

*From the University/College Applicant Study™:*

# How Applicants Choose in Ontario and Alberta

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In spring 2009, we surveyed about 150,000 applicants to more than 40 colleges and universities across Canada, and asked them what drew them to specific institutions as their first choice for higher education. Respondents rated the impact of 50 different factors in 5 categories, on a seven-point scale from -3 to +3. Typically we convert the data into a "Push/Pull Graph" to demonstrate the perceived strengths and weaknesses of specific institutions against specific competitor institutions.

In this *UCAS™ FactSheet*, we take a different kind of look, at the measurable differences between applicants living in two dynamic markets: Ontario and Alberta.

Compared to the more pragmatic Albertans, Ontarians were generally more attracted by campus comforts and academic prestige.

## UNIVERSITY APPLICANTS

Ontario applicants report higher influence for most factors on their choice of university, suggesting a more crowded competitive landscape with greater choice. Doubtless this is in part attributable to the OUAC centralized application centre, where Ontario applicants can easily apply to multiple institutions at once, and also to the

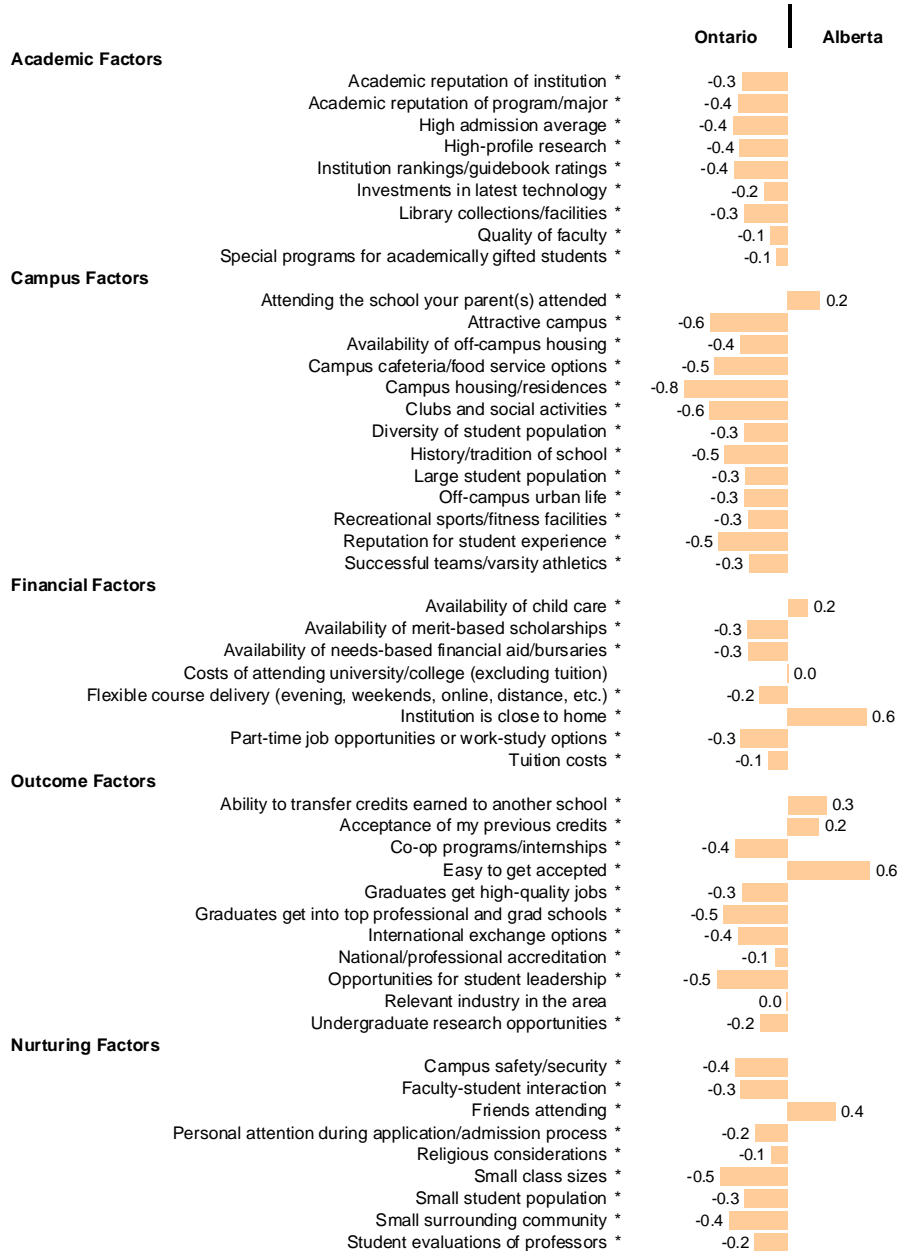


concentration of applicants and institutions in Toronto and the GTA. Alberta has just launched its own centralized application service, Apply Alberta, in spring 2010; it will be interesting to see what impact this has on cross-applications and decision-making processes in the 2010 UCAS™.

Albertans applying to university anywhere in the country appear to place significantly more emphasis on very practical considerations, particularly ease of acceptance, proximity to home, credit transfer and articulation, and the availability of childcare. Relative to Ontarians, Albertans also appear to be more influenced by family traditions, and seem a bit less independent-minded about their choice of university: they are more attracted to universities because their friends are also attending, or because their parents are alumni. Albertans are about twice as likely to report they intend to commute to university, rather than moving away to live on campus for four years, and the weight they give these factors in part reflects this difference in mobility.

Because Albertans generally reported less influence for all factors on their choice of university, it is also notable that the differential between the two provinces is quite minor on perceived costs, relevant industry in the area, professional accreditations, religious considerations, special honours programs, and perceived quality of faculty. On average, Albertan applicants also are not so different from Ontario applicants when it comes to the importance of investments in the latest technology, flexible course delivery methods, undergraduate research opportunities, student evaluations of professors, and personal attention during the application process.

On the other hand, relative to their Albertan counterparts, Ontario applicants to universities anywhere in the country are much more attracted by what we call Campus factors, especially campus housing/ residences, attractive campuses, clubs and social activities, campus food services, reputations for student experience, and school traditions. They report being much more influenced by opportunities for student leadership, small class sizes, and promising graduate school placement outcomes. Ontario applicants appear to be much more swayed by creature comforts on campus, and the ongoing “arms race” between universities to construct luxurious new residences and athletic centres. Ontario applicants aren’t



Push/Pull Graph 1: Impact of Key Decision Factors on selection of First-Choice University, Ontarian vs Albertan University applicants, 2009 UCAS™ Applicant Study.

just more concerned with their comfort on-campus, however: they also place greater emphasis on off-campus housing and off-campus urban life.

Ontarian applicants to university also placed more emphasis on all the Academic factors than their Albertan counterparts, from academic reputation and

rankings to admission averages and high-profile research. We also know that 57% of Ontario applicants read the *Maclean's Guide to Universities*, compared to just 29% of Albertan applicants. It appears that Ontario applicants perceive a greater differential between universities on the basis of reputation, and are more influenced by reputational considerations.

Although the gap is smaller than for campus and academic factors overall, Ontario university applicants also place more emphasis on Nurturing factors than Albertan applicants, from small class sizes and small surrounding communities to campus safety, small student populations, and levels of faculty-student interaction. Either Ontario university applicants are more attracted by nurturing environments, or (more likely) they perceive a greater difference between universities on matters such as safety and size than do Alberta applicants.

Where Financial factors are concerned, Albertan university applicants appear to be focused on keeping the costs of attending university under control: they are more attracted by proximity to home and the availability of childcare, and as concerned as Ontarians about tuition and other costs. On the other hand, Ontario applicants are somewhat more attracted by revenue sources to pay whatever it takes for university: part-time employment opportunities, co-op programs, merit-based scholarships and need-based financial aid. Relative to their Albertan counterparts, Ontario applicants may be somewhat desensitized to the costs of university, and appear to be focused on finding the means to pay for it, rather than minimizing its cost.

## COLLEGE APPLICANTS

College applicants in Ontario and Alberta demonstrate some of the same tendencies as those noted above for university applicants, although the differences between the two provinces are generally much more subtle. The biggest differences between college applicants in the two provinces hinge on the importance of co-op programs and internships, small class sizes, part-time work, campus and off-campus housing, ease of acceptance and transferability of credits.

Ontario college applicants place more emphasis on almost all Academic factors than their Alberta counterparts, particularly on institutional rankings, library collections and facilities, and high admission averages. (Since colleges are not ranked in Ontario, this may reflect some overlap or confusion with published university rankings.) When it comes to the impact of perceived institutional reputation and quality of faculty on their choice of college, applicants in the two provinces are statistically indistinguishable.

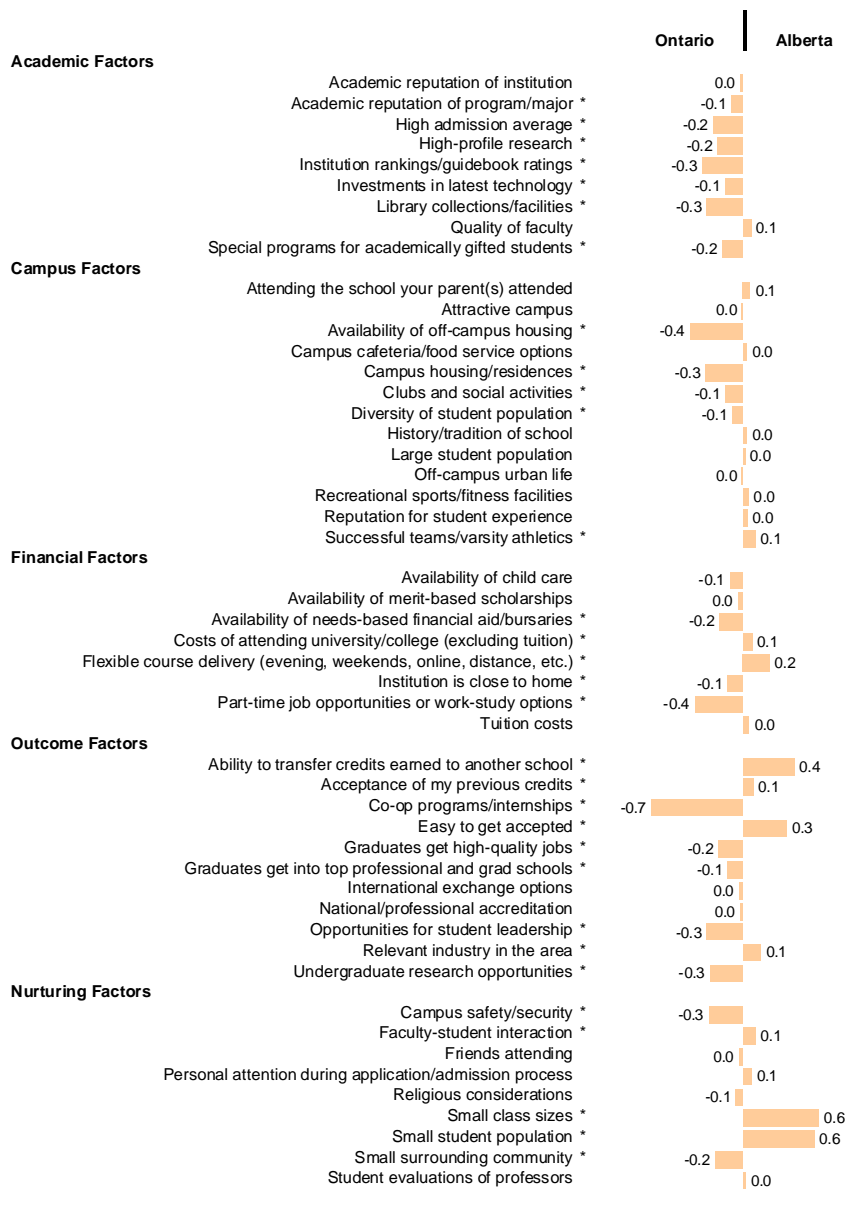
Like Ontarians applying to university, those applying to college also tend to put more emphasis on Campus factors than their Albertan counterparts. In particular, Ontario college applicants place considerably more emphasis on the availability of off-campus housing, campus housing and residences than Albertans, and slightly more emphasis on clubs and social activities, and the diversity of the student population. On most other campus factors, Albertan college applicants are statistically indistinguishable from their Ontarian counterparts, except for placing slightly more emphasis on successful sports teams and varsity athletics.

On several Financial factors, college applicants in Alberta and Ontario are indistinguishable. Ontario applicants place far more emphasis on part-time work opportunities or work-study options when selecting their first-choice college, however, and somewhat more emphasis on needs-based financial aid (bursaries), childcare,

and proximity to home. Albertans placed more emphasis on flexible course delivery methods, and slightly more emphasis on the costs of attending college, other than tuition (which was given the same significance by applicants in both provinces).

When it comes to Outcome factors, college applicants in Ontario place vastly more importance on co-op programs and internships, and more importance on opportunities for student leadership and undergraduate research opportunities, than their Alberta counterparts. Albertan college applicants, on the other hand, put more emphasis on articulation and transfer agreements, possibly reflecting the higher level of college-university transfer opportunities in Alberta than in Ontario. Albertan college applicants also placed more weight on ease of acceptance in selecting their first-choice college, suggesting either a greater perceived disparity between Alberta colleges on this matter, or a greater tendency among Albertans to prefer a college over a university because of admission requirements.

Although among university applicants, it was Ontarians who placed more weight on Nurturing factors, surprisingly among college applicants Albertans emphasized them more. In particular, Albertan college applicants placed much more emphasis on small class sizes and small student population as drivers of their choice of



Push/Pull Graph 2: Impact of Key Decision Factors on selection of First-Choice College, Ontarian vs Albertan College applicants, 2009 UCAS™ Applicant Study.

college. This may well reflect the longer history of college-university transfer in Alberta. Ontarian college applicants, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on campus safety and security, and small surrounding community, in selecting their first-choice college – suggesting either more concerns about these aspects of college life, or greater perceived differences between the colleges Ontario applicants were considering.

## SUMMARY

The higher education landscapes in Ontario and Alberta are quite distinct, from the urban/rural distribution of applicants and the immigration patterns of new Canadians, to the sheer number of colleges and universities, and the transfer and articulation pathways between them.

The very existence of centralized university (OUAC) and college (OCAS) application centres in Ontario likely creates greater awareness of institutional choices, higher levels of cross-application, and more intense student recruitment competition. (The fact that Alberta has just launched its own centralized application centre, Apply Alberta, and that it consolidates the application process for both colleges and universities in one portal, will doubtless reshape the landscape yet again.) The two application centres in Ontario serve to underscore the deeper market division between universities and community colleges in Ontario, than in Western Canada where many students commence university-level study at a local college campus with the expectation of a smooth 2+2 transfer.

Comparing the decision factors used by Ontarians and Albertans to select their first-choice college or university, it becomes clear that university applicants differ considerably between the two provinces, while the differences between college applicants are much more subtle.

Ontario university applicants are clearly much more influenced by perceptions of campus amenities and student life, academic reputation and prestige, and nurturing academic and campus environments. Ontarians appear on average more focused on the student experience, and less focused on minimizing financial cost or ensuring transferability of credits. By contrast, Albertan university applicants seem more pragmatic than their Ontario counterparts, focused on proximity, entrance requirements, credit transfer and articulation.

College applicants in the two provinces are in most ways more similar than university applicants, placing identical emphasis on many factors in selecting their first-choice colleges. Ontarians placed notably more weight on co-op programs, part-time employment opportunities and work-study options, while Albertans emphasized small class sizes, small student populations, ease of acceptance and transferability of credits. The overall impression is that Ontarian college applicants are much more pragmatic, focused on work experience and earning potential, while Albertan college applicants are looking for a smaller, more nurturing start to higher education, with clear transferability to university or other institutions.

## MORE INFO

Naturally, this brief FactSheet risks oversimplification by treating two entire provinces as single markets. Academica Group's UCAS™ database, extending back 14 years, can answer much more specific questions for our clients about more granular geographic regions, specific demographic groups, subject areas, or perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of individual colleges or universities.

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