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# Sorry, Harvard. Everyone Wants to Go to College in the South Now.

The likes of Georgia Tech, Clemson and Ole Miss are drawing students from the North who want to have fun and save on tuition. The shift is boosting the economies of cities across the region.

By *Douglas Belkin* [Follow](#) and *Andrea Fuller* [Follow](#)

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A growing number of high-school seniors in the North are making an unexpected choice for college: They are heading to Clemson, Georgia Tech, South Carolina, Alabama and other universities in the South.

Students say they are searching for the fun and school spirit emanating from the South on their social-media feeds. Their parents cite lower tuition and less debt, and warmer weather. College counselors also say many teens are eager to trade the political polarization ripping apart campuses in New England and New York for the sense of community epitomized by the South's football Saturdays. Promising job prospects after graduation can sweeten the pot.

The number of Northerners going to Southern public schools went up 84% over the past two decades, and jumped 30% from 2018 to 2022, a Wall Street Journal analysis of the latest available Education Department data found.

At the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, total freshmen from the Northeast jumped to nearly 600 in a class of about 6,800, up from around 50 in 2002. At the University of Mississippi, in Oxford, they increased from 11 to more than 200 in a class of about 4,500 in 2022. At the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, 11% of students came from the Northeast in 2022, compared with less than 1% two decades prior.

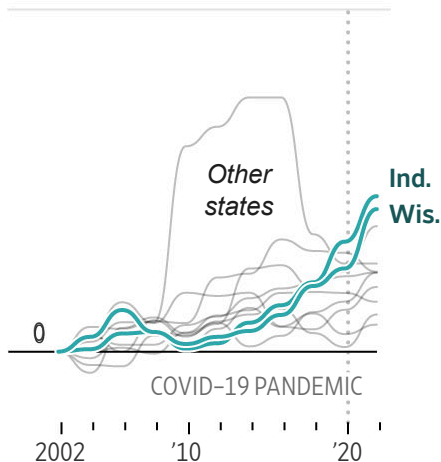
## Students Head South

Where freshmen from the Northeast are heading to college, change from 2002-22

### Top 10 states with the biggest growth

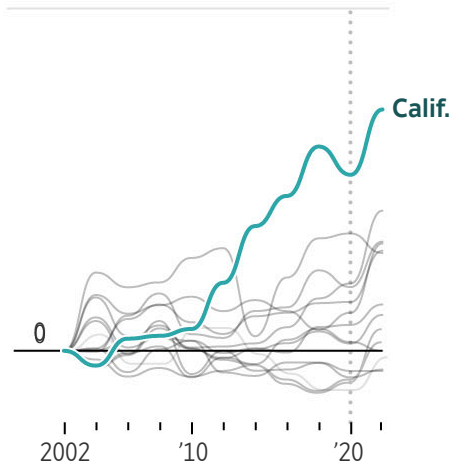
Midwest

500%



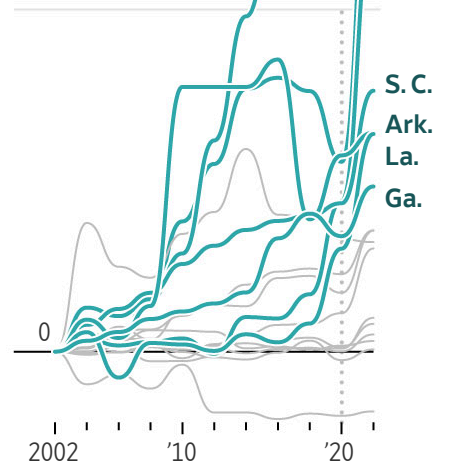
West

500%



South

500%



Note: Among public four-year colleges. Data reported in even years.

Source: Education Department

Stephanie Stamm/WSJ

This flow of students to Southern colleges promises to impact the region's economy for years. About two-thirds of college graduates go on to work in the same state where they graduate, according to a recent study from researchers at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and others. The transplants are well-educated, motivated young workers at the least expensive points in their careers.

For most of American history, many high-school seniors have aspired to go to college in the Northeast, home to the Ivy League. Southern academic stalwarts, such as Duke, Tulane, Emory and Vanderbilt, have long drawn their share of students from up North, but the recent uptick of students going to the South is fueled by attendance at public universities.

Though far more students apply to Ivy League schools than in 2002, some of the hottest Southern public schools—including Clemson and Georgia Institute of Technology—have seen even a bigger spike in interest. At Alabama, applications were up more than 600% in the same period—about three times as much as bids to attend Harvard.

## Saturday is football

Mitch Savalli drove 15 hours with his parents in a rented white Lincoln Navigator from his home in North Bellmore, N.Y., on Long Island, to Atlanta for his freshman year at Georgia Tech.

A few weeks later he was walking from the grocery store to his dorm with a bouquet of flowers for the woman he was taking to a fraternity event when the reality of his new surroundings dawned on him.



Mitch Savalli chose to attend Georgia Tech after seeing that Southern schools imposed fewer restrictions during the pandemic. PHOTO: NICOLE CRAINE FOR WSJ

“Five people stopped me and told me how kind it was and what a sweet gesture I was making,” he said. “No way would that have happened in New York.”

At the University of South Carolina in Columbia, Alicia Caracciolo, a junior, said it takes her about two weeks to acclimate to the pace of the South every time she returns from her home in New York. At the grocery store she reminds herself to pause and slow down.

“If you go and you don’t end up learning something about the cashier, you did it wrong,” she said.

“Saturdays down South are a real thing,” she said. “The whole world kind of shuts down in Columbia when there’s a home football game.”

The increase in the number of students heading South grew for years and then accelerated suddenly after the pandemic, federal data show.

“You had students home in their basement in Connecticut looking at their phone seeing most of the Northeast closed down and not much happening,” said Rick Clark, executive director of strategic student access at Georgia Tech. “At the same time they are seeing sororities at Alabama and football games in Georgia and Florida. Life is happening.”

Savalli's path to Georgia Tech was paved by two years listening to his older brother complain about college in Upstate New York.

During the pandemic, Mitch's brother had regular lockdowns at his college after he had been exposed to Covid. There were social-distancing rules, mask requirements and online classes from his dorm room.

Meanwhile, both the Savalli boys were watching students on television cheering at university football games down South.

"There were more freedoms in the Southern schools and that really started to drive applications," Vincent Pisano, an assistant principal in the Long Island school district Savalli attended. "Then the outreach really started to grow from the Southern schools. Schools like LSU and South Carolina started attracting huge groups of kids."

Applications to some Southern universities from Savalli's school district on Long Island have tripled compared with a few years before the pandemic, according to data provided by the school district.



University of South Carolina students celebrate on campus after its Gamecocks won the NCAA women's basketball championship in April. PHOTO: SEAN RAYFORD/GETTY IMAGES

Savalli wanted to attend a college with a strong engineering program and a competitive lacrosse team. He considered two Boston-area schools—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Tufts University, his top choice, as well as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.

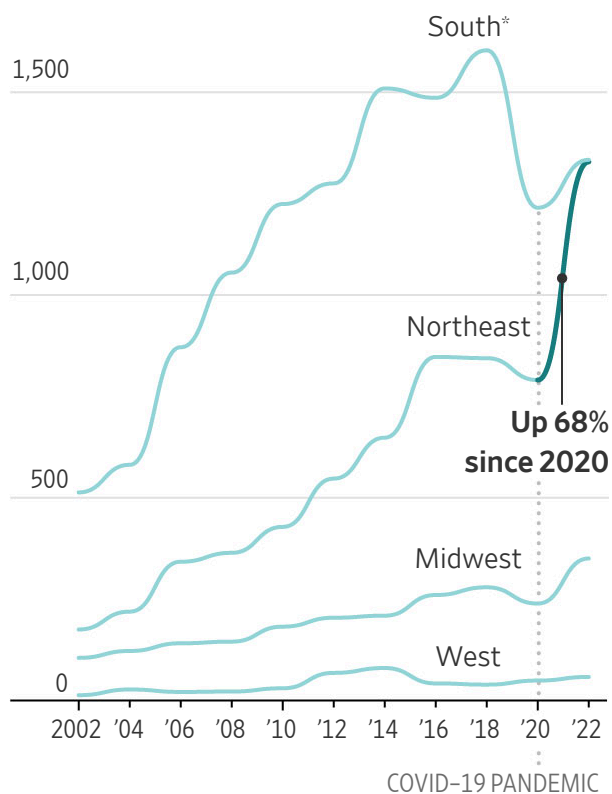
He applied to Georgia Tech without knowing anyone who had gone there. When he realized his out-of-pocket cost at Tufts would be about \$80,000 and Georgia Tech would be half of

that, he decided to fly down for a visit. That sealed the deal.

## Tuition bargains

For out-of-state students, Southern schools are often a bargain, according to figures from roughly 100 of the nation's top public research universities. Last school year, such Southern schools charged students from other states a median \$29,000 in tuition and fees, the least of top public colleges in any region.

**Out-of-state students attending the University of South Carolina, by region**



\*Excluding students from South Carolina

Note: Columbia campus. Data reported in even years.

Source: Education Department

Stephanie Stamm/WSJ

Scholarships often make it cheaper.

Caracciolo first heard of the University of South Carolina from her cousin who attended medical school there. She knew she wanted to study marketing and her ambition was to go to Syracuse University, which has one of the most respected communications programs in the country.

The Long Island native was admitted to Syracuse with a \$15,000 merit scholarship knocking her out-of-pocket expense down to \$65,000, she said.

She applied to South Carolina as an afterthought. When Caracciolo earned admission to the honors program and won a scholarship, she realized it would cost her about half as much as Syracuse and she would be more likely to attend classes in person. The year after she started, around a dozen students from her private Catholic school followed her down, she said.

South Carolina is home to several magnets for Northern students. The University of South Carolina, the state flagship, and Clemson University, in Clemson, each enrolled hundreds of freshmen from the Northeast in 2022. At USC, that was a 659% jump in 20 years; at Clemson, the spike was 456% over the same period.

The pipeline from New York is particularly robust. In 2022, South Carolina public universities were the No. 2 out-of-state destination for public-college-bound freshmen from New York, after Pennsylvania.





Alicia Caracciolo is a junior at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. PHOTO: ELIZABETH GRUSHKOWS

## #Rushtok

In addition to Saturday's football bonanzas, there is typically a vibrant Greek fraternity and sorority life on Southern college campuses—all documented by undergrads on Instagram and TikTok. Search #rushtok for a glimpse. Every Saturday, thousands of students attend tailgate parties and football games across the South. "Bama Rush," a Max hit television show, chronicles sorority rush at the University of Alabama.

At many Northern schools, by contrast, television news showed campuses beset by protests last year. This juxtaposition is one reason the flow of Northerners heading South could continue in the coming years, say college counselors.

Students who have moved to the South for college pay less attention to politics than students who have moved to the Northeast, said Colby College sociology professor Neil Gross, citing a survey he took this summer.

"Some students are saying, 'I don't want to be in a super political environment,' and they are opting into an atmosphere where they can focus on things other than politics," he said.



The hit show 'Bama Rush' chronicles sorority rush at the University of Alabama. PHOTO: MAX

Southern schools have, by and large, better track records on free speech, according to rankings by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, a nonprofit civil liberties group which has defended faculty and students in cases regarding speech issues. This year, most of the top 25 schools are located in the South. The six schools with the worst ratings were in the Northeast.

Following student protests over the war in Gaza, some Jewish and Southeast Asian students declined to apply to some highly selective schools in the Northeast because the environment is so tense, said Rachel Rubin, co-founder of Spark Admissions, a private college-counseling company.

“They are being much more careful about which Ivies they are applying to and are expanding their search to the rest of the country,” she said.

## Postcards from the beach

At Coastal Carolina University in Conway, S.C., more than 1,000 freshmen came from the Northeast in 2022—41% of the class and a bigger share than at any other public Southeastern school. That’s up from 26% four years prior.

The school has focused recruiting efforts along the I-95 corridor as far north as Boston, said Amanda Craddock, vice president of enrollment. When winter weather blankets the Northeast with snow, the school sends marketing emails to prospective students featuring pictures of the sunny campus and its many palm trees.

Sometimes, a student from New York or New England gets interested in Coastal Carolina on a family vacation to Myrtle Beach, near the school, Craddock said. On a cloudy or rainy day, families swing over to the campus just to check it out. When they take a tour or talk to students, they learn about the huge concentration of Northern students in the school’s business program. They find out the cost is cheaper than their public flagship where they live.

Then, if a parent works remotely, the family realizes they could buy a home in the area and live more cheaply in South Carolina than in Massachusetts, Rhode Island or New Jersey. So many families relocate after their child enrolls that the phenomenon has its own name: Craddock and others call them trailing families.



Georgia Tech's campus. Many students and their families are seeking out warmer weather at Southern schools.

PHOTO: NICOLE CRAINE FOR WSJ

The Southern enrollment surge is taking place in some booming regional economies. The top five most promising locations to find work for newly minted college graduates are all in the South, according to a recent study by payroll provider ADP.

Growing universities create a snowball effect for local and regional economies—especially research universities, said Jason Owen-Smith, executive director of Institute for Research on Innovation and Science at the University of Michigan.

More undergraduates means more customers to patronize local businesses. They can also help underwrite graduate programs that support researchers who bring in grants. That grant money is often spent with local vendors to build out labs, which, in turn, may generate new knowledge, patents and startup businesses that hire people. Those businesses may then attract more high-paying employers to the region.

In the short term, however, more students can also create bottlenecks when it comes to adding the infrastructure to accommodate the people.

“The challenge on everybody’s mind,” said University of Mississippi Provost Noel Wilkin. “How do you accommodate the growth?”

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