, as executive vice president for operations for the Lundquist Institute, as chief strategy officer for El Camino Hospital, and as vice president of academic affairs and previously as vice president for business development at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center (CSMC). Prior to joining CSMC, he had a range of planning, business development, and financial experiences, from running community-based hospitals to university and academic medical centers to a publicly traded corporation and a start-up information technology company. Katzman is co-author of *Leading Existential Change in Higher Ed: Mergers, Closures and Other Major Institutional Restructuring* (JHU Press, 2025). He earned a BA in finance from The American University in Washington, D.C., and holds a master’s degree in health services administration from the university.

Gary Stocker is a fellow at CHEMA and CEO of College Viability and has substantial business experience in health care and higher education with skills in sales and marketing, management, consulting, data analytics, operations, and technology. As the chief of staff to a president at a small college in Missouri, his first few months on the job introduced him to the fragile nature of private college finances. Stocker uses his experience in developing new business models for higher education that allow for greater efficiency and long-term growth. His research on the financial health and viability of colleges resulted in the development of the College Viability App, which provides consumers and higher education leaders with a resource to compare the financial health of American private colleges. He earned an MHA in health care management and a Doctor of Management in organizational development, both from Webster University.

Karla Leeper is a senior fellow at CHEMA and a nationally recognized expert in strategic communication for higher education, health care, and nonprofits. Over the course of her more than 30 years of leadership, she’s developed successful, context-driven, data-informed communication strategies to implement reorganizations, realignments, and mergers in professional organizations, public school districts, nonprofit health care organizations, and three universities. In 2015, she led the effort to create and launch the new brand identity for Augusta University and Augusta University Health following the merger that formed the university, efforts that were recognized with the Council on Advancement and Support of Higher Education’s Gold Award. She is the vice chancellor for strategic communications and marketing at University of Tennessee Health Science Center. Leeper holds a PhD in communication studies from Kansas University and an MBA from Augusta University.

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