

# RETAIN ALABAMA

# 4 Research Learnings

What did we learn from the data collected in our research?

# 3 Methodology

How and when was quantitative and qualitative research conducted to learn about students' hopes and priorities for their future?

# 2 Introduction

The Retain Alabama initiative, established in 2021, solidified talent attraction and retention as a statewide focus. The introduction provides an overview of the motivations to do so, the data to back the initiative, and the stakeholders involved.

# Contents



# Success/Next Steps

Where do we go from here to retain more of our talented graduates from Alabama's colleges and universities?



# Takeaways

Why are students staying or leaving Alabama after graduation?

## Acknowledgments

EDPA is grateful for the partnership of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, which undertook the quantitative study and analysis and continues to lead research around retaining college students in Alabama. For the insights from the qualitative study, we thank Lewis Communications for its ongoing communications and marketing expertise.



# Introduction

**Alabama produces thousands of talented college graduates each year. It's time we kept more of them in the state for their careers as well as their education.**

Over 34,000 students graduated from Alabama universities and colleges with bachelor's degrees in 2020. These are students that could build our state's economy by working for its companies, large and small, established and emerging, as well as by living and contributing to its communities. We hear from companies every day that they are struggling to find the talent that they need and that they need to build pipelines of talent for the future. But unfortunately, these students are leaving.

Alabama keeps only approximately 20% of its out-of-state students one year after graduation. We do much better with in-state students – retaining about two-thirds one year after graduation – but still fall behind most other states in retention. In fact, Forbes has ranked us the third-worst state on this metric.

We can do better. EDPA, along with the state's largest employers, economic developers, and higher education institutions, hopes to shift the trend on student retention. We will add value through strategic research, convenings, communications and programming, striving always to add value and collaborate rather than duplicating the work of other organizations.

To that end, we consistently ground our efforts in data. This report covers the findings from quantitative and qualitative research collected from colleges and universities across the state, which we have used to inform our next steps. This was the first time such studies were undertaken, and it allows us to understand more of what students think and feel about Alabama and their plans post-graduation.

We have a lot of work to do to convince students of Alabama's ample opportunities and amenities – but based on the research, we also have a chance at a tremendously diverse and valuable talent pool if we succeed. This will require statewide partnership, dedication, and continued growth, and with those things in place, EDPA sees a bright future ahead for its graduates and communities.

## Comparing Research Methodologies

	Qualitative Methodology	Quantitative Methodology
Platform	Online focus group	Online survey
Sample Size	55	8,208
In-State students	49%	64%
Out-of-State Students	51%	36%
Grades surveyed	Juniors, Seniors	Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors
Additional Recruiting Specs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mix of public/private colleges/universities</li> <li>Mix of HBCUs (~30%)</li> <li>Mix of areas of study (~50% STEM)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participation from 14 public colleges/universities</li> <li>Mix of college/university sizes</li> <li>Mix of areas of study (32.3% STEM)</li> </ul>

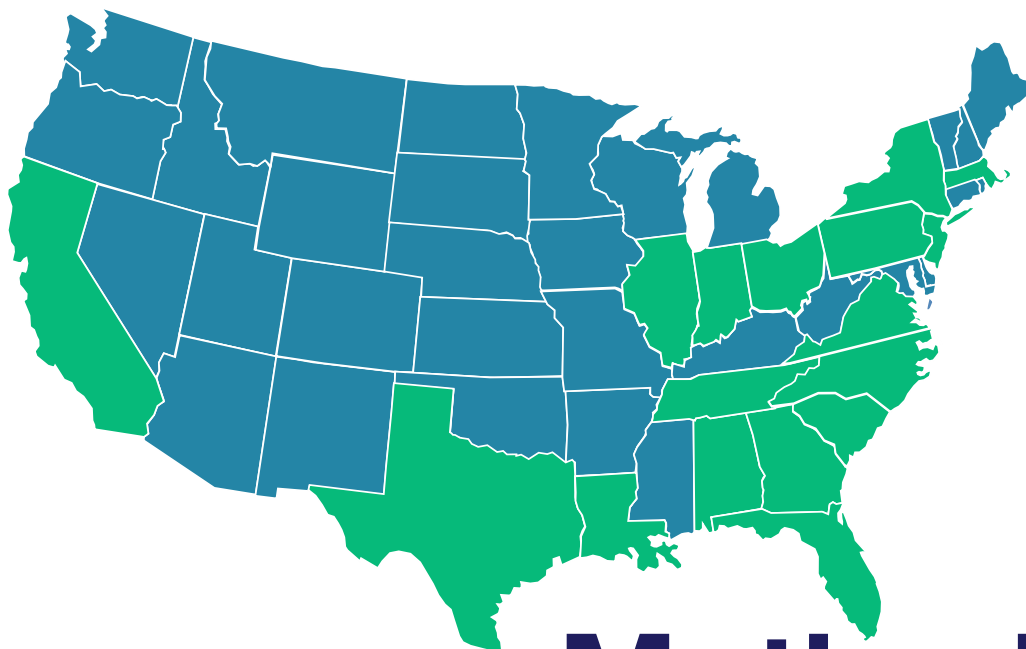
This report covers studies completed in spring 2021: a qualitative study conducted by Lewis Communications, and quantitative research produced and analyzed by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE).

The goals for the research were to glean further insight into the following:

- Perceptions of Alabama by in- and out-of-state students
- Students' career interests post-graduation
- Barriers to, and interest in, living in the state after graduating
- The audience most likely to stay in the state
- Messaging for talent attraction & retention in Alabama

18 colleges and universities were represented in our sample - all 14 public four-year institutions were included in the quantitative research, and the qualitative data includes additional private institutions as well. A third of participants in the qualitative study, for instance, attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Between both studies, we were able to capture students from all 50 states and more.

The pairing of qualitative and quantitative data allowed for a broader, deeper understanding of students graduating from Alabama institutions. In the following report, you will see these studies referenced side by side.



**Quantitative Participation**

**Qualitative + Quantitative Participation**

# Methodology<sub>3</sub>

# Learning #1

**Students are looking to live and work in a city with plenty of professional opportunities, social activities, and a sense of community.**

Both in- and out-of-state students want a vibrant community with potential upward mobility and diversity when looking for a place to live and work, but there are slight differences between these groups.

- In-state students are more concerned with the cost of living
- Out-of-state students are looking for a manageable city: a short commute, small-town feel, and lots of amenities

# Learning #2

**Students from Alabama are more than twice as likely to stay in the state after graduation than students from outside of Alabama.**

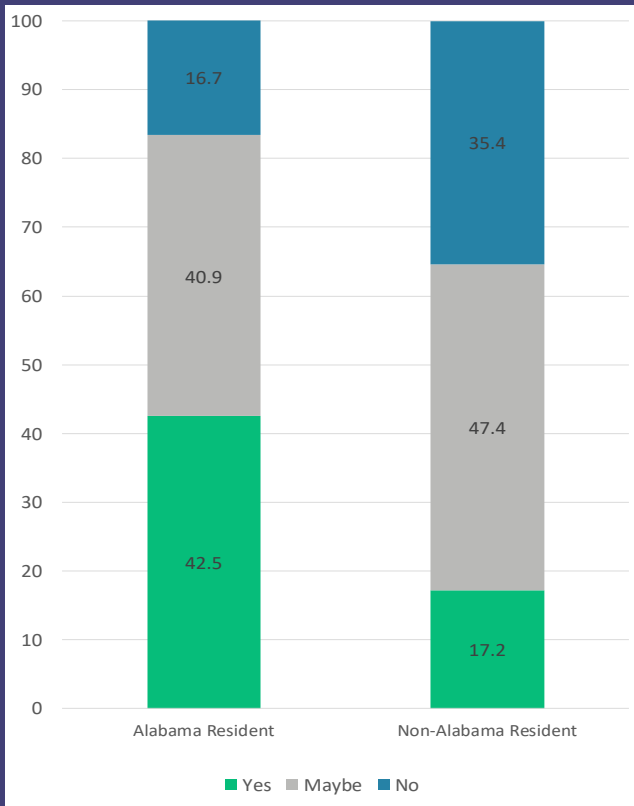
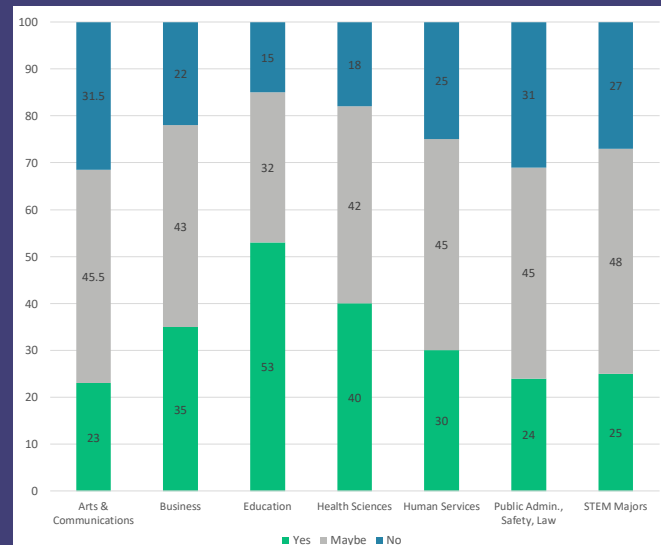
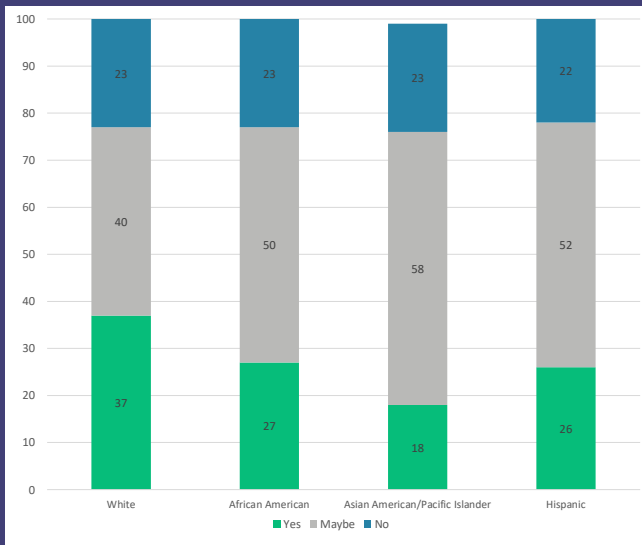
This comes as no surprise when intuitively, we know that many in-state students have family, relationships, or professional connections in the state that out-of-state students often don't have or have in their home communities. Moreover, in-state students have more familiarity with Alabama outside its college campuses.

A key note: students, regardless of race, gender, or Alabama residency, have visited Birmingham more than any other part of the state. Students across all demographics have a more positive view of Birmingham and Huntsville than elsewhere in the state.

**“I would like to live somewhere where the cost of living isn't [too] high but it's still a very interesting place with things to do and job opportunities in the field I'm interested in.”**

- In-state student

**“I would like to find a city with a booming tech culture, a thriving black middle class, and a 2-hour max commute to another nearby major city.”**



## Would you stay?

**Above Left:** Across all racial demographics, roughly 75% are potentially interested in staying in Alabama, indicating a diverse talent pool available to employers – if more unsure students remain.

**Above Right:** Declared major has a strong influence on students' post-graduation plans. Notably, education majors are most likely to stay, while STEM students are the most unsure.

**Left:** The percentage of in-state and out-of-state students considering staying in Alabama post-graduation are nearly mirror images of each other. EDPA sees an opportunity to capture more students in the “maybe” category.

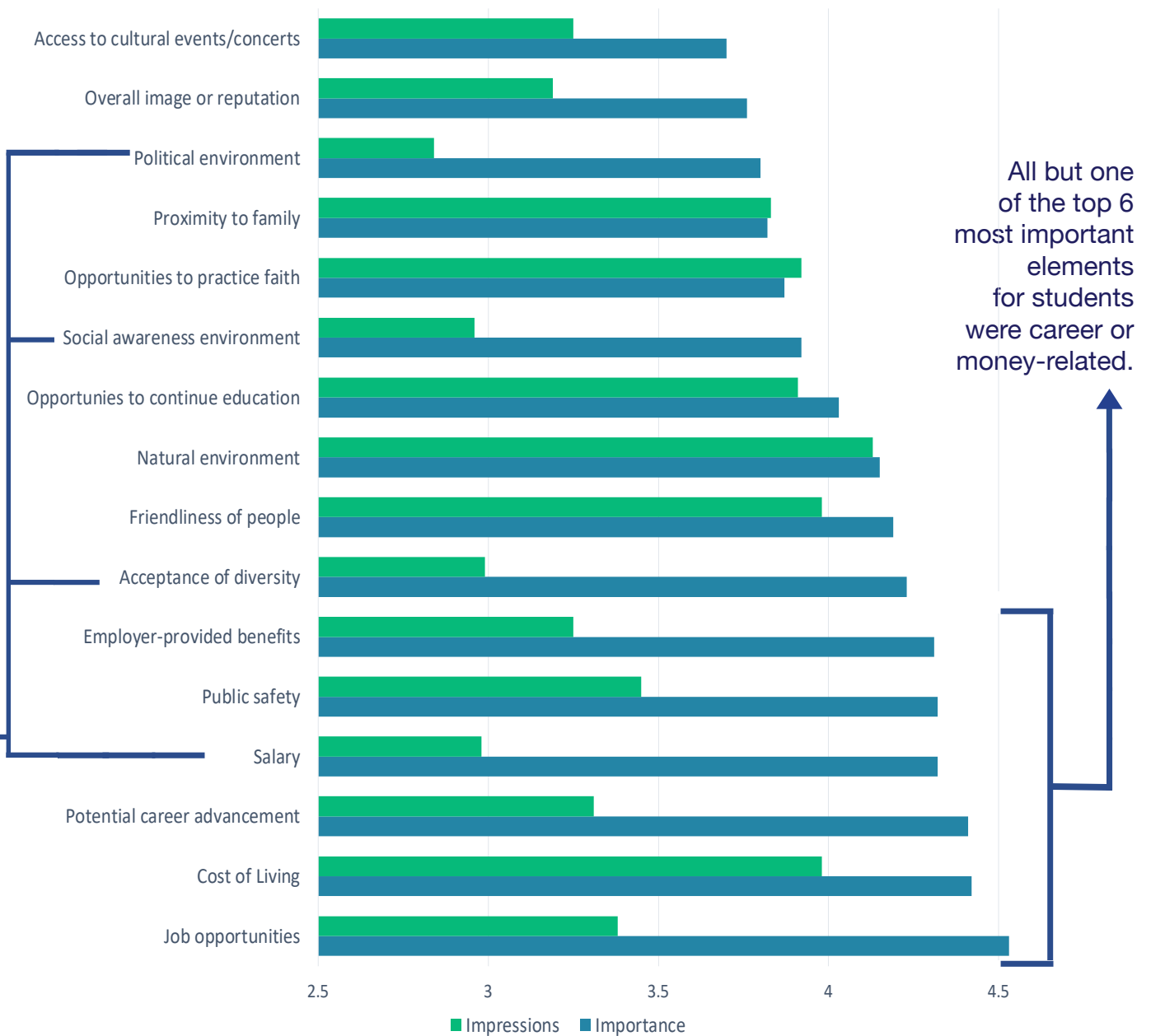
**Below:** Students cited the cost of living and jobs as priorities. Outside of Alabama, most shared interest in other Southeastern cities.

Rationale for Post-Graduation Destination	
In-State Students	Out-of-State Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cite “familiarity” and “cost of living” in the state</li> <li>• Decided during college</li> <li>• Interested in Birmingham and Huntsville</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cite “connections/network” and “opportunities within field of interest”</li> <li>• Decided during college</li> <li>• Interested in Birmingham</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interested in Birmingham</li> <li>• Interested in Dallas, Houston, Atlanta</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interested in Tuscaloosa, Mobile</li> <li>• Outside of Alabama, interested in Atlanta, Houston</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decided before college</li> <li>• Desire a bigger city with more opportunities/growth</li> <li>• Interested in Houston, Dallas, Atlanta</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decided during college</li> <li>• Report “wanting more” and “limited opportunities”</li> <li>• Interested in Houston, Dallas, Austin, Atlanta</li> </ul>

# Learning #3

## Students from across the country have the same perceptions of the state—both good and bad.

This graph shows various priorities students have when choosing a place to live after graduation. Blue bars signify how important that item is, while green bars show how well they think Alabama is doing on that metric.



All but one of the top 6 most important elements for students were career or money-related.

These are the most negative impressions of Alabama. Note that most were related to its social/political environment.



**“Ideally, I would like to live somewhere that is big enough that stores, restaurants, activities, and job opportunities are easily accessible but not so big that one has to deal with constant traffic or very high costs of living. I would like to live somewhere that has access to outdoor activities but isn’t extremely remote. I would want to live in a city that has a welcoming culture.”**

- Out-of-state student

**“I think salary is one of the most important factors as it impacts all the others.”**

- In-state student

**“I think we are slowly progressing as a state with our politics and culture so it isn’t as polarized. However, we still have a long way to go.”**

-In-state student

## **Filling the Gaps**

In an ideal world, if a blue bar is all the way over to the right, the green bar would meet it. Where there is a large gap between the two bars, Alabama has a lot of work to do to improve students’ perceptions. The largest gaps between impressions and a metric’s importance are:

1. Salary
2. Acceptance of people with diverse backgrounds
3. Job opportunities
4. Potential for career advancement
5. Employer-provided benefits
6. Political environment
7. Social awareness environment
8. Public safety

As students are making decisions around post-graduate plans, we recognize the wide variety of priorities at play; the perceptions that span the widest gap between impression and importance are the areas with the most opportunity for growth in Alabama.

## **Students love Alabama’s outdoors, but express concerns about politics.**

For almost all racial demographics, Alabama’s *outdoor amenities* and *natural environment* were students’ favorite aspects of the state. African American respondents, however, cited *educational opportunities* as Alabama’s strongest asset. Across the board, students ranked Alabama’s *political environment* as the state’s most negative characteristic.

# National Examples

Talent retention is a growing focus for states and their respective economic development organizations. Learning Alabama's acute opportunities is essential, but widening our scope of research to existing solutions informs our own approach.

## 1. Ascend Indiana



Ascend Indiana partners with employers and higher education institutions to create pipelines of talent for specific employers and/or sectors of the region's economy. They work with talent to offer coaching for open jobs and offer pre-screened, pre-qualified talent to employers that contract with the organization. This is a great example of a college-focused talent solution implemented for an entire state, whereas many other efforts around talent retention focus on specific cities or communities.

## 2. Campus Philly

Campus Philly's stated mission is to fuel "inclusive economic growth by empowering diverse college students and recent graduates to explore, live and work in Greater Philadelphia." They create content, host activities, and highlight entry-level internships and job opportunities for both students and recent graduates. Perks like free museum passes and transportation entice students to explore the city and potentially stay after they graduate.



## 3. Say Yes to Dallas



Our research indicated that students choose communities, not states – and this is a great example of a community leveraging its brand to attract and retain talent. A campaign by the Dallas Regional Chamber, Say Yes to Dallas offers information, such as outdoor activities, cost calculators and more, for job seekers and newcomers. Notably, it also includes resources for corporate recruiters in the city.

# Takeaways

From the research learnings above, the data resulted in six main takeaways, as addressed below. These trends present us both a breadth and depth of the talent retention landscape in Alabama, producing insights that have actionable solutions for the EDPA going forward.

## 1. The biggest barrier to retaining Alabama students is their sense that the state doesn't have the job opportunities they want. However, their perceptions of the state as socially and politically unwelcoming have a strong impact as well.

The majority of students use positive words to describe their experience in Alabama; however, those who describe Alabama negatively do so with strong words.

Positive/Neutral Experience	Poor External Reputation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "More industries moving here. Better jobs and a brighter future. AL has it all! History, decent cities, and nice rural areas."</li><li>• "I think we are slowly progressing as a state with our politics and culture so it isn't as polarized. However, we still have a long way to go."</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "I've found that my friends don't think very highly of Alabama... Most of them think it's a really dumb place until they visit."</li><li>• "Racism ran rampant throughout the South in the past, and Alabama is [viewed as] the stereotypical southern state."</li></ul>

## 2. Students are evaluating their post-graduate opportunities on a city level, not a state level, and Alabama's cities are competing against other Southern cities more than the East or West Coasts.

The nearby cities of Atlanta and Nashville are popular hubs for recent graduates around the Southeast, including Alabama graduates. However, Alabama boasts a large contingency of students from Texas - and our research highlighted Texas cities as particularly appealing. This is one of many trends we hope to further research to learn how great Alabama's chance is to capture out-of-state students hailing from compelling hometowns in their own right.

# Takeaways (cont.)

## 3. When it comes to how to position Alabama, there's a clear direction: its cities offer mid-size, manageable communities with short commutes that let graduates enjoy life outside of work.

The qualitative research measured strategic messages related to the state of Alabama. Students were asked to rate statements for the level of agreement, believability, and uniqueness.

Of the options given, students agreed most with the following general statements:

- Where you live will make an impact on you – and you can make an impact on where you live.
- A mid-size, manageable city with a short commute lets me enjoy other parts of my non-work life.
- I am drawn to a place where tech, job opportunities, and positive culture changes are on the rise.

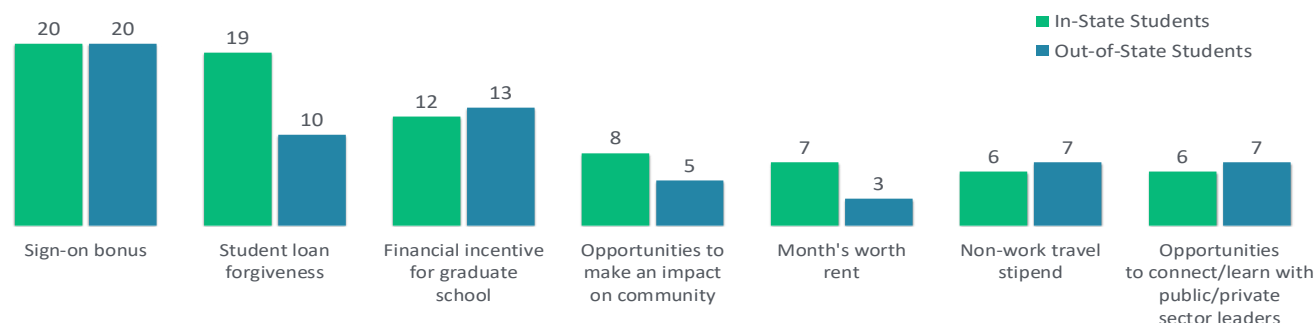
When narrowed to Alabama specifically, students ranked the below statements most believable:

- Alabama offers mid-size, manageable cities with a short commute that lets me enjoy other parts of my non-work life.
- Alabama will make an impact on you, and you can make an impact on Alabama.

This data shows that students are drawn to a place with a sense of momentum and potential for personal investment.

## 4. Students indicate that practical incentives would increase their likelihood to stay in the state.

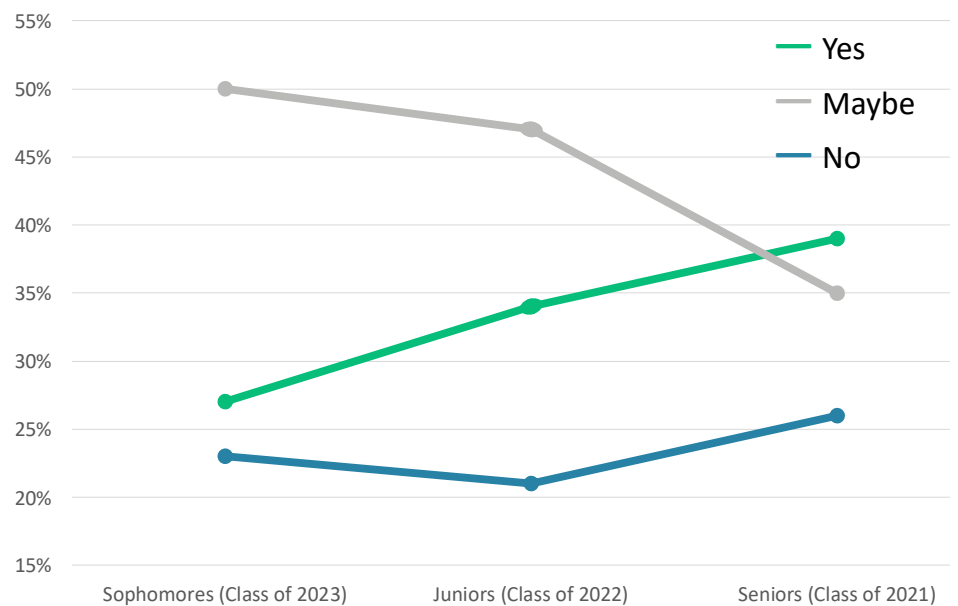
The qualitative survey asked respondents what might entice them to stay in Alabama from an aided list. Besides salary, the majority would consider staying for financial incentives like sign-on bonuses, student loan forgiveness, and incentives for graduate school.



# Takeaways (cont.)

## 5. Students start prioritizing places of interest before graduation, so early engagement with students will be critical.

The graph on the right shows how dramatically the number of unsure students drops as they age. Students did indicate they would be open to hearing about in-state opportunities relevant to them, but in order to showcase Alabama's communities and compelling careers while students are still unsure, that must begin before senior year. With that in mind, internships, co-ops, apprenticeships, and other engagements *during* college, as well as full-time job openings for graduates, are important to highlight.



**“Alabama is rich in history. I’ve been here for 4 years and I’ve built a life here. I love it here honestly. The cost of living isn’t extremely high. There are lots of job opportunities. The nightlife is really fun as well & I’m social, so that’s important.”**

- Out-of-State Senior

## 6. EDPA will play a key role in helping communities and employers attract & retain talent graduating from its universities in four key ways.

# EDPA's Talent Pillar: Areas of Focus

**Based on the research and the work of collaborators across Alabama, EDPA has identified four focus areas to pursue in the first year of this effort.**

## 1. Research

EDPA's partnerships enable us to have a broad and deep research approach to gleaning insights about students and graduates in a qualitative and quantitative manner. Moving forward, we will continue to conduct student-facing research, but our research efforts will expand to include employers and communities. By looking at all three stakeholders, we can ascertain more of the state's talent supply and demand – and address shortfalls in more specific, targeted ways.

## 2. Convening

EDPA is one of few organizations with relationships with the three major stakeholders in the talent space: employers, universities, and economic developers. As a statewide organization, we can convene these disparate groups to learn from each other's success, failures, and best practices, as well as learn from national or international examples of talent attraction and retention. We plan to convene regional versions of these groups throughout the year and will offer a statewide conference on an annual basis.

## 3. Communications

The data has shown that cities should be the focus, not the state; students are eager to learn more about job opportunities; and different communities offer different value propositions.

EDPA will work with individual communities to establish and communicate a brand that emphasizes their unique assets directly to the talent they need.

## 4. Targeted Student Programming

EDPA will continue to learn directly from and communicate with students. Our summer fellowship program will offer sophomores and juniors internships at compelling Alabama companies supplemented by experiential education, exposing them to the rich history, culture, and opportunities across the state. EDPA will work with universities, employers, and economic developers to highlight community assets and offer insight into career opportunities in Alabama.

# Defining Success

EDPA is committed to moving the needle on student retention in collaboration with partners across the state. We will measure ourselves against aggressive goals and hope to expand our efforts in the coming years.

- Conduct regular qualitative and quantitative research to ensure that our efforts remain on-target and that our impact is felt by students across the state
- Inventory more than 1,000 competitive Alabama career opportunities and internships for STEM graduates
  - Collaborate with universities and other partners to realize 1,000 matches of entry-level talent to Alabama opportunities
- Create a talent map to understand efforts around the state addressing and affecting talent attraction & retention
  - Create a statewide network of community-based talent retention & attraction efforts
  - Inventory every local talent-focused community offering, such as remote work stipends, loan forgiveness programs, and other best practices
- Recruit 20 students for the first Summer Fellowship
- Plan a Talent-focused statewide gathering in 2022, including the state's major employers, universities, and economic developers

## Join Us.

If you are an **employer** in Alabama, we would like to work with you to identify internship, co-op, and entry-level opportunities at your company—and help you fill those with qualified graduates. If you are a **higher education professional**, we'd like to learn with you how we can best support our students and showcase the state's compelling jobs and community assets. If you are an **economic developer**, we hope to work alongside you to adopt best practices and elevate local efforts to retain the talent pool graduating from Alabama's colleges and universities each year. EDPA's role in this effort depends upon its relationships with organizations and individuals across the state. Please join us.

