



Which School Characteristics Do Students Consider When Choosing a College or University? Experimental Evidence from the K-12 Private Christian School Sector

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Abstract

College matriculation is a consequential decision for aspiring college students, who often consider many institutional factors such as academics, cost, and reputation. However, while many studies have descriptively examined patterns of student enrollment in higher education, little research has estimated causal effects of different college characteristics on the likelihood of student enrollment. We surveyed a sample of K-12 private Christian school students and used a fully randomized survey method known as a conjoint experiment to estimate how various institutional factors, including reputation, size, and religious affiliation, affected students' stated preferences for enrollment. We find that religious affiliation and academic reputation mattered most for these students, while other factors mattered less.

Keywords Conjoint experiment · Randomized controlled trial · College matriculation · Christian education

College enrollment is an important and consequential decision for many aspiring college students, costing in excess of \$500,000 after factoring in tuition, expenses, interest, and loss of income (Hanson, 2025). As enrollment in Christian colleges and universities continues to increase (Glanzer, 2025; McClellan, 2025) and thought leaders call for a bold recommitment to core theological principles (Rine, 2024), it

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is incumbent on Christian higher education institutions to understand how students make enrollment decisions.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 5,916 higher education institutions in the United States in 2020–21.¹ Though the exact number may be disputed based on how “Christian” is defined, whether the institution is recognized, and other considerations, sources estimate that there are between 600–900 Christian colleges and universities in the U.S. Thus, the matriculation of high school students from private religious schools, which enroll nearly 2 million K-12 students in the U.S.,² into these higher education institutions, which represent upwards of 15 percent of all colleges and universities in the U.S., constitutes a substantial proportion of all college and university enrollments in the U.S.

While many studies examine descriptively patterns of student higher education matriculation, few studies estimate the causal effect of school characteristics on students’ enrollment decisions. Furthermore, no studies have attempted to answer this question among K-12 private Christian school students, a subgroup which might be more inclined to enroll in Christian colleges or universities. We seek to help close this research gap with our present study.

The remainder of our paper is organized as follows: we begin by summarizing the relevant research literature and outlining the theoretical framework of our study; next we describe our methods and materials, including our data, sample, and empirical strategy; then we present our main results and supplemental analyses; we conclude by considering some limitations and discussing the implications of our findings for K-12 private Christian schools as well as for Christian higher education institutions.

Literature Review

Institutional Factors

Prior research consistently documents evidence that academic quality and cost factor heavily into students’ higher education enrollment decisions. Academic factors, such as academic reputation, student/faculty ratio, and academic faculty (Sevier, 1987), the quality of faculty and the availability of degree programs (Coccarri & Javalgi, 1995), and the amount of money a school spends on teaching (Drewes & Michael, 2006) were all positively associated with the likelihood a student would enroll in a college or university. Furthermore, students are more likely to enroll in schools in which their SAT score is below the mean and less likely to enroll when their SAT score is above the mean, suggesting institutional prestige is a factor (Avery & Hoxby, 2004).

¹ Data on the number of institutional institutions from 2010–11 to 2020–21 can be found at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=1122>.

² Data on private school enrollments can be found at <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgc/private-school-enrollment>.

Cost is also a universal consideration of higher education matriculation. Higher tuition levels are associated with a lower likelihood of enrollment (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Coccari & Javalgi, 1995; Hayes, 1989; Sevier, 1987), while factors that may defray cost, such as grants, loans, work study programs (Avery & Hoxby, 2004), and scholarships (Drewes & Michael, 2006) are positively associated with enrollment decisions. A descriptive study by Kern (2000) examined students enrolled in urban high schools and found that the availability of financial aid was important to their enrollment decisions.

Research also documents some evidence of subgroup heterogeneity in enrollment decisions. Coccari and Javalgi's (1995) study of university students found that Black students emphasized quality faculty less and tutoring services and athletic programs more than their peers, while White students emphasized cost and financial aid less than their peers. Drewes and Michael's (2006) analysis of Canadian high school graduates found that smaller classes are preferred by females but not males.

Research on other institutional factors is nascent or disputed. Three studies found that the size, appearance, and location of the campus matter to students' decisions (Drewes & Michael, 2006; Hayes, 1989; Sevier, 1987), while Avery and Hoxby (2004) fail to detect a statistically meaningful relationship between size and likelihood of enrollment. Agrey and Lampadan (2014) surveyed 261 Thai high school students and found that five factors contribute to students' college decision-making: support systems, learning environment and job prospects, sporting facilities, student life programs and activities, and a safe and friendly environment.

Student Factors

Students' college selection decisions may also be influenced not only by school characteristics but also by individual characteristics. Niu and Tienda (2008) used data from the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project, a longitudinal study of Texas public high school students, and found that the type of high school students attended significantly changes the characteristics of the college students and how they value different college attributes. Specifically, Niu & Tienda argued that students' socio-economic status, academic preparation, and college-going culture in high school determine which college/university they will apply to and attend. For instance, students from lower-economic backgrounds attending low-resourced schools tend to have less access to information about college, and they end up missing out on opportunities to consider or apply to more selective universities due to a lack of encouragement and support from their high school environment. These studies underscore an important trend about college-going and factors influencing students' decisions to attend college. There are complex factors influencing students' decisions to go to college. While academic quality consistently emerges as the dominant factor influencing students' decisions, it is also important to note that there is still a complex mix of other factors such as faculty, quality, program availability, job prospects, financial ability, and many other social factors that can vary from one student subgroup to another. In addition, since high school characteristics also shape students' college aspirations and attendance, it is important to incorporate high

school characteristics into the analyses about college choice as indicated by Niu and Tienda (2008).

Faith and Higher Education

The exploration of factors influencing graduates from Christian schools in their college choice is a multifaceted area of research that is heavily influenced by faith integration and development and other unique characteristics. While most of the literature around college choice and attendance comes from secular higher education institution contexts, a few studies from Christian higher education contexts have sought to answer some tangent questions around this topic. For instance, Lee et al. (2024a) analyzed graduates of private Christian schools and found that students attending Christian higher institutions were more likely to feel supported in their faith than their counterparts in secular institutions, suggesting spiritual formation in Christian higher education institutions might be an appealing factor deciding college attendance among Christian high school graduates. This result aligns with several studies showing how the primary factors that attract students to Christian institutions are the emphasis on faith formation and moral development, which also influence their overall academic experiences (Craft & Yang, 2020; Davignon & Thomson, 2015). These shared values that resonate with their faith commitment woven into a strong sense of Christian community have proven to be a pivotal factor in students' college choices.

Some studies also point to integrating faith and learning, a fundamental aspect of Christian learning philosophy. For instance, Savarirajan and Fong (2019) found that faith integration in college-course subjects, particularly science courses, can enhance students' overall spiritual development, which in turn can provide a holistic education experience, which is often something that many Christian students seek out. Since a college experience that aligns with students' spiritual values and aspirations is something that many college students value (Smith et al., 2021), it is understandable then if the integration of faith in learning attracts certain students to Christian colleges and universities. Moreover, because some Christian institutions have historically maintained a distinct Christian identity that is appealing to students (Glanzer et al., 2011), these institutions often employ faculty and staff who embody strong Christian values, helping students not only to shape their academic pursuit but also to cultivate their spiritual formation (Yoder, 2024). Since research has shown how Christian college experiences can change students' faith and identity, attending Christian college might be appealing for high school graduates who want to deepen their faith or even among those who are struggling with reconciling their faith especially during their high school senior years which aligns with what Powell et al. (2012) have documented.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Park and Hossler's (2015) literature review on student college choice concludes that there are many theoretical frameworks for understanding how students decide whether to pursue further education and how to choose a college or university in

which to enroll. In an economic framework for understanding higher education matriculation, students decide whether to enroll in college or university by considering the costs and benefits of higher education. Students may decide to enroll in a school if benefits exceed costs. Economic research on higher education matriculation finds that the benefits of a college education have grown over time (Goldin & Katz, 2010), though returns are contingent upon a student's choice of degree program and constrained by cost factors such as the willingness to assume debt or the availability of financial aid (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). The latest research has documented how the college wage premium has grown by about 0.7 percentage points after COVID-19, especially among men (Patrinos & Rivera-Olvera, 2025).

A sociological framework considers the influence of various inputs such as parents' social capital and the potential for college education to change one's social standing. Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction, for example, suggests that education can be a means of reproducing social power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990/2000). Chapman's (1981) Model for College Choice combines both economic and sociological factors and suggests that colleges must appeal to both to influence students enrollment decisions.

Other research draws on the concept of religious capital, a framework borrowed from sociology and religion. A religious capital framework posits that any type of religious socialization, affiliation, and involvement shapes an individual's social outcomes, decisions, and choices (Iannaccone, 1990; Smith, 2003). With the investment of time and effort through involvement and affiliation with religious organizations, a person accumulates religious capital, which can be utilized for various aspects of life, including social interactions and involvement, educational choices, and other cultural participations. Smith (2003) noted that there are four distinct elements within this religious capital framework: (1) the religious capital itself—accumulated skills, knowledge, practices, and experience; (2) religious habitus—an individual's ingrained dispositions, values, and worldview that are shaped by their religious environment; (3) religious socialization—the mechanism of acquiring religious capital through family, church, school, and the broader community; and (4) religious identity—self-understanding rooted in fundamental beliefs and values.

This framework is helpful for understanding college choices, particularly among graduates of private Christian schools. For many of these graduates, religious capital is cultivated through years of interactions, involvement, and affiliations, at a minimum with their Christian schools, and likely with their families, churches, and broader communities as well. This framework aligns with other studies that have documented parents consider which schools will help their children develop religious capital when choosing a school (Lee et al., 2024b), but also how the religious capital of these students is manifested in religious practices and community engagement (Cheng & Djita, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022; Lee & Djita, 2025).

In addition, some literature also provides critical framework that argues how education can be used as a means of reproducing social power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Specifically, Bourdieu and Passeron's seminal work on this topic articulates that education can perpetuate social hierarchies since it is a vehicle for individual advancement in society and a mechanism through which social inequalities are maintained and reproduced. Central to their argument is "cultural capital," which refers to the non-financial

assets such as cultural knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that educational institutions highly value. Possessing cultural capital enables students to better position themselves while navigating the higher education landscape, which in turn helps them to achieve greater educational success than their counterparts. Moreover, they also introduced the concept of "habitus," which captures one's habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through life experiences. An individual's habitus may then influence their educational choices and aspirations. For instance, individuals from less privileged backgrounds tend to internalize lower expectations due to limited exposure to educational success (Beltrão et al., 2021; Djita, 2024; Klimczuk, 2015).

Parallel with these theories, an extensive body of literature has shown how economic return to higher education has grown, making decisions to attend college much more significant. Studies have documented how individuals with higher degrees tend to experience better employment and higher earnings compared to those with lower qualifications (Altonji et al., 2012; Arcidiacono, 2004) and it can vary greatly from one major to another (Altonji et al., 2012; Fu, 2014). As a result, college majors, university reputations, job availability upon graduation, potential earnings, and many other relevant factors further influence an individual's overall college choice. In an economic framework for understanding higher education matriculation, students decide whether to enroll in college or university by considering the costs and benefits of higher education. A literature review by Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) finds that benefits are often contingent upon the student's choice of degree program, while costs are often related to financial constraints such as debt or availability of financial aid.

Our present study follows both an economic framework and a religious capital framework for understanding enrollment decisions. We consider several characteristics that students may consider when making an enrollment decision, including reputation, size, affiliation, extracurricular and community service opportunities, tuition, and distance. Guided by prior research, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H₀: These factors will not influence students' enrollment preferences.

H₁: Factors that increase perceived benefits of college education such as reputation, affiliation, and extracurricular and community service opportunities will increase the likelihood that a student will select a college or university.

H₂: Factors that increase perceived costs of college education such as tuition and distance will decrease the likelihood that a student will select a college or university.

H₃: Reputation will produce effect sizes that are largest in magnitude, while other factors such as size and affiliation will be heterogeneous by student characteristics.

Methods and Materials

Data and Sample

Data come from the 2023–2024 administration of the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI), a validated survey instrument fielded by the Association of Christian Schools

International (ACSI), one of the largest private school organizations in the United States (Broughman et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023). According to Broughman et al. (2021), there are 2,345 ACSI member schools in the U.S., which altogether enroll 486,539 students (an average of 207.5 students per school) and employ 51,911 teachers (22.1 per school). According to a member report (ACSI, 2025), median tuition is around \$8,000 for elementary school (interquartile range \approx \$4,000) and \$10,000 for high school (IQR \approx \$6,000). Roughly half of all ACSI schools are “covenantal,” requiring at least one parent to agree with the school’s statement of faith, while another quarter are “missional,” in which parents must acknowledge but do not have to indicate agreement with the school’s statement of faith.

Our analysis focuses on a sample of 812 students who completed the FFI, including the conjoint experiment questions designed to understand which college or university characteristics private Christian school students consider most strongly for themselves. We present descriptive statistics for our analytic sample in Table 1. The average respondent is a ninth-grade student enrolled in his or her school for 5.45 years. The sample is evenly divided by sex (51 percent male), predominantly white (64 percent), with some representation of Black (11 percent), Hispanic (7 percent), and other ethnic groups (15 percent). Most respondents come from two-parent households (80 percent) and self-identify as a Christian for many years (69 percent). Seventy-four percent of our sample reports attending religious services at least weekly, 74 percent report praying at least daily, 33 percent report reading the Bible at least daily, and 22 percent report practicing family devotions at least weekly. Importantly for our analysis, most of the sample plans to attend college or university (86 percent). Among those with college plans, 46 percent are most strongly considering a public college or university and 39 percent are most strongly considering a private Christian college or university. Fewer respondents are strongly considering a secular (12 percent) or private religious (non-Christian) (3 percent) institution.

Empirical Strategy

To test how various college or university characteristics affect students’ stated preferences for choosing a college or university, we implement an experimental research design known as conjoint analysis. In conjoint analysis, survey respondents are presented with a series of sets of hypothetical candidates with randomly assigned attributes. Because attributes are randomly designed, the researcher can estimate the causal effect (known as the “average marginal component effect” or AMCE) of each attribute on the respondent’s likelihood of choosing a candidate. Conjoint analysis was first introduced in 1964 (Luce & Tukey, 1964) and is widely used in marketing research to understand consumers’ preferences. In education research, conjoint analysis has been used to understand parents’ preferred school characteristics when choosing a school in which to enroll their child (Lee et al., 2024b), administrators’ preferences when hiring a teacher (Johnson et al., 2024), and board members’ preferences when hiring a head of school (Klutts et al., 2026).

In our conjoint analysis, we present student respondents with four sets of three hypothetical colleges or universities each and ask, “Among the following options,

Table 1 Analytic sample descriptive statistics

	n	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Grade Level	806	9.01	1.88	6	12
Years Enrolled at Current School	738	5.45	3.51	1	14
Do you plan to attend college / university? (Yes)	804	0.86	0.35	0	1
<i>Preferred college / university type</i>					
Private Christian	691	0.39	0.49	0	1
Private religious (non-Christian)	691	0.03	0.17	0	1
Private secular	691	0.12	0.33	0	1
Public	691	0.46	0.50	0	1
Male	772	0.51	0.50	0	1
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>					
Black	768	0.11	0.31	0	1
Hispanic	768	0.07	0.25	0	1
White	768	0.64	0.48	0	1
Other	768	0.15	0.36	0	1
Birth year	777	2008.59	1.93	1999	2012
My parents are married	787	0.80	0.40	0	1
I've been a Christian for many years	806	0.69	0.46	0	1
<i>Freq. of religious service attendance</i>	796	5.52	1.69	1 (Never)	7 (Several times a week)
Never	796	0.26	0.44	0	1
Weekly	796	0.46	0.50	0	1
Several times a week	796	0.27	0.45	0	1
Weekly or more frequently	796	0.74	0.44	0	1
<i>Frequency of prayer</i>	794	7.66	1.86	1 (Never)	9 (Several times a day)
Never	794	0.26	0.44	0	1
Daily	794	0.37	0.48	0	1
Several times a day	794	0.38	0.48	0	1
Daily or more frequently	794	0.74	0.44	0	1
<i>Frequency of Bible reading</i>	794	6.27	2.07	1 (Never)	9 (Several times a day)
Never	794	0.67	0.47	0	1
Daily	794	0.27	0.45	0	1
Several times a day	794	0.06	0.23	0	1
Daily or more frequently	794	0.33	0.47	0	1
<i>Frequency of family devotions</i>	791	3.17	2.38	1 (Never)	9 (Several times a day)
Weekly or more frequently	791	0.22	0.41	0	1

which college or university would you most strongly consider?" Each hypothetical college or university was randomly assigned attributes in six components: (1) Reputation, (2) Size, (3) Affiliation, (4) Extracurricular / Community Service Opportunities, (5) Tuition, and (6) Distance. Language for levels within each component are fully detailed in Table 2.

To estimate the AMCE of each attribute on the likelihood a respondent would choose the school, we estimate the following model:

$$y_{qrs} = \beta_0 + \rho' \beta + \sigma' \beta + \alpha' \beta + \omega' \beta + \tau' \beta + \delta' \beta + \epsilon_r \tag{1}$$

in which y_{qrs} takes a value of 1 if school q presented to respondent r in set s is chosen and 0 otherwise; ρ represents a vector of reputation attributes (“below average academics and job placement” omitted); σ represents a vector of size attributes (“large school with large classes” omitted); α represents a vector of affiliation attributes (“secular” omitted), ω represents a vector of extracurricular and community service opportunities (“few” omitted), τ represents a vector of tuition attributes (“average tuition, debt possible” omitted), and δ represents a vector of distance attributes (“within 50 miles from home” omitted). Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Each coefficient can be interpreted as the effect of the associated attribute on the likelihood a respondent would choose a school relative to the omitted category, a large secular college or university with below average academics and job placement,

Table 2 Conjoint experiment design

Components (1)	Levels (2)
Academics and Job Placement Reputation	Above average academics and job placement
	Below average academics and job placement
	Above average academics
	Below average academics
	Above average job placement
	Below average job placement
Size	Large school with large classes
	Large school with small classes
	Medium school with large classes
	Medium school with small classes
	Small school with large classes
	Small school with small classes
Affiliation	Christian
	Religious (non-Christian)
	Secular
Extracurriculars / Community Service Opportunities	Few opportunities for involvement
	Average opportunities for involvement
	Many opportunities for involvement
Tuition	Low tuition, debt unlikely
	Average tuition, debt possible
	High tuition, debt likely
Distance	Within 50 miles from home
	Within 100 miles from home
	Within 250 miles from home
	More than 250 miles from home

large class sizes, few extracurricular and community service opportunities, and average tuition with possible debt within 50 miles from the respondent's home.

To consider how students' preference for a college or university with a Christian affiliation was constrained by the school's academic and job placement, we interacted the reputation and affiliation components and regressed the following model:

$$y_{qrs} = \beta_0 + (\boldsymbol{\rho} * \boldsymbol{\alpha})' \boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\sigma}' \boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\omega}' \boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\tau}' \boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\delta}' \boldsymbol{\beta} + \epsilon_r \quad (2)$$

where $(\boldsymbol{\rho} * \boldsymbol{\alpha})'$ represents a vector of interactions of reputation and affiliation attributes, with "Religious (non-Christian); below average academics and job placement reputation" serving as the omitted category. Reputation attributes $\boldsymbol{\rho}$ and affiliation attributes $\boldsymbol{\alpha}$ are omitted from this analysis.

Results

Main Results

We present the AMCEs for each attribute in Table 3. AMCEs can be interpreted as the causal effect of each attribute on the likelihood that a student will prefer a school with that attribute, relative to the base or omitted category within each component. Students most strongly considered a school's reputation when choosing a school. A hypothetical college or university with "above average academics and job placement" was 22 percentage points more likely to be chosen ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, hypothetical schools with "above average job placement" (18 points, $p < 0.001$) or "above average academics" (16 points, $p < 0.001$) were more likely to be chosen. Schools with "below average academics" or "below average job placement" were chosen at similar rates as schools with "below average academics and job placement."

Students also strongly considered a school's affiliation. Schools with a Christian affiliation were 19 points more likely to be chosen ($p < 0.001$) than secular colleges or universities. Conversely, religious non-Christian schools were 5 points less likely to be chosen than secular colleges or universities ($p < 0.001$).

Students also considered extracurricular and community service opportunities, tuition and the likelihood of debt, and distance from home. Schools with "many" (7 points, $p < 0.001$) or "average" (5 points, $p < 0.001$) opportunities were more likely to be chosen than schools with "few" opportunities. Low tuition increased the likelihood of choice by 4 points ($p < 0.01$), while schools with high tuition decreased the likelihood by 9 points ($p < 0.001$). Finally, students preferred schools that were closer to home, with schools within 250 miles reducing likelihood by 4 points ($p < 0.01$) and schools more than 250 miles reducing likelihood by 9 points ($p < 0.001$). School size did not factor into students' decisions when choosing a college or university.

Table 3 Main results (average marginal component effects)

	Est	SE	p-value	Sig
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Reputation ("Below average academics and job placement" omitted)</i>				
Above average academics and job placement	0.22	(0.02)	0.000	***
Above average academics	0.16	(0.02)	0.000	***
Below average academics	0.00	(0.01)	0.886	
Above average job placement	0.18	(0.02)	0.000	***
Below average job placement	0.01	(0.01)	0.343	
<i>Size ("Large school with large classes" omitted)</i>				
Large school with small classes	0.01	(0.02)	0.659	
Medium school with large classes	0.01	(0.02)	0.430	
Medium school with small classes	0.02	(0.02)	0.244	
Small school with large classes	0.00	(0.02)	0.802	
Small school with small classes	-0.02	(0.02)	0.274	
<i>Affiliation ("Secular" omitted)</i>				
Christian	0.19	(0.01)	0.000	***
Religious (non-Christian)	-0.05	(0.01)	0.000	***
<i>Extracurricular / Community Service Opportunities ("Few" omitted)</i>				
Average	0.05	(0.01)	0.000	***
Many	0.07	(0.01)	0.000	***
<i>Tuition ("Average tuition, debt possible" omitted)</i>				
Low tuition, debt unlikely	0.04	(0.01)	0.001	**
High tuition, debt likely	-0.09	(0.01)	0.000	***
<i>Distance ("Within 50 miles from home" omitted)</i>				
Within 100 miles	-0.02	(0.01)	0.141	
Within 250 miles	-0.04	(0.01)	0.006	**
More than 250 miles	-0.09	(0.01)	0.000	***
n respondents	812			
n sets (n × 4)	2,436			
n hypothetical schools (n × 12)	9,744			

Standard errors clustered by respondent. Asterisks indicate level of significance, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Interactions Analysis

For our interactions analysis, we interacted the reputation and affiliation attributes to test how students' preference for a Christian college or university was constrained by its academics and job placement reputation. This analysis thus provides helpful insights into potential trade-offs between academic quality and missional alignment. We present these results in Table 4. We find that a strong preference for a Christian college or university persists, with effect estimates ranging from 0.20 ("below average academics and job placement"; $p < 0.001$) to 0.47 ("above average academics and job placement"; $p < 0.001$). Students also preferred a secular

college or university, but only with an above average reputation for academics (0.23, $p < 0.001$), job placement (0.22, $p < 0.001$), or both (0.26, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, students expressed the lowest preference for any religious non-Christian college or university, and religious non-Christian colleges with above average academics and job placement reputations produced similar effect sizes as the least desired Christian college or university (0.20, $p < 0.001$).

Subgroup Analysis

Next, we consider whether subgroups of students had different preferential patterns by estimating marginal means (MMs). MMs represent the rate at which a school with a given attribute was chosen. Because students chose one school in sets of three schools, the overall MMs are equivalent to the expected value of the proportion of schools chosen, 0.33 or 33 percent. Thus, attributes with MMs exceeding 0.33 were positively associated with the likelihood of being chosen with attributes with MMs less than 0.33 were negatively associated with the likelihood of being chosen.

In Fig. 1, we plot MMs, dividing students into three subgroups by years of enrollment in current school: 1–3 years ($n = 311$), 4–11 years ($n = 379$), and 12–14 years ($n = 48$). Two divergent patterns emerge. First, students enrolled in their current school for 12–14 years are less likely to prefer a Christian college or university (38 percent) than their peers who have been enrolled in their current K-12 Christian school for 1–3 years (49 percent) or 4–11 years (47 percent). Conversely, long-term enrollees are more likely to prefer a secular college or university (36 percent) than either short (28 percent) or medium-term enrollees (30 percent). However, long-term enrollees are not more likely to prefer a secular college or university when conditioning this subgroup analysis on students enrolled in the 11th or 12th grade, suggesting a strong correlation between age and preference for a secular college (see Appendix, Fig. 4). Secondly, long-term enrollees are less likely to prefer a college or university more than 250 miles from home (20 percent) than their short (31 percent) or medium-term peers (29 percent).

In Fig. 2, we compare the MMs of students who plan to attend college or university ($n = 691$) to those who do not plan to attend ($n = 113$). Respondents with college attendance plans are more sensitive to institutional reputation for academics and job placement than their peers who do not plan to attend college or university, choosing hypothetical schools with above average reputations in academics (41 percent vs. 34 percent), job placement (42 percent vs. 39 percent), and both (46 percent vs. 40 percent) than their peers. They also chose schools with below average reputations in academics (23 percent vs. 26 percent), job placement (24 percent vs. 32 percent), and both (23 percent vs. 29 percent) at lower rates than their peers without college plans. Students without college plans were more sensitive to tuition and the possibility of debt. They were more likely to choose a school with low tuition and unlikely debt (44 percent vs. 38 percent) and less likely to choose a school with average tuition and possible debt (31 percent vs. 35 percent) than their peers, though both groups were similarly unlikely to choose a school with high tuition and likely debt.

Table 4 Supplemental analysis (average marginal component effects)

	Est	SE	p-value	Sig
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Reputation and Affiliation ("Religious (non-Christian); below average academics & job placement" omitted)</i>				
Christian; above average acad. & job	0.47	(0.03)	0.000	***
Christian; below average acad. & job	0.20	(0.03)	0.000	***
Christian; above average acad	0.40	(0.03)	0.000	***
Christian; below average acad	0.22	(0.03)	0.000	***
Christian; above average job	0.41	(0.03)	0.000	***
Christian; below average job	0.24	(0.03)	0.000	***
Relig. (non-Christian); above average acad. & job	0.20	(0.03)	0.000	***
Relig. (non-Christian); above average acad	0.11	(0.02)	0.000	***
Relig. (non-Christian); below average acad	0.01	(0.02)	0.510	
Relig. (non-Christian); above average job	0.18	(0.02)	0.000	***
Relig. (non-Christian); below average job	0.03	(0.02)	0.245	
Secular; above average acad. & job	0.26	(0.03)	0.000	***
Secular; below average acad. & job	0.07	(0.02)	0.005	**
Secular; above average acad	0.23	(0.03)	0.000	***
Secular; below average job	0.02	(0.02)	0.360	
Secular; above average job	0.22	(0.03)	0.000	***
Secular; below average job	0.04	(0.02)	0.103	
<i>Size ("Large school with large classes" omitted)</i>				
Large school with small classes	0.01	(0.02)	0.670	
Medium school with large classes	0.01	(0.02)	0.440	
Medium school with small classes	0.02	(0.02)	0.256	
Small school with large classes	0.00	(0.02)	0.755	
Small school with small classes	-0.02	(0.02)	0.254	
<i>Extracurricular / Community Service Opportunities ("Few" omitted)</i>				
Average	0.05	(0.01)	0.000	***
Many	0.07	(0.01)	0.000	***
<i>Tuition ("Average tuition, debt possible" omitted)</i>				
Low tuition, debt unlikely	0.04	(0.01)	0.001	***
High tuition, debt likely	-0.09	(0.01)	0.000	***
<i>Distance ("Within 50 miles from home" omitted)</i>				
Within 100 miles	-0.02	(0.01)	0.152	
Within 250 miles	-0.04	(0.01)	0.008	**
More than 250 miles	-0.09	(0.01)	0.000	***
n respondents	812			
n sets (n×4)	2,436			
n hypothetical schools (n×12)	9,744			

Standard errors clustered by respondent. Asterisks indicate level of significance, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

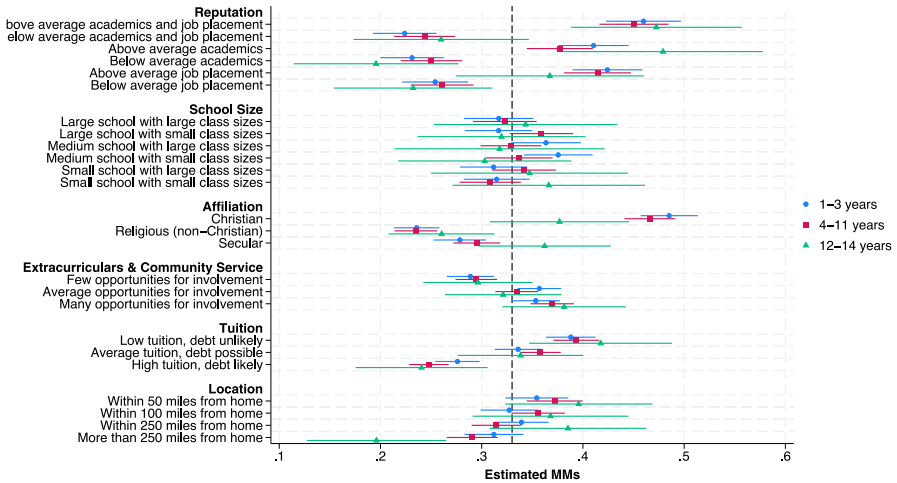


Fig. 1 Marginal means by years enrolled in private Christian school

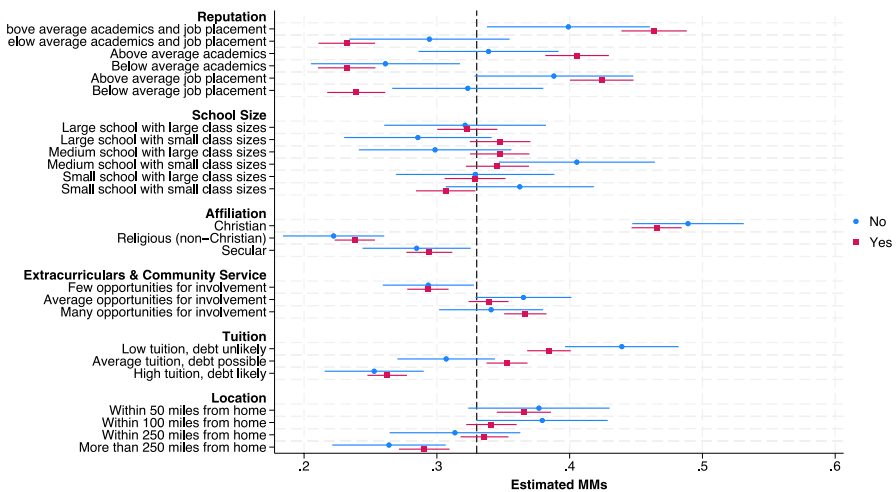


Fig. 2 Marginal means by college plans to attend college or university

Finally, in Fig. 3, we plot MMs, dividing students into three subgroups by frequency of religious service attendance: less than weekly ($n = 210$), weekly ($n = 369$), and more than weekly ($n = 217$). Students who attend religious service weekly (49 percent) or more than weekly (51 percent) were more likely to choose a college or university with a Christian affiliation than students who attend religious services less than weekly (38 percent). Conversely, students who attend weekly (27 percent) or more than weekly (25 percent) were less likely to choose a secular college or university than students who attend religious services less than weekly (37 percent). Notably, students, regardless of frequency of religious service attendance,

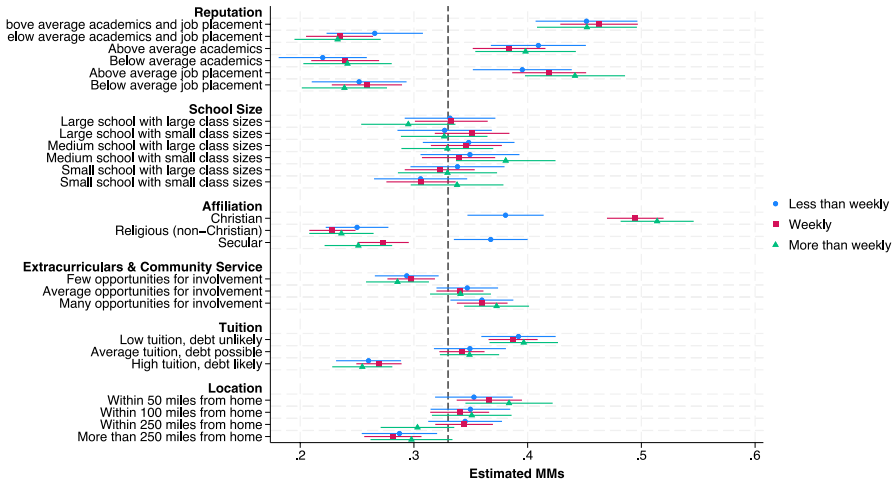


Fig. 3 Marginal means by religious service attendance

demonstrated similar preference patterns with respect to other hypothetical college or university characteristics examined, including reputation, extracurricular and community service opportunities, tuition, and distance. We observed similar patterns by frequency of Bible reading, frequency of prayer, frequency of family devotions, and whether the student identified as having been a Christian for many years.

We report precise estimates for MMs in the Appendix Tables 5 and 6. Students generally demonstrated similar preference profiles when divided into subgroups based on type of postsecondary institution considered, sex, ethnicity, and family structure.

Limitations

Our analysis is subject to a few important limitations. First, as a stated preferences experiment, we estimate how institutional attributes affect students' preference among hypothetical higher education options, but we cannot observe revealed enrollment behaviors (i.e., the actual students' enrollment in college or university). While it is reasonable to expect that students will enroll in colleges or universities that are similar to their stated preferences, there may be differences between students' stated and revealed preferences that our study cannot capture, perhaps due to many unmeasured constraints such as admission outcomes, parental influence, and financial aid and scholarship packages. Secondly, our analysis is limited to our sample of private Christian K-12 students in the U.S., whose preferences are unlikely to generalize to other student populations. Private Christian students likely have distinct reasons for enrolling in their K-12 schools relative to their secular private school, traditional public school, or alternative education students, and these differences are likely related to the ways in which these student groups choose higher education institutions. Future research should consider how students in other

educational sectors make higher education matriculation decisions. While this experimental study of this research has a strong internal validity, the external validity can be enhanced through replications from other school and cultural contexts. Fourthly, the cross-sectional study design of this study cannot really capture the evolving change of students' preferences over time. Finally, there are limitations of the conjoint method itself for fully understanding students' preferences when making a college enrollment decision. The randomization of attributes, while a strength in the sense that it allows for causal inference, is also a limitation in the sense that it may yield unreasonable combinations of characteristics. For example, a student may not be able to think of a Christian college with low tuition within 50 miles of home.

Discussion

These limitations aside, our study makes several important contributions to understanding how students make college matriculation decisions. College matriculation is a weighty decision in the life of an aspiring college student. As enrollment in Christian higher education institutions continues to rise, it is imperative to understand how students make enrollment decisions. Our study is the first to estimate causal effects of college characteristics on students' enrollment decisions using a unique sample of K-12 private Christian school students. We find that faith and academics were most important to students, producing effect sizes of largest magnitude (between 16–22 percentage points), providing strong evidence that for Christian colleges and universities, embracing their faith-based identity is a viable strategy for the future (Rine, 2024). This reinforces the idea that an institution that can successfully integrate academic excellence with strong faith foundation may be able to not only attract more students from Christian faith but also distinguish their uniqueness in a competitive higher education market. In particular, our finding that students strongly consider academic quality is consistent with the findings of prior studies (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Coccari & Javalgi, 1995; Drewes & Michael, 2006; Sevier, 1987). This preference for high academic quality is constrained by costs such as higher levels of tuition, which reduced the likelihood a student would choose a hypothetical school. Again, this finding is consistent with the findings of prior research, which conclude that tuition and the likelihood of debt factor into students' matriculation decisions (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Coccari & Javalgi, 1995; Drewes & Michael, 2006; Hayes, 1989; Kern, 2000; Sevier, 1987). Of less importance were distance from home, tuition, and extracurricular and community service opportunities (between 4 to 10 points). School size had no effect on revealed preferences, which was consistent with one prior study (Avery & Hoxby, 2004) but not with other studies examining size and enrollment (Drewes & Michael, 2006; Hayes, 1989; Sevier, 1987).

Our study also expands knowledge about higher education matriculation in several ways. Our study is the first to document differences in higher education preferences by length of time enrolled in a private Christian school. Students enrolled the longest (12–14 years) had a stronger preference for secular colleges and universities. However, given our survey design, it is unclear what motivated

this subgroup to prefer secular schools. For example, these students may have felt “pushed” out of Christian education and desired something new. Alternatively, they may have felt well prepared by their private Christian school to take their faith into a secular setting. They also demonstrated the strongest preference for remaining close to home, suggesting that the second explanation is more likely than the first. Unsurprisingly, students who attend religious services at least weekly had the strongest preference for colleges or universities with a Christian affiliation. Similarities in patterns in other components provide evidence that students seeking a coreligious postsecondary education are not prioritizing faith to the neglect of academics, job placement, or other opportunities, but doing so in addition to those other characteristics.

Furthermore, we document evidence of wide variation in students’ sensitivity to measures of institutional quality and cost. Students with college plans were more sensitive to academic and job placement reputation, suggesting they are thinking practically in terms of how college or university may prepare them for life after graduation. Those not planning on attending college or university were more sensitive to tuition and the possibility of debt, suggesting that their financial situations may affect their responses.

Our findings have several important implications. First, for K-12 guidance counselors or other staff advising students on college enrollment, it is important to be aware of these preference patterns among private Christian K-12 school students. For example, it may be important to understand why a long-term Christian K-12 school student may prefer a college or university based on its Christian identity, and to offer appropriate guidance to navigate that decision. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that there may be students, even in private K-12 schools, who are not planning on enrolling in college or university because of constraints. Their matriculation decisions may be more sensitive to the availability of grants, scholarships, or work-study opportunities that may help defray the cost of tuition, as prior research suggests (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Drewes & Michael, 2006). In addition, since there is a fraction of students who are not certain about continuing their higher education, Christian higher education institutions can take an active role in echoing much clearer communication about financial package that they can offer to attract more students.

Our study also has important implications for marketers representing Christian higher education institutions. Our finding that the Christian identity of a college or university matters as much as its academic and job placement reputation confirms the idea that embracing a distinctive Christian identity is a viable financial and sustainability strategy for Christian colleges and universities (Glanzer, 2025; McClellan, 2025; Rine, 2024). These representatives should be aware of students’ institutional preferences in order to market their respective institutions most effectively to prospective students.

Appendix

Table 5 Marginal means by years enrolled in current school and plans to enroll in college/university

	Years Enrolled in Current School			College Plans	
	1–3 years	4–11 years	12–14 years	Yes	No
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Reputation</i>					
Above avg. academics and job	0.46	0.45	0.47	0.46	0.40
Below avg. academics and job	0.22	0.24	0.26	0.23	0.29
Above average academics	0.41	0.38	0.48	0.41	0.34
Below average academics	0.23	0.25	0.20	0.23	0.26
Above average job placement	0.42	0.41	0.37	0.42	0.39
Below average job placement	0.25	0.26	0.23	0.24	0.32
<i>Size</i>					
Large school with large classes	0.32	0.32	0.34	0.32	0.32
Large school with small classes	0.32	0.36	0.32	0.35	0.29
Medium school with large classes	0.36	0.33	0.32	0.35	0.30
Medium school with small classes	0.38	0.34	0.30	0.35	0.41
Small school with large classes	0.31	0.34	0.35	0.33	0.33
Small school with small classes	0.31	0.31	0.37	0.31	0.36
<i>Affiliation</i>					
Christian	0.49	0.47	0.38	0.47	0.49
Religious (non-Christian)	0.24	0.24	0.26	0.24	0.22
Secular	0.28	0.30	0.36	0.29	0.28
<i>Extracurriculars/Community Service</i>					
Few opportunities for involvement	0.29	0.29	0.30	0.29	0.29
Avg. opportunities for involvement	0.36	0.33	0.32	0.34	0.37
Many opportunities for involvement	0.35	0.37	0.38	0.37	0.34
<i>Tuition</i>					
Low tuition, debt unlikely	0.39	0.39	0.42	0.38	0.44
Average tuition, debt possible	0.34	0.36	0.34	0.35	0.31
High tuition, debt likely	0.28	0.25	0.24	0.26	0.25
<i>Distance</i>					
Within 50 miles from home	0.35	0.37	0.40	0.37	0.38
Within 100 miles from home	0.33	0.36	0.37	0.34	0.38
Within 250 miles from home	0.34	0.31	0.39	0.34	0.31
More than 250 miles from home	0.31	0.29	0.20	0.29	0.26
<i>n</i> respondents	311	379	48	113	691
<i>n</i> sets ($n \times 4$)	1,244	1,516	192	452	2,764
<i>n</i> hypothetical schools ($n \times 12$)	3,732	4,548	576	1,356	8,292

Table 6 Marginal means by personal faith and religious service attendance

	I have been a Christian for many years		Religious service attendance		
	Yes	No	> Weekly	Weekly	< Weekly
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Reputation</i>					
Above avg. academics and job	0.47	0.41	0.45	0.46	0.45
Below avg. academics and job	0.22	0.28	0.23	0.23	0.27
Above average academics	0.41	0.37	0.40	0.38	0.41
Below average academics	0.23	0.25	0.24	0.24	0.22
Above average job placement	0.42	0.42	0.44	0.42	0.40
Below average job placement	0.25	0.26	0.24	0.26	0.25
<i>Size</i>					
Large school with large classes	0.32	0.32	0.30	0.33	0.33
Large school with small classes	0.33	0.35	0.33	0.35	0.33
Medium school with large classes	0.35	0.33	0.33	0.35	0.35
Medium school with small classes	0.34	0.39	0.38	0.34	0.35
Small school with large classes	0.34	0.31	0.33	0.32	0.34
Small school with small classes	0.32	0.30	0.34	0.31	0.31
<i>Affiliation</i>					
Christian	0.49	0.42	0.51	0.49	0.38
Religious (non-Christian)	0.24	0.23	0.24	0.23	0.25
Secular	0.27	0.35	0.25	0.27	0.37
<i>Extracurriculars/Community Service</i>					
Few opportunities for involvement	0.30	0.28	0.29	0.30	0.29
Avg. opportunities for involvement	0.32	0.39	0.34	0.34	0.35
Many opportunities for involvement	0.37	0.34	0.37	0.36	0.36
<i>Tuition</i>					
Low tuition, debt unlikely	0.39	0.40	0.40	0.39	0.39
Average tuition, debt possible	0.35	0.33	0.35	0.34	0.35
High tuition, debt likely	0.26	0.27	0.25	0.27	0.26
<i>Distance</i>					
Within 50 miles from home	0.36	0.37	0.38	0.37	0.35
Within 100 miles from home	0.35	0.33	0.35	0.34	0.35
Within 250 miles from home	0.33	0.33	0.30	0.34	0.34
More than 250 miles from home	0.28	0.30	0.30	0.28	0.29
<i>n</i> respondents	560	246	217	369	210
<i>n</i> sets (<i>n</i> × 4)	2,240	984	868	1,476	840
<i>n</i> hypothetical schools (<i>n</i> × 12)	6,720	2,952	2,604	4,428	2,520

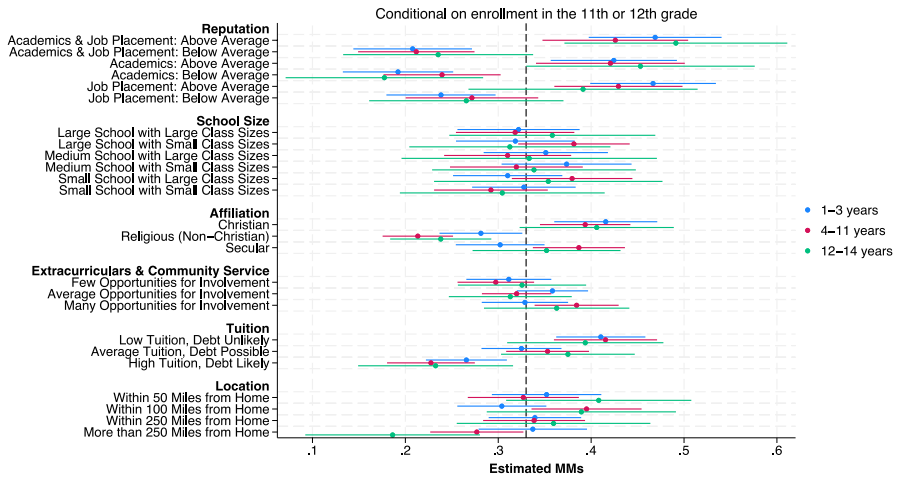


Fig. 4 Marginal means by years enrolled

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Data Availability Due to our data-sharing agreement with the Association of Christian Schools International, data are not available for replication.

Declarations

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