

Survey of University of Michigan Emerging Professionals

Prepared for Ann Arbor SPARK by a QMSS Capstone Course 451:

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Executive Summary

Through the QMSS course on Social Science Data Management, senior undergraduate students, in partnership with Ann Arbor SPARK, examined the preferences and perspectives of University of Michigan students regarding post-graduation decision-making. In 2022, a similar course launched a survey on soon-to-be graduating U-M students called, “2022 Survey of U-M Emerging Professionals: What Are They Looking For in Communities and Jobs Post-Graduation?” In 2025, the “2025 Survey of U-M Emerging Professionals: What Are They Looking for in Communities and Jobs Post-Graduation?” was launched in order to follow up on insights from the first survey and add questions on artificial intelligence (AI). The 2025 dataset serves as the primary focus of student analysis here, but comparisons to the 2022 data are included, where appropriate.

The target population for the 2025 survey consisted of upper-level undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Michigan, primarily focused on students studying STEM, business, social sciences, and other technical majors. The project analyzed student preferences related to workplace characteristics, job benefits, preferred locations and community features, as well as perceptions of Ann Arbor among these emerging professionals. Overall, findings indicate that University of Michigan students are strongly financially motivated. This is reflected in the importance they place on salary, paid time off, and retirement benefits. This is also reflected in what they are looking for in communities, including access to well-paying jobs and a reasonable cost of living. These preferences have remained relatively consistent between 2022 and 2025. Ann Arbor performs well in areas such as safety, educational opportunities, and diversity, however, it is perceived less favorably in regards to cost of living, housing affordability, and job availability. Students in the survey were more likely to view Ann Arbor as a good post-graduation fit if they were originally from Michigan or interested in careers in healthcare or manufacturing. Overall, the results underscore a clear alignment between financial priorities and post-graduation decision-making, with important implications for how communities attract and retain students post graduation.

Survey and Demographics

The 2025 Ann Arbor SPARK Survey sample (n = 286) is predominantly composed of undergraduate students aged 18–22, with a slight female majority (54%) and a largely white (53%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (32%) population. Respondents are geographically diverse, with 45.6% out-of-state, 42.1% in-state, and 12.3% international students, with strong representation from California, New York, and Illinois. The most common majors include economics, engineering, and social sciences, and students on average expressed the highest interest in entering the Finance/Insurance industry. Meanwhile, leading

industries in Ann Arbor like Health Care and Manufacturing are underrepresented among student interests, suggesting many graduates may look outside the region for opportunities.

Workplace and Job Benefits Preferences

Student preferences for workplace environments remained highly consistent from 2022 to 2025, with all features viewed as important. The most valued features include salary, advancement opportunities, meaningful work, work-life balance, and company culture. Traditional benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and paid time off increased in importance from 2022, while interest in remote work and tuition support declined. Most students prefer hybrid work (59.9%), with limited desire for fully remote roles. Across all groups, traditional benefits like 401(k), health insurance, and PTO were viewed as highly important. Students also view AI as increasingly important and report growing comfort using it. Notably, perceptions of Ann Arbor do not significantly influence these preferences.

City Preferences

City preferences show a clear and growing preference for major metropolitan areas, with New York City and Chicago consistently rated highest and increasing in appeal from 2022 to 2025. In contrast, all other cities declined in ratings, with Ann Arbor falling from second to fourth and experiencing a notable drop. Students are primarily driven by career opportunities, salary potential, and social/cultural amenities, while high cost of living and distance from family remain key concerns. Preferences vary by major: business students strongly favor large cities, while engineering students show more geographic flexibility. Overall, students balance career opportunities with personal stability, with college towns appealing to many lifestyle considerations, but lacking affordability.

Community Preferences and Ann Arbor Perceptions

Student community preferences remained highly consistent from 2022 to 2025, with top priorities including good-paying jobs, safety, and a welcoming population. Ann Arbor is perceived as strong in higher education, safety, and diversity, but underperforms in perceptions of cost of living, housing availability, and job opportunities. While students value both career prospects and affordability, many are still willing to accept higher costs in exchange for stronger job markets in large cities. Preferences vary by group: international students emphasize climate, while domestic students prioritize proximity to family. Overall, Ann Arbor is seen as an attractive place to live, but is perceived to fall short when it comes to balancing the economic opportunity with affordability.

1. Survey Overview

Survey information, sample, and demographics

1.1 Survey Information

For the 2022 and 2025 University of Michigan Emerging Professionals surveys, data were collected from upper-classmen and graduate students at the University of Michigan who possess technical, STEM, or business skills.

The 2025 survey specifically takes a clustered random sampling approach to targeting the population of interest. Survey distribution is based on a select list of Fall 2025 courses that meet specific criteria, where survey respondents are most likely to be entering or already participating in the labor market.

Criteria for eligible courses in Fall 2025 included being a 400-level 3 or 4 credit course delivered in lecture format with an enrollment size of 30+ students. The course list was then sorted by academic group and catalogue number, and every third course was selected. This process yields outreach to a total population size of 4,434 across 70 courses.

A final sample of 286 responses was obtained, yielding an overall response rate of 6.4%. Note, the response rate reflects non-response at two levels: some instructors did not distribute the survey to their classes, and some students who were offered the survey did not respond. As a result, the response rate among students who were actually offered the survey is higher than the overall figure suggests.

1.2 Sample

Race, Gender, Age, and Major

As Figure 1.1 shows, the survey sample was majority female (54%), with 44% male and 2% identifying as other or preferring not to answer. Figure 1.2 shows that respondents were predominantly white (53%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (32%), with limited Black representation (2.6%). The sample was heavily composed of undergraduate students aged 18–22 (95%), as shown in Figure 1.3. The most common majors represented were economics (21%), engineering (16%), social sciences (15%), and computer science (12%), as shown in Figure 1.4.

Gender Distribution of Respondents

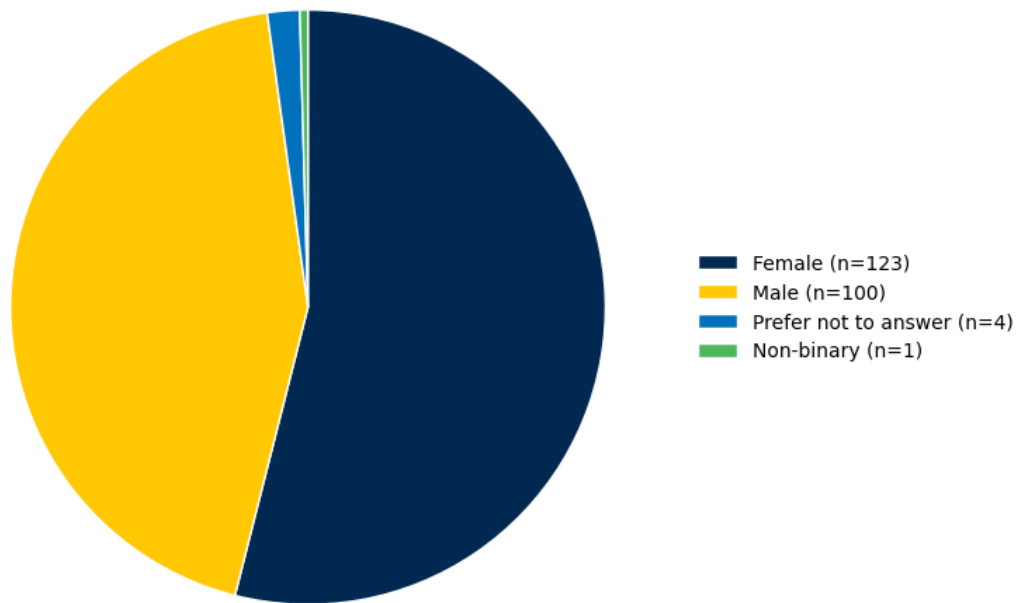


Figure 1.1. Count of survey respondents' reported gender.

Race Distribution of Respondents

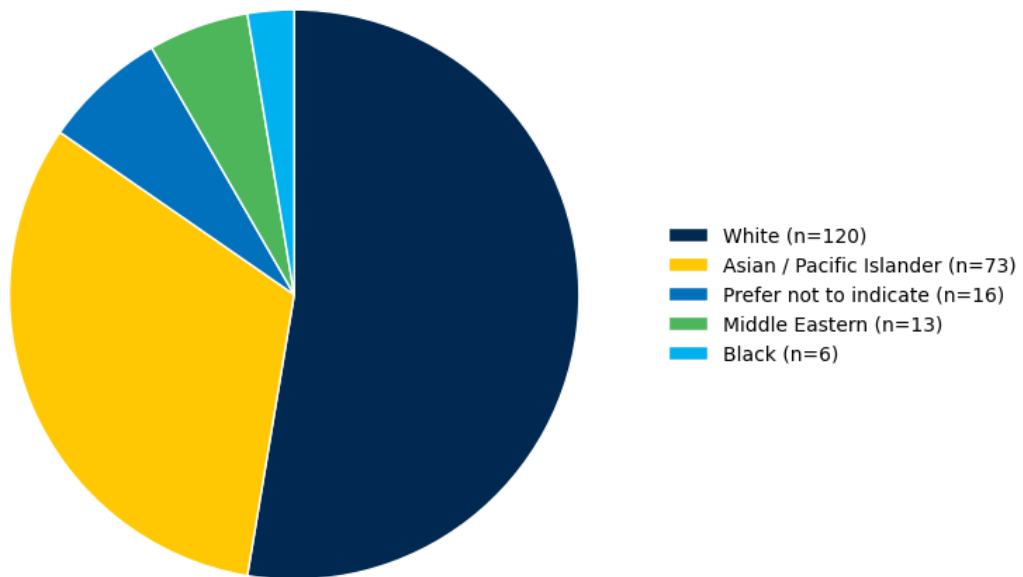


Figure 1.2. Count of survey respondents' reported race.

Age Distribution of Respondents

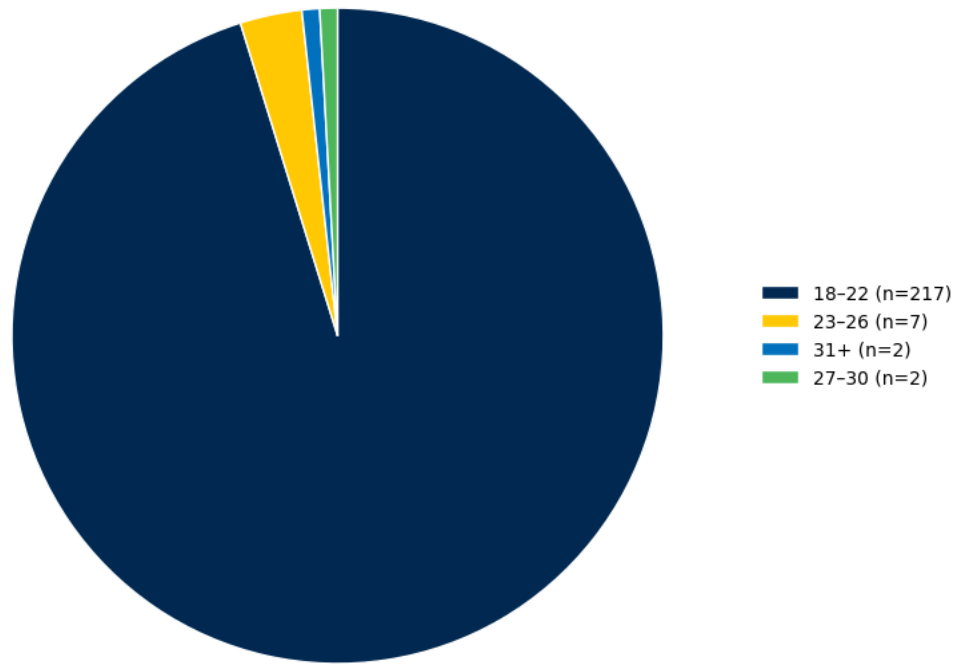


Figure 1.3. Count of survey respondents' reported age.

Major Distribution of Respondents

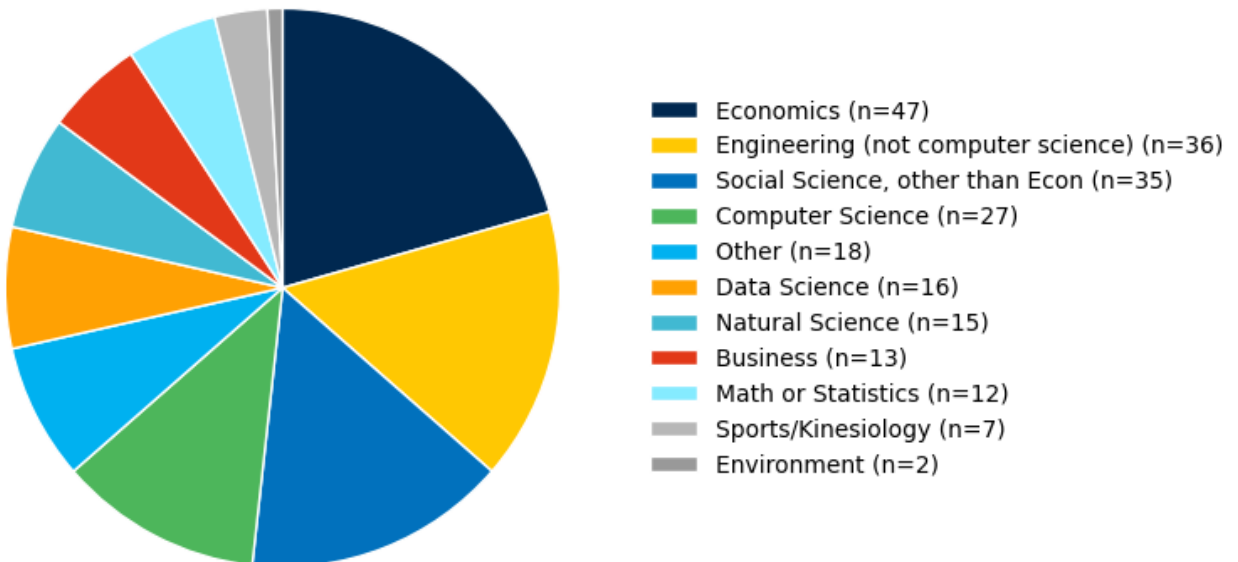


Figure 1.4. Count of survey major distribution.

Residency Status

Analysis of residency status reports 130 (45.6%) respondents are out-of-state students, followed by 120 in-state students (42.1%), and 35 international students (12.3%).

Out-of-state students primarily come from California, with 35 respondents (26.6%). New York and Illinois follow, with 20 (15.6%) and 16 (12.5%) respondents, respectively. Following suit, students from Texas, Florida, Wisconsin, Maryland, Connecticut, and New Jersey each individually make up a range of 7 to 11 respondents (5% – 8.8%). Virginia has the smallest representation, with 5 respondents (3.8%).

Making up almost half of the international student distribution was China, with 16 respondents (45.8%). The next largest group is 4 respondents (12.5%) from South Korea, with Malaysia, India, Guatemala, New Zealand, Chile, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Peru all individually making up between 1 to 3 respondents (4.2% – 8.3%) of international students.

Post-Graduation Plans

72.8% of respondents intend to work full-time while 26.4% plan to attend graduate school, and very few reported other plans. Among respondents who answered questions about staying in the United States, most indicated that they plan to remain in the U.S. after graduation, with only a small percentage expressing uncertainty or plans to leave. For those considering leaving, factors such as the political environment appear to play a relatively minor role overall, though some respondents report that it influences their decision to varying degrees.

2025 and 2022 Comparison

The 2022 dataset served as a baseline for comparison with the 2025 data, helping to identify how students' post-graduation preferences and patterns have changed over time. Comparison between the 2022 and 2025 data revealed changes in student preferences that reflect a different respondent profile, with shifts in age, academic major, and race.

The 2022 sample was more heavily concentrated among traditional undergraduate students, with a much larger share of respondents aged 18–22 and fewer older participants as compared to the 2025 sample. The gender distribution remained broadly similar, though 2025 showed a higher proportion of female respondents, a slight decline in those identifying as non-binary, and a small increase in those who prefer not to disclose.

Racial demographics remained relatively stable overall from 2022 to 2025, with small increases in Middle Eastern and Black respondents and a higher share of individuals

opting not to report their race. Residency patterns also shifted, with fewer in-state and international students and a notable increase in out-of-state respondents in 2025.

Class year representation shifted modestly, with seniors still the largest group but less dominant proportionally. The 2025 data also had increased participation from juniors and a slight rise in sophomores, while freshmen were no longer represented.

Most notably, the distribution of majors became far more diverse in 2025, as shown in Figure 1.5. The major distribution moved away from a heavy concentration in Engineering toward a broader spread across fields, namely Economics, Social Science, Computer Science, and Data Science. Overall, these changes suggest that the 2025 sample captured a slightly younger, more domestically diverse, and more academically varied student population than in 2022.

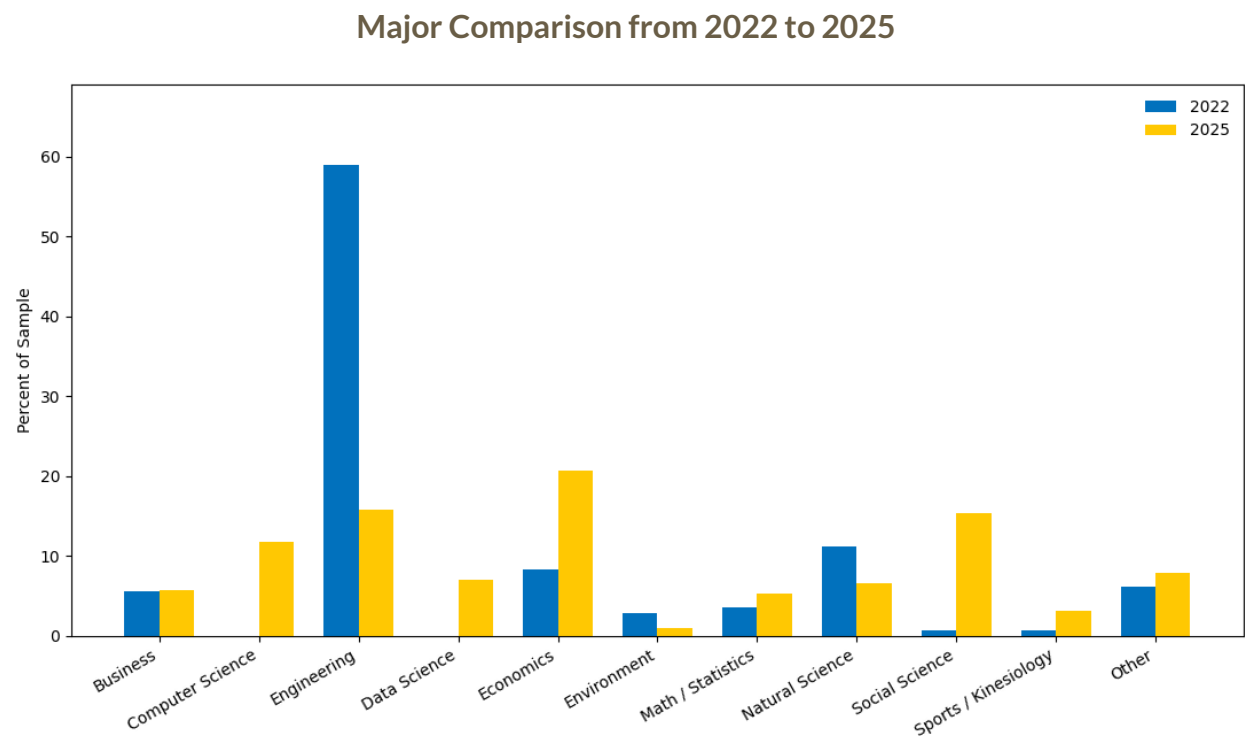


Figure 1.5. Bar chart comparing the 2022 and 2025 percentage distributions of student majors.

1.3 Alignment Between Students’ Majors, Intended Careers, and Ann Arbor Employment Opportunities

This analysis shows whether and how students’ college majors correspond to their intended career industries, and whether these industries align with major employers in the Ann Arbor region. Ann Arbor SPARK’s report on the Top 10 Regional Employers was used as comparative data for this analysis. Using survey responses on academic majors

and intended career fields, cross-tabulations were used to link majors to industries and then compared those industries to the largest local employers in the Ann Arbor area.

The survey results indicated that students' intended career paths generally correspond to their academic disciplines. Students majoring in computer science, engineering, mathematics, and data science most frequently reported plans to enter technology or engineering industries. Similarly, students studying economics, business, or other social science majors commonly indicated career interests in finance, consulting, marketing, or corporate business sectors. Natural science majors were more likely to report plans to enter health-related fields, while some social science and policy-oriented majors indicated interest in government or public sector careers.

Overall, the comparison indicates that, while some sectors show reasonable correspondence between student career interests and local employment opportunities, other sectors reveal clear mismatches. Students appear to be disproportionately interested in Finance/Insurance, Business Management, and Professional/Technical careers, while Health Care and Manufacturing, two major components of the Ann Arbor economy, attract comparatively fewer student career intentions (Figure 1.6). These findings suggest that many graduates may either seek employment outside the region or adjust their career paths as they respond to the realities of the local labor market.

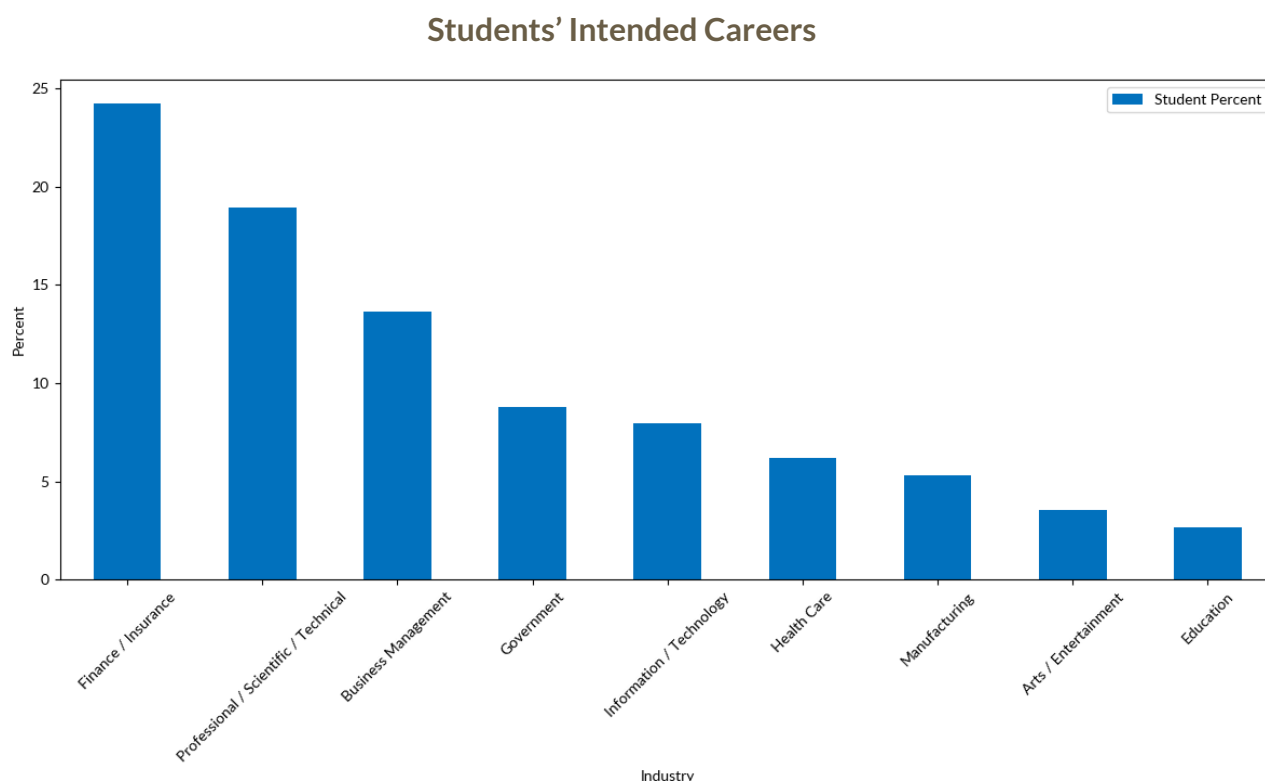


Figure 1.6. Percentage of respondents' reported intended career paths.

Summary of Key Insights

The 2025 University of Michigan Emerging Professionals survey offers insight into a pool of highly skilled, early-career talent. The survey reflects a sample population of 286 students whom are aligned with a population of interest—traditional undergraduate students in technical, business, and analytical fields. However, this sample of graduating students are misaligned with the regional economic and career opportunities.

The data reveal a critical gap between student aspirations and local labor market realities. Student career interests align with their academic degrees, such as engineering students pursuing technology roles or economics majors pursuing finance. However, the data show the popular majors being computer science or economics majors contrasts with top industries present in the Washtenaw County region such as health care and manufacturing. This suggests that students in the sample population may be drawn to opportunities outside this region, not due to a lack of talent alignment, but due to a perceived or actual lack of local opportunities to their fields of interest.

Nearly half of the sample population reports out-of-state residency along with a meaningful international population. This exemplifies the geographic diversity of the sample, meaning that many students may have weaker geographic ties to Michigan and therefore face lower barriers to relocating for work.

Importantly, these findings highlight opportunities and considerations for the Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County region. University of Michigan Ann Arbor continues to generate a diverse and capable workforce aligned with finance/insurance, professional/scientific/technical, and business management industries. However, there are opportunities for stronger alignment between student interests and regional industry demand. Understanding this gap can inform strong connections between students and local career opportunities, whether through internships, partnerships, or targeted industry development.

Key Insights

- **Major as a key demographic variable.** The sample population indicates a highly technical and quantitative academic background, indicated by the following major breakdown: economics (21%), engineering (16%), social sciences (15%), and computer science (12%).
- **Talent-Opportunity Mismatch.** Student's highest ranked career interests (finance, consulting, tech-adjacent roles) are misaligned with Ann Arbor's dominant industries (health care and manufacturing), which suggests a structural disconnect.
- **High Mobility of Talent.** Given the significant out-of-state student population for the sample, there may be weaker geographic ties to Michigan that provide low barriers to students relocating for work.

2. Workplace and Job Benefit Preferences

What UofM students value in their workplace and what benefits are most important to them

2.1 Summary

Job benefit packages are a way for companies to show that they value their employees and can offer growth opportunities within the organization. To better understand how new graduates perceive these opportunities, we analyzed survey results from 2022 and 2025 related to perceived importance of job benefits, workplace preferences, and work-mode preferences to understand what emerging professionals are looking for as they enter the workforce and begin their professional careers.

Overall, the survey suggests the students placed the most importance on job benefits like salary, paid time off, advancement opportunities, 401(k), and health insurance. When it came to workplace preferences, students tended to place importance on salary, advancement opportunities, and meaningful work. Moreover, we found that this does not vary across demographic groups, industry, experience, residency status, or interest in living in Ann Arbor. Students were also more likely to prefer hybrid workplaces, but show flexibility in their preferences when it comes to working remotely or in offices. The survey also suggested that students perceived that AI is becoming increasingly important for future careers and that students report feeling comfortable knowing when and how to use AI. These insights suggest that employers who offer strong compensation packages, clear growth pathways, and more flexible work arrangements will be better positioned to attract and retain new graduates in Ann Arbor.

2.2 Descriptives

Student Perspectives on AI

Students were asked a group of questions which indicated their comfort level with using AI on a scale of 1 (extremely uncomfortable) to 4 (extremely comfortable) and how important they feel it is for their future on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important).

We found that overall, students think that AI will be very important for their future careers ($M = 3.35$), and they report being comfortable knowing both when to use AI ($M =$

3.11) and how to use AI ($M = 3.12$) in their work. This highlights that the upcoming graduates from the University of Michigan already have experience using AI and understand that it will be important as they enter the workforce.

Student Average Responses for AI Questions

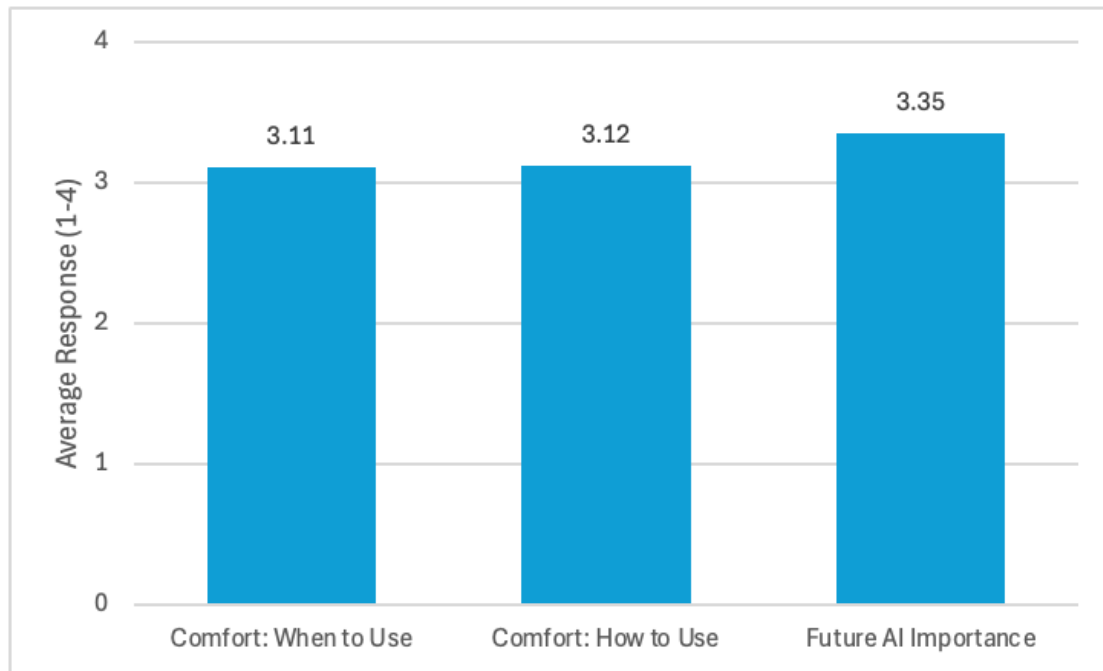


Figure 2.1: This graph shows the average responses for each of the AI questions asked in the survey on a scale of 1 (extremely uncomfortable) - 4 (extremely comfortable) and 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important).

Workplace Preferences and Job Benefits

To measure the perceived importance of specific job benefits, respondents were asked, “On a scale from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important), how important are the following job benefits to you when considering a job opportunity?” We calculated mean scores and we computed a benchmark by averaging the ratings across all job benefits to understand which benefits were perceived to be the most important. This benchmark represents the overall average response value for each question and allows us to identify which job benefits were rated above or below the average response.

The job benefits rated above-average in importance are health insurance (+0.91), retirement plans (+0.91), paid time off (+0.87), bonuses (+0.38), flexible work arrangements (+0.25), and stock/equity (+0.01 units from the benchmark), as shown in Figure 2.2. Health insurance, retirement plans, and PTO are considered the highest valued job benefits, as they are furthest above the benchmark.

Average Importance of Job Benefits When Considering a Job Opportunity

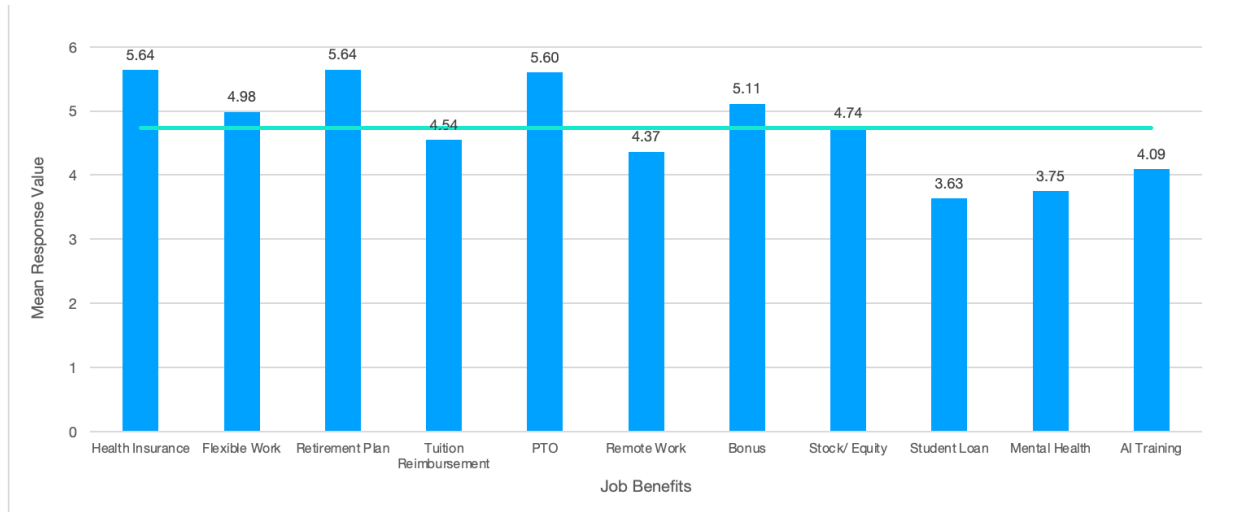


Figure 2.2: This graph shows the average ratings of job benefits based on the 2025 survey. Benchmark = 4.73 which represents the average response rate for all questions and is shown on the graph as a light blue line.

The survey also asked students about what might be important to them in their workplaces. To measure these workplace preferences, students were asked: “On a scale from 1 (not important to me) to 7 (very important to me), please rate the importance of each of the following factors if you are/were considering a job opportunity?”

As with the jobs benefits questions, we calculated mean scores, and we computed an average benchmark. The workplace preferences rated above-average in importance are salary (+0.65), advancement opportunities (+0.45), meaningful work (+0.29), work-life balance (+0.04), and company culture (+0.01), as shown in Figure 2.3. We see that salary, advancement opportunities, and meaningful work are considered the highest valued workplace preferences, as they are furthest above the benchmark.

Average Importance Ratings of Workplace Preferences When Considering a Job Opportunity

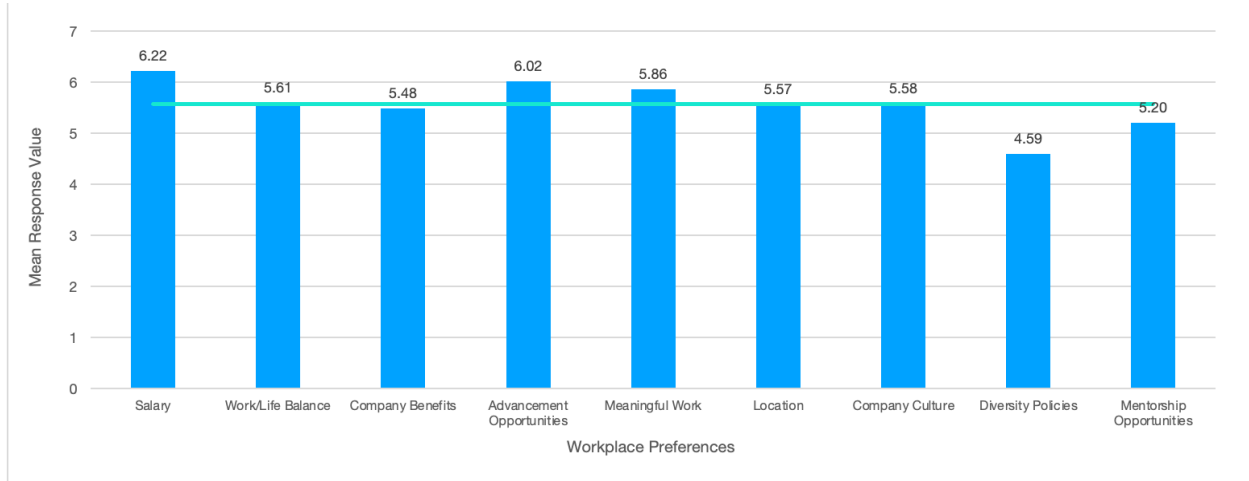


Figure 2.3: This graph shows the average ratings of workplace preferences based on the 2025 survey. Benchmark = 5.57 which represents the average response rate for all questions and is shown on the graph as a light blue line.

Work Modes

Respondents were asked two questions about their preferences related to working remotely, in an office, or a hybrid environment. The first focused on their preferred work arrangement (hybrid, in-office, remote, or no preference) and the other about how committed they are to that choice (committed, flexible, or no preference). In 2025, most respondents preferred a hybrid work arrangement (59.9%). In-office work was the next most common preference (31.7%), while relatively few respondents preferred remote work (1.8%). Additionally, 6.6% of respondents indicated no preference.

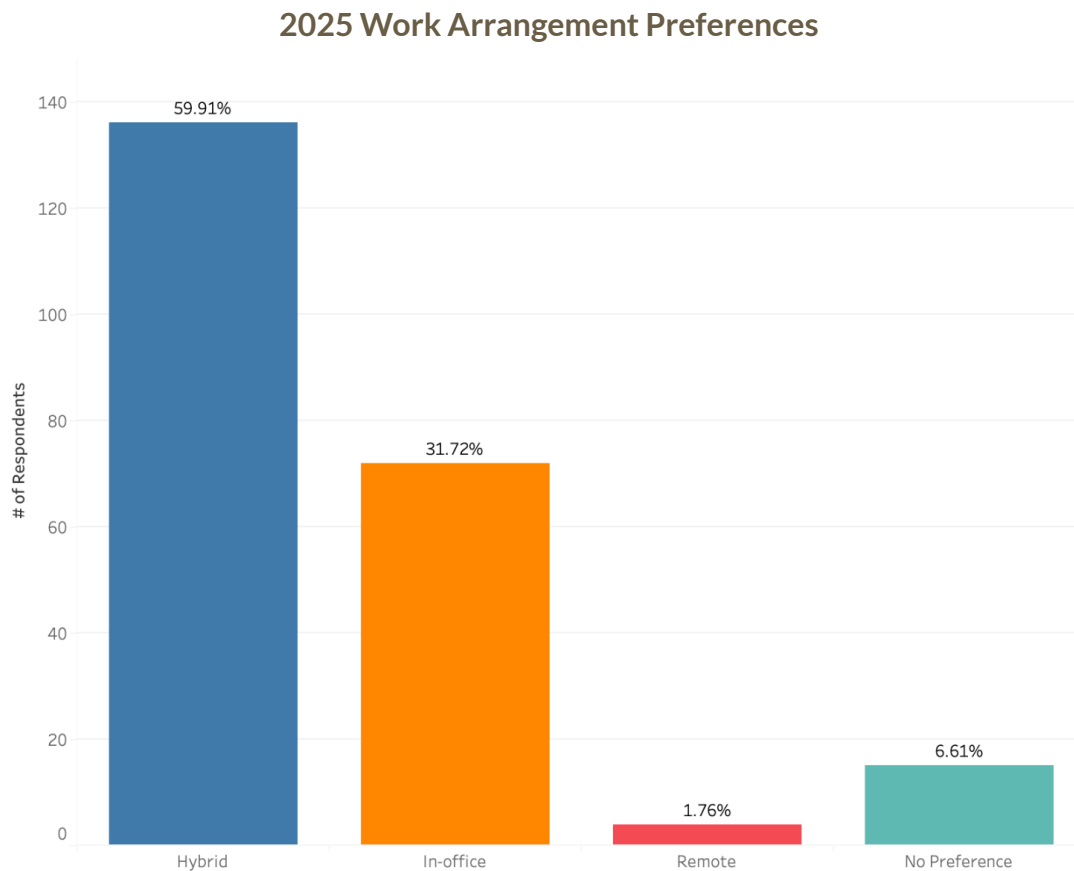


Figure 2.4: This graph shows student preferences for work arrangements (hybrid, in-office, remote, no preferences) based on the 2025 survey.

2.3 Workplace Skills, Preferences, and Advancement Opportunities

Students' Comfort and Perceptions of AI in the Workplace

Within the last few years, AI has become increasingly more prevalent in every aspect of society. From doing homework to analyzing massive amounts of data, new AI tools help make many processes more efficient and accurate. Currently, there is a lot of uncertainty and fear in how AI will be integrated into the workplace and how it will shape the future jobs market. In the 2025 survey, questions were asked of soon-to-be graduates to understand their comfort level and perception of AI. We looked at how current students are perceiving AI in order to understand if there is any disconnect between what employers are expecting and what the current graduating class is feeling.

Overall, the sampled students indicated they were somewhat comfortable with AI and saw it as highly important for their future. We also wanted to see if there were differences

in AI comfort and perception between different demographic groups. We ran statistical analyses with the AI-specific survey questions and variables such as gender, race, major, age, prior experience, and student origin. We found that between these groups, there were no significant differences in their views towards AI. This indicates the students in the sample had a similar comfort level with AI. This also suggests that when this group of students enters the workforce, they will already have a baseline understanding of when/how to use AI and are prepared for it to be implemented in their future career. Since this study was conducted at the University of Michigan, it is important to note that there is a high level of focus on tech and research within the university which may skew our results. Also, the 2026 graduates have experienced college with AI at their disposal and may have different perspectives versus those students who attended college in the past. Because of this, the results of our survey may not be consistent with the overall general recent graduates of the last few years.

Students' Ratings of Workplace Preferences

As students begin their professional journeys, they can develop certain perceptions of what is important in a workplace in a way that may influence the way they view job opportunities. We also compared how students viewed the importance of workplace factors in both the 2022 and 2025 surveys to see how they may have changed (Figure 2.5). The results were fairly consistent across both years, with the majority of factors ranging between 5 and 6 on a 1-7 scale, with 1 being 'Not At All Important to Me' and 7 being 'Very Important to Me'.

Salary, advancement opportunities, and meaningful work were rated the highest on average, and diversity policy was rated the lowest, though it was still rated as important. Between 2022 and 2025, salary, advancement opportunities, and location became more important, while work/life balance, company benefits, meaningful work, company culture, and diversity policies became less important. However, the differences between these factors are small. In the 2025 survey, the differences between the lowest rated factor and highest rated factor are 1.62. This indicates that in both years, students value almost all of these factors and may prefer a job that has a comprehensive package. The mentorship opportunities preference was not included in the 2022 survey, and hence has no comparison.

Average Rating of Workplace Preferences between 2022 and 2025



Figure 2.5: This graph shows the average rating of workplace preferences when students were asked to rate them on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being ‘Not At All Important to Me’ and 7 being ‘Very Important to me.’

We also analyzed the data by demographics (gender, race, residency, primary major, and Hispanic background) and prior work experience to explore how different groups of students view the importance of these workplace preferences. We found no significant differences between these groups, or between 2022 and 2025, suggesting that perceptions were largely consistent across demographic groups and over time.

Understanding Students’ Workplace and Locational Preferences

We additionally wanted to explore whether these workplace preferences might differ between those who were willing to live in Ann Arbor post-graduation and those who were less willing to remain in the area. To do this, we used responses to a survey question that asked, on a scale of 1-7, how much you could see yourself living and pursuing a career in Ann Arbor, and grouped them into three categories: willing, neutral, and unwilling. We bucketed responses of 1-2 as “Unwilling,” 3-5 as “Neutral,” and 6-7 as “Willing.” We found that the most important workplace preferences were the same across all interest groups, with salary, advancement opportunities, meaningful work, work-life balance, and company culture rated highest (Figure 2.6). The key takeaway is that there are no meaningful differences in how students evaluate workplace preferences based on their willingness to live in Ann Arbor. In other words, students who see themselves living in Ann Arbor value the same workplace preferences as those who do not.

2025 Average Ratings of Workplace Preferences by Willingness to Live in Ann Arbor

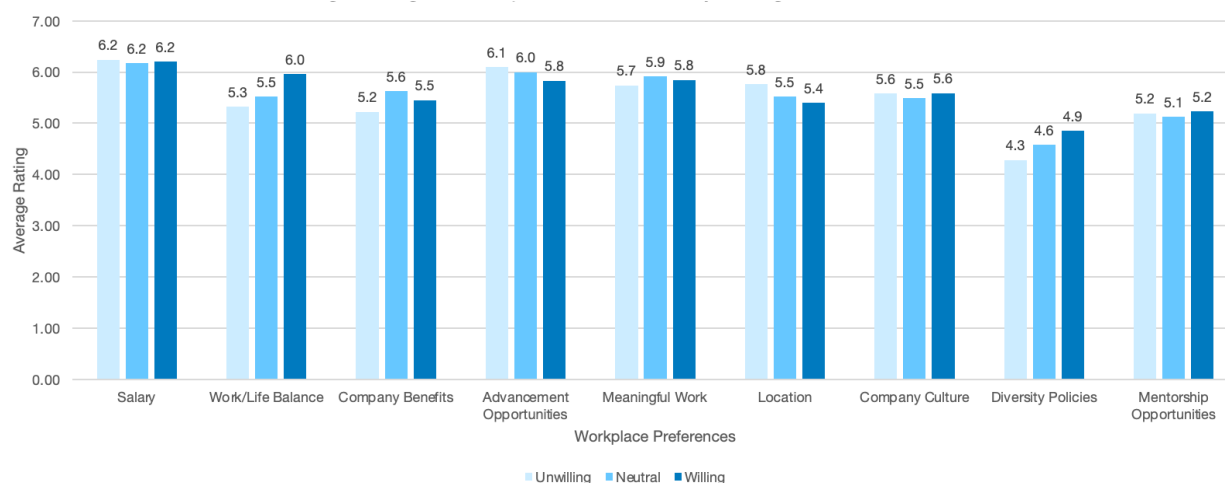


Figure 2.6: This graph shows the average rating of workplace preferences based on their willingness to live in Ann Arbor, where students were asked to rate them on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being ‘Not At All Important to Me’ and 7 being ‘Very Important to Me.’

We also examined how students’ intended industry impacted their preferences. To find more meaningful comparisons across the respondents, we grouped the industry options into five broader buckets. The five buckets included: Public & Social Services (healthcare/social assistance, education, government), Business (professional/scientific/technical, finance/insurance, business management, information), Hospitality & Entertainment (arts/entertainment/recreation, accommodations/food service), Manufacturing, and Other (those who answered “other” on the survey).

After bucketing respondents by industry, the only significant result we found was that students entering the information/technology sector are less motivated by meaningful work and advancement opportunities than peers pursuing creative or public-sector fields, but the significance is small. There being no statistically significant difference across other sectors suggests that across most industries, young adults share similar workplace benefit preferences. However, some of the subsamples are quite small and should be interpreted cautiously. By bucketing the data by both location and industry interest, we found that the overall results of workplace preferences are representative of most students surveyed.

Workplace Preferences Key Insights

Overall, our findings suggest that graduating students entering the workplace highly value all aspects of a company’s compensation and workplace package and may be looking for positions that will include these valued benefits. The responses indicate that salary, advancement opportunities, and meaningful work are the workplace preferences that

most college students value the most when considering job opportunities. However, all factors included in the study were rated as important, suggesting that students value many different workplace factors as they consider job opportunities.. Students are also very consistent in their opinions about workplace advancement opportunities across demographics, industry, year, and location preferences. This consistency highlights that despite rapid technological change and innovation, these core career motivations stay unchanged across cohorts.

Key Insights

- AI is becoming more of a vital skill in the workplace and students feel comfortable using AI and think it will be important for their future careers.
- Workplace preferences stay consistent over time and students value salary, advancement opportunities, and meaningful work the most for their future careers.
- There are minimal differences between demographic groups, location preferences, and industry suggesting that students interested in Ann Arbor do not have significant differences in their perception of workplace preferences.

2.4 Job Benefits and Work Mode Preferences

Understanding Student Perceptions of Job Benefits in 2022 and 2025

Similar to workplace preferences, we looked into respondents' perceived importance of job benefits and compared the results from the 2022 and 2025 surveys. Figure 2.7 shows a bar chart representing the average ratings for each job benefit by year. The blue bars represent 2022, and the yellow bars represent 2025. The y-axis represents the average rating, ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important). The x-axis represents each job benefit included in the surveys, allowing us to compare how perceptions changed between 2022 and 2025. Since the last three job benefits on the chart were only added to the survey in 2025, there is no 2022 data available for comparison.

Overall, we see only moderate shifts in ratings from 2022 to 2025. Health insurance, retirement, and PTO were rated more favorably in 2025, suggesting that students may place greater emphasis on stability and long-term security when evaluating job offers. Simultaneously, the importance of remote work, tuition reimbursement, and stock options saw declines. This may reflect a shift toward prioritizing more immediate, stable, and easily understood benefits over options that are less certain, less familiar, or longer-term. Finally, the job benefits introduced in the 2025 survey were generally rated lower than more traditional benefits like health insurance and PTO. This suggests that students may be less familiar with or place less value on newer offerings that have not yet proven their relevance, instead valuing a comprehensive benefit package.

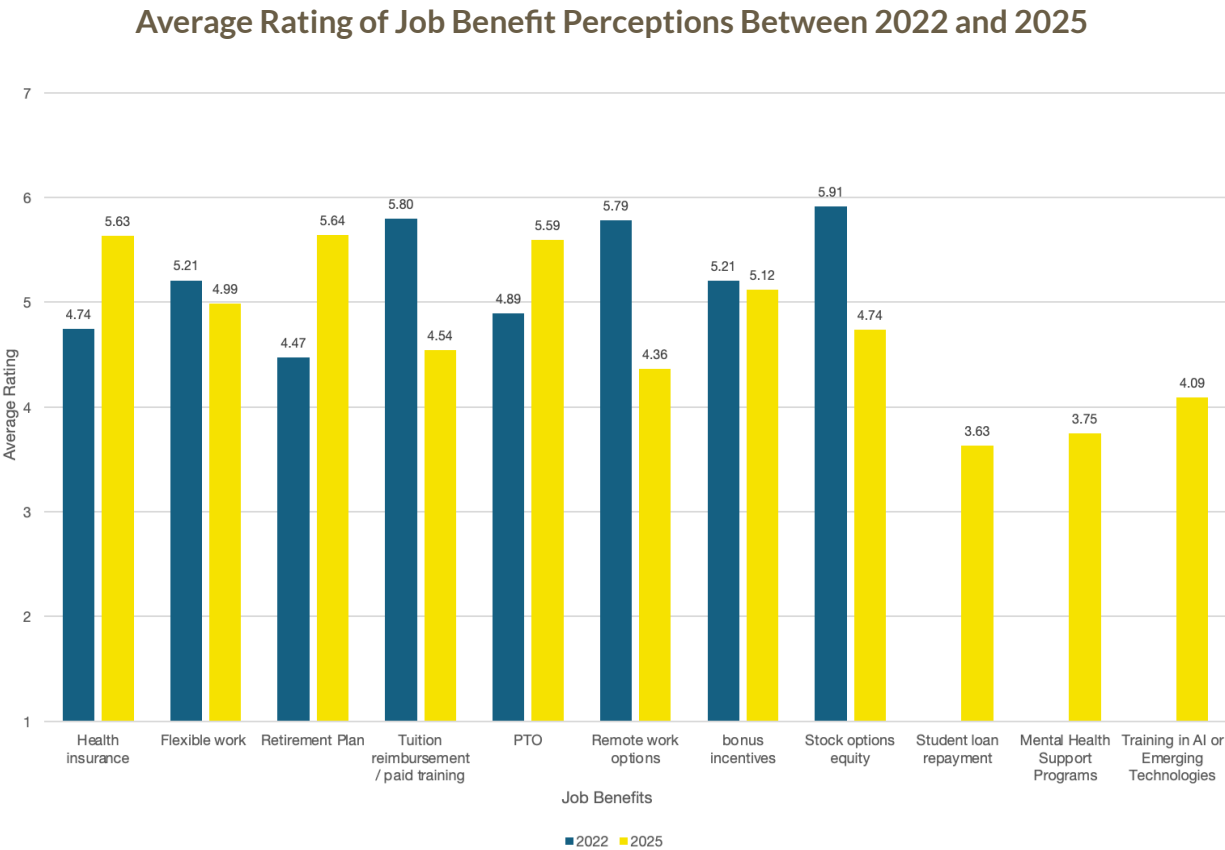


Figure 2.7: This graph shows the average ratings for each job benefit asked in the 2022 and 2025 surveys on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important).

As we did with the workplace preferences, we explored whether the perceived importance of these job benefits might differ between those who were willing to live in Ann Arbor post-graduation and those who were less willing to remain in the area. Using the same bucketing method described in the previous section, allowing for direct comparison across willingness to live in Ann Arbor.

We found that the most important job benefits remain consistent across all willingness groups (Figure 2.8). Health insurance, retirement plans, PTO, bonuses, flexible work arrangements, and stock or equity are rated highest overall, as they were rated above the overall average benefit rating of 4.73 across all respondents. There are no meaningful differences in how students evaluate job benefits based on their willingness to live in Ann Arbor. In other words, students who see themselves living in Ann Arbor have very similar perceptions of job benefits compared to those who do not.

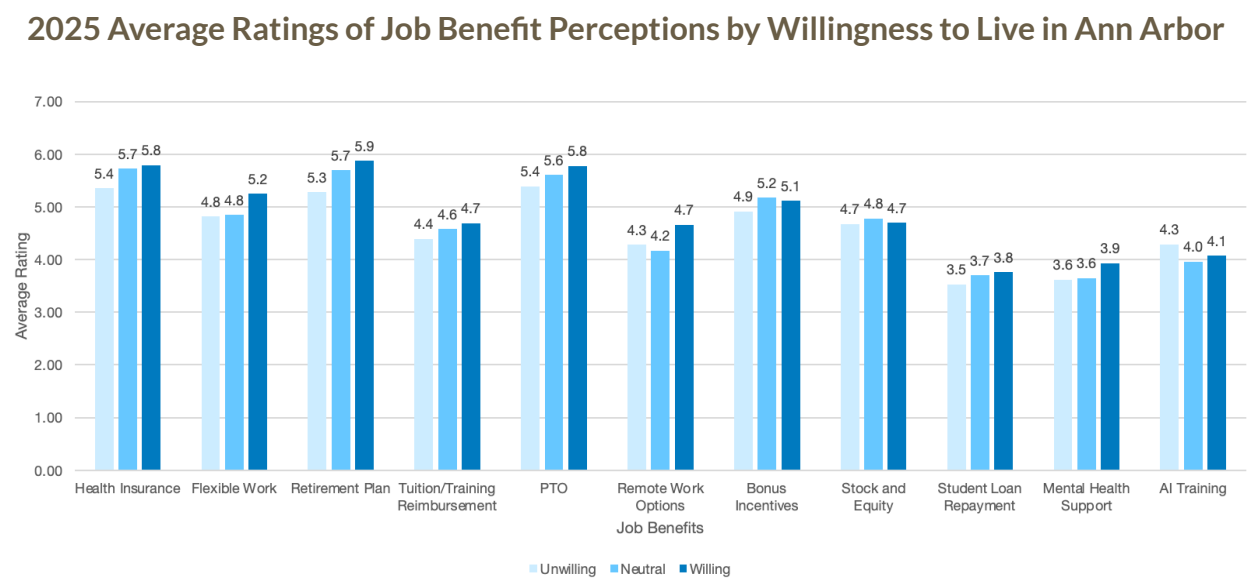


Figure 2.8: This graph shows the average ratings for each job benefit asked in the 2025 survey on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important) based on their willingness to live in Ann Arbor.

In addition, we compared how perceptions of job benefits might compare across both intended industry and residency status. Results showed that perceived importance of job benefits were generally similar across intended industry and residency status. However, we did find a few significant differences across residency status. International students valued remote work and AI training significantly more, while Michigan residents valued 401(k) benefits significantly more. International students may value remote work options and AI training for broader job access and skill development, while Michigan residents may prioritize 401(k) benefits due to a greater concern related to long-term financial stability in the U.S. system.

Understanding Work Mode Preferences, Changes from 2022 and 2025

When comparing work mode preferences between respondents in 2022 and 2025, we found that preferences were very similar. In 2022, 56.3% preferred a hybrid work

arrangement, increasing to 59.9% in 2025. The difference between those who preferred in-office work in 2022 (32.4%) and 2025 (31.7%) was also minimal. Remote work remained the least preferred option across years: 2.8% of respondents preferred it in 2022, decreasing to 1.8% in 2025.

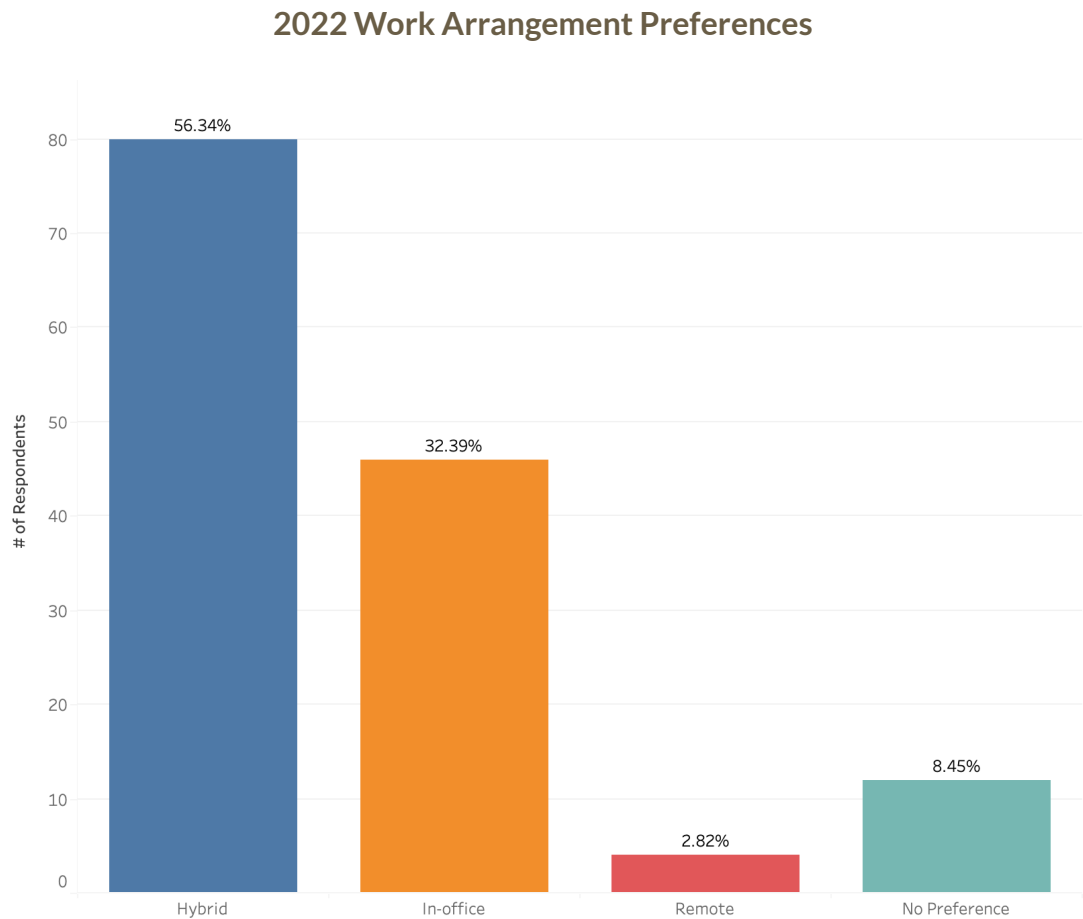


Figure 2.9: This graph shows student preferences for work arrangements (hybrid, in-office, remote, no preferences) based on the 2022 survey.

Our findings regarding in-office preference for this question were somewhat surprising given our background research. In our review of trends, we found that many surveys reported that in-office work was the least popular among Gen Z workers, with a Gallup study¹ reporting that only 5% wanted to work in-person all the time. This suggests that UofM students may be situated differently than the national sample.

Job Benefit and Work Mode Preferences Key Insights

¹ Agrawal, Sangeeta, and Ryan Pendell. "Fully Remote Work Least Popular with Gen Z." *Gallup*, 7 Aug. 2025, www.gallup.com/workplace/692675/fully-remote-work-least-popular-gen-z.aspx.

Throughout the survey, respondents identified job benefits and work mode preferences they consider important when evaluating potential opportunities. Overall, respondents value monetary benefits highly and generally prefer hybrid work, but are also highly flexible.

When looking at job benefit preferences, 401(k), health insurance coverage, and PTO remain the most important. Common benefits such as health insurance, 401(k), and PTO appear to matter more than newer or less common benefits, indicating that students may be focused on financial security and overall well-being as they enter the workforce. Additionally, how respondents evaluate job benefits does not differ by their willingness to live in Ann Arbor. Students who see themselves living in Ann Arbor value the same benefits as those who do not. This may indicate that location decisions are driven more by factors like lifestyle, cost of living, or personal ties instead of differences in available job benefits.

In both the 2022 and 2025 surveys, hybrid remains the most preferred work mode. This preference may reflect the desire among early-career professionals to balance the social benefits of in-office work with the flexibility of remote work. Given this, we can anticipate that these preferences will remain largely consistent in the future. Respondents were also flexible in their preferences in both 2022 and 2025, suggesting that other factors, such as those listed above, may be prioritized more when considering a potential job opportunity, despite a stronger overall preference for hybrid work. This is likely due to the increasing value placed on schedule flexibility and work-life balance in the post-pandemic era, as many young professionals entered the workforce under highly flexible conditions and have since adapted their working styles accordingly.

Key Insights

- The most important job benefits to respondents are 401(k), health insurance coverage, and PTO.
- Respondents' perceptions of Ann Arbor don't meaningfully influence how they rate job benefits and there are no significant differences in benefit preferences by industry or residency status.
- Most respondents prefer a hybrid work mode and most respondents are flexible within their preference.

3. City Preferences

Where UM students see themselves living and working post-graduation

3.1 Summary

In this section, we explore how demographics and community preferences influence students' decisions to live and pursue a career in a specific city. Overall, students weigh career opportunities alongside personal stability when deciding where they want to live and work after graduation. Proximity to family and friends consistently plays a major role in shaping city preferences, showing that geographic connection and support systems remain important considerations even as students evaluate professional options. College towns such as Ann Arbor, Boulder, and Bloomington are associated with work-life balance, suggesting these environments appeal to students seeking long-term stability and lifestyles. At the same time, major cities such as New York City and Chicago remain highly attractive due to strong job markets and higher salary potential, reinforcing the importance of economic opportunity in decision-making. Differences in student characteristics further shape openness to relocation, as engineering students and those less concerned with proximity tend to consider a broader range of cities, while business students and those who prioritize staying close to home demonstrate more geographically constrained preferences.

3.2 Descriptives

Student Views on Living and Working in Various Cities from 2022 to 2025

In surveys from both 2022 and 2025, students rated Ann Arbor and other comparable cities across the country on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself living and pursuing a career here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could easily see myself living and pursuing a career here.” In 2022, the highest-rated cities were Chicago, IL (4.94), Ann Arbor, MI (4.61), and New York, NY (4.4) (Figure 3.1). In 2025, the highest-rated cities were New York (5.6), Chicago (5.54), and Berkeley (3.93) (Figure 3.2).

As shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2, New York and Chicago showed increases in average ratings, whereas all other cities showed decreases in average ratings.

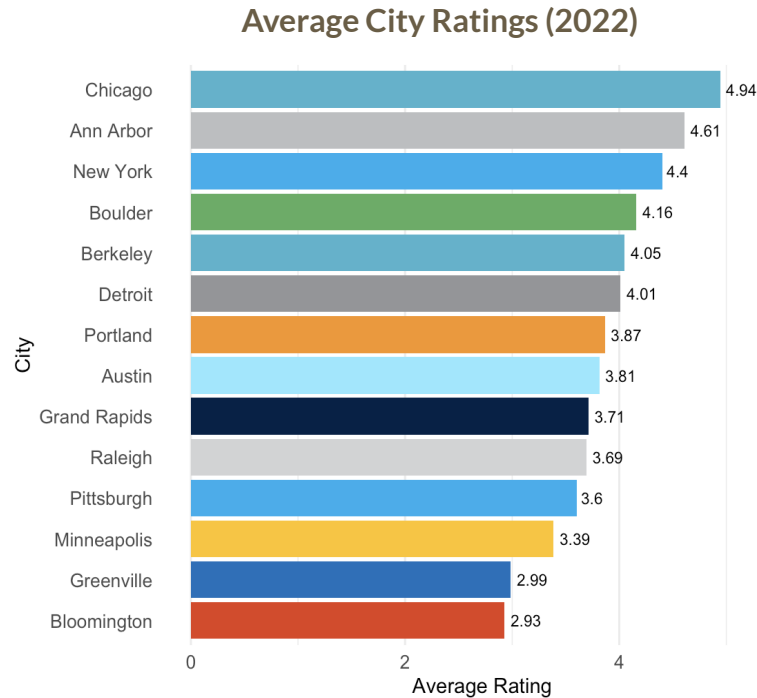


Figure 3.1. Average rating for cities in 2022. Respondents rated whether they could see themselves living and working in each city on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.”

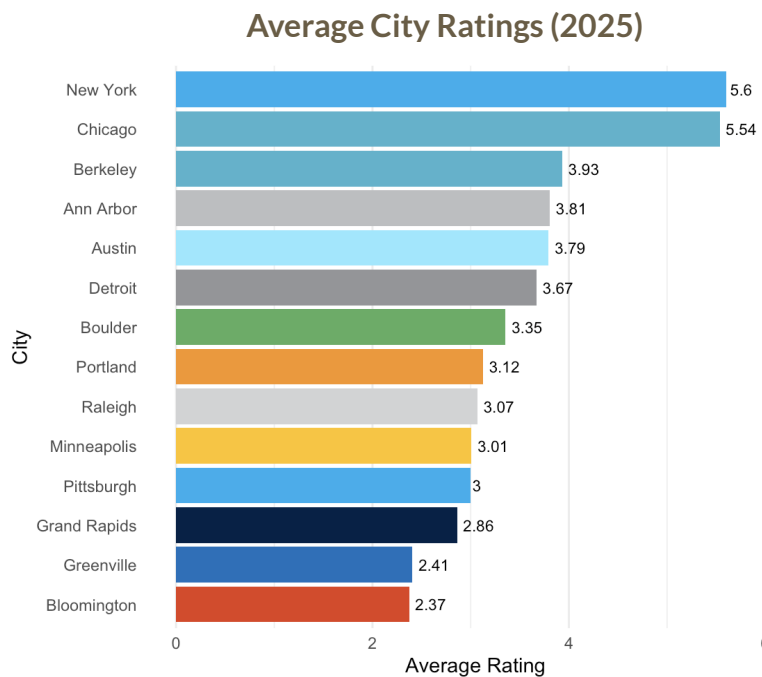


Figure 3.2. Average rating for cities in 2025. Respondents rated whether they could see themselves living and working in each city on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.”

3.3 Understanding Respondents' City Ratings by Demographics and Individual Attributes

Demographic Indicators and City Ratings

Here, we evaluated whether factors such as age, class standing, gender, and race were associated with differences in how cities were rated by emerging professionals. Ultimately, this analysis provides insight into the extent to which demographic segmentation is useful for understanding and predicting city preferences among emerging professionals, helping to distinguish between broadly shared trends and subgroup-specific preferences.

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 below show the highest rated cities that students can see themselves living and working in for females and males, respectively. The majority of both males ($n = 100$) and females ($n = 120$) report high ratings for New York and Chicago, whereas greater gender differences appear in ratings for the other cities. Statistical analysis shows that males are more likely to rate cities higher (at a 5 or greater on the 7-point scale) than females by a score of 0.4 rating points on average. This result suggests that although males and females show slight differences in their city ratings, these differences are minimal and do not provide strong evidence of meaningful variation in preferences.

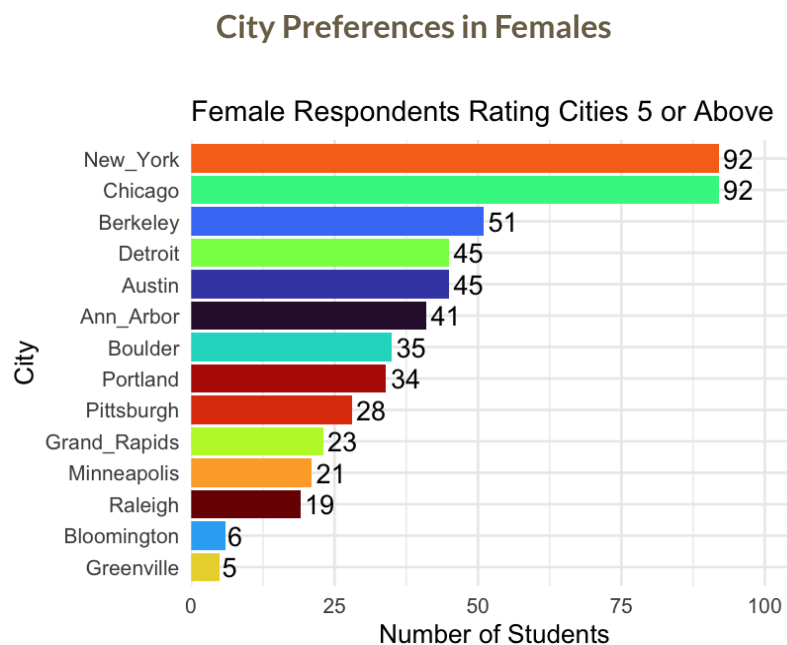


Figure 3.3. The number of reported female respondents rating each city a 5 or above on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.”

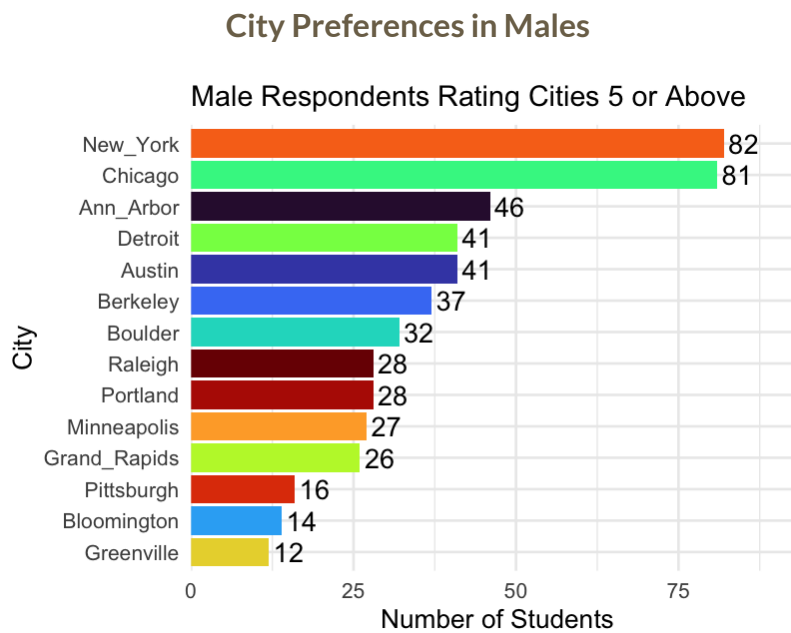


Figure 3.4. The number of reported male respondents rating each city a 5 or above on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.”

Interestingly, there was no significant impact of race, class standing, or age on how respondents ranked cities in this survey.

Academic Major and City Ratings

Engineering and Business majors showed distinct differences in how they evaluated cities in the survey. Business majors tended to concentrate their highest ratings of 5 and above on a small number of cities, most notably New York and Chicago, while all other cities were selected by just four or fewer students in this group (Figure 3.5). In contrast, Engineering majors exhibited a broader distribution of high ratings across cities, with a greater number of cities receiving ratings of five or above compared to Business majors (Figure 3.6). This pattern is consistent when comparing STEM-focused majors more broadly to humanities-focused majors, with STEM students more likely to assign higher ratings (five or above) across a wider range of cities.

City Ratings of Business Majors

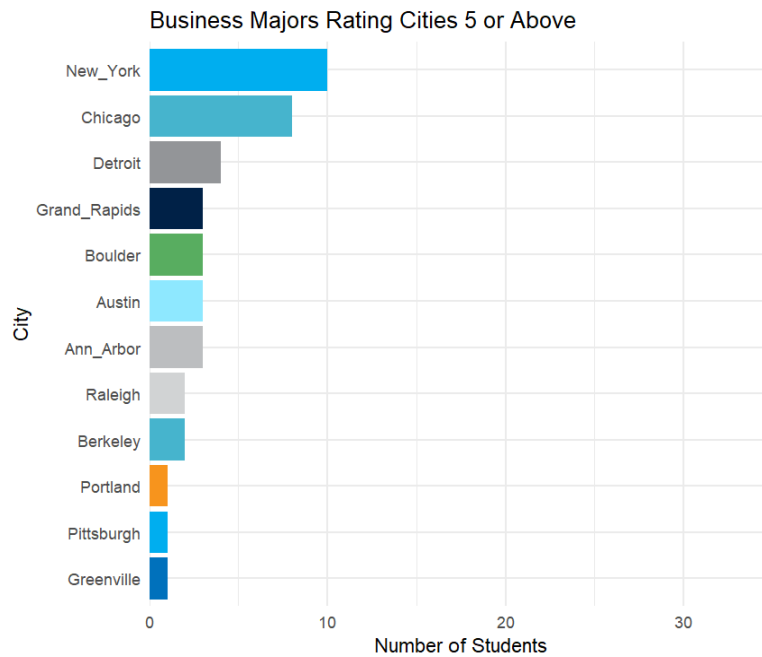


Figure 3.5. The number of reported business major respondents rating each city a 5 or above on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.”

City Ratings of Engineering Majors

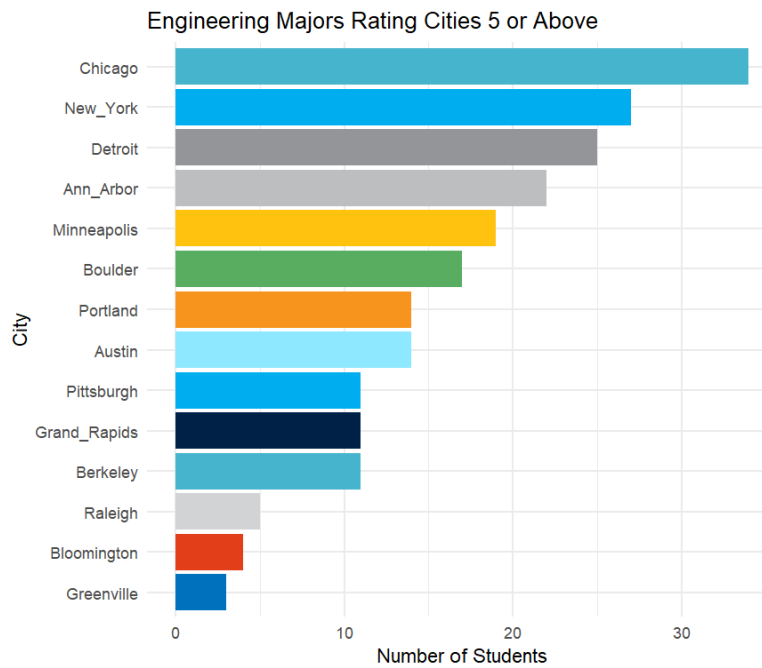


Figure 3.6. The number of reported engineering major respondents rating each city a 5 or above on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.”

Perhaps Engineering and other STEM students evaluate cities more favorably overall or consider a more diverse set of cities as desirable because they believe a wider range of cities provide job opportunities related to their education and training compared with Business majors. Alternatively, perhaps Business majors view these cities more neutrally because their “ideal” city or location is not represented among the cities asked about in the survey. Although an underlying explanation is unclear at this time, these findings highlight that major may be a more deterministic factor in understanding city preferences of respondents than demographics such as gender, race, or age.

Regional and Familial Distance on City Ratings

To better assess why students highly rated specific cities in the survey, we considered two measures of the relative familiarity of a city for each respondent. Job opportunities related to a student’s degree may not be the only major consideration for deciding where to live and work after graduation. In fact, strong positive cultural and/or familial associations may play a more significant role for some.

First, we categorized students by their residency status at the University of Michigan, and compared how in-state, out-of-state, and international students felt about living and working in the cities of the survey (Figure 3.7). While all students rated both New York City and Chicago most favorably out of all cities in the survey, in-state respondents rated other in-state cities including Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Grand Rapids highest compared with out-of-state and international students, suggesting stronger familiarity or comfort with closer physical locations. Interestingly, on average, out-of-state respondents could only see themselves living and working in New York and Chicago, as all other cities in the survey averaged ratings below a neutral 4. International respondents demonstrated a similar pattern to out-of-state students but also rated cities associated with technology and innovation such as Austin and Berkeley more neutrally and higher than out-of-state students.

City Preferences by Student Residency Status

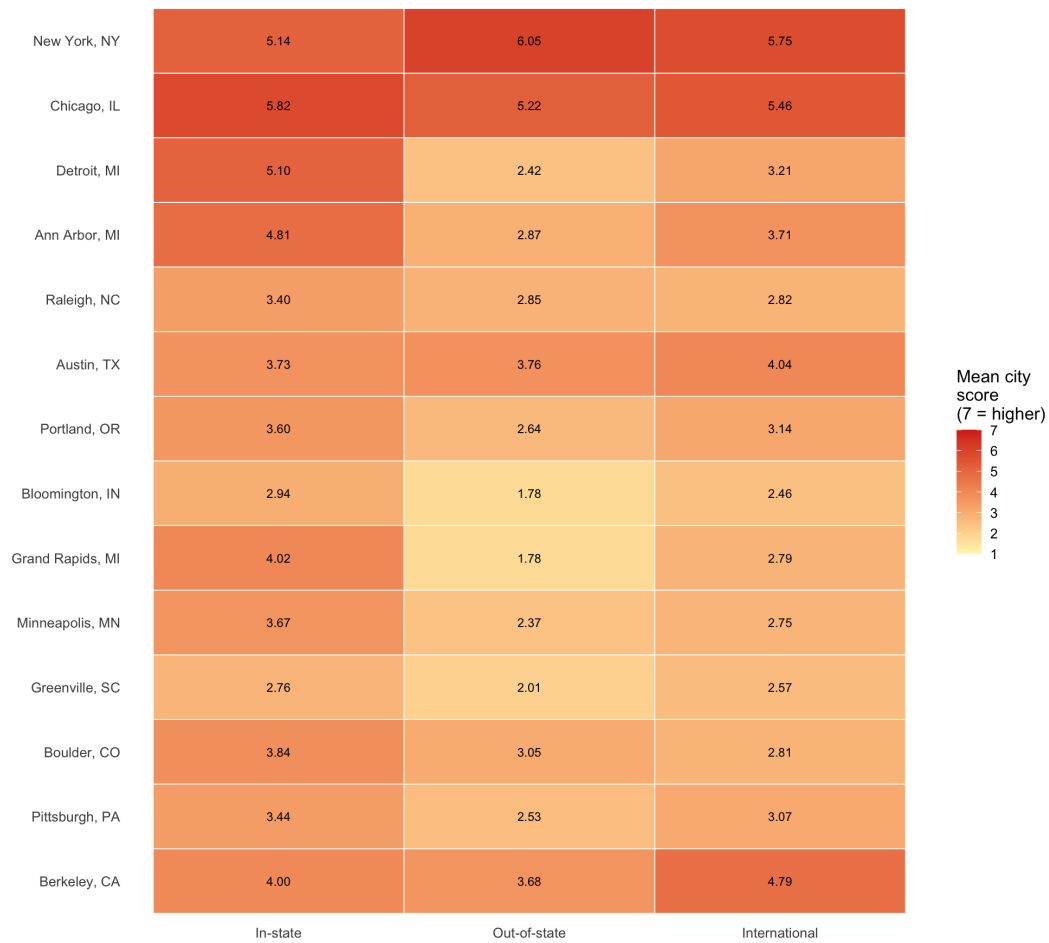


Figure 3.7. Average rating of each city for reported in-state, out-of-state, and international student respondents on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.” Darker red colors indicate a higher average rating, and lighter yellow colors indicate a lower average rating.

The survey specifically included a question measuring the importance of living near family and friends when deciding where to live and work after graduation. Respondents answered on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicated that proximity was not important at all, and 7 indicated that it was extremely important. For analysis, scores of 1-3 were grouped into a “low proximity importance” category, and scores of 5-7 were grouped into a “high proximity importance” category. Scores of 4 indicated a response of “neutral.”

Approximately 60% of respondents placed a high value on the proximity of friends and family in their decision-making (Figure 3.8). 21.2% of respondents deemed this unimportant, and 18.3% felt neutral about proximity. From 2022 to 2025, the average proximity scores increased from 4.62 to 4.87, indicating individuals today place more importance on working and living near their hometown compared with 2022. This appears to be driven by students more strongly considering proximity in 2025 than in 2022, with

the proportion of respondents who placed a high degree of importance on this increasing by approximately 10%, and those feeling neutral about it decreasing by about 10% (Figure 3.8). The sample size of those surveyed increased in 2025, so these findings reflect both a larger respondent base and a meaningful shift toward stronger preferences for geographic proximity to friends and family.

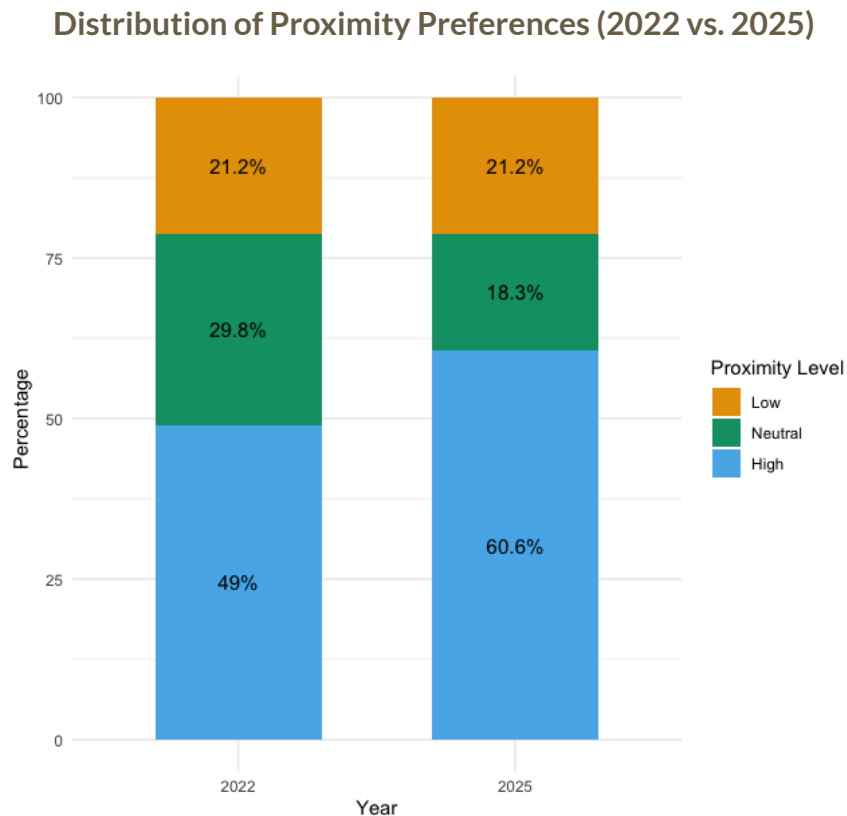


Figure 3.8. The percentage distribution of respondents in 2022 and 2025 who reported a low, neutral, and high level of importance in the proximity of friends and family when deciding where to live and work after graduation. Respondents rated the level of importance on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “not at all important,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “extremely important.” Ratings of 1-3 here were classified as “low,” 4 remained “neutral,” and ratings of 5-7 were classified as “high.”

Next, we assessed whether there was a meaningful relationship between the value of living and working near friends and family and how students rated cities in the survey. Interestingly, we found that for several out-of-state cities including Boulder, Minneapolis, Portland, Austin, Raleigh, and Chicago, as a student’s value on proximity to friends and family decreases, they view these cities more favorably than those who highly value proximity. Considering that the majority of out-of-state students are not from the respective states of these cities, this finding suggests that individuals who care less about being close to friends and family may be more likely to be willing to move to different cities.

City Ratings Key Insights

Student preferences for post-graduation cities reflect a balance between opportunity and personal constraints. Large metropolitan areas like New York City and Chicago remain the most attractive, perhaps driven by strong job markets and salary potential. However, preferences vary across students, with those less concerned about proximity more open to relocation, while others prioritize staying closer to home. Overall, the findings suggest a growing tension: students are increasingly drawn to major cities but are also placing greater importance on geographic proximity.

Key Insights

- Across both phases, cities like **New York City and Chicago consistently rated highest, and became even more attractive over time**, largely because students prioritize strong job markets and salary potential above all else.
- **Student characteristics shape city openness:** engineering majors and students less concerned with proximity are more willing to consider a wider range of cities, while business majors and those who value staying close to home are more selective and geographically constrained.
- **Preferences are shifting but also tightening:** while interest in big cities has grown from 2022 to 2025, the increasing importance of proximity suggests a tension; students are drawn to opportunity in large metros, but are simultaneously becoming more sensitive to distance from home.

3.4 Understanding Respondent City Ratings by Community Attributes

Community Preferences by City

To better understand what, if any, specific factors influence student perceptions on a city's attractiveness, we examined the importance of individual community attributes and whether and how these attributes relate to high ratings of cities.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various community attributes on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicates “not at all important” and 7 indicates “extremely important.” Good-paying jobs (6.29), safe streets and neighborhoods (5.40), and a

welcoming population (5.37) were the most important factors across all respondents on average (Figure 3.9). Other highly rated factors included cost of living (5.12) and alternative job opportunities in the location (5.10). The lowest rated attributes of importance were arts and cultural amenities (4.22), warm or mild climate (3.89), and convenient parking (3.77), though these ratings hover around a more “neutral” evaluation of 4 and are not necessarily deemed completely unimportant by respondents overall.

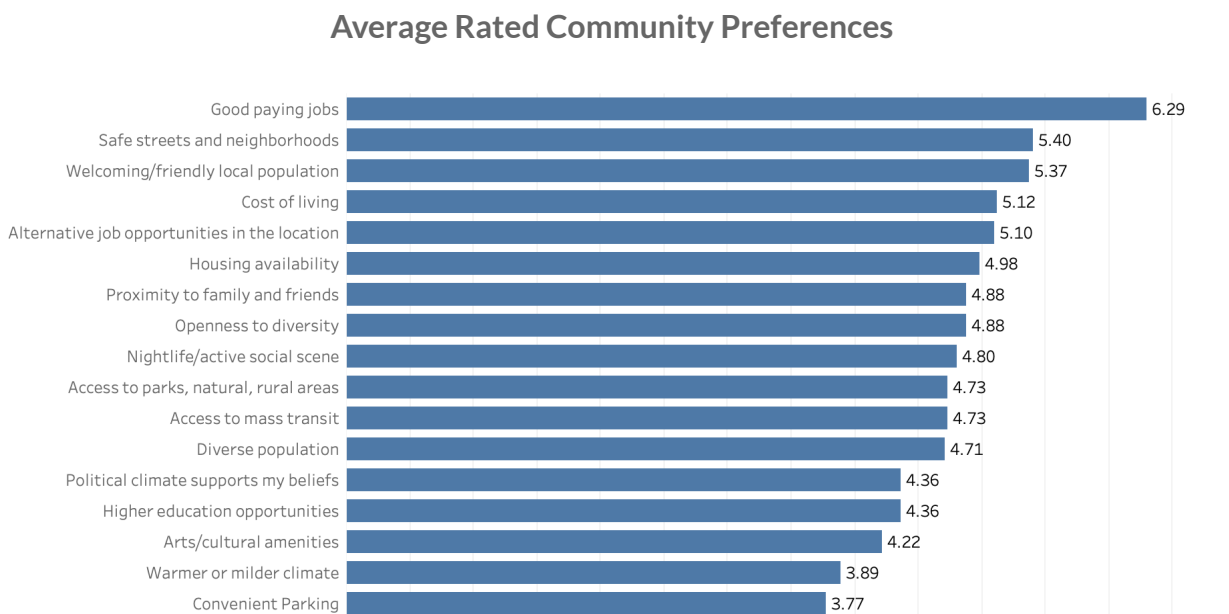


Figure 3.9. Average rating of importance of individual community attributes for deciding where to live and work after graduation on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “not at all important,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “extremely important.”

At first glance, it appears as though all community attributes seem somewhat important to students based on the figure above. However, we found significant relationships between categories of attributes and city ratings that suggests there is more nuance. Specifically, respondents highlighted that positive drivers of a top-rated city are career opportunities and high pay, arts and culture, and social scene (Table 3.1). Arts and cultural amenities and nightlife on their own appear more neutrally important to students on average (Figure 3.9), but when they are deemed more important to a respondent, that respondent is also more likely to rate cities more highly. This reveals that a strong sense of community (social scene, proximity to family and friends, safe neighborhoods) and social alignment may sustain or increase the likelihood of a smaller city's high rating, even if it does not offer the same level of access to professional and educational opportunities as large metropolitan cities like New York and Chicago do. These community factors may be especially important contrasts to the high cost of living and/or distance from friends and family that were the only significant negative drivers for a city's rating and factors (Table 3.1) despite

not being the most important community attribute on their own (Figure 3.9).

Drivers of Top-Rated Cities

Positive Drivers	Negative Drivers
Career Opportunities & High Pay	High Cost of Living
Arts & Culture	Distance from Family & Friends
Social Scene	

Table 3.1. Community attributes that are statistically related to high ratings of 5-7 on a 7-point scale for cities in which respondents can see themselves living and working. Positive drivers indicate community attributes that are related to higher ratings of cities, and negative drivers indicate community attributes that are related to lower ratings of cities.

New York and Chicago, the two highest rated cities, and the two largest cities, are boosted by high perceived availability of amenities (access to parks, natural and rural areas, arts/cultural amenities, nightlife/active social scene), and New York is boosted by high perceived opportunities (good paying jobs, alternative job opportunities, higher education opportunities). On the other hand, New York is hurt by high perceived costs (cost of living, housing availability). At the same time, we found that the “costs” category (cost of living, housing availability) was the most frequent positive driver of city ratings for other cities. This suggests that smaller cities may capitalize on a lower perceived cost of living when marketing to college graduates.

Identifying “College Town” Top Priorities

Due to their large metropolitan nature, New York City and Chicago could be seen as “outliers” compared with the rest of the cities included in the survey. Likewise, those cities may be overshadowing or masking other interesting findings about how students decide where to live and work post-graduation. Here, we specifically examined “college towns” included in the survey and whether students who saw themselves living there valued unique community attributes compared with the rest of respondents.

Here, we defined a “college town” as one in which the number of four-year college students equals at least 20% of the city’s population, and this included Ann Arbor, MI, Berkeley, CA, Boulder, CO, and Bloomington, IL. For students who specifically rated these cities highly on average, they placed particularly strong importance on the city’s cost of living (Figure 3.10).

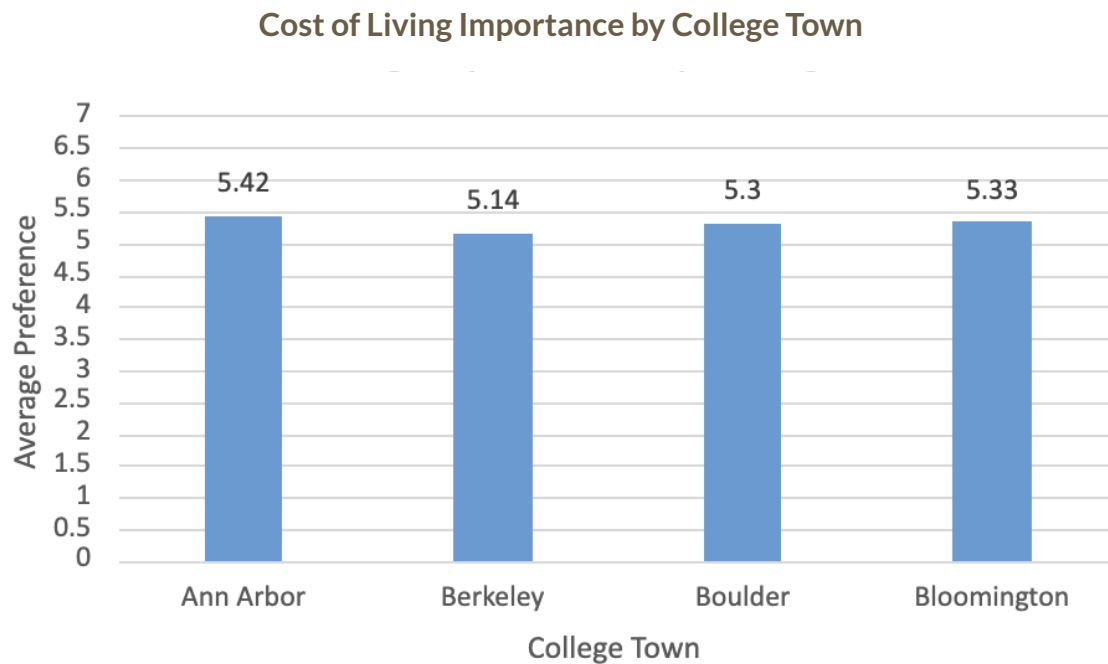


Figure 3.10. Average ratings of importance for the “cost of living” community attribute for respondents who highly rated “college town” cities in the survey as a 5-7 on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here.” College towns are defined as cities in which at least 20% of the population are four-year college students.

Compared to the overall average importance placed on a city’s cost of living across all respondents (5.12), each college town received a noticeably higher average rating (Figure 3.10). This significant finding was also observed for the importance of safe streets and neighborhoods. Openness to diversity and access to parks and natural or rural areas showed a similar pattern. This may indicate that respondents expect college towns to meet a certain threshold for supporting work-life balance, while also placing pressure on these towns to remain affordable and provide greater long-term career stability.

Together, these findings reinforce respondents’ preference for more affordable college towns paired with a safe and secure living environment. Ann Arbor’s position of residing in a state with a relatively low cost of living could help address this need and alleviate the financial pressures that may derive from the importance placed on a city’s cost of living. Furthermore, highlighting safe streets and neighborhoods as a defining characteristic of a college town may appeal to incoming college graduates.

Location Preferences and Community Attributes

To better understand why emerging professionals prefer to live in certain geographical regions of the United States, we examined how respondents’ desired location types relate to the community attributes they value most when deciding where to live.

Respondents who expressed interest in living in Michigan cities (Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Grand Rapids) consistently placed greater emphasis on practical factors and affordability-based factors. Compared to the overall survey sample, this group rated convenient parking and cost of living higher on the preference scale than the overall survey sample as shown in Figure 3.12. Additionally, Michigan-interested respondents placed less interest in traditional urban amenities such as nightlife and mass transit. Taken together, these patterns suggest that respondents interested in remaining in Michigan may be willing to trade some urban conveniences in exchange for affordability and day-to-day convenience.

Community Attribute Priorities Among Respondents Interested in Michigan Relative to Overall Sample

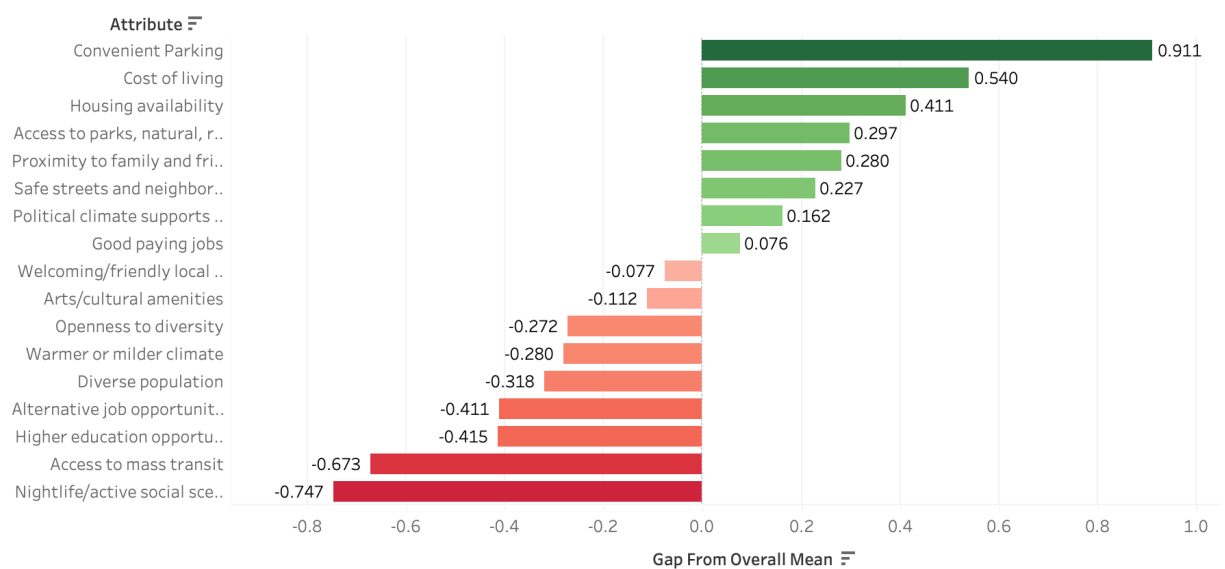


Figure 3.11. Gap analysis of community attribute importance ratings comparing those highly rating Michigan cities specifically (Ann Arbor, Detroit, Grand Rapids as a 5-7 on a 7-point scale) with the average importance ratings of attributes for the overall sample.

Respondents showing interest in big cities (Chicago and New York) showed the opposite patterns. As shown below in Figure 3.13, this group placed higher importance on higher education, nightlife and social scene, and political alignment, suggesting a preference for dense and cultured urban environments. In return, they appeared less concerned with factors such as parking availability, housing availability, and proximity to family/friends,

indicating a greater willingness to accept cost and convenience tradeoffs in exchange for urban amenities.

Community Attribute Priorities Among Respondents Interested in Big Cities Relative to Overall Sample

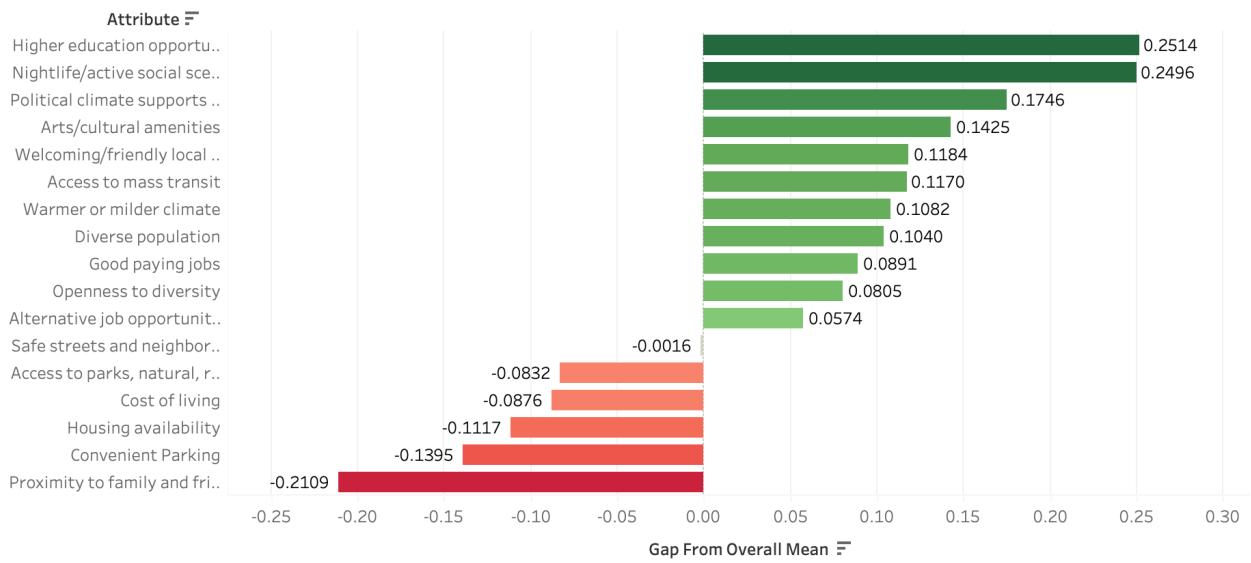


Figure 3.12. Gap analysis of community attribute importance ratings comparing those highly rating big metropolitan cities specifically (New York City, Chicago) as a 5-7 on a 7-point scale) with the average importance ratings of attributes for the overall sample.

Respondents interested in settling on the west coast (Berkeley, Boulder, and Portland) prioritized a different set of attributes, placing greater value on political climate alignment, arts and cultural amenities, and access to parks and natural areas as demonstrated in Figure 3.14. Inversely, this group presents as less concerned with proximity to family and friends as well as alternative job opportunities. This suggests that for these respondents, lifestyle and environmental considerations play an especially important role in shaping location preferences.

Community Attribute Priorities Among Respondents Interested in West Coast Relative to Overall Sample

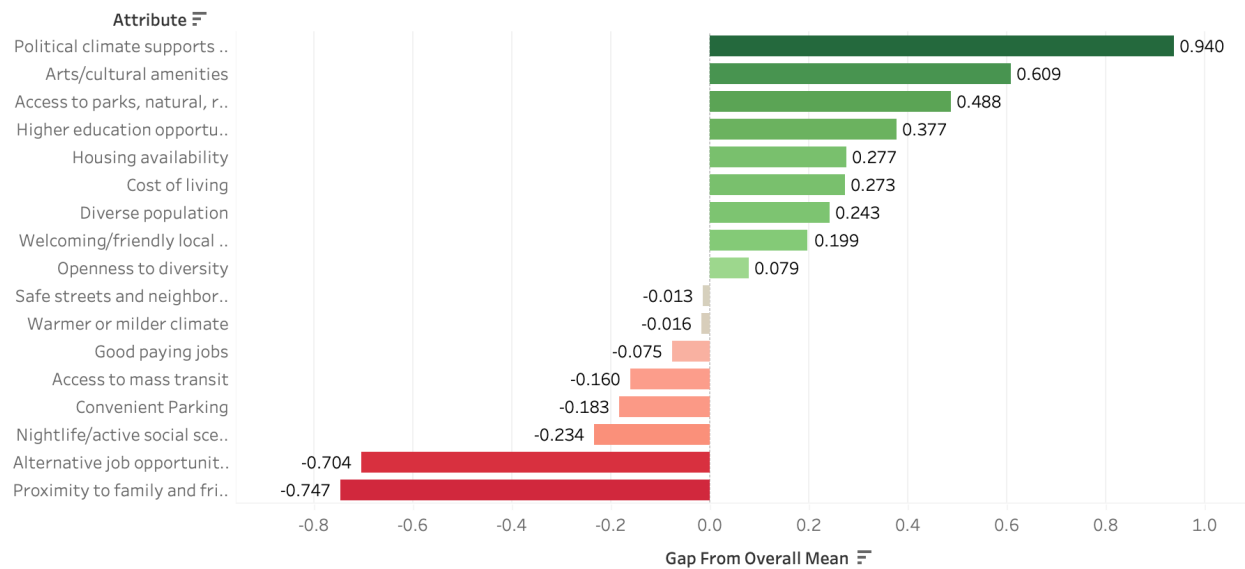


Figure 3.13. Gap analysis of community attribute importance ratings comparing those highly rating west coast cities specifically (Berkeley, Boulder, and Portland as a 5-7 on a 7-point scale) with the average importance ratings of attributes for the overall sample.

Impact of Political Climate on City Ratings

The Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI) is a measurement of the partisanship of a U.S. congressional district or a U.S. state. Partisanship is indicated as a lean towards either the Republican Party or Democratic Party compared to the country, based on how that district or state voted on the previous two presidential elections. Utilizing PVI, each potential city option (to live and reside in after graduating) was assigned a political leaning based on the congressional district in which it is located. Stronger Democratic-leaning cities were depicted in darker blue colors, while stronger Republican-leaning cities were depicted in darker red colors.

City ratings varied depending on how important it was to respondents that a city aligned with their own political beliefs. For respondents that rated political climate low, Chicago and New York City were rated significantly higher while Austin emerged as the third-rated city (Figure 3.14). Additionally, there existed no noticeable pattern in a district's PVI score in relation to city ratings, as seen by a more random assortment of blue and red colors in the graph below.

Low Political Climate Ratings by Overall City Ratings

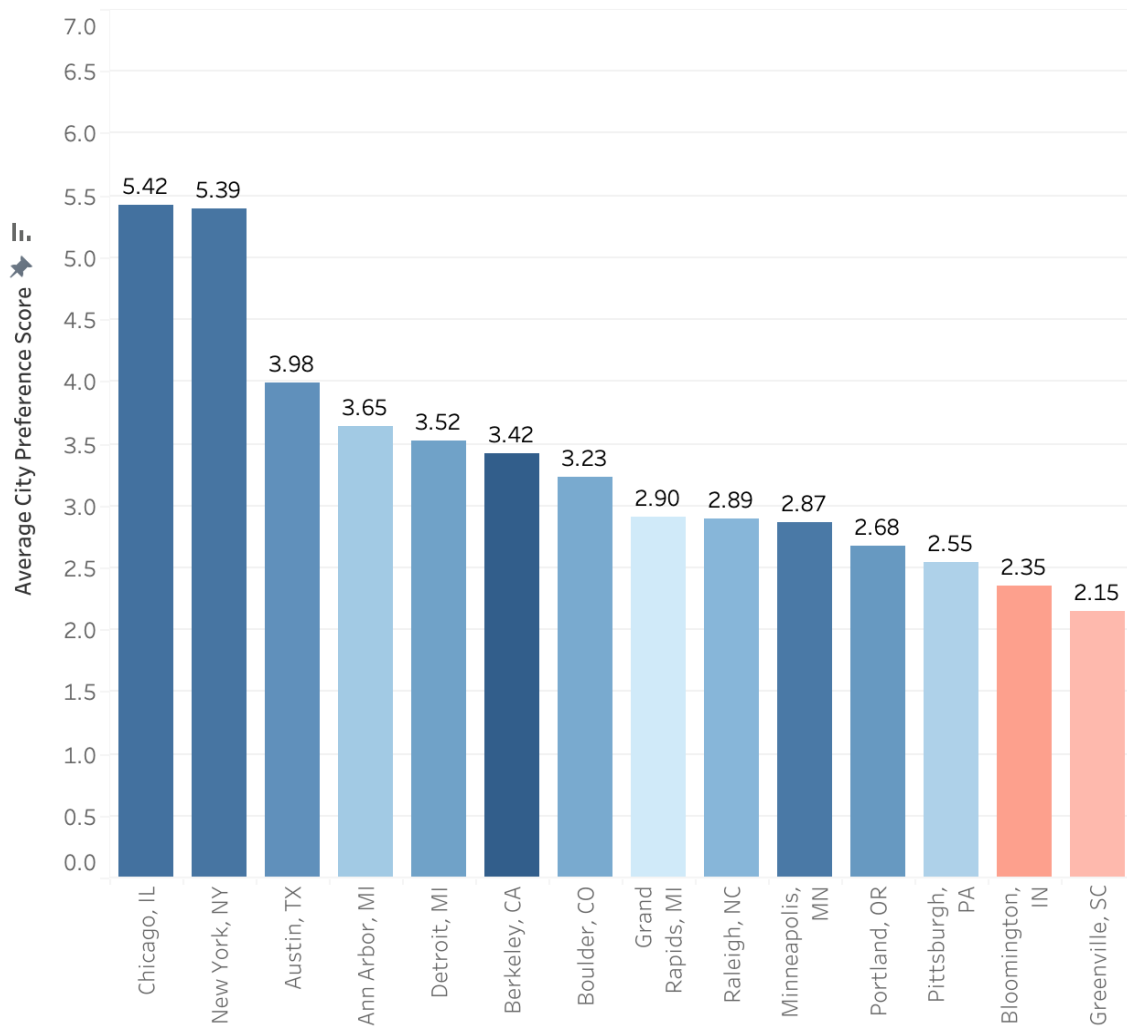


Figure 3.14. Average city ratings on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here” for respondents that rated “political climate” as **low** importance for a community attribute. Blue colors indicate Democratic-leaning cities, and red colors indicate Republican-leaning cities based on the Cook Partisan Voting Index. Darker colors indicate stronger leanings in that political party.

In contrast, for those that rated political climate high, some interesting patterns emerge. First, every average city rating was substantially higher than those who valued political climate low, which may show a more opinionated perception of city preferences when aligned with a respondent's beliefs (Figure 3.15). While Chicago and New York City were still rated highly, Berkeley emerged as the third-rated city, possibly due to its historically political environment.

High Political Climate Ratings by Overall City Ratings

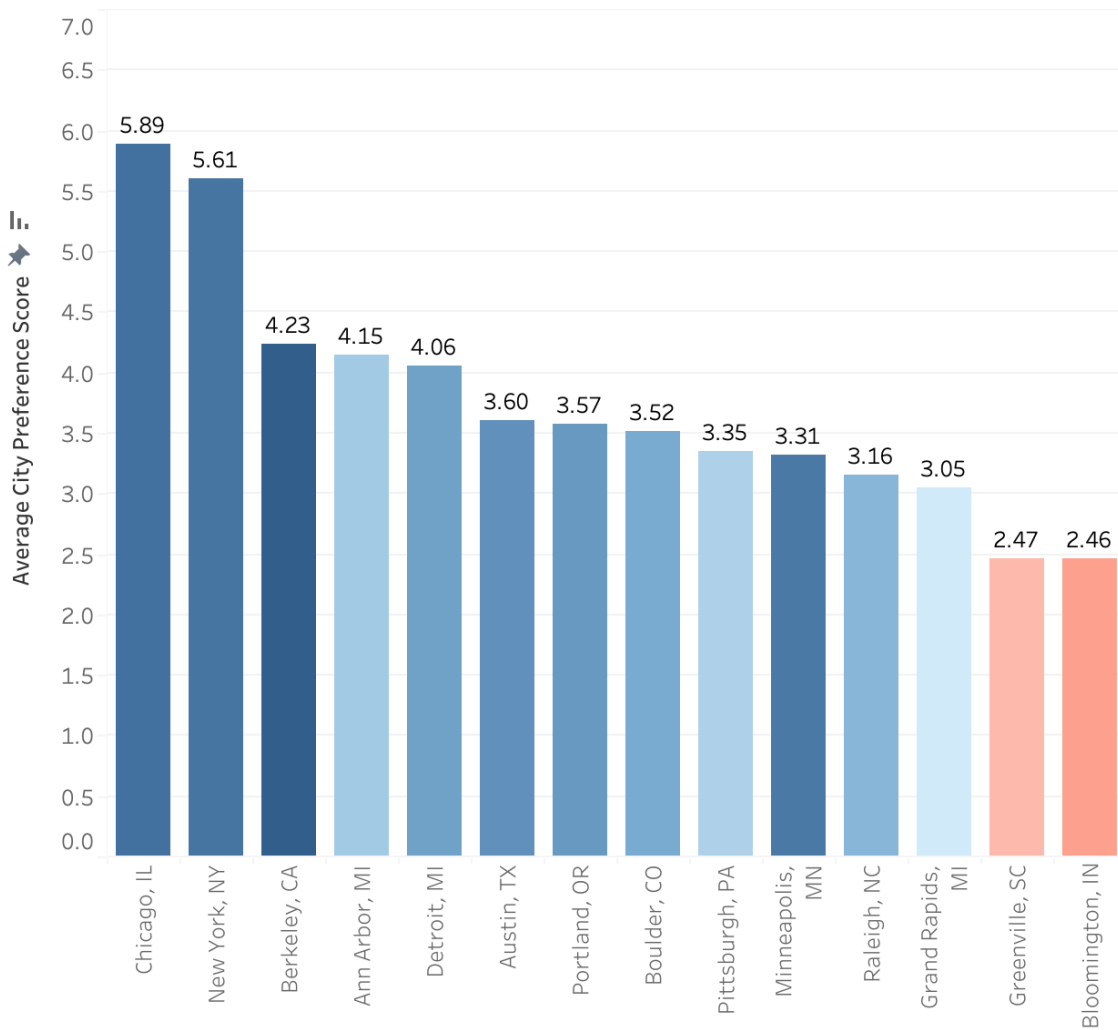


Figure 3.15. Average city ratings on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates “could not at all see myself here,” 4 indicates “neutral,” and 7 indicates “could definitely see myself here” for respondents that rated “political climate” as **high** importance for a community attribute. Blue colors indicate Democratic-leaning cities, and red colors indicate Republican-leaning cities based on the Cook Partisan Voting Index. Darker colors indicate stronger leanings in that political party.

Additionally, city preferences are relatively higher when a city is more Democratic-leaning. For instance, Grand Rapids, which has a more neutral leaning compared to other cities, was rated 8th for low political climate ratings and fell to 12th, while Austin’s average rating decreased from 3rd to 6th. Ann Arbor remained 4th for both high and low political climate ratings, which may illustrate that the city contains an inherent advantage when it comes to political perceptions: the city’s as well as the university’s high political involvement could be relied on as a motivator for young graduates, but does not necessarily mean that it will drive away potential employees from a variety of industries that can be implemented within the city. Ann Arbor’s political

climate can be valuable for graduates who rate climate high and also for those who value other attributes.

Indicators of City Preferences Key Insights

Our findings illustrate specific trade-offs that responders grapple with across community attributes when evaluating desired cities to live and work in after graduation. While emerging graduates may indicate that major hubs like New York and Chicago can offer strong professional opportunities and social amenities, they also come with a significant "cost penalty" that smaller cities can capitalize on. Our analysis shows that college towns like Ann Arbor and Bloomington are perceived as places of stability by attracting students who are willing to trade these "big city" offerings for high-quality work-life balance, safety, and long-term benefits like retirement planning.

We also identified that location preferences are not solely driven by employment alone but instead reflect broader lifestyle tradeoffs. Respondents interested in remaining in Michigan consistently placed greater emphasis on practical factors like parking and affordability, while those headed to the West Coast prioritized environmental access and political alignment.

Furthermore, our data shows it acts as a powerful multiplier for engagement. While Ann Arbor remains a resilient "sweet spot" that appeals to respondents regardless of their political intensity, cities with strong ideological identities like Berkeley see their ratings increase among students who value social alignment.

Ultimately, attracting the next generation of talent is a game of strategic positioning and alignment. Smaller cities do not need to out-amenity New York or Chicago; instead, they should lean into their identity as safe, affordable, and community-oriented environments. By focusing on these "quality of life" anchors, cities like Ann Arbor can successfully capture a high-tier workforce looking for a stable foundation and long-term career stability rather than just a high-pressure career ladder.

Key Insights

- **Opportunity-Cost Tradeoff.** While major cities such as New York and Chicago attract graduates with strong job access and amenities, their high cost of living creates an opportunity for smaller cities to compete on affordability.
- **College Town Stability Advantage.** Cities like Ann Arbor and Boulder are viewed as reliable, high-quality environments, where safety and cost of living can significantly boost appeal despite fewer large-scale career opportunities.
- **Lifestyle-Driven Location Preferences.** Regional choices reflect tradeoffs, where respondents that value residing in Michigan prioritize affordability and convenience and big-city as well as West Coast preferences emphasize culture and amenities.
- **Political Climate as Preference Amplifier.** Political alignment can impact city ratings for those who value it, while broadly appealing cities like Ann Arbor maintain consistent ratings regardless of respondents' political priorities.

4. Community Preferences and Ann Arbor Perceptions

What UM students value in their communities and their perceptions of Ann Arbor as a place to live and work

4.1 Summary

In our analysis of community preferences and perceptions of Ann Arbor, we find that the community features most important to our sample are good-paying jobs, cost of living, safety, and having a welcoming community. These aren't just preferences; they function as baseline expectations that have stayed the same from 2022 to 2025 and stay relatively consistent across majors and backgrounds.

When it comes to perceptions of Ann Arbor, students generally view the city in a positive light. It's perceived as strong in areas like education, safety, and diversity, which makes sense given its reputation. But one of the biggest takeaways is that liking a city doesn't necessarily mean wanting to stay there. Students seem to separate what they appreciate about a place from what actually drives their decisions. For example, Ann Arbor is known for its great higher education opportunities, but recent graduates tend to care less about this when picking where to live.

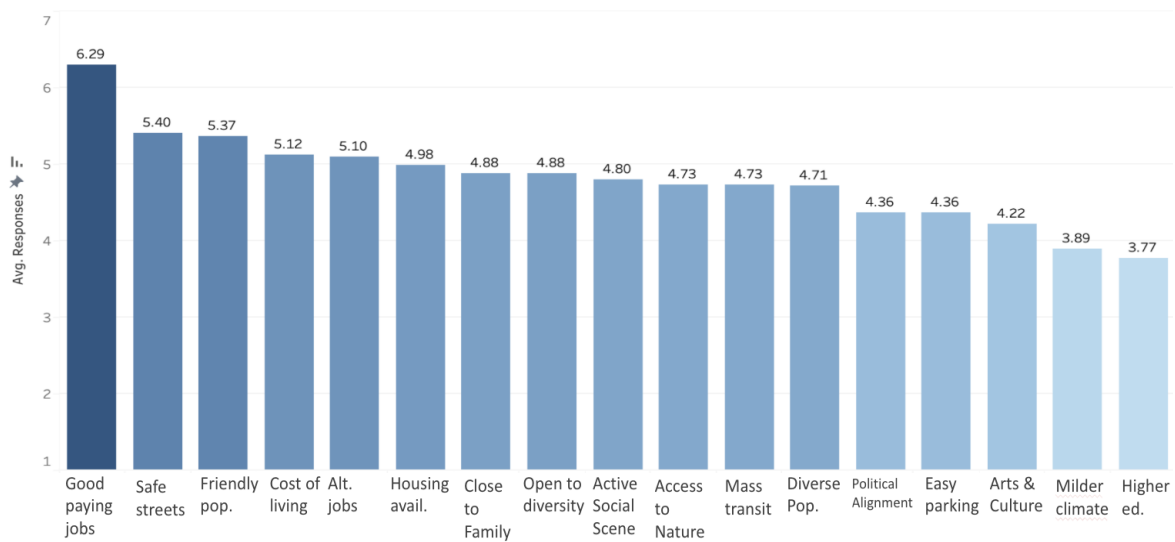
This highlights an important gap between perception and decision-making. Ann Arbor performs well on features related to a high quality-of-life, like safety, education, and community environment, but students place more weight on economic factors when choosing where to live after graduation. In particular, features like job availability, salary potential, and cost of living tended to carry more influence. However, those in our sample who were from Michigan were significantly more likely to want to stay in Michigan after graduation.

Overall, the findings suggest that students generally have positive perceptions of Ann Arbor and view it as a great place to live, but they tend to prefer other cities when they believe those cities offer stronger career opportunities or better financial outcomes.

4.2 Descriptives

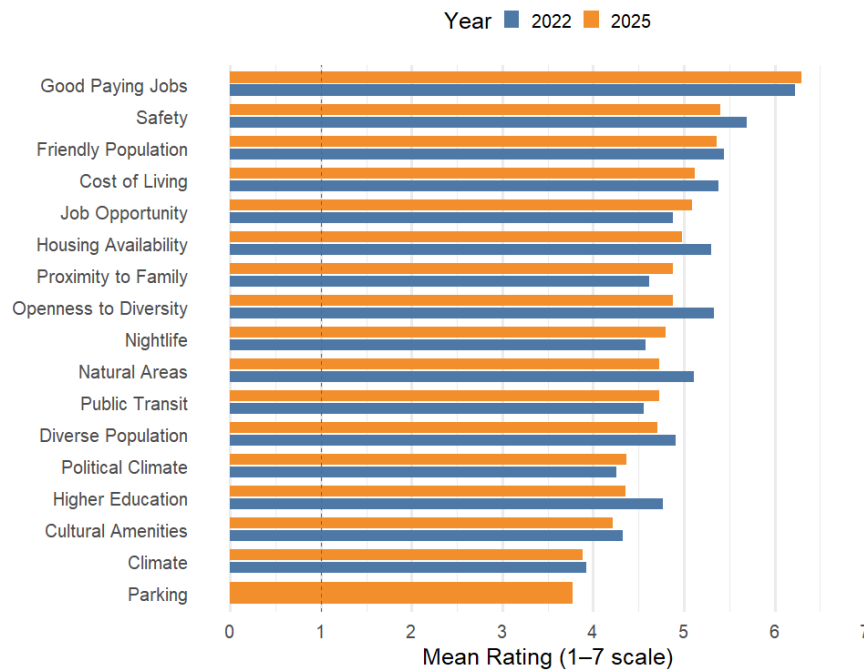
To measure community preferences, the survey asked students to rate a number of community features on a 1–7 scale, with one being 1 “not at all important” and 7 “extremely important”; there were 17 features in total in the 2025 survey. The four highest-rated features were good-paying jobs (mean = 6.29, SD = 1.00), safe streets and neighborhoods (5.40, SD = 1.22), a friendly and welcoming population (5.37, SD = 1.20), and cost of living (5.12, SD = 1.35). See Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1: Community Factors Prioritized by Students in 2025



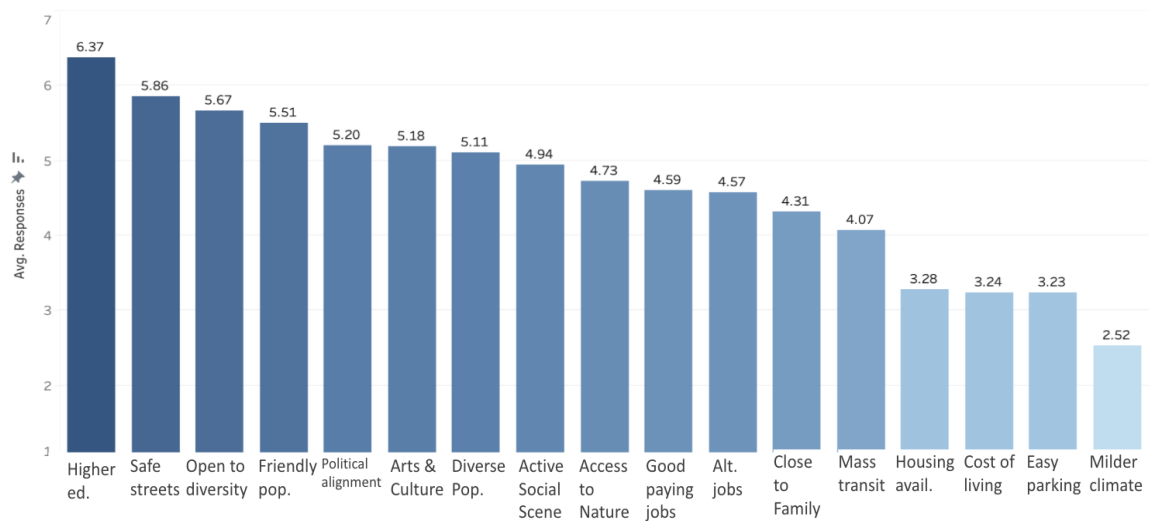
These were also the most important features in the 2022 survey. Figure 4.2 shows the means for all the features in 2025 and 2022 together for comparison. The stability of these ratings across three years suggests that students' core community priorities are consistent preferences rather than reactive to current events or economic conditions.

Figure 4.2: 2022 vs 2025 Community Feature Importance Ratings



The survey also asked about students' perceptions of Ann Arbor when it comes to these features on a 1–7 scale, with one being 1 “Poor” and 7 “Excellent.” The results show that the city's perceived strengths diverged noticeably from what students said they valued most. Ann Arbor scored highest on higher education opportunities (6.37), safe streets (5.86), and openness to diversity (5.67) - features that, while appreciated, ranked lower in overall importance to students' location decisions. See Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3: How Ann Arbor is Perceived Across Community Factors in 2025



We also compared how perceptions of Ann Arbor may have changed between the 2022 and 2025 surveys, but found very few differences between the two survey years. Higher educational opportunities, safe streets and neighborhoods, and openness to diversity remained among the top five perceived strengths of Ann Arbor in both years. This shows that Ann Arbor is perceived as particularly strong in areas relating to education, inclusivity, and community atmosphere among the students surveyed.

4.3 General Community Preferences

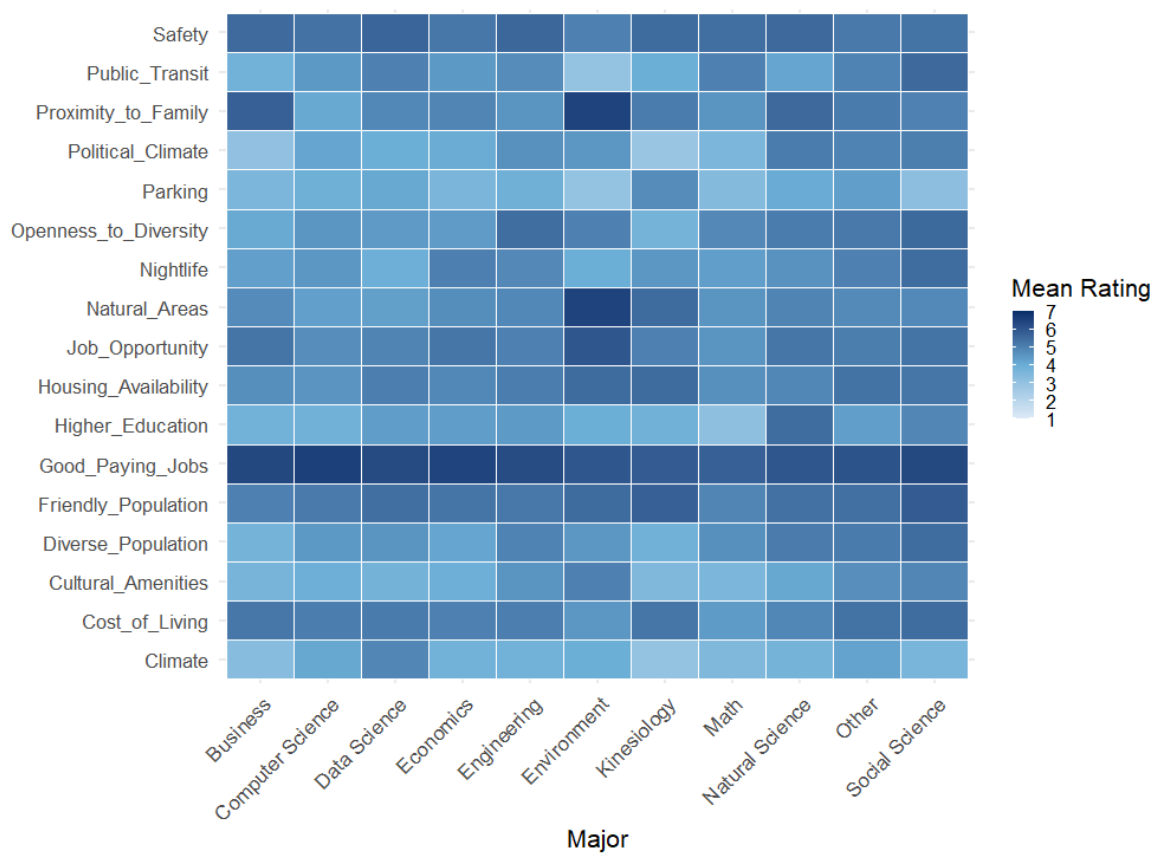
What Students Want in a Community by Major and Other Categories

We additionally examined which community features our sample view as important across major, political interest, and post graduation plans. The results paint a clear and consistent picture: across the entire sample, four features stood out as near-universal priorities: good-paying jobs, safe streets and neighborhoods, a friendly and welcoming population, and cost of living. These weren't just the highest-rated features; they were rated highly with remarkably little disagreement across respondents, suggesting that these aren't niche preferences but rather baseline expectations that nearly every student carries into their post-graduation decision-making.

The heatmap below (Figure 4.4) breaks down mean importance ratings for all 17 community features across every major represented in the survey, from Business and

Computer Science to Kinesiology and Natural Science. Across the feature rows, for good-paying jobs, safety, friendly population, and cost of living, the shading remains consistently dark across every major column, with no notable outliers pulling any of these features toward lower ratings. Even majors with otherwise distinctive preference profiles follow this pattern. Environment students, for instance, rated access to natural areas notably higher than other majors, and Kinesiology students placed stronger emphasis on proximity to family, yet both groups aligned with the broader sample on the four core features. Regardless of what field a student is entering, the economic and social fundamentals are the most important.

Figure 4.4: Importance of Feature Across Majors



Beyond the four common priorities, our analysis also explored whether other demographic characteristics produced meaningful differences in how students prioritize community features. Two factors stood out as significant: political beliefs and post-graduation plans. Students who identified as politically engaged rated political climate as a meaningfully more important location factor compared to their apolitical

peers, suggesting that for this group, a community's political environment functions as an important consideration rather than a secondary preference.

When it comes to post-graduation plans, students planning to attend graduate school placed greater importance on higher education opportunities, political climate, cultural amenities, safety, and openness to diversity compared to students entering the workforce directly, while full-time job seekers rated nightlife higher than their graduate school-bound peers. These differences likely reflect the different life stages each group is entering, respectively. Graduate-bound students are choosing to remain in an academically immersed environment for several more years, so they weigh features commonly associated with university towns. On the other hand, students entering the labor market tended to place more importance on nightlife and job opportunities.

Proximity to Family and Location Decisions

To understand some of the factors that might influence post-graduation location decisions, we examined how proximity to family and friends and students' home state might impact how students rate these other community features.

Proximity to family and friends ranked 7th out of 17 community features overall. To understand how this preference interacts with other features students value, we isolated students who rated it a 6 or 7, treating it as a genuine top priority, and examined their ratings of all other community features.

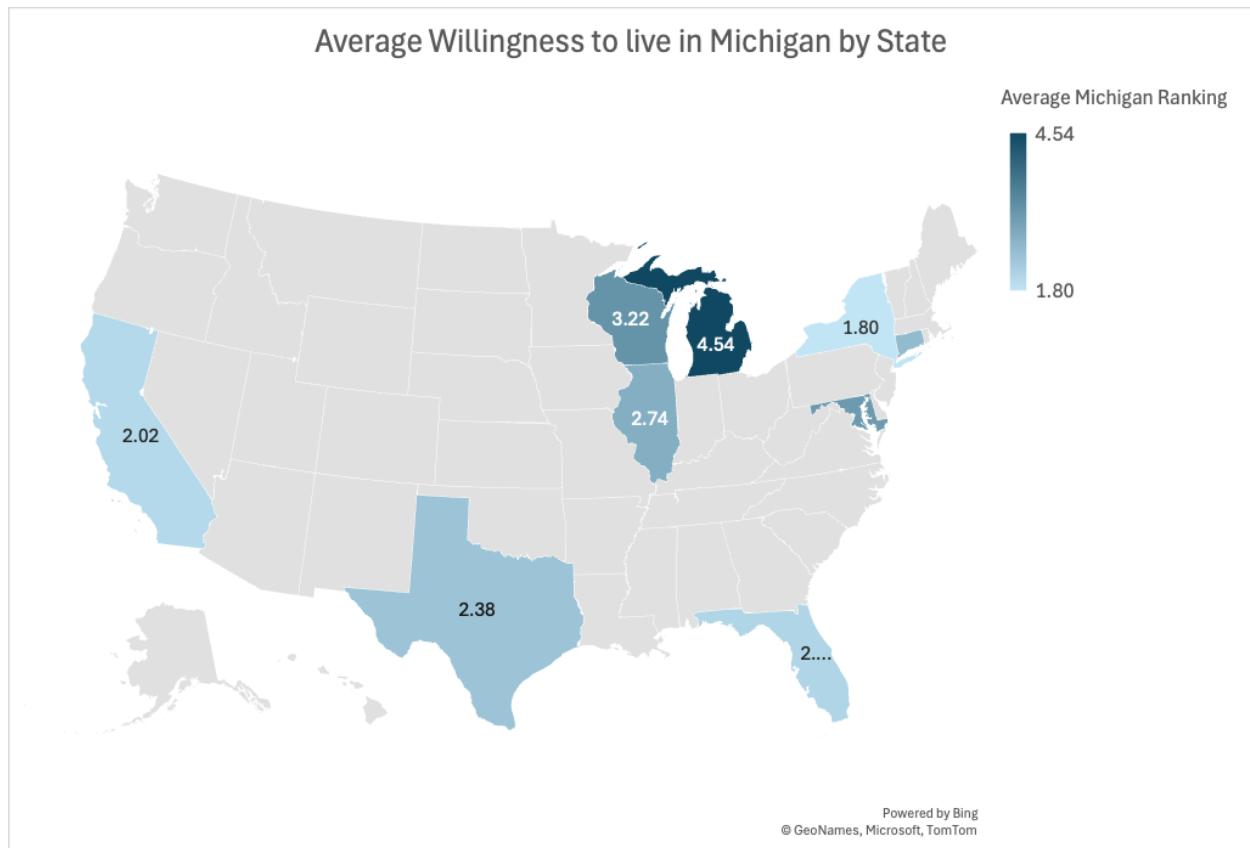
Even among students who strongly prioritize being near family, the top-rated features remained: good-paying jobs, safe streets, and a welcoming population, the same fundamentals that topped the rankings for the full sample. This suggests that students who care deeply about being near family are not trading off economic and social fundamentals to get there, they want both.

This finding matters for SPARK because it rules out a potential concern. Students with strong family ties might be expected to prioritize their home region, limiting their options. Instead, the data shows this group holds the same expectations around jobs, safety, and community as everyone else.

We also examined whether students' home state predicted their interest in remaining in Michigan after graduation. To do this, we looked at respondents from states with at least five survey respondents ($n = 233$) and looked at how willing they were to stay in Michigan (either in Ann Arbor, Detroit, or Grand Rapids; see Section 3). We found that students from Michigan reported the highest desire to remain in Michigan, with an average willingness-to-live rating of 4.54 across Michigan cities. Wisconsin students followed at

3.22, and Illinois students at 2.74, no out-of-state group came close to matching Michigan residents. See Figure 4.5 below.

Figure 4.5: Average Willingness to Live in Michigan by State



Across both the 2022 and 2025 surveys, in-state students have consistently expressed strong interest in remaining in Michigan, a stable pattern that represents one of Ann Arbor's most reliable recruitment pipelines. Beyond that, students from neighboring Midwestern states, particularly Wisconsin and Illinois, show the next strongest regional affinity, pointing to a natural geographic zone of influence from which Ann Arbor has historically drawn and retained talent.

Summary of Key Insights

Taken together, these analyses show that this sample consistently has priorities in three distinct categories: workplace factors, personal living factors, and safety. Good-paying jobs and alternative job opportunities represent the economic dimension, and they

dominate. Across every major, every demographic subgroup, and both survey years, good-paying jobs ranked first with near-unanimous agreement.

But economic concerns alone don't tell the whole story. Personal living factors, cost of living, housing availability, a friendly and welcoming population, and proximity to social networks, consistently occupied the middle tier of priorities, reflecting that students are not only evaluating job markets but also asking whether a city feels livable and socially comfortable.

Safety sits in its own category as a baseline expectation that cuts across all other considerations; no matter what else a student values, safe streets and neighborhoods are ranked among the top three features universally. These three tiers suggest that students approach location decisions less as a search for an ideal community and more as a layered checklist of needs, in which economic diversity, daily livability, and personal safety must be met before other preferences come into play.

Together, the data suggest that, for this population, the practical realities of building an early career outweigh the lifestyle conveniences and emotional pulls that might dominate other stages of life. For example, students who prioritize proximity to family still base their decisions on the same economic and social fundamentals as everyone else.

The data also reveals meaningful variation beneath the universal priorities. Politically engaged students treat political climate as a non-negotiable location factor, suggesting that for this group, political environment functions less as a preference and more as an extension of personal identity. Students heading to graduate school place significantly greater weight on educational access, cultural offerings, and political environment, while those entering the workforce directly care more about nightlife and job market access. These distinctions likely reflect the different life stages each group is entering: graduate school-bound students are extending their time in an academic setting and continue to value the features of university life, while workforce-bound students are stepping into a stage where social life outside of an institution and immediate earning potential will define their day-to-day experience.

Ultimately, the picture that emerges is one of a population making pragmatic, economically grounded decisions about where to begin their adult lives. University of Michigan students appreciate Ann Arbor's strengths - its academic environment, its Midwestern accessibility, its proximity to major employers in tech, healthcare, and automotive, but they evaluate any potential long-term home after graduation through a practical and financial lens first. Understanding this hierarchy of priorities, and the life-stage and demographic factors that shape it, is essential to interpreting how this population thinks about the move from college to career.

Key Insights

- **Core decision factors are consistent and economically driven:** Students prioritize three main categories when choosing where to live after graduation: workplace outcomes, personal living conditions, and safety, with good-paying jobs being the most influential factor.
- **Even when proximity to family is important, its influence is limited:** Proximity to friends and family have limited influence on location decisions, however, students from the Midwest are more likely to remain in Michigan, highlighting the role of regional familiarity.
- **Preferences are stable over time:** Student priorities have remained consistent across survey years, indicating that these decision-making patterns are unlikely to change in the near future and can be reliably used to inform long-term planning.

4.4 Student Perceptions of Ann Arbor

Assessing How Students Perceive Ann Arbor as a Post-Graduate Place to Live and Work by Major and Intended Industry

We next examined how perceptions of Ann Arbor might differ by students' major and intended industry. The heatmap below, Figure 4.6, shows how students across majors perceive Ann Arbor. Again, all students rated Ann Arbor consistently higher when it comes to higher education opportunities, safe streets and neighborhoods, and openness to diversity. Engineering and computer science majors have the highest average scores across all community factors, placing them in the top two rows of the heatmap, which is sorted from the overall highest scores to the lowest. These differences, however, should be interpreted cautiously, as the number of respondents was not consistent across the majors, which could have led to a disproportionate representation of the views of a few students in majors like Environment or Kinesiology.

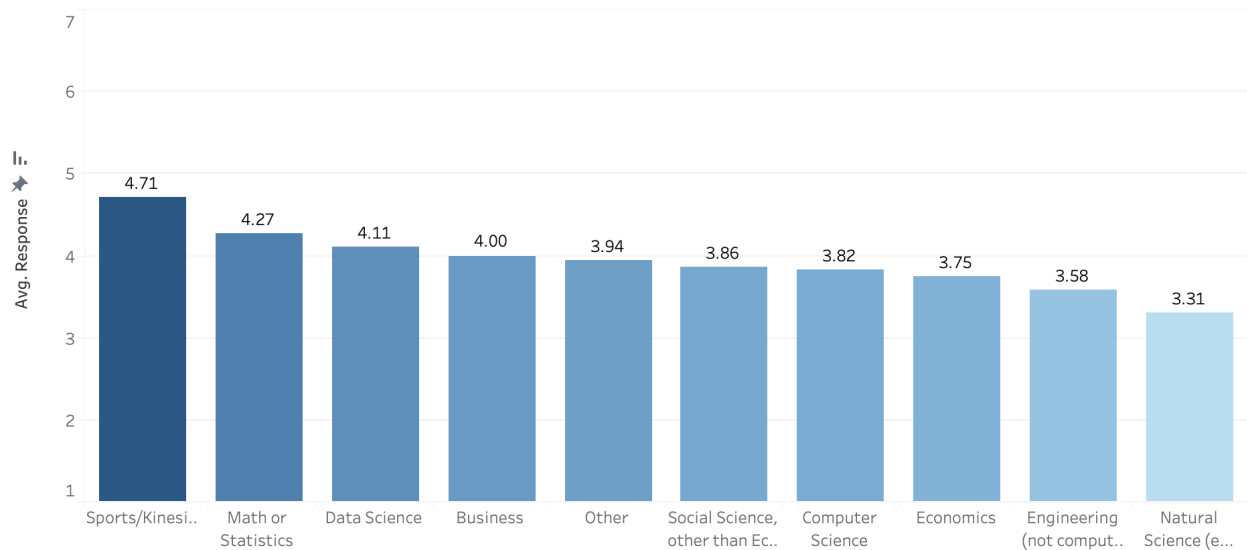
Figure 4.6: How Ann Arbor is Perceived Across Community Factors in 2025 by Major

Average response to "...rate on a scale of 1-7 your perception of the Ann Arbor area on following factors" where 1 is poor (dark green) and 7 is excellent (dark blue) by major

	Higher Educati..	Safe Streets ..	Opennes s to Div..	Welcomi ng/Frien..	Access to Parks, N..	Political Climate ..	Arts/ Cultural..	Diverse P opulation /Active ..	Nightlife Paying J..	Good ve Job O..	Alternati y to Frie..	Proximit Mass Tr..	Access to Availabi..	Housing Cost of Living	Convenie nt Parki..	Warmer or Milde..	
Engineering	6.41	6.00	6.16	5.41	5.73	5.43	5.73	5.24	5.27	4.92	4.70	5.19	4.41	3.30	3.19	3.57	3.03
Computer Science	6.48	5.90	5.79	5.62	5.76	5.31	5.10	5.41	5.28	4.56	4.55	3.76	4.07	3.69	3.55	3.69	2.55
Other	5.68	5.58	5.37	5.42	5.42	4.74	4.79	5.21	5.26	5.17	5.26	5.16	4.32	3.26	3.32	3.11	2.68
Data Science	6.65	5.94	5.71	5.59	5.35	5.18	5.53	5.94	5.06	4.36	4.82	4.65	4.53	2.82	2.71	2.65	2.18
Math or Statistics	6.58	6.00	5.92	5.33	5.50	5.17	5.25	5.25	5.58	3.90	4.67	4.42	3.58	3.00	3.50	3.33	2.42
Kinesiology	6.57	5.14	6.00	5.86	5.14	4.71	5.29	4.86	5.14	5.00	5.29	5.00	4.00	2.71	3.00	2.86	2.71
Business	6.23	5.69	5.77	5.31	5.62	4.08	4.92	5.23	4.23	4.67	4.23	4.62	3.77	4.62	3.69	3.69	2.46
Social Science (ot..	6.50	6.41	5.24	5.94	5.59	5.44	5.19	4.94	4.81	4.75	4.19	3.95	3.61	3.11	3.19	2.86	2.33
Environment	6.50	5.00	5.50	6.00	5.00	6.50	5.50	3.50	5.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	3.50	2.00	2.00	3.50	3.00
Economics	6.17	5.79	5.45	5.21	5.04	5.06	4.85	4.72	4.34	4.26	4.30	3.53	4.13	3.45	3.47	3.43	2.45
Natural Science	6.69	5.13	5.81	5.50	4.75	5.81	5.19	4.81	5.06	4.21	4.75	4.38	4.13	2.50	2.38	2.31	2.13

We also considered how students' ability to imagine themselves living in Ann Arbor post-graduation varies by major (Figure 4.7), though no group reports an especially strong attachment to remaining in the city. Students majoring in Sports/Kinesiology are the most likely to see themselves staying in Ann Arbor, with an average score of 4.71, followed by Math and Statistics students with an average score of 4.27, and Data Science students with an average score of 4.11. Engineering and Natural Science students are the least likely among the majors surveyed to envision themselves remaining in Ann Arbor, with average scores of 3.58 and 3.31, respectively.

Figure 4.7: How Easily Students Could See Themselves Living In Ann Arbor by Major



We then also considered how students' intended industries might influence how they perceive Ann Arbor's top community features and willingness to live in Ann Arbor. Figure 4.8 shows the students who intend to go into the education or manufacturing industries rate Ann Arbor the highest across community features, while those interested in government and finance/insurance rate the city the lowest overall. This could be due to students studying government or finance/insurance potentially viewing Ann Arbor as not having the industries that they are interested in, and thus rate the city more poorly. Emerging professionals interested in education and manufacturing, however, may picture Ann Arbor as a place they see themselves staying in, thereby perceiving the city better across several factors.

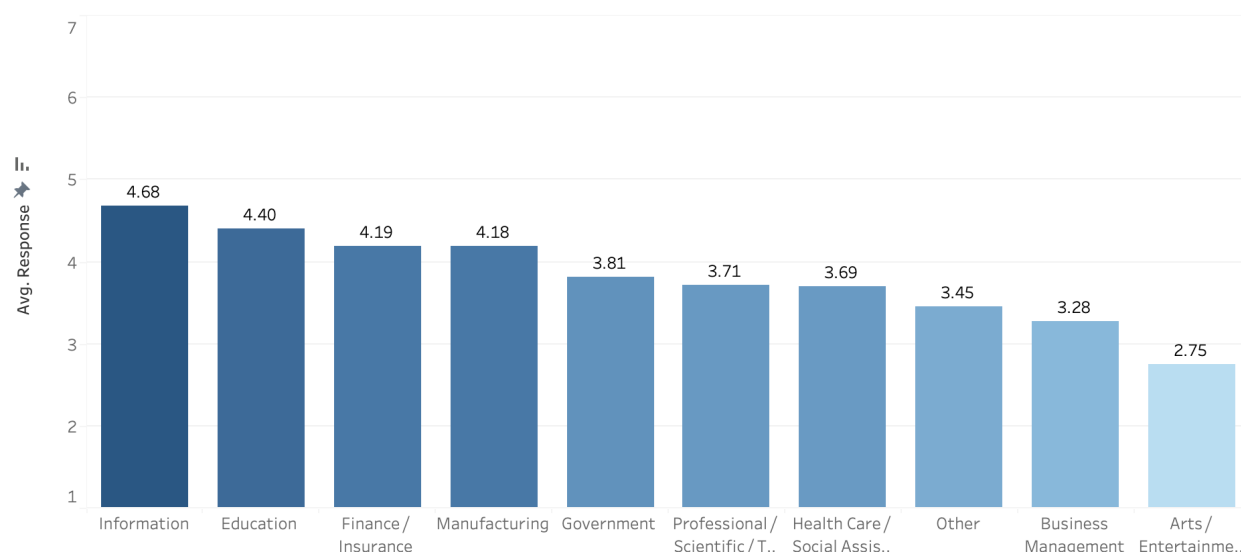
Figure 4.8: How Ann Arbor is Perceived Across Community Factors in 2025 by Intended Industry

Average response to "...rate on a scale of 1-7 your perception of the Ann Arbor area on following factors" where 1 is poor (dark green) and 7 is excellent (dark blue) by intended industry

	Higher Education	Safe Streets	Openness to Diversity	Welcoming/Friendly	Access to Parks	Political Climate	Arts/Cultural	Diverse Population	Nightlife/Active	Good Paying	Alternative Job	Proximity to Friends	Access to Mass	Housing Availab	Cost of Living	Convenient Parking	Warm or Cool
Education	6.00	5.67	4.83	5.67	5.33	5.50	5.17	4.67	5.33	5.00	4.50	4.33	4.00	3.50	2.83	2.83	3.17
Manufacturing	6.42	6.25	6.25	5.42	6.08	5.33	5.92	5.42	5.33	5.08	4.92	5.42	4.25	3.33	3.42	3.33	3.00
Other	6.32	5.82	6.23	5.36	5.23	5.00	5.18	5.23	4.64	4.40	5.05	4.82	4.45	3.64	3.73	3.45	2.68
Information	6.55	5.95	5.65	5.75	5.35	5.30	4.95	5.50	4.95	4.60	4.35	3.80	3.65	2.65	2.50	3.25	2.60
Professional/Science	6.60	5.91	5.81	5.43	5.64	5.32	5.17	5.23	5.21	4.74	4.85	4.83	4.47	3.40	3.02	3.40	2.60
Healthcare/Social Assistance	6.14	5.29	5.86	5.79	5.00	5.79	5.36	5.29	5.64	4.92	4.93	4.50	4.43	3.29	2.79	2.57	2.50
Business Management	5.90	5.47	5.43	5.20	4.93	5.17	4.77	5.33	4.57	4.78	4.60	3.83	3.70	3.30	3.67	3.23	2.47
Arts/Entertainment	6.00	5.75	4.75	5.63	6.00	4.88	5.63	5.00	4.88	5.71	5.00	3.88	4.00	2.75	4.13	4.13	2.38
Government	6.65	6.15	5.40	5.95	5.25	6.20	5.35	4.60	5.20	4.94	4.80	4.80	3.75	2.20	2.40	2.30	2.35
Finance/Insurance	6.41	6.00	5.60	5.46	5.53	4.63	5.18	4.82	4.64	3.94	3.91	3.72	3.95	3.68	3.54	3.38	2.32

Figure 4.9 demonstrates how students' willingness to live in Ann Arbor post-graduation varies by their intended industry, though none of the intended industry groups report an especially strong attachment to remaining in the city. Students pursuing a career in Information after graduating are the most likely to see themselves staying in Ann Arbor, with an average score of 4.68, followed by Education students with an average score of 4.40, and Finance/Insurance students with an average score of 4.19. Business Management and Arts/Entertainment students are the least likely among the majors surveyed to envision themselves remaining in Ann Arbor, with average scores of 3.28 and 2.75, respectively.

Figure 4.9: Students Willingness to Live in Ann Arbor by Intended Industry



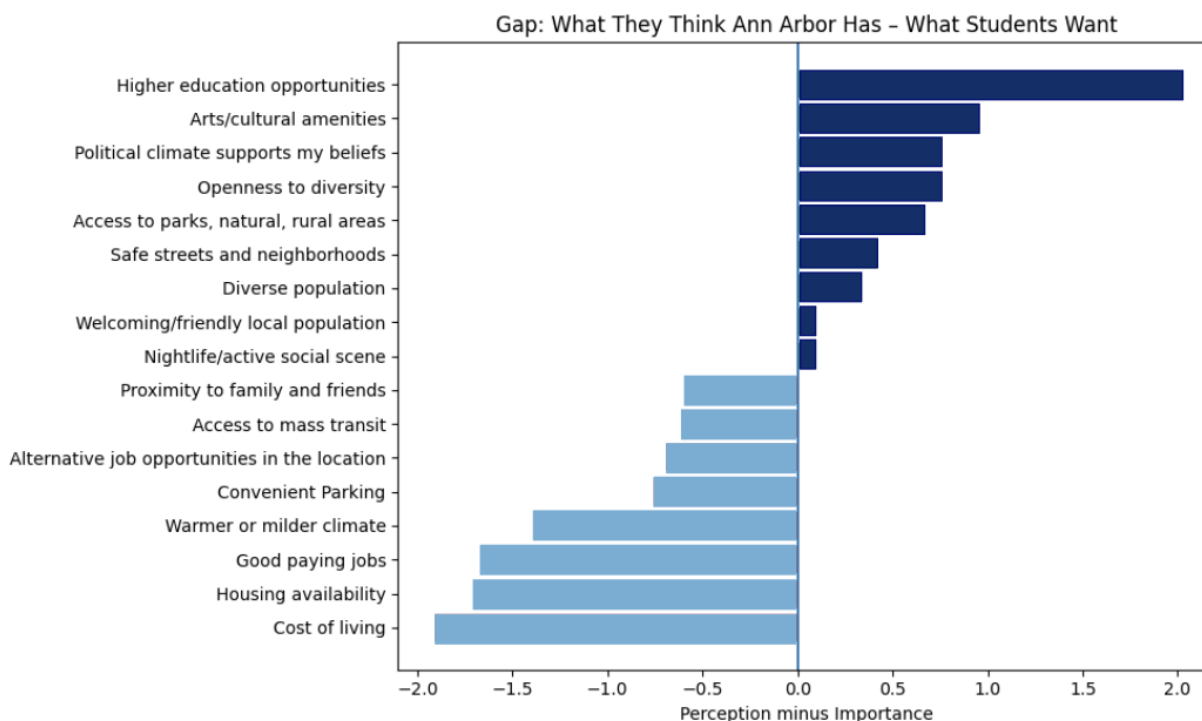
Overall, the findings from our analyses exemplify that students generally perceive Ann Arbor positively, particularly with respect to higher educational opportunities, safe streets and neighborhoods, and openness to diversity. Results suggest that students in certain majors (Engineering and Natural Science) and intended industries (Business Management and Arts/Entertainment students) cannot easily see themselves staying in Ann Arbor due to the perceived benefits of other cities, not the perceived detriments of Ann Arbor. More research would be needed to assess whether that is the case.

Gaps Between Student Perceptions of Ann Arbor and True Statistics About The City

Next, we considered that there are some perceptions of Ann Arbor that are not consistent with the objective reality of the city. To do this we first examined the differentials between the community features students value and their perceptions of Ann Arbor. Figure 4.10 depicts the gap calculation in which we took the mean Ann Arbor perception rating of community factors and subtracted their mean level of importance for students (X-axis). A negative gap score indicates that students value the community feature more than it is rated in Ann Arbor, while a positive gap score indicates that Ann Arbor meets or exceeds students' importance for that factor. From this, we can tell that Ann Arbor exceeds students' expectations in higher education opportunities, especially, but also arts/cultural amenities, political alignment, diversity, access to parks, and safety (positive scores). While the cost of living, housing availability, good-paying jobs, alternative job

opportunities, and convenient parking are some factors that University of Michigan students value more highly than they perceive Ann Arbor as meeting. This illustrates the clear student assumption that Ann Arbor excels in quality of life community factors, yet lacks in economic opportunity and affordability.

Figure 4.10: Community Factors Students Desire In Relation to How They Perceive Ann Arbor

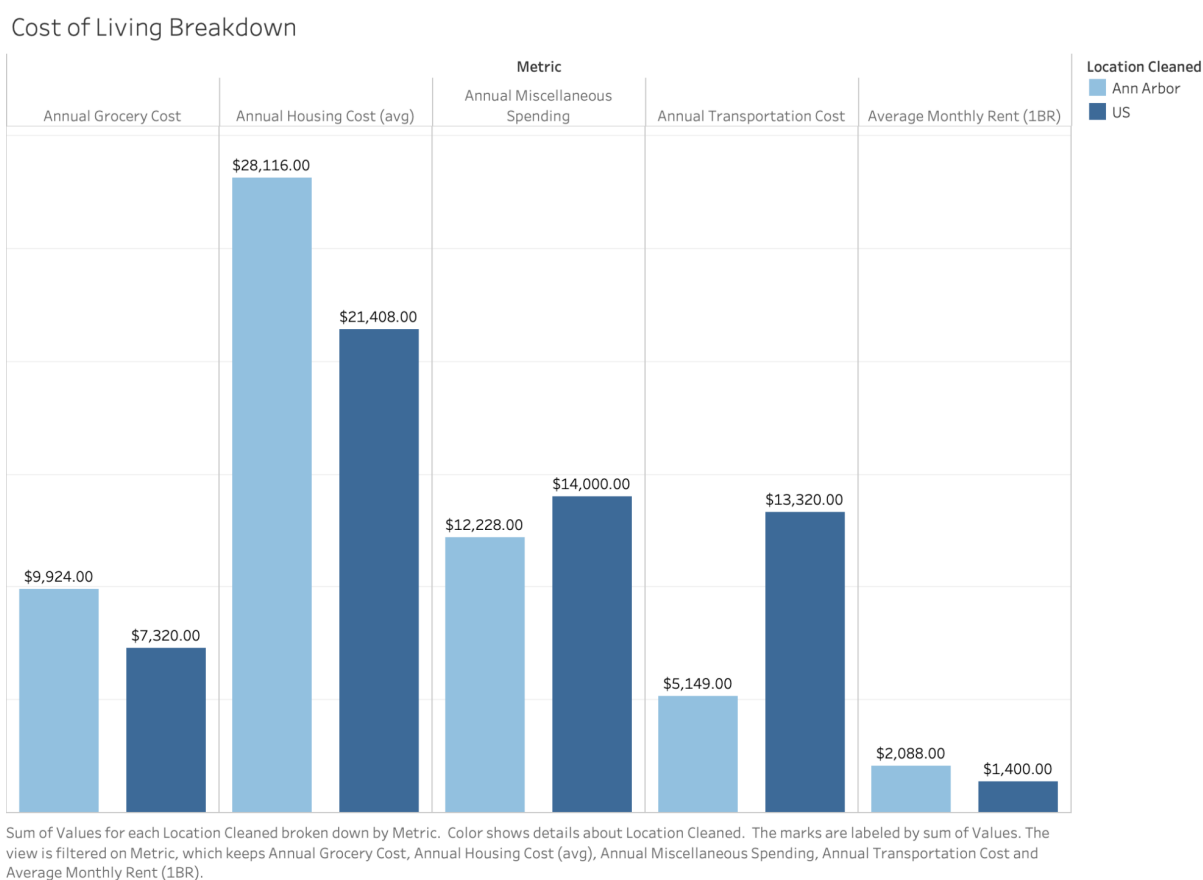


When we compare Ann Arbor to national averages across key economic indicators, like income levels, cost of living, housing affordability, and other specific expenses, we see that Ann Arbor has a mixed economic profile. External data sources such as the [2024 U.S. Census](#), [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#), and [cost-of-living datasets](#), suggest that median household income is higher in Ann Arbor than the U.S. average, but this advantage does not extend to nonfamily households, which is especially relevant for recent graduates. Ann Arbor's median nonfamily household income is \$41,273, while the U.S. median is \$50,000. At the same time, total annual living costs are very similar between Ann Arbor and the U.S. overall. This indicates that individuals earning less income in Ann Arbor face a comparable cost burden, providing a clear explanation for why students perceive Ann Arbor as less affordable. Another important statistic for recent graduates is the average

monthly rent. Ann Arbor has a significantly higher average monthly rent for a 1-bedroom apartment compared to the U.S. average

Figure 4.11 provides a detailed breakdown of other cost-of-living components, again showing where Ann Arbor differs from the national average. Housing is the most significant difference, with an average annual housing expense of \$28,116 in Ann Arbor compared to \$21,408 nationally. Grocery costs are also elevated, indicating that essential daily expenses are higher in Ann Arbor. Other categories, transportation and miscellaneous spending, are lower in Ann Arbor.

Figure 4.11: Breakdown of Cost of Living in Ann Arbor Compared to the Broader U.S.



Overall, the data suggest that students' negative perceptions of Ann Arbor's affordability are not a misperception for recent graduates. While the median household income appears strong, a deeper analysis reveals that this does not reflect the financial situation of many graduates who most likely earn lower nonfamily household incomes. At the same time, they face high housing and rental costs. Students place a high importance on cost of living, which may explain why this sample has a relatively poor evaluation of Ann Arbor from this perspective, though they appreciate the high quality of life in Ann Arbor.

Summary of Key Insights

Our analyses suggest that Ann Arbor is perceived as a safe, welcoming, diverse, and academically strong city among the students surveyed. This suggests that Ann Arbor has a positive reputation among University of Michigan students. However, our findings reveal an important mismatch between what students appreciate about Ann Arbor and what ultimately drives their post-graduate decisions. Students consistently value Ann Arbor's strengths in higher education, safe streets, and community atmosphere, yet when deciding where to live after graduation, they prioritize more practical concerns such as good-paying jobs and cost of living. This may especially be true among students in fields such as Engineering, Natural Science, Business, and the Arts, who are the least likely to see themselves remaining in Ann Arbor despite rating the city relatively positively overall.

These findings suggest that Ann Arbor's challenge may not be that students dislike the city, but that they believe other cities could offer stronger career opportunities and greater long-term financial security. Our data displays the imbalance between students' value of important community factors such as safety, diversity, and education, and the economic realities that shape their post-graduate decisions. Ann Arbor excels at fostering an environment that students perceive as comfortable and safe; however, these attributes alone may not be sufficient to outweigh concerns about career advancement, salary potential, and economic opportunity.

Key Insights

- **Misalignment between priorities and strengths:** While students value safety, community, and strong job opportunities, Ann Arbor is perceived to excel more in education, safety, and diversity, leaving a gap in meeting their top priority of career prospects.
- **Income potential as the key constraint:** Ann Arbor's main limitation is not cost of living, but its comparatively lower earning potential for graduates relative to competing cities.
- **Livability vs. long-term opportunity trade-off:** Although Ann Arbor offers a high quality of life in terms of safety and relative affordability, students often choose other cities that they perceive to provide stronger income potential and career advancement opportunities.