

What 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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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.

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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

Which school characteristics do students consider when choosing a college or university?

Experimental evidence from the K-12 private Christian school sector

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 is incumbent on Christian higher education institutions to understand how students make enrollment decisions. 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 subgroup analysis; 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 (Coccari & 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).

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 subgroups 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 & 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 not only by faith integration and development, but also many 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, Djita, and Price (2024) 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 becomes one appealing factor in attracting 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., 2010), these institutions will then be able to provide students with a strong model from figures who embody strong Christian values through their faculty and staff. This provides students with more opportunity to not only shape their academic pursuit but also cultivate their spiritual formation (Yoder, 2024). Since literature has shown how this experience in Christian colleges can change one's 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 that maximizes the benefit/cost ratio 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, 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.

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 this "cultural capital," which refers to the non-financial assets such as cultural knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that educational institutions highly value. Possessing this cultural capital enables students to better position themselves in navigating the higher education landscape, which in turn helps them to achieve greater educational success than their counterparts, which is basically how social inequalities are reinforced. Moreover, they also introduced the concept of "habitus," which captures one's habits, skills, and dispositions acquired through life experiences. This habitus then influences many different aspects of individuals, including their educational choices and aspirations. For instance, individuals from less privileged backgrounds tend to internalize lower expectations due to limited exposure to educational success (Djita, 2024; Beltrão et al., 2021; 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 an economic framework for understanding enrollment decisions. We consider a number of broad 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:

- H_0 : These factors will not influence students' enrollment preferences.
- H_1 : 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.

- H_2 : 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.
- H_3 : 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).

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, the vast majority 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.

[Table 1 about here]

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 is able to 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, Johnson, et al., 2024), administrators' preferences when hiring a teacher (Johnson et al., 2024), and board members' preferences when hiring a head of school (Klutts et al., forthcoming).

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

[Table 2 about here]

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

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

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

Results

Main Results

We present the AMCEs for each attribute in Table 3. 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.

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 Figure 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). 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).

[Figure 1 about here]

In Figure 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. 38 percent) and less likely to choose a school with average tuition and possible debt (31 percent vs. 38 percent) and less likely to choose a school with average tuition and possible debt (31 percent vs. 39 percent) and possible debt (31 percent vs. 30 percent) and possible debt (31 percent vs. 39 percent) and possible debt vs. 30 percent) and possible debt vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent) and possible debt vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent) and possible debt vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent) and possible debt vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent) and possible debt vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent vs. 30 percent vs. 30 perce

vs. 35 percent) than their peers, though both groups were similarly unlikely to choose a school with high tuition and likely debt.

[Figure 2 about here]

Finally, in Figure 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, 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.

[Figure 3 about here]

Tables with precise estimates for MMs can be found in the Appendix. 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. There might still be some discrepancies between this experiment and real-life decisions in attending college or university 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. Finally, the cross-sectional study design of this study cannot really capture the evolving change of students' preferences over time.

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 (Drewes & Michael, 2006; Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Coccari & Javalgi, 1995; 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 (Drewes & Michael, 2006; Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Kern, 2000; Coccari & Javalgi, 1995; Hayes, 1989; 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

(Drewes & Michael, 2006; Avery & Hoxby, 2004). 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.

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Tables

	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
Preferred college / university type					
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
Race/Ethnicity					
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
Freq. of religious service attendance	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
Frequency of prayer	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
Frequency of Bible reading	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
Frequency of family devotions	791	3.17	2.38	1 (Never)	9 (Several times a day)
Weekly or more frequently	791	0.22	0.41	0	1

Table 1. Analytic sample descriptive statistics

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

Table 2. Conjoint experiment design

Table 3. Main results (average marginal component effects)

	Est.	SE	<i>p</i> -value	Sig.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Reputation ("Below average academics and job placement" on	itted)			
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	
Size ("Large school with large classes" omitted)				
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	
Affiliation ("Secular" omitted)				
Christian	0.19	(0.01)	0.000	***
Religious (non-Christian)	-0.05	(0.01)	0.000	***
Extracurricular / Community Service Opportunities ("Few" on	itted)			
Average	0.05	(0.01)	0.000	***
Many	0.07	(0.01)	0.000	***
Tuition ("Average tuition, debt possible" omitted)				
Low tuition, debt unlikely	0.04	(0.01)	0.001	**
High tuition, debt likely	-0.09	(0.01)	0.000	***
Distance ("Within 50 miles from home" omitted)				
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	***
<i>n</i> respondents	812			
$n \text{ sets } (n \ge 4)$	2,436			
<i>n</i> hypothetical schools (<i>n</i> x 12)	9,744			

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

Figures







Appendix

	Years Enrolled in Current					
	School			College Plans		
	1-3	4-11	12-14		N	
	vears	vears	vears	Yes	No	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
Reputation						
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	
Size						
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	
Affiliation						
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	
Extracurriculars / Community Service						
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	
Tuition						
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	
Distance						
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	
$n \text{ sets}(n \ge 4)$	1,244	1,516	192	452	2,764	
<i>n</i> hypothetical schools $(n \ge 12)$	3,732	4,548	576	1,356	8,292	

Table A1. Marginal means by years enrolled in current school and plans to enroll in college / university

	Table A2. Margina	l means by persona	al faith and religio	ous service attendance
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	I have been a					
	Christian for many years		Religious service attendance			
	Yes	No	> Weekly	Weekly	< Weekly	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
Reputation						
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	
Size						
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	
Affiliation						
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	
Extracurriculars / Community Service						
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	
Tuition						
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	
Distance						
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> x 4)	2,240	984	868	1,476	840	
<i>n</i> hypothetical schools (<i>n</i> x 12)	6,720	2,952	2,604	4,428	2,520	