

GO CATS GO: WHY PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS GO TO
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

by

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ABSTRACT

While a “demographic cliff” and rising costs have sent national college enrollment into a decade-long slide, Montana State University (MSU) is telling a different story. Defying the trend of growing skepticism toward higher education, MSU has seen record-breaking application and enrollment growth. This study sets out to solve that puzzle: why here, and why now? To uncover the answer, I employed a constructivist grounded theory approach. By analyzing 100 de-identified application essays and conducting semi-structured interviews, the study utilized inductive coding and constant comparison to map the internal decision-making process of prospective applicants. Contrary to the logic that affordability drives the modern student, we found that 91% were motivated by the promise of academic rigor and specialized pedagogy. They aren’t just looking for a degree; they are seeking a specific identity shaped by the Montana landscape and a deep sense of social belonging. In an era of institutional decline, these findings reveal that the most powerful recruitment tool isn’t a lower price tag, but a compelling synthesis of place, purpose, and community.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

A college education provides students with significant advantages, both professionally and personally. From a career perspective, a degree expands the number of accessible job opportunities while also increasing a candidate's marketability. Research consistently affirms the substantial return on investment of a college degree, fueled by a persistent and growing corporate demand for highly educated workers (Tarver, 2025). Coursework sharpens vital communication, critical thinking, and analytical skills that are highly valued by employers. For those pursuing specific paths, such as becoming a doctor, lawyer, or teacher, a degree is a fundamental prerequisite. On average, college graduates also experience a higher earning potential over their lifetime, providing greater financial stability. Students who attended any college or university generated an estimated total of \$73.4 billion in additional annual earnings compared to those of the typical high school graduate, even after accounting for the amount students invested in their education (Tarver, 2025). Beyond these tangible benefits, the collegiate experience promotes self-management, collaboration, and networking, equipping students with a suite of essential skills for future success. While these universal benefits explain the value of a degree, the specific motivations driving students to choose Montana State University often stem from a unique blend of its R1 research status, specialized academic programs, and the distinct lifestyle appeal of the Bozeman community.

However, the impact of a degree extends far beyond financial stability; it also has a profound effect on the length and quality of a student's life. According to the latest analysis by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington's School of Medicine (*The Lancet Public Health* journal), US college graduates live an average of 11 years longer than those who never finish high school (IHME, 2025). More specifically, the research found that the gap between the most and least educated was substantial and increased over time, from eight years in 2000 to nearly 11 years in 2019. College graduates increased their lifespans by 2.5 years to 84.2 years. Those who completed some college increased their life expectancy (LE) by 0.7 years to 82.1 years. In contrast, high school graduates increased their lifespans by 0.3 years to 77.3 years, and those without a high school diploma saw no improvement in their LE, which remained 73.5 years.

Higher education provides significant returns not only for the individual graduate, but also for the economic and civil health of society. A 2025 University of Maryland study examines whether higher education acts as a remedy to modern political polarization by fostering civil, constructive discourse rather than performative conflict. This research highlights the societal impact of a degree, suggesting colleges can serve as an antidote to prevalent political hostility and promote intellectual engagement (University of Maryland, 2025). Utilizing data from 4,990 respondents to the National Survey on America Civic Health, researchers analyzed essential "civic virtues"—character attributes that facilitate productive participation in a democratic society. These virtues include a tolerance for political disagreement and humility to engage with opposing perspectives with an open mind. The study found that on average, people who earned a bachelor's or graduate degree demonstrated 13-14.4% higher levels of tolerance and humility

compared to those with a high school education or less (“The Transformative Ripple Effect of Higher Education,” 2025). These findings suggest that universities may encourage bridge-building and a willingness to engage across political divides.

Furthermore, the future economic vitality of the United States depends on a steady supply of college graduates to fuel innovation and meet the growing demand for specialized labor. However, according to the 2022 article, *How Higher Education Lost Its Shine*, the United States “has fallen from second to 16th among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member nations in the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with bachelor’s degrees since 2000” (Marcus, 2022). Projections from the American Action Forum (AAF) indicate that even before the pandemic, the United States faced a looming labor deficit of over nine million college-educated workers. This shortage, spanning nearly every state, was estimated to cost the national economy roughly \$1.2 trillion in lost output over the coming decade (Marcus, 2022). These projections underscore the deep-seated structural imbalances within the US economy. This persistent skills gap not only threatens long-term economic growth and national productivity, but also undermines the United States’ ability to remain competitive in the global market. This scarcity of skilled labor threatens to stifle innovation and erode the global standing of the U.S. industry. Addressing this challenge through improved recruitment and retention is a vital societal investment, laying the groundwork for the specific institutional strategies seen at universities like Montana State.

Furthermore, beyond its intellectual and societal value, a college degree remains a financial asset. Those with bachelor’s degrees earn 67 percent more than those with only high school diplomas, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Marcus, 2022). The Georgetown

University Center on Education and the Workforce estimates that more than half of “good jobs”—meaning those with salaries of at least \$35,000 for workers under age 45 and \$45,000 for people between 45 and 64—call for bachelor’s degrees (Marcus 2022). In 2022, households headed by a young high school graduate had a median net worth of \$30,700, up from \$12,700 in 2013. Those headed by a young adult with some college education had a median net worth of \$52,900, up from \$15,700 in 2013. The typical wealth level of households headed by a young college graduate was \$120,200 in 2022, up from \$46,600 in 2013. (Fry, Braga & Parker, 2024). Ultimately, a degree significantly elevates an individual’s lifetime earning potential.

Despite the importance, value, and criticalness of a college degree, the proportion of 14 to 18-year-olds who think education is necessary beyond high school has dropped from 60 percent to 45 percent since the pandemic of 2020; and, more than half of teenagers who are planning on some further education say they are open to something other than a four-year degree (Marcus, 2022). Institutions of higher education will be facing increasing challenges in recruiting prospective students. This decline in applications is driven by several factors, including the high cost of tuition, a projected decrease in the number of high school graduates starting in 2025, a shift in public and political perception toward higher education, and growing skepticism about the return on investment of a college degree.

Despite the clear advantages of a degree, the high education sector is bracing for a profound structural shift driven by a cooling of applicant interest and a shrinking student population. Often referred to as the Demographic Cliff, this phenomenon stems from a confluence of demographic and behavioral changes that are reshaping higher education. While lower birth rates following the 2008 financial crisis have produced a smaller cohort of traditional

college-aged students, this demographic shift alone does not fully account for the scale of the enrollment downturn (Marcus, 2022). These non-demographic factors include rising skepticism about the return on investment of a college degree, a growing impatience with the time required to earn a diploma, and tuition costs that have exceeded many families' ability or willingness to pay. As Ashbrook (2025) concurs, these factors, coupled with the increasing viability of alternative career pathways, are driving a critical shift away from traditional higher education.

Previously, colleges and universities had a relatively steady pipeline of high school graduates to sustain enrollment as high school counselors and parents encouraged college as the next logical step for graduating seniors. However, with fewer students available and a decrease in interest in higher education, institutions will need to rethink their recruitment strategies. When students consider that the average cost of college in 2025 in the United States is \$38,270 per student per year, including books, supplies, and daily living expenses (Hanson, 2025), they will carefully consider whether or not to enroll, and which college to choose.

Moreover, it is important for students to find the right school for their first year of college. Notably, “college enrollment statistics indicate that, whether they earn their degree or drop out, most undergraduate students make only one attempt to complete their college education” (Hanson, 2025). This fact indicates the high-stakes, one-shot, nature of the modern student lifecycle. Put simply, students’ likelihood of college completion is heavily influenced by their choice of college; therefore, where students choose to enroll can be just as important as whether they choose to enroll in college at all (Cochran & Coles, 2012). Learning about what motivates students to apply to MSU and looking at the commonalities of the responses will give

the Admissions Office a clearer view of incoming students and whether or not it can predict if MSU will be the right fit for these individuals.

Despite existing research on college choice, a specific, empirically grounded account of the decision process used by applicants to MSU is missing. This study will address that gap by exploring the motivations that guide MSU applicants' choices, providing valuable data to inform and improve the Admissions Office's marketing and recruitment strategies.

Statement of Purpose

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, this study develops a process model of MSU undergraduate applications decisions, analyzing application essays and interviews. By exploring the intersection of personal values, academic aspirations, and desired environments, this study aims to construct a model of how applicants navigate their decision to apply. Through analyzing undergraduate applications, I hope to uncover what attracts incoming students and align MSU's resources with the evolving needs and expectations of its students. These findings can provide valuable insights to enhance recruitment strategies and support mechanisms for prospective students.

This study investigates the multidimensional nature of student decision-making, specifically focusing on the intersection of motivational drivers and institutional perceptions. Key areas of inquiry include the specific actions students take, such as conducting institutional research, seeking input from family and peers, and evaluating affordability. In other words, how do personal experiences, attitudes, and values influence student choice?

Guiding Research Questions

1. How do MSU undergraduate applicants make the decision to apply to MSU?
2. What motivations and contextual factors do applicants describe as shaping that decision?

Significance of the Study

Higher education remains a primary driver of socioeconomic mobility, offering students enhanced earning potential, expanded career opportunities, and a more profound understanding of diverse perspectives. However, despite these individual and societal advantages, the landscape of higher education recruitment has become increasingly volatile. National undergraduate enrollment has entered a period of steady contraction; as of Fall 2024, enrollment totaled 19.28 million undergraduate students—an 8.43% decline from the 2010 peak of 21.0 million students (Hansen, 2025). A primary driver of this enrollment contraction is the shrinking high school population, often referred to as the Demographic Cliff. According to Marcus (2025), the high school class of 2025 represents the final peak before a projected long-term decline in the number of 18-year-olds, the traditional demographic for college entry. As this population diminishes, institutions face an increasingly hyper-competitive landscape where more colleges must compete for fewer prospective students.

Furthermore, falling enrollment has been exacerbated by a decline in the perceived value of a college or university degree. Only one in four Americans now say that having a bachelor's degree is extremely or very important for getting a good job, according to the Pew Research Center (Marcus, 2025). Among high school graduates, the proportion going straight to college

has decreased, from a peak of 70% in 2016 to 62% in 2022, the most recent year for which the figure is available (Marcus, 2025). Since many students do not perceive a degree as a crucial step to getting a good job, they are not rushing to enroll in college. Ultimately, this shift in perception has created a buyer's market where interest is no longer guaranteed. As the proportion of high school graduates bypasses higher education for immediate workforce entry, colleges must now work twice as hard to recruit from a population that is increasingly unconvinced of the return on investment.

This shift in sentiment does more than just strain university budgets; it places the broader economic stability of entire regions at risk. The potential closure of higher education institutions represents a significant threat to the national economy, with every lost college resulting in an average annual loss of 265 jobs and \$67 million in economic impact (Marcus, 2025). In contrast to these national vulnerabilities, Montana State University serves as a vital economic engine for its region, standing as the largest employer in Bozeman with 3,644 executive, faculty, and staff members (MSU Institutional Profile, 2025). This workforce—comprising 60 executives, 2,219 staff, and over 1,300 faculty—is central to MSU's land grant mission. As Provost Robert Mokwa noted, this “exceptional faculty” is essential for expanding academic access and preparing graduates to meet Montana's specific workforce needs (Cantrell, 2025). Thus, while the national landscape faces diminution, MSU's operational scale reinforces its role as a critical contributor to both local community stability and statewide progress.

The success of Montana State University is vital to the Bozeman community and the state of Montana. MSU must recruit new students annually to sustain its programs, fund research, offer scholarships, and foster academic growth. By learning about student applicant motivations,

the Office of Admissions can identify changing student inclinations. This knowledge will provide a clearer path to recruitment. It is vital that MSU attract enough students each year to maintain its programs, educational opportunities, and jobs. Findings can inform message testing, campus visit design, and program-page content to align recruitment with demonstrated applicant motivations. This study is significant as it examines how institutions navigate this contraction to remain viable and relevant in a shifting educational market.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesizes four strands relevant to MSU applicants' decision processes: 1) individual motivations for college attendance; 2) social influences such as family and peers; 3) institutional touchpoints such as campus visits or program signaling; and 4) challenges facing college recruitment now and in the near future.

While social and economic pressures heavily influence a student's path, they are part of a broader spectrum of reasons for pursuing a degree. Recognizing that no two students share identical goals, scholars began formulating typologies in the 1960s to better differentiate between these varied academic and personal incentives (Monaghan, 2024). One of the most influential of these was developed by Clark and Trow in 1966 who identified four distinct student subcultures—academic, collegiate, vocational, and nonconformist—based on their level of involvement with ideas and institutional loyalty (Hendel, D. D., & Harrold, R., 2007). Clark and Trow's (1966) study provided one of the first formal frameworks for examining student characteristics and development. Later, researchers revised these student types. Astin (1993), for instance, identified seven student types applying to colleges: scholar, leader, hedonist, status-striver, artist, and unconnected. Later, Kuh et al. (2000) defined ten types: intellectual, grind, scientist, collegiate, recreator, socializer, conventional, individualist, artist, and disengaged (Monaghan, 2024). This shift from Astin's (1993) focus on pre-college values to Kuh's (2000) emphasis on engagement patterns reflects a broader transition in higher education research toward prioritizing behavioral activities over static student characteristics. The refinement of these classifications illustrates the evolving interests of students. Ultimately, categorizing these

distinct groups enables educational institutions to tailor recruitment strategies to specific student behaviors.

Recent literature highlights the specific determinants that influence a student's decision to pursue higher education. A study done by Cipriano & Riccardi (2016) asked why students would want to enroll in college. Using a Likert scale from one to five, where one indicated strong agreement and five indicated strong disagreement, an average was calculated for all results. A lower number indicates students more strongly agree with a specific reason as an answer to the question: *Why would you want to go to college?* The results showed that the most common reason students in the survey wanted to go to college was to gain training and skills for a specific occupation (average score of 1.51). While finding a spouse ($M = 3.61$) was the least common. Students prioritized more practical outcomes. Mid-range motivations included gaining expertise in a specialized field (1.57), securing employment (1.64), acquiring skills to serve the community (1.77), and establishing lifelong personal goals (1.91). These findings suggest that in 2016, recruitment efforts could have been more effective if they moved beyond social incentives and instead emphasized a clear return on investment through career readiness and specialized skill development.

In a recent study regarding the motivations of two-year college degree applicants, VanOra (2019) asked why community college students choose to enroll through a series of semi-structured interviews. VanOra noted, "in almost every interview, students described feeling motivated by opportunities to reimagine themselves as scholars who were deeply committed to grappling with critical ideas" (p.15). Beyond professional gains, students often pursue higher education to elevate their social standing, fulfill familial expectations, and undergo a personal

transformation centered on purpose and achievement (VanOra, 2019). VanOra (2019) concluded that “almost every motivation that students articulated was connected with their desires to explore, reconstruct, and/or reimagine some aspect of self. Moreover, I found that students were calling on us not only to understand who they are now, but also whom they strive to become” (p. 15). Interestingly, while many think that students choose MSU for the mountains or skiing, VanOra’s data suggests there is a deeper intellectual identity shift happening.

This shift toward identity-seeking suggests that for today’s students, the university is seen as a catalyst for personal transformation. In contemporary society, higher education has become inextricably linked to both personal and public identity. It is the primary mechanism for improving one’s capacities and establishing moral worth. As Monaghan (2024) suggests, the bachelor’s degree has become the hallmark of full citizenship and adulthood, cementing the university’s role as a primary architect of the modern self. Consequently, recruitment strategies must address this profound desire for self-actualization, recognizing that students are seeking not just a degree, but a definitive pathway toward their realized adult identity. While VanOra’s (2019) research focused on community college applicants, the underlying desire for intellectual reimagining likely extends to the record-breaking numbers of students now choosing MSU.

Beyond individual aspirations, the decision to pursue a degree is heavily influenced by the structural conditions and cultural norms of a student’s upbringing. Barr (2018) argues that to truly understand students’ college choices, we must understand the environment in which their choices occur. Barr’s assertion highlights that choice is conditioned by information. When a student is immersed in a college-going culture, higher education is often perceived as a predetermined milestone rather than a mere possibility. In contrast, students outside such

environments may experience a cultural disconnect. Whether viewing higher education as a betrayal of local norms or as a high-risk financial gamble, many students see immediate workforce entry as the more logical, normal next step.

Some studies say that applicants are swayed by a college's reputation to successfully employ its graduates. Students want assurance that their degree will lead to a job. "Inspired by human capital investment models, early educational choice models focus on how individuals make rational assessments about educational choices based on the costs and returns associated with choosing a particular education" (Andersen & Hjortskov, 2022). Typically, the focus is on the resulting lifetime earnings.

Beyond identity seeking, students increasingly view higher education through a pragmatic lens, expecting that a degree will directly facilitate their entry into a modern workforce (Schultz & Higbee, 2007). This expectation reflects a broader economic shift from the industrial and manufacturing sectors of the previous century to a service-based Information Age where knowledge management has replaced physical production as the primary economic driver. While the holistic experience of college remains a draw, the fundamental motivation has shifted toward economic mobility. Research from the Project on Workforce (Roden, 2023), highlights a growing disconnect between higher education and the labor market, emphasizing the need for college-to-job pipelines that prioritize economic outcomes over traditional academic milestones. This research urges institutions to prioritize mobility by aligning curriculum with regional employment needs and integrating experiential learning into the student journey. For prospective MSU students, the college experience—defined largely by the university's immersive mountain setting—is the backdrop, but the career remains the primary objective. Understanding how MSU

navigates this tension between its lifestyle brand and its role as a conduit for professional advancement is central to decoding its recent enrollment success.

Kamssu (2021), suggests the necessity of the traditional college experience is being reconsidered as stakeholders weigh its influence on student costs, enrollment choices, and university financial sustainability. As a result, the modern college search has become an exercise in calculating professional return on investment, or ROI. Student expectations have shifted from general learning to career-specific outcomes. Kamssu (2021) notes that the pandemic immediately impacted these calculations for the class of 2020; based on the data from Art & Science Group LLC (2020), 65% of surveyed high school seniors cited affordability concerns for their first-choice schools, while 17% altering plans to include gap years and community college. These shifts align with current high costs and growing public skepticism. For example, the total cost of attendance at UCLA for the 2024-25 academic year reached \$80,739 for nonresidents and \$43,137 for California residents living on campus (University of California, Los Angeles [n.d.]). Such figures mirror a 2024 Pew Research Center study finding that only 22% of Americans believe a four-year college degree today is worth the cost if it requires student loans, while 29% maintain it is not worth the investment regardless of financing (Fry, et al, 2024). Given the escalating costs of higher education, students increasingly view their degrees as financial investments, seeking assurance that their degrees will yield a substantial return on their investment through high-paying career opportunities. There needs to be a shift in academia. Colleges can no longer prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical skills and real-world application. Relying on these antiquated pedagogical models risks disengaging prospective

students and leaves graduates ill-equipped to navigate the evolving demands of the 21st Century labor market.

Economic factors, however, represent only one facet of the college choice equation; the interpersonal dynamics of a student's life play an equally critical role in mitigating the uncertainty of the investment. Gazmuri and Prager (2025) emphasize this in their study of peer learning, finding that students rely heavily on their social networks to test a program's value. Specifically, their research shows that a student's likelihood of applying to a specific program increases when an older peer from their social or school network has previously applied or enrolled. This suggests that students are not merely swayed by social pressure, but are engaging in a form of social learning—using the experiences of friends and family to validate their own pathways post high school. Ultimately, since peer networks heavily influence college selection, institutional policies that curate a student's social environment—from targeted recruitment to lifestyle-driven orientation programs—can effectively steer enrollment.

By curating these social environments, institutions tap into the primary channel through which students gather information and form aspirations. Consistent with this approach, peer groups have been identified as one of the significant social factors influencing a student's educational trajectory (Zölitz and Feld, 2021). Rosenqvist (2018) identifies conformity and social contrast as the primary mechanisms through which peer influence shapes educational choices. Under the pressure of conformity, peers establish the norms for a social circle, frequently resulting in students making similar decisions regarding university enrollment and career paths. This suggests that the collective identity of a peer group often dictates the individual's long-term educational pathway. In summary, peer influence affects students'

educational choices through two primary mechanisms: conformity, where the desire for social integration drives students to align their decisions with the collective group, and social contrast, where comparative standing either bolsters or diminishes individual motivation. Contemporary research indicates that these comparisons have expanded beyond traditional academic achievement; today's university students increasingly measure their success against peers in terms of physical appearance and overall life satisfaction (Pham Thi, et al., 2025). In essence, MUS's record-breaking enrollment growth is driven by a brand identity that mirrors the dual motivations of the modern student; by leveraging its "Mountain and Minds" slogan, the university provides a social environment where academic achievement and a high-satisfaction lifestyle are not mutually exclusive. They are instead the very benchmarks by which prospective students validate their choice to enroll.

However, the effectiveness of such branding depends on how it interacts with the broader, multifaceted process of university selection. Do and Le (2020) identify tuition fees, institutional reputation, advice from those around them, and personal self-awareness as primary drivers in this decision-making journey. However, social dynamics—specifically peer pressure—play a specialized role in shaping student choices. A recent research project involving 676 Vietnamese students further categorizes this peer influence into five components: social integration, social networks, trust in friends, social comparison, and risk tolerance (Pham Thi, H. et al., 2025). Collectively, these factors dictate how students navigate the tension between their personal aspirations and the collective norms of their peer groups when selecting both a college and a field of study.

Despite rising costs and skepticism, the pressure to attend college remains deeply embedded in the American experience. A significant driver of enrollment is the pervasive ‘college-going culture’ institutionalized within the American secondary education system. By the time students reach high school, the expectation of higher education has been reinforced for years by parents, educators, and community (Monaghan, 2024). Consequently, college is viewed as the inevitable next expected step for most American students. Furthermore, “most affluent students take for granted that they will go to college immediately after high school and that college costs will be paid; thus, they focus on what school to attend” (Monaghan, 2024). If your parents can afford to send you, you won't wonder if you'll enroll in college, but rather which college you'll attend. In today's climate, parents, teachers, coaches, and other respected community members are influential on student enrollment.

However, this deeply ingrained cultural mandate is increasingly clashing with a more difficult economic and demographic reality. Even though a college education can lead to higher earning potential, increased employment opportunities, and provide exposure to different cultures, ideas, and perspectives, college enrollment across the country is declining. Since 2010, college enrollment in the United States has been shrinking. Significant obstacles within the college enrollment pipeline prevent many qualified students from pursuing higher education. As Odell (2022) notes, the dual pressures of financial instability and limited institutional information create a prohibitive environment, particularly for students in the lower income distribution who are most vulnerable to these shifting economic realities.

The crisis of declining enrollment is compounded by a shifting public consciousness regarding the utility of higher education. Evidence of this growing skepticism is seen in recent

data: only one in four Americans now considers a bachelor's degree “extremely” or “very important” for securing high-quality employment (Marcus, 2025). Consequently, today’s universities must navigate a complex landscape to attract and engage a new generation of applicants who are increasingly wary of the traditional college path. The harsh reality of this cultural shift is most evident in the sharp decline of institutional headcount.

According to the Education Data Initiative, college enrollment totaled 19.28 million undergraduate students nationwide in Fall 2024—a 8.43% drop from the 2010 peak of 21.0 million students. While undergraduates still comprise the vast majority (82.9%) of the postsecondary population, these dwindling figures highlight the urgency of the crisis (Hansen, 2025). A primary driver of this decline is the “demographic cliff,” a sharp reduction in the college-aged population stemming from the 2007 birth rate drop. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) projects that after peaking in 2025, the number of high school graduates nationwide will erode by 13%—roughly 500,000 students—by 2041 (Lane, 2024). This downward trend is already visible; national enrollment among new graduates has fallen 11.6% from its 2009 peak, a crisis mirrored locally as Montana’s enrollment has contracted by 11.5% since 2010 (Hanson, 2025). This is not an isolated struggle, as 45 states have faced similar postsecondary declines over the last decade.

The “demographic cliff” has transformed recruitment into a high-stakes search for efficiency; as the pool of applicants shrinks, institutions must prioritize marketing channels with proven conversion power. While earlier marketers perceived a simple transition from brochures to social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook (Johnston, 2010), the modern landscape is far more specialized. According to EducationDynamics (2025), short-form video has emerged as

the “cornerstone” of recruitment, allowing universities to cut through digital noise with authentic, peer-led story storytelling that resonates more deeply with Gen Z than traditional, polished advertisements (EducationDynamics, 2025). However, if social media acts as the digital front door for discovery, the physical campus remains the ultimate site for decision making. Despite the widespread availability of information on the web, most students review the campus visit as a top resource for making their college choice (EAB, 2024). While a campus visit is a relatively expensive means of communication, its outsized impact makes it a clear way to break through the digital clutter .

While financial concerns remain a baseline requirement, recent benchmarks reveal that non-monetary factors—specifically campus safety, facilities, and social environment—carry equal weight in determining a student’s ultimate institutional fit. Educational research company EAB (2023), formerly known as the Education Advisory Board, observed that “while financial concerns remain the top factor in students’ choice of college, our research shows that they place more weight on their campus experience than they did at the start of the pandemic” (p, 5). Specifically, students now rank “beautiful campus, school spirit and traditions” more highly than they did in 2020 (Donaher, 2023). This shift suggests that modern applicants are no longer seeking just a degree, but a deeply immersive and community-oriented collegiate experience.

While the “demographic cliff” and rising cynicism have created shrinkage across much of the higher education landscape, Montana State University (MSU) has emerged as a notable outlier. Fortunately, for MSU, the number of applications has increased significantly in recent years. In the 2024-25 academic year, the university saw record-breaking interest with over 27,000 new student applications. This surge culminated in the largest enrollment in state history,

as MSU became the first institution in Montana’s history to surpass 17,000 students (MSU News Service, 2024). This anomaly raises the question: What specific factors are drawing students to MSU in an era of national decline? My research seeks to gain insight into that “something.” While existing literature emphasizes career-related motivations, it seldom explores the nuanced decision-making process of individual students. By utilizing a grounded approach, this study intends to reveal the specific triggers—such as peer influence, institutional reputation, or affordability—that drive the MSU enrollment journey.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The primary dataset consisted of 100 de-identified applications from the incoming class that will matriculate in fall of 2026 (ages 18-25). To ensure anonymity, a staff member who was not engaging in the research replaced student names with numerical identifiers while retaining key demographic data: student status (freshman vs. transfer), residence, and intended major. These responses were organized into a spreadsheet and analyzed using thematic coding, which involved three comprehensive readings of each essay to identify recurring themes.

To supplement the essay data, five MSU students were recruited via convenience sampling for interviews regarding their reasons for choosing to attend MSU. Interviews were conducted at the Strand Union Building's SRO Cafe. Following IRB-approved informed consent, each participant engaged in a 15-minute semi-structured interview based on four open-ended questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure data integrity, I employed member checking, allowing participants to review their transcripts for accuracy. Like the essays, the interview transcripts were anonymized and read three times to extract common themes.

The data were analyzed using open coding, an inductive process consistent with Grounded Theory. As defined by Creswell and Poth (2018), open coding involves breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts and assigning emergent codes to identify concepts and categories. This approach prioritizes theoretical flexibility, allowing patterns to surface directly from the text rather than fitting data into predetermined categories. Following this inductive method, I analyzed each sample without a prior coding scheme. Through multiple readings of the

student essays and interview transcripts, several distinct motivational categories emerged, which I grouped into three primary clusters. These categories included environmental and social factors (such as the Montana landscape, outdoor recreation, and the friendly campus climate); institutional ties (including the strength of various academic programs at MSU, smaller class sizes, and legacy connections); and personal growth (such as career aspirations and the desire for a new adventure).

While both datasets centered on enrollment motivations, the interviews allowed for deeper exploration. I utilized follow-up questions—such as “What motivated you to attend MSU?” and “In considering other colleges, why did you select MSU?”—to capture the nuance of the student experience that the essays alone could not provide. This layered approach allowed for the triangulation of findings across both datasets, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of student motivations.

To analyze the data, I employed an inductive approach rooted in Grounded Theory, ensuring that the themes emerged directly from the participants’ experiences rather than preconceived categories. The analysis followed a rigorous three-stage process.

I began with open coding to break the data into discrete segments, identifying initial labels and ideas. During this stage, I utilized InVivo coding to preserve the emic perspective, using participants’ exact words to ensure the themes remain grounded in their own language. Throughout this process, I maintained reflective memos to document emergent insights and theoretical transitions.

Using the Contrast Comparative Method, I continuously compared new data segments against previously coded sections. This allowed for the transition into axial coding, where I

identified relationships and connections between categories. Finally, through thematic analysis, I synthesized these categories into the primary motivators for attending MSU.

The most prominent recurring themes identified through this process included: the Montana landscape and outdoor environment, the friendly campus culture/climate, the strength of academic programs, family and friend ties, career aspirations, and the pursuit of new adventures.

The analytical process moved from raw data collection to an iterative phase of thematic refinement. Initially, I anticipated that affordability would be a primary motivator; however, as only 3% of the sample referenced financial factors, this category was excluded. Similarly, I refined the initial interview instrument after determining the early questions lacked the specificity required to meet the study's objective.

As the analysis progressed, I engaged in thematic collapsing to create more robust categories. For example, five distinct codes—the beauty of Montana, skiing, hiking, Yellowstone National Park, and outdoor pursuits—were consolidated into the singular theme: Montana Landscape and Outdoor Environment. This constant comparison of data segments continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring the final theme accurately represented the collective student experience.

The final list of themes is as follows: Academic programs and pedagogical quality; Outdoor environment/Montana landscape; Family and friend connections; Research opportunities; Friendly campus culture; and Career aspirations.

To ensure the integrity of the findings, I employed several strategies to acknowledge and mitigate researcher bias. I maintained a reflexive journal to document evolving insights and

assumptions. For instance, early entries noted a surprising trend regarding the high impact of campus visits on student decision-making—a factor I had not previously prioritized. In addition, I engaged in peer debriefing by discussing my interpretations with a research partner. This collaboration was important for accuracy. It was my partner who observed that affordability was an outlier rather than a primary theme despite my initial expectations.

Finally, I used reflexive memoing to critically examine my own influence on the data. I realized during the coding process that my personal affinity for the Montana landscape was causing me to over-emphasize outdoor pursuits in the transcripts. By acknowledging this bias through memoization, I was able to re-evaluate the data with more objectivity, ultimately identifying the “welcoming campus climate” as a core theme that I had initially overlooked. To enhance the credibility of the findings, this study utilized data triangulation by drawing from two distinct sources: optional undergraduate application essays and in-person interviews with MSU students. By grounding the analysis in the participants’ own words, I aimed to provide a detailed and authentic account of their experiences, allowing the evidence to remain transparent to the reader. Furthermore, I employed member checking to mitigate researcher bias and ensure an accurate representation of the participants’ voices. Following the transcription of the interviews, each participant was invited to review their transcript for accuracy. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), this validation step is essential for confirming that the researchers’ interpretations align with the participants’ intended meanings, thereby strengthening the overall integrity of the qualitative data. The participants were de-identified. Future research could look at whether first-generation students have different motivators than legacy students.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Academic Programs & Pedagogical Quality

Thematic analysis of student application essays (n=100) indicated that specific academic programs and the quality of instruction were primary drivers for student enrollment. A significant majority of applicants (91%) cited Montana State University's (MSU) academic offerings as a leading factor in their decision to apply.

The data revealed a diverse range of academic interests across the university's various colleges (see Table 1). While University Studies/Undeclared represented the largest segment of the applicant pool (20%), there was substantial interest in the College of Letters and Science (18%) and the College of Agriculture (16%), followed by the Jake Jabs College of Business & Entrepreneurship (14%) and the College of Engineering (13%). Many applicants specifically highlighted the value of high-impact, hands-on learning experiences and the benefit of smaller class sizes. This preference for an intimate, applied learning environment was a recurring sub-theme. For example, one freshman applicant noted: "...academic opportunity with the variety of strong health science programs you offer. I would appreciate the hands-on applied sciences and the smaller class sizes where I could actually get to know my professors."

Other students identified specific prestigious programs as the sole reason for their interest. A prospective nursing student emphasized the institutional reputation, stating, "The most significant factor in my decision to MSU is its outstanding nursing program. It focuses on hands-

on clinical training and community health which is what I value.” Similarly, applicants interested in the arts were drawn to the intersection of geography and discipline, with one student noting that the Film and Photography program was uniquely positioned in an area they “really enjoy and want to explore.” Ultimately, the application data suggest that while many students enter the university undecided, the presence of robust, specialized programs—particularly in the health sciences, agriculture, and the arts—serves as a critical recruitment channel.

Theme 2: Outdoor Environment & Montana Landscape

The second most significant factor for incoming students was Montana’s natural beauty and the abundance of outdoor activities, cited by 61% of applicants (n=61). Students frequently described Bozeman as a “special spot” nestled near mountain valleys and iconic national parks. One freshman from Arizona highlighted its proximity to nature, while a student from Wisconsin noted the balance between the “bustling downtown” and the surrounding peaks. For many, like an incoming business major from New Jersey, the “open skies and adventurous spirit” aligned perfectly with their personal identity. Beyond the scenery, students expressed excitement for the local lifestyle; respondents from around the country—from California to Massachusetts—specifically cited skiing, hiking, and mountain biking as primary draws. The allure of the mountains isn’t just aesthetic; it represents a lifestyle these students are eager to embrace.

Theme 3: Friendly Campus Climate

While the physical landscape is a major draw, students were equally compelled by the human element of the university. Tied as a leading influence, MSU’s friendly campus climate was cited by 61% of applicants (n=61). For many, the “vibe” of the campus was the deciding factor that

transformed a beautiful location into a welcoming home. Students frequently described an immediate sense of belonging upon arrival. For instance, a freshman from Washington recalled that feeling of being “home” began the moment they stepped off the plane, citing Bozeman’s “friendly, tight community.” This sentiment was echoed by an Ohio freshman who noted that while the scenery was attractive, it was the people who truly made the environment feel personal. For transfer students, this atmosphere is particularly vital; one California student chose MSU specifically for its “sense of family,” noting that the community-centric culture was the primary reason they felt the university was the right fit. Ultimately, these responses suggest that while Montana’s mountains may catch a student’s eye, it is the authentic warmth of the campus community that secures their commitment to attend.

Theme 4: Career Aspirations

Beyond the immediate campus experience, a significant portion of the incoming class is focused on long-term professional outcomes. Cited by 19% of students (n=19), Career Aspirations represent a goal-oriented segment of the population. These applicants frequently underscored MSU’s reputation for preparing graduates to excel in competitive fields, ranging from engineering to the natural sciences. Student responses revealed a deep desire to translate their education into meaningful work. For example, a student from Florida articulated a common altruistic goal, stating she chose an engineering degree to “improve people’s lives.” Others were drawn by MSU’s unique regional expertise in specialized disciplines; a freshman from Colorado identified a clear path toward becoming, “a wildlife biologist,” while a student from Washington state was motivated by the university’s world-renowned reputation in paleontology.

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Theme 5: Family & Friend Connections

Beyond the call of the wilderness and future careers, many students were drawn to MSU by the presence of a pre-established support system. This connection to people—specifically family and friends—emerged as the third most prominent theme, with 17% of students (n=17) citing it as a factor in their decision-making process. For several applicants, MSU is a family tradition. One Montana freshman noted their deep roots, mentioning that several family members graduated from the university and their grandmother even served on the faculty. Similarly, a student from Michigan emphasized that having alumni in the family provided a sense of comfort while moving far from home. For others, the draw was more immediate; students from Colorado and

Texas highlighted that having siblings currently enrolled helped solidify their choice, providing a bridge between MSU's academic reputation and the welcoming community of Bozeman.

Theme 6: Research Opportunities

While many students are drawn to the lifestyle of Bozeman, a dedicated segment of the incoming class is motivated by MSU's reputation for scholarly inquiry. As an R1 institution, the opportunity for undergraduate research emerged as a distinct deciding factor for 12% of applicants (n=12). Student responses highlighted that MSU's research appeal is both broad and specialized. For some, like a freshman from North Carolina, the draw was the chance to engage in "field work," while others cited MSU's status as a "national leader" in niche fields like rural nursing. This academic prestige is often tied directly to Montana's unique landscape; for instance, a transfer student from Idaho specifically chose MSU for its proximity to "geologically significant features" that allow for unique research experiences. For these students, MSU's robust research infrastructure serves as a critical differentiator in their college selection process.

This emphasis on research and academic prestige found in the application essays was further mirrored and expanded upon during the qualitative interview phase. Across the five semi-structured interviews, participants consistently described their decision to attend MSU as the result of an intersection between academic opportunity, personal fit, and practical considerations. Several students emphasized the strength and flexibility of MSU's academic programs—particularly in environmental science, education, and pre-professional pathways—as central to their decision, noting opportunities for undergraduate research, hands-on learning, and Honors College engagement. The Montana landscape and proximity to Yellowstone National Park emerged as powerful motivators for students interested in environmental studies and outdoor

lifestyles. These findings reinforce MSU's appeal as both an academic and experiential setting. Equally prominent was the theme of campus climate; participants repeatedly referenced the university's friendliness, sense of belonging, and supportive faculty and staff as distinguishing features that make MSU feel like "home." For some students, financial and geographical considerations, including in-state tuition, scholarships, living at home, or family proximity, played a significant role, while others described MSU as the only institution to which they applied. Collectively, the interviews suggest that applicants do not select MSU based on a single factor, but rather through a synthesis of academic rigor, environmental identity, social belonging, and practical feasibility, reinforcing patterns identified in the broader essay dataset.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study sought to uncover the primary motivators behind the decision to attend Montana State University. Through the triangulation of application essays and semi-structured interviews, a clear picture emerges: students are drawn to MSU not by a single factor, but by a synthesis of academic reputation and the unique Montana “sense of place.” While the initial hypothesis suggested that financial affordability would be a primary driver, the data overwhelmingly pointed toward institutional ties and environmental factors. The discovery that only 3% of participants prioritized cost suggests that MSU’s perceived value proposition is rooted in the holistic experience of the institution rather than its price point.

The data suggests that the decision to attend MSU is driven by a powerful synergy between academic rigor, social connection, and environmental lifestyle. At the foundation of this choice is Academic Programs and Pedagogical Quality, cited by a vast majority of students (91%) as their primary reason for choosing MSU. This academic priority is complemented by dual pillars of the student experience: a Friendly Campus Climate (61%) and the Outdoor Montana Landscape (61%). While these primary drivers create the initial pull, the decision is further anchored by a desire for long-term success and personal support. Students balanced their lifestyle choices with Career Aspirations (19%) and the prestigious Research Opportunities (12%) available at an R1 institution. Finally, the presence of Family and Friend Connections (17%) provides the social continuity necessary for a successful transition. Collectively, these themes reveal that MSU attracts a purposeful student body seeking a whole-person education where academic excellence and an adventurous community spirit coexist.

Ultimately, for the Class of 2026, MSU represents more than a degree; it represents a transformative journey defined by a welcoming community and a rigorous academic environment. Future research should expand the interview pool to ensure that these themes persist across more diverse student demographics, including non-traditional and international students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

APPLICANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND RESULTS

Table 1. Applicant Distribution by Intended College

Intended College	Number of Students (Total n=100)
College of Agriculture	16
College of Arts and Architecture	5
College of Education, Health and Human Development	4
Jake Jabs College of Business and Entrepreneurship	14
College of Letters and Science	18
Mark & Robyn Jones College of Nursing	8
Norm Asbjornson College of Engineering	13
University Studies	20

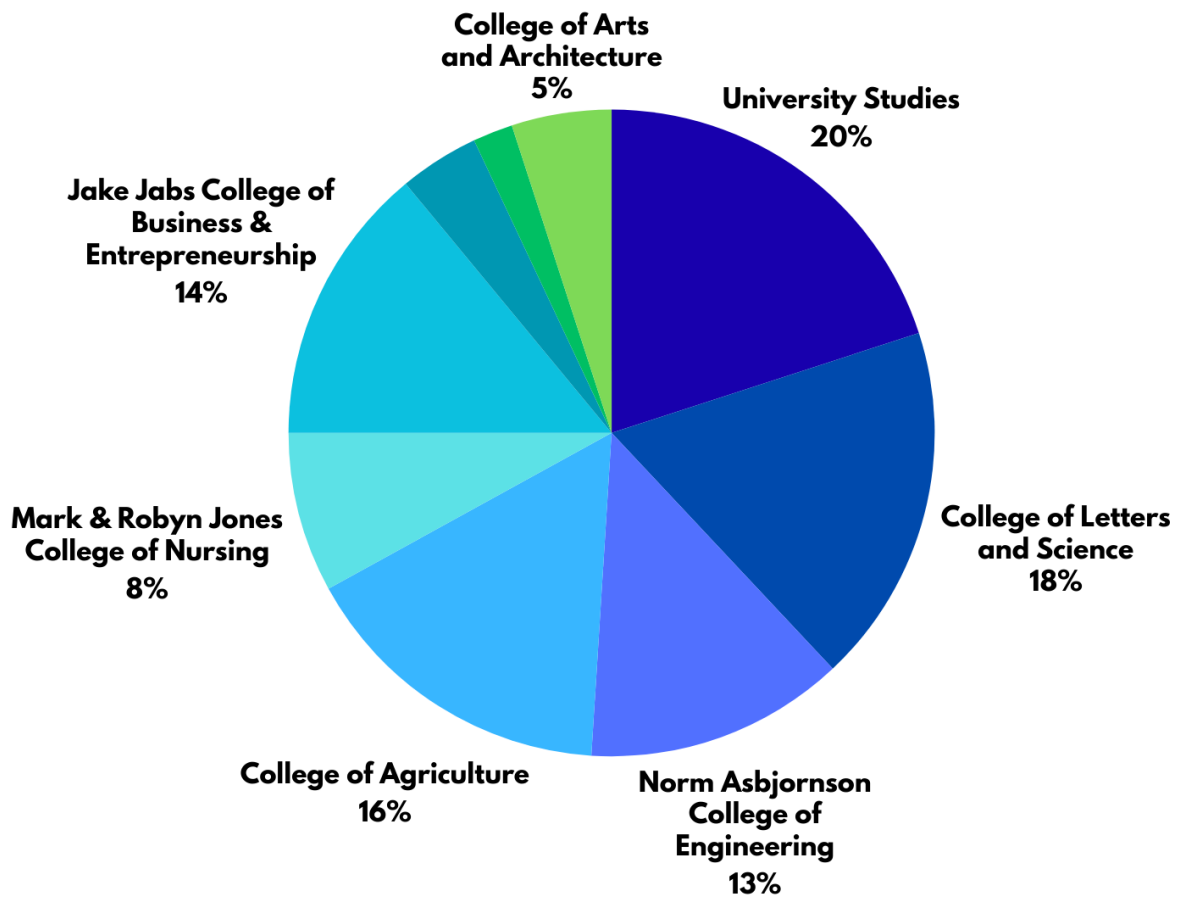


Figure 1: Applicant Distribution by Intended College

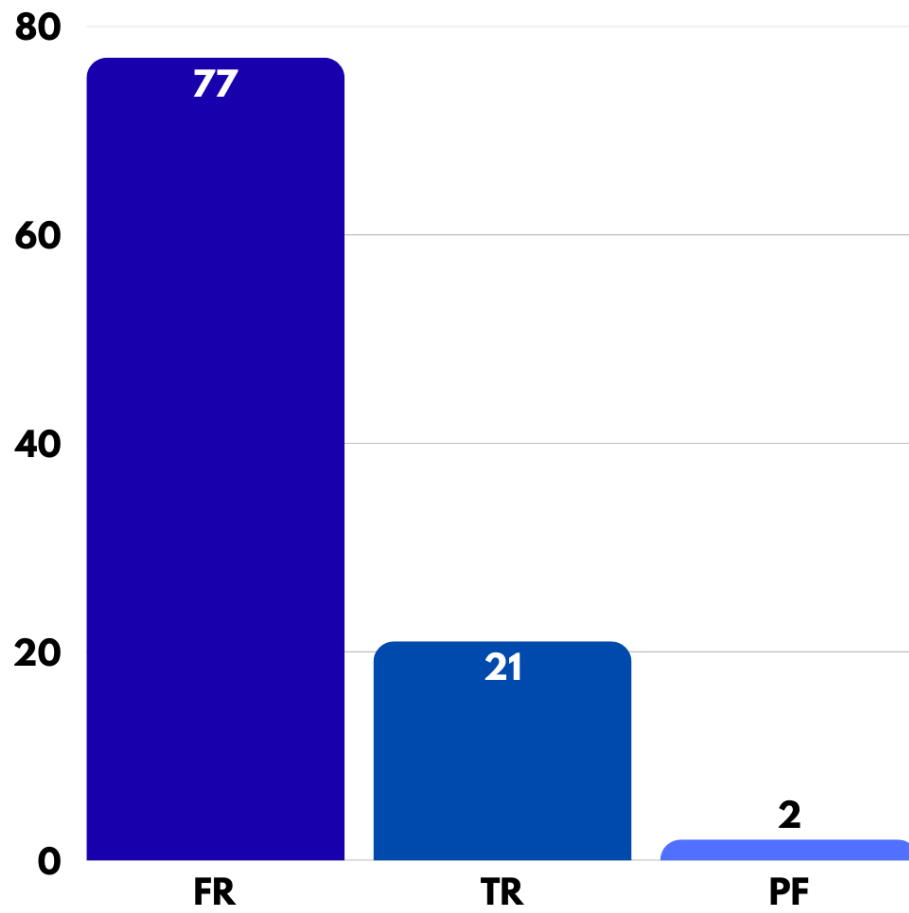


Figure 2: Applicants' Intended Student Status at Time of Application (FR: Traditional Freshman; TR: Transfer Student; PF: Two-Year College)

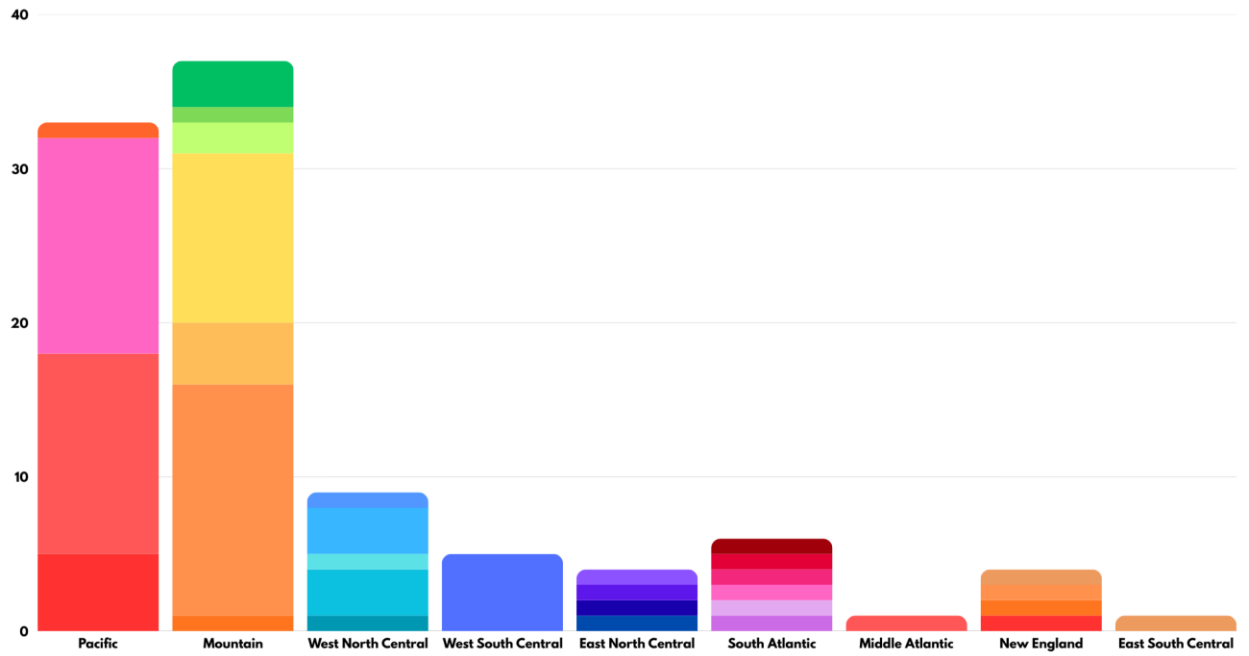


Figure 3: Applicants' Home State by Region

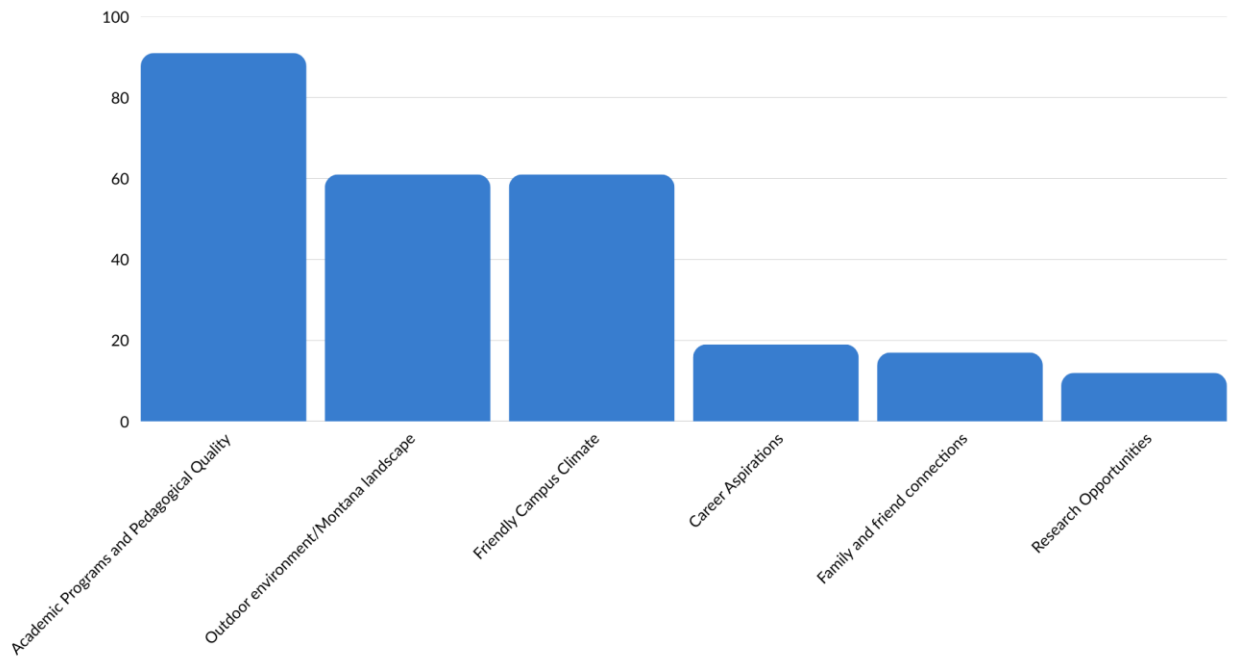


Figure 4: Results of Thematic Analysis by Frequency

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Interview 1

2/18/2026

What motivated you to attend MSU?

Being from MT, I originally wanted to go out of state for school because I worried that it'd feel too much like high school again to stay in-state. I wanted to go to a big university and had the idea in my head that I'd have to leave my home-state to get the college experience I wanted. Once I started to actually look into MSU and their programs, I realized that I could absolutely have the big-school experience that I wanted, both through research/class opportunities as well as clubs and events on campus being the largest in the state. Adding in finances, MSU just made the most sense! It ended up being the perfect fit for me and had the right "campus vibe" that I was hoping for.

What factors influenced your decision?

Financial aid and all of the research opportunities were huge motivators to attend MSU! I liked that MSU offered such a wide range of programs; I initially was torn between pre-med or environmental science, and I felt that I would have ample opportunities in either program. It was great to have less pressure to immediately know what I wanted to do, as both programs were strong at MSU, whereas other schools I was looking at maybe had a strong environmental science program, but didn't offer many courses for pre-med, for example. The size of campus was also something I considered, as I knew I didn't want to be on a small campus so I could have plenty of opportunities to get involved and make new friends.

What do/did you hope to gain from going to college?

I really wanted to be in a program where I could be getting hands-on experience, whether it was in the lab or through field-work. Outside of class, I am a big outdoors person, so being in a place where I could continue on with those hobbies was a make-or-break when considering schools. I wanted to graduate having had real-world experience in my field and to find something that I was truly passionate about!

In considering other colleges, why did you select MSU?

Ultimately, I chose MSU because of the student-life opportunities that are available. Of course, you're in college to get an education, but the social/community aspect outside of class is so important for students. At MSU, I actually felt like an important member of the campus community, and it was easy to make many different friends from all over the country. As a senior in high school, I could tell how genuine all of the staff and faculty were, and how supportive they were of students, and that I wasn't going to be just another number. It sounds kind of cheesy, but at the end of the day, MSU just felt like home!

Interview 2

2/23/2026

What motivated you to attend MSU?

The campus is close to my home. I knew I would start college early at age 17 & would need to live at home for at least the first few years. Another reason I was interested in MSU was that I had relatives who went there and they liked it.

What factors influenced your decision?

I knew the Honors College was a good program from some of my friends. I had also heard that the Education Dept was good. I wanted to join the Honors College and possibly earn a degree in education. Also my mom had taught at MSU, so I knew it was a good school.

What do/did you hope to gain from going to college?

I want to become an elementary school teacher. I'm thinking of teaching 3rd or 4th grade. The reason I'm thinking about becoming a teacher for the little kids is that it seems like a lot of kids are lacking skills and falling behind. I want to help the younger students get a solid foundation before moving up.

In considering other colleges, why did you select MSU?

I did not really consider other colleges, but they sent me a lot of mailers since I took the ACT. It was fun to look at all the mailers & one school sent me a cool bucket hat. I ended up donating all the college mailers to my high school to share with other students. But, really, I did not consider other schools; I knew I wanted to go to MSU.

Interview 3

2/24/2026

What motivated you to attend MSU?

During high school, I received flyers and information from MSU. My family vacationed in Yellowstone National Park in summer 2020, and since we were going to be spending time in Bozeman, I decided to tour MSU. I had been on a few college tours before, and the schools were okay, but I wasn't sure I wanted to attend them. When I toured MSU, I loved the friendliness of the campus, the accessibility of tutoring and other resources, and the undergraduate research opportunities available. I applied to MSU and shortly after, my family decided to move to Montana. Since I did not graduate from a Montana high school, I was considered an out of state student my first year, but I got WUE, making it affordable for me to attend.

What factors influenced your decision?

When deciding to apply, I was influenced by the undergraduate research opportunities and the friendliness of the campus, as well as staff and faculty's enthusiasm for helping students, which I had not experienced at school before. MSU was the only school I applied to and luckily, it was also financially a good option.

What do/did you hope to gain from going to college?

I hoped to gain knowledge in order to get a good job doing something that I liked. I had struggled in high school and I was worried about college, so I was hoping to attend a school with lots of academic support, like MSU. I also hoped to gain research experience during my time as an undergraduate, with hopes of attending graduate school.

In considering other colleges, why did you select MSU?

I selected MSU because I felt that it was the place where I could best succeed. It was a smaller school, but it was still an R1 school. It was focused on student retention, while some of the other schools I toured (UC Davis, UC Irvine, etc.) were focused on weeding students out. I liked the location, and my family was moving there, so it made sense to attend MSU.

Interview 4
Feb 20, 2026

What motivated you to attend MSU?

I never imagined that it would be possible for me to attend a college out of state, especially in Montana of all places. I wanted to study environmental science, and MSU has a good program. I also thought it would be cool to live close to Yellowstone National Park.

What factors influenced your decision?

MSU reached out to me several times through email regarding the president's application—a quick application with no essays, resume, or letter of recommendations required—and finally decided “why not?,” paid the \$38, and filled out the application. To my surprise, I was accepted less than two days later. MSU was the first of eight schools to accept me, and my grandma likes to say that I had one foot in Montana from the moment I filled out the application. I chose MSU over UCLA, UC Irvine, UC Davis, UC San Diego, Cal Poly Pomona, Sonoma State University, and Cal State Fullerton. However, because of the cost of out-of-state tuition, I knew I couldn't afford to go to MSU without a tremendous amount of financial assistance. At the recommendation of my 8th grade English teacher, I applied for the Presidential Scholarship through the MSU Honors College. My application earned me a spot in the interview process where I was later selected to be one of 20 students nation-wide to receive this award. I accepted the scholarship as soon as I received the letter, and fully committed to coming to MSU! I could not afford to fly out to Montana to visit the campus before I made my decision, so I took a leap of faith and first visited the campus during summer orientation. I feel so incredibly fortunate to be a Bobcat.

What do/did you hope to gain from going to college?

I want to travel to new places. I want to study environmental issues and help to save the planet.

In considering other colleges, why did you select MSU?

I was excited to be so close to Yellowstone National Park and have the potential to take classes that would allow me to better understand the biodiversity in the YNP ecosystem and surrounding areas. I was also excited to join the Spirit of the West Marching Band

and to be able to continue playing my instrument in college.

Interview 5

2/05/2026

What motivated you to attend MSU?

I graduated high school in 2016 but took a gap year since I was unsure what I wanted to do. I did end up applying to MSU believing that college was the right step forward and that I would eventually figure out my major. I chose MSU specifically since my family lived in Belgrade. It was financially smart for me to remain at home and be an in-state, commuting student that worked part-time.

What factors influenced your decision?

Being able to take the next step in my life by being a college student, becoming an adult, and learning all sorts of new things that I was never exposed to previously. I was more focused on academics so I was especially looking forward to pursuing my interests and exploring future career paths at MSU.

What do/did you hope to gain from going to college?

I majored in History and thought about becoming a museum curator, researcher, or guide. I am now in graduate school and trying to figure out my overall career goal.

In considering other colleges, why did you select MSU?

I knew I wanted to live at home and go to school. MSU was the closest to my home and it had the major I was interested in. I didn't want to pay out of state tuition, so I planned to stay in Montana for college. The MSU campus was inviting and the programs seemed solid.

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