8-2024

# The Utah State University Ambassador Program: Predictors of Acceptance and Rural High School Representation

Mariah P. Spencer
*Utah State University*

# THE UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY AMBASSADOR PROGRAM: PREDICTORS OF ACCEPTANCE AND RURAL HIGH SCHOOL REPRESENTATION

by

Mariah P. Spencer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Agricultural Extension and Education

Approved:

| | |
|---|---|
| Rose Judd-Murray, Ph.D.<br>Major Professor | Tyson Sorensen, Ph.D.<br>Committee Member |
| Michelle Burrows, Ph.D.<br>Committee Member | D. Richard Cutler, Ph.D.<br>Vice Provost of Graduate Studies |

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2024

# ABSTRACT

The Utah State University Ambassador Program: Predictors of Acceptance and Rural High School Representation

by

Mariah P. Spencer, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2024

Major Professor: Rose Judd-Murray, Ph.D.
Department: Applied Sciences, Technology, & Education

The Utah State University Ambassador Program focuses on leadership, recruitment, and service. In addition to the Logan Main Campus, there are ambassadors on the USU Eastern and Statewide Campuses. The Logan Program is the most competitive, receiving 450-700 applications each year. Selected applicants receive a scholarship of 100% tuition and fees renewable for up to four years. This longitudinal study determined if there were factors that significantly predicted acceptance into the University Ambassador Program in Logan for in-state and out-of-state first-year applicants. Factors included student government involvement, school and community involvement, first-generation status, and high school size. Deidentified applicant data from 2019-2023 was obtained from the USU Admissions Office. The data was coded and analyzed using chi-square and logistical regression. Maximum involvement in extracurricular activities, clubs, and community, along with first-generation status, did not significantly predict acceptance into the Logan Ambassador Program for in-state or

out-of-state first-year students. High school size was also not a significant predictor for either group. The data showed that in the five years of the study's review, there were only six students in total from in-state rural high schools selected for the Program. However, this was not statistically significant, indicating that there was a deficient number of applicants coming from rural in-state high schools. Having been a class officer for at least one year, a student body officer, or a student body president were all highly significant predictors for Program selection for both in-state and out-of-state first-year students. Recommendations were made to create a separate category on the rubric that included all types of leadership. This category would showcase the points students get for being sports team captains, organization or club presidents, or community leaders, in addition to student government roles. Additionally, a recommendation was made to automatically advance students to the next round of the selection process if their leadership and/or involvement scores reached a certain benchmark. Finally, a recommendation was made to recruit more students from rural in-state high schools to apply for the Program.

(91 pages)

# PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Utah State University Ambassador Program: Predictors of Acceptance and Rural High School Representation

Mariah P. Spencer

The Utah State University Ambassador Program focuses on leadership, recruitment, and service. In addition to the Logan Main Campus, there are ambassadors on the USU Eastern and Statewide Campuses. The Logan Program is the most competitive, receiving 450-700 applications each year. Selected applicants receive a scholarship of 100% tuition and fees renewable for up to four years. This study looked at what factors predict whether students are accepted into the University Ambassador Program in Logan for in-state and out-of-state first-year applicants. Factors considered included involvement in student government, school and community activities, whether the student is the first in their family to attend college, and the size of their high school. Data from applications submitted between 2019-2023 was collected and analyzed. The analysis showed that being highly involved in extracurricular activities, clubs, and community, as well as being a first-generation college student, did not significantly impact acceptance into the Program. The size of the high school also did not matter. However, the data showed that very few applications came from students attending rural high schools in the state. Leadership roles such as class officer, student body officer, or student body president were strong predictors of acceptance for both in-state and out-of-state students. Recommendations included updating the criteria to recognize all types of leadership, such as sports team captain, club president, and community leader, in addition

to student government roles. It was also recommended that students who achieve high scores in leadership and involvement should automatically progress to the next stage of the selection process. Finally, efforts should be made to encourage more students from rural high schools in the state to apply for the Program.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Rose Judd-Murray for always cheering me on, for never giving up on me, and for making sure I did not give up on myself. I truly do not think I would be here today if it were not for your mentorship and friendship.

Thank you to Dr. Tyson Sorensen and Dr. Michelle Burrows for your guidance on my committee and for asking questions that challenged me to think deeper about my research. You are both examples of excellent educators.

Thank you to USU Executive Director of New Student Enrollment Katie Jo North and USU Director of Recruitment Operations Shelby Frauen-Riddle for supporting me in this research. Your passion and care for the students you serve is an inspiration.

Finally, thank you to my biggest supporters. To Dad, for showing me what it means to be in a career you truly love. Some of my favorite memories with you are those summer mornings spent in the orchards during my early research days - I wouldn't have believed you if you told me I would write a thesis one day. To Mom, for teaching me the importance of being an educated woman. Watching you get your master's degree inspired me to get mine, and I owe my love of learning to you. To Lily, for spending more time with me in the library than any three-month-old should have to. You are the joy of my life. And to Tristan, for being there through it all. I can't wait to see what adventures are in store for us.

Mariah P. Spencer

CONTENTS

# LIST OF TABLES

Page

# LIST OF FIGURES

Page

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

The Utah State University (USU) Student Ambassador Program was established in 1983 and focuses on service, recruitment, and leadership development. Ambassadors represent the University through recruitment activities on and off campus and participate in university and community service. Ambassadors also participate in a leadership course for credit throughout their time in the Program and assist the USU Admissions Office in hosting multiple recruitment and leadership events for high school students each year (Utah State University, 2024). Initially, the Program was only available to students on the Logan Main Campus. However, the Program now extends to USU Eastern and other USU Statewide Campuses.

Program participants receive 100% tuition and fees, including differential tuition, renewable for up to four years. Students may only apply to the Program as incoming first-year or transfer students. In recent years, there have been 450-700 applicants per year for the Logan Program. Because these students are the face of university recruitment and often have the first interactions with guests when visiting campus, a rigorous process is used to select ambassadors that will represent the University favorably.

## Selection Process

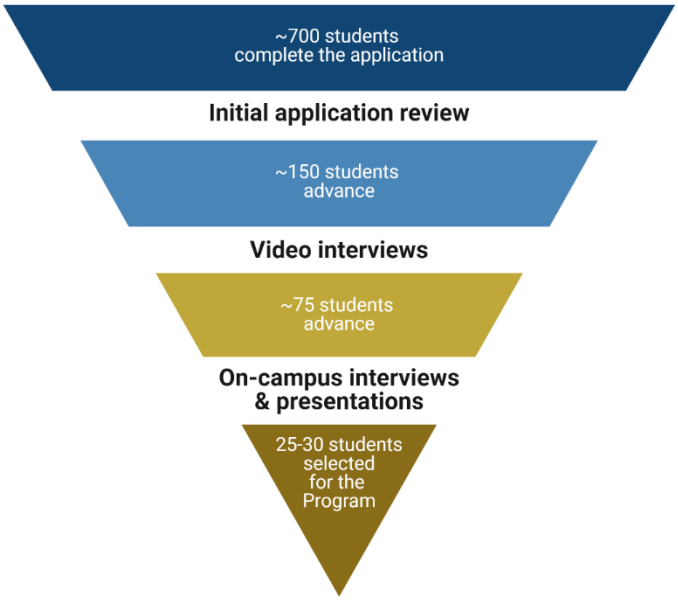
In the ambassador selection process, there are four stages of advancement. Students are graded at each stage by an internal rubric created by the Ambassador Selection Committee. The committee is comprised of staff from the USU Admissions Office, which houses the Ambassador Program. According to the USU Ambassador webpage, during the application review and selection process, the selection committee is looking for the following:

- "Students who are involved in school and/or community leadership."
- "Students who are motivated."
- "Students who have a passion for Utah State University."

For the application process on the Logan campus, the stages and approximate number of students that advance to each stage are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Logan Ambassador Selection Process*




*Note.* Created with BioRender.com by Cody Jay Bills.

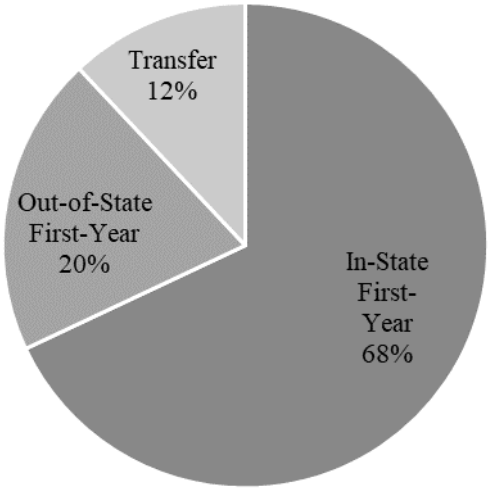
The 25-30 students are selected each year from the following categories, shown in Figure 2. Student selection is determined by student enrollment and student population at USU. For Utah-resident students, the Ambassador Selection Committee analyzes areas of the state to ensure they are looking at enough applicants from the different markets (recruitment areas in the state). School districts, high schools, and the influence of recruitment potential play a role in the decision-making process. Katie North, Executive Director of New Student Enrollment and head of the Ambassador Selection Committee, said:

> The hardest part of this selection process is there's a recruitment tool with it. Getting the right kid with an influence at the right school is so important. I also take it really, really personally that there's a student aspect. Who needs this

scholarship? You're changing a kid's life when you select them for the Ambassador Program (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

**Figure 2**

*Breakdown of Approximate Ambassador Selection per Year*




## Statement of the Problem

In 2023, of the final students selected for the leadership program and accompanying full-ride scholarship on the Logan campus, 16/17 (94%) in-state and 4/6 (66%) out-of-state first-year students attended high schools with graduating classes of 300+ students. In this group, 9/23 (39%) graduated from a high school with a graduating class of 500+ students.

On the application rubric, students are given points based on their high school class size:

- 1-100 students = 1 point
- 101-200 students = 2 points
- 201-300 students = 3 points
- 301-400 students = 4 points
- 401-500 students = 5 points
- 500+ students = 6 points

According to Executive Director North, the justification behind giving more points to larger schools was the idea that at a smaller school, students can get involved in many activities. In contrast, at a larger school, they may be limited in the number of activities in which they can participate (personal communication, October 16, 2023). However, the selection percentages showed that for the ambassadors selected in 2023, there was greater scholarship success among students from larger schools.

This dataset led me to question the predicting factors of students' acceptance into the Ambassador Program, particularly in the relationship between acceptance and graduating class size (hereafter referred to simply as high school size).

## Purpose Statement

This study will focus on in-state and out-of-state first-year students who apply to the Logan campus. The Ambassador Program was chosen for analysis because it focuses on leadership development and recruitment. Potential USU students tour campus and attend USU events, and they need to see themselves represented in the Ambassador

Program. If the ambassadors selected do not represent students from rural schools, how can they be expected to recruit rural students by relating to their unique experiences?

The Logan campus has approximately 18,000 undergraduate students, which is likely more people than a rural student's entire hometown. Many rural students feel anxious about the idea of attending a college campus and reported feeling different from other students because of their background (Schultz, 2004).

Rural students need to see ambassadors with similar backgrounds and experiences on tours and at recruiting events when considering USU as a college option. Patfield et al. (2022) showed that underrepresentation negatively influenced rural youth's participation in higher education.

There are many ways that rural is defined in research. In this study, rural high schools were designated as up to 299 students per graduating class to align with the scoring system of the rubric. In theory, applicants from these schools should be compared apples-to-apples with applicants from larger high schools, with all students having an equal chance of being selected for the Program.

The purpose of this study was to determine if factors significantly predicted a student's acceptance into the USU Ambassador Program and to recommend, if needed, changes to the application process to make it more equitable to students of various backgrounds and experiences.

## Research Questions

This study aimed to predict factors that led to acceptance into the USU University Ambassador Program. These factors included student government involvement, other

school involvement, community involvement, and high school size. The research questions that drove the study were the following:

1. What variables significantly predict student selection for the USU University Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?
2. Is there a significant relationship between high school size and acceptance into the Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?

I hypothesized high school size would significantly affect student acceptance into the program. The null hypothesis stated no relationship between the variables and selection into the Program. If the analyses showed that the predictors did significantly relate to selection into the Program ($p < .05$), the null hypothesis would be rejected. A non-experimental, retrospective, predictive study was performed to analyze these research questions.

## Limitations of the Study

The study conclusions can only be applied to the Logan USU Ambassador Program. However, determining bias patterns may benefit other scholarship programs as they examine their application review practices. Similar Ambassador programs should be careful not to overstate these outcome findings but should use the study framework to determine their conclusions.

Furthermore, the study recognizes the subjectivity of the other components and stages of the selection process. In the initial application, there are three other components that reviewers are instructed to consider when making their decisions about which applicants to advance to the next round. The other components are short essay questions, a digital leadership portfolio, and letters of recommendation. Reviewers may have their own implicit bias when evaluating these components. Additionally, after an applicant advances past the initial application review, they must advance past the video interview stage and the on-campus interviews and presentation stage. At these stages, reviewers again may be subjective in their evaluations of candidates. The study bases the findings on only one element of the process, namely one that should be most objective, but there are limitations to fully determining Program selection.

It also should be noted that due to the bussing of students to metropolitan areas, students could be from an extremely rural area and still attend a larger high school. For example, students living in Park Valley, Utah, which has a population of just over 200, attend Bear River High School, located an hour away, with a 4A classification (United States Zip Codes, 2023). Therefore, this study may incorrectly categorize some rural students as attending a non-rural high school. In contrast, public charter schools traditionally have smaller class sizes, so they may have been classified as rural in this study but are located in an urban area. For example, the American Leadership Academy has an average class size of less than 150 students but is in the city of Spanish Fork, Utah.

## Significance of the Study

This study aimed to determine what factors predicted acceptance into the Ambassador Program and whether high school size dominated the determination of the Ambassador scholarship award. If unbalanced representation occurred in this population, the research would provide data-driven evidence that recommendations for application and review process change were necessary to equitably identify candidates from smaller high schools. The study was significant because no previous work has evaluated the Ambassador Program from this perspective, and student success should not be limited due to the location and size of a student's high school.

In an interview with Executive Director North, I asked if there was a need to examine the application process and how a review may benefit the program, and her reply was as follows:

> Any time you have a process that has 600 applications - we've had as high as 800 applications before - and you select 24, it's such a competitive process. It must be a process that we continually examine. We know we've made some good changes in the past, and we have some good processes. But I also think it's always good to have a new set of eyes on it because I've done it for 20 years. To have someone look at it and ask questions is always good. We want to make sure, 'Are we doing this for a reason, or was it just because we've always done it this way?' (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

The Utah Board of Higher Education defines the school size classification: "The designation of a school based on the size of the school's student enrollment population for purposes of interscholastic activities" (Utah State Legislature, 2019, para 4.). The higher

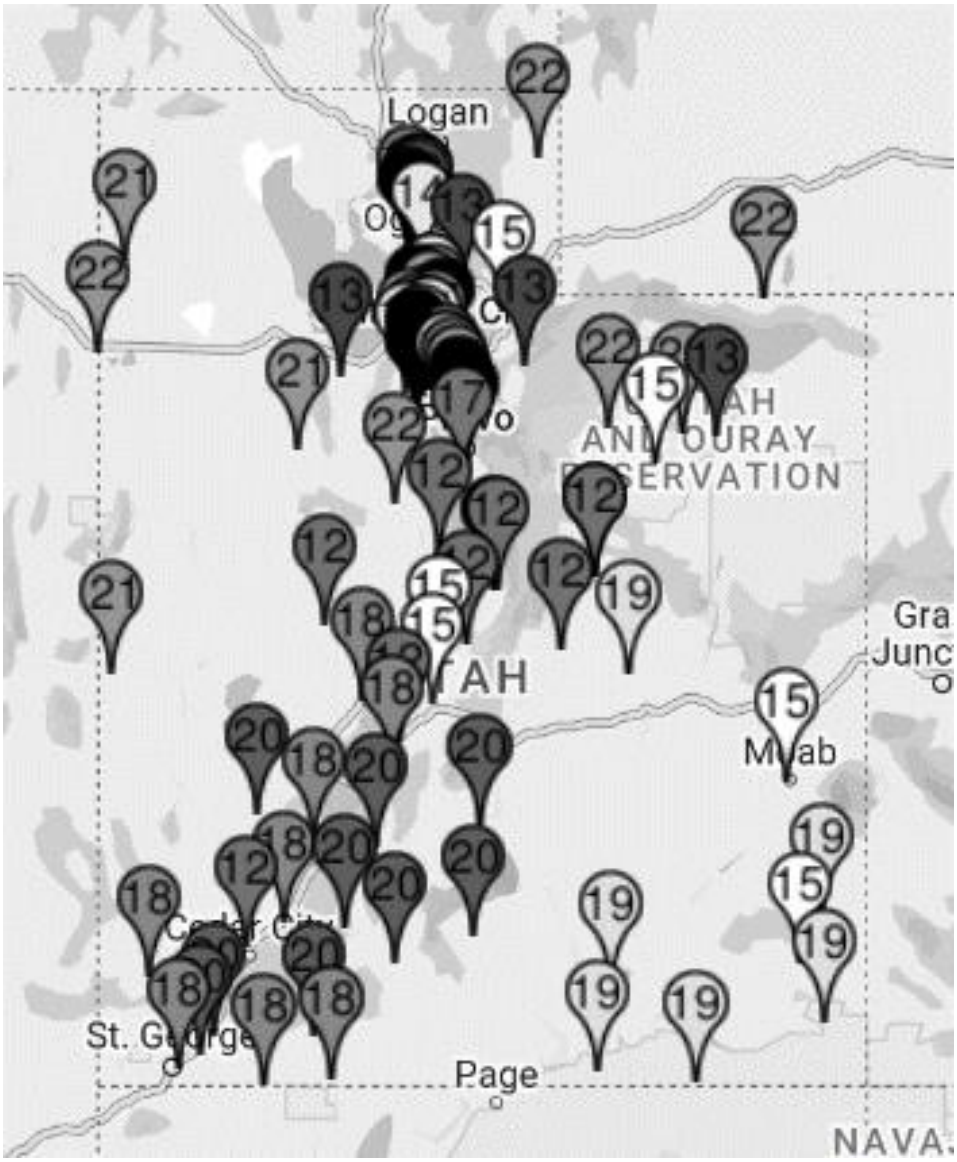
the classification, the larger the total student enrollment and, generally, the greater access to class selection and extracurricular activities. Funding, access to resources, and teacher retention were likely higher in larger schools (Bauch, 2001), giving students better opportunities for involvement. Students at rural schools generally must travel farther to have access to the same programs and activities afforded by students in larger schools, and rural communities were more likely to have more economic instability (Headden, 2019).

The classification breakdown for 2023-2025 for public schools under the Utah High School Activities Association (UHSAA) is as follows: (a) 1A – 29 high schools, (b) 2A – 34 high schools, (c) 3A – 20 high schools, (d) 4A – 28 high schools, (e) 5A – 30 high schools and (f) 6A - 18 high schools (Utah High School Activities Association, 2023). Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the spread of high schools across the state. Appendix A has a map of each classification shown separately.

High schools with larger class sizes cover much less area of the state, so representation is inconsistent if students are being selected at a disproportional rate from those schools. As the land-grant institution of Utah, the university's mission statement states that USU is "committed to excellence, access, and inclusion" (USU, n.d.) across the entire state with equal diligence to all populations, and the scholarships awarded by the university should service all areas. Additionally, the mission of the Utah Board of Higher Education states, "The Utah Board of Higher Education governs and supports the Utah System of Higher Education to equitably provide accessible, valuable, innovative, and affordable higher education for students…" (Utah System of Higher Education, 2023).

**Figure 3**

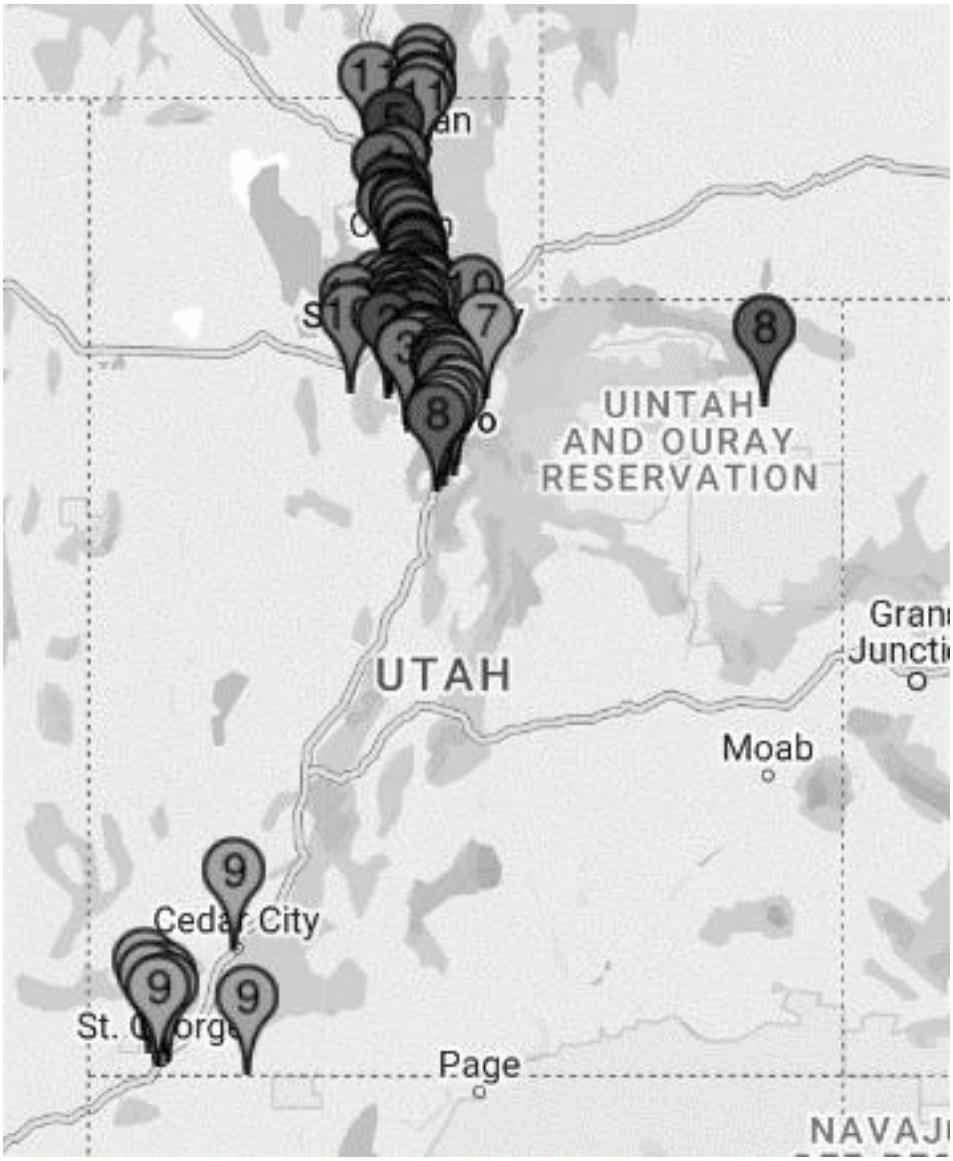
*Utah High Schools with 1A - 3A Classification*




*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region. From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

**Figure 4**

*Utah High Schools with 4A - 6A Classification*




*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region. From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

Although high school size and classification go hand in hand, this research focused on high school size rather than high school classification for two reasons. First,

on the ambassador application, students are asked for the number of seniors in their graduating class and are given one point for every 100 students, up to six points maximum. Thus, the application concerns the number of students per graduating class (re: high school size) rather than the classification. Additionally, the number of seniors in the graduating class and the scoring of such is equal across state lines, regardless of individual states' classification systems. This allowed me to use this variable for both in-state and out-of-state students.

## Conclusion

The USU University Ambassador Program focuses on leadership, recruitment, and service. The competitive Program and accompanying 100% tuition and fees scholarship receives 450-700 applications each year for the Logan campus. We analyzed past data for in-state and out-of-state first-year applicants at the initial step of the application process and determined predictive factors for students being selected for the Program. We also determined if students from rural high schools were being selected for the Ambassador Program.

# CHAPTER II

# REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study aimed to determine if factors significantly predicted a student's acceptance into the USU Ambassador Program and to recommend, if needed, changes to the application process to make it more equitable to students of various backgrounds and experiences.

This literature review explored existing research concerning studies in higher education that used predictive factors, rural high school students' experience with higher education, the impact of scholarships, and leadership opportunities for rural students. This chapter also reviewed the application and rubric for the ambassador selection process.

A study of this nature had never been conducted concerning this Program. I presented the findings and recommended application changes to the Ambassador Selection Committee. The data now adds to the body of research concerning predictive factors of higher education scholarship programs.

## Previous Research

### Predictive Factor Studies

A review of research revealed multiple studies that analyzed predictive factors regarding student success in higher education. Campbell and Fuqua (2008) studied what predictive factors contributed to students completing a collegiate honors program. Data

showed that high school GPA, class rank, first-semester GPA, gender, and Honors housing assignments were determinants of program completion. McCarron et al. (2022) showed that for undergraduate students, pre-college athletics, team leadership, extracurricular activities, and community service experiences were all factors that contributed to self-confidence in college and leadership development. Additionally, positive parental and family relationships led to greater confidence. Significant factors that predicted a rural student's completion of a bachelor's degree included family socioeconomic status, education expectations of parents, high school course rigor, and the intensity and timeline of college enrollment (Byun et al., 2012). These studies were relevant to this research because they supported the reasoning that certain factors contributed to a student's likelihood of success in higher education.

## Rural Youth and Higher Education

The number of rural Americans with a college education has risen. However, the percentage is still low compared to non-rural Americans. Table 1 shows the current percentages of the following populations of adults 25 and older with at least a bachelor's degree (Ma & Matea, 2023; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2024).

**Table 1**

*Percentage of United States Population with a Minimum of a Bachelor's Degree*

| Population | Percentage of population |
|---|---|
| Rural Americans | 21.5% |
| Non-rural Americans | 36.4% |
| Utah (Top third in the Nation) | 35% |
| National Average | 33% |

More than 9.3 million (20%) of public-school students attend rural schools. In Utah, there are just under 20,000 rural students. Rural students in Utah were considered 'fair' regarding college readiness based on their dual enrollment, the percentage that passed at least one Advanced Placement (AP) exam, and the percentage that took the ACT (Showalter et al., 2019).

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) reported that 54.6% of rural high school students from the class of 2022 enrolled in college straight out of high school, compared to 63.7% of suburban graduates and 58.6% of urban high school graduates from the same class. Of the college-bound rural students, 42.3% attended four-year institutions, and 37.1% participated in two-year institutions (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2024).

A study of almost 8,000 rural high-school-aged youth in the United States showed that over half the students planned to continue schooling (Hutchins et al., 2012). However, some factors and obstacles played a role in this demographic pursuing post-high school education. According to a survey by Byun et al. (2017), parental education, college preparation from classes and experiences, and teacher expectations were the main

factors that contributed to the choice to attend college. Good grades and perceived ability to complete a degree also helped encourage college attendance of rural youth (Yang, 1981). Lower parental expectations regarding education, negative experiences surrounding school, and lower economic status were potential barriers for these same students (Hutchins et al., 2012).

There are multiple barriers that rural students face in the education system. Educational policies and initiatives set at the state and federal levels have systematically overlooked rural schools. Geographic isolation, lower budgets for school districts, and shrinking populations affected these students and their families (Means, 2018). There has also been a struggle with teacher recruitment and retention (Showalter et al., 2019).

Higher education may not be an initial desire or a self-determined need for this population. Rural students struggled to leave their families and communities, which were often tight-knit, for higher education and career opportunities (Petrin et al., 2014), and students may not return home after college because they could get a higher-paying job with their degree in an urban area (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). Furthermore, many blue-collar industries that rural communities revolved around did not require a bachelor's degree (Headden, 2019).

Although higher education at a four-year institution is not for every student, nor does it have to be, studies showed that a bachelor's degree led to a higher average income, greater likelihood of insurance, lower unemployment rates, and greater likelihood of job satisfaction (Perna, 2005; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017). College graduates were also less likely to need to rely on public assistance and were more likely to live active lifestyles and volunteer in their communities (Ma & Matea, 2023).

In 2021, the median earnings of adults 25 and older with only a bachelor's degree and no graduate degree were 65% higher than adults with solely a high school diploma (Ma & Matea, 2023). By the age of 34, the average college graduate with a bachelor's degree could expect to have earned enough money to compensate for four years of absence from the workforce and to have paid back all student loans (Ma & Matea, 2023).

Contrary to some stereotypes, many rural parents who did not have a degree supported their children in attending college (Slocum et al., 2019). In some cases, rural parents who did not participate in college wanted to support their students in their college aspirations but may not have been able to provide contacts or resources, nor did they have their own experiences to rely on. They also could not vouch for the personal benefits of obtaining a degree (Ardoin, 2018).

Admissions recruiters were less likely to visit rural high schools, so students were often less aware of their options post-high school (Newlin, 2020). Higher education jargon could be overwhelming for rural students and their families, especially if the student's parents did not attend college. Assumptions made by college admissions offices about what students already knew about college added to this struggle (Ardoin, 2018).

In a study by Schultz (2004), nearly all rural students believed they had to work harder than other students prior to attending college. However, after rural students enrolled, their retention rate was favorable. According to the National Student Clearing House (2019), 84% of rural students continued onto their second year of college, which is the same rate as urban students, and 41% of rural students completed a college degree within the six years post high school graduation, compared to only 36% of urban students. Factors that promoted college enrollment for rural youth included access to

rigorous academic courses and support from teachers, counselors, coaches, and peers to attend college (Means, 2018).

Access programs have also been created at the local, state, federal, and university levels to support students at rural high schools in their higher education endeavors. These include TRIO programs (present at USU), the College Advising Corp, Bottom Line, and College Summit (Ardoin, 2018).

Higher education institutions could work to understand rural students' backgrounds to better serve them. Rather than focusing on areas where these students lacked, the focus should be placed on their strengths, which often included resilience, adaptability, and perseverance. They also had a unique perspective to add to the campus culture (Newlin, 2020).

**Importance of Scholarships**

Scholarships generally have a positive impact on the students who receive them, especially if those students have financial hardship. Students with scholarships had higher retention rates, reported lower stress levels, and had more time to focus on their schoolwork. On the other hand, financial pressures resulted in lower educational achievement and a lower desire to attend a higher institution (Zacharias & Ryan, 2021).

Because the Ambassador Program includes full tuition and fees renewable for up to four years, it was important to address the financial impact that a scholarship of this magnitude could have on a student from a rural high school. According to research conducted by Park and Denson (2013), “A certain class of higher education institutions is growing increasingly out of reach for low-income, working class, and first-generation

college students." This was important to note because data from the ACT Information Brief reported that 12% of rural students were first-generation, 20% of rural students were low-income, and an additional 18% of students were both first-generation and low-income (Buddin, 2014). Rural students who attended four-year colleges or universities were disproportionately more likely to have been first-generation students or come from low-income families (Byun et al., 2012).

The High School Longitudinal Study, cited by The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2024), reported that 46.3% of rural students were offered a Pell grant or scholarship. Rural students borrowed more in loans than the national average ($7,005 compared to $6,354) and received less grant money ($7,864 compared to $8,460). Rural students who applied for FAFSA increased by 3% between 2022 and 2023 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2024).

Rural students were more conscious of the cost of higher education than nonrural students, and financial aid played a significant role in their higher education decisions (Yang & Venezia, 2020). There is still a need to address the value of socioeconomic diversity on campuses and scholarships that support this cause (Park & Denson, 2013).

## Rural Youth Leadership

Rural high school students in a research study in Kentucky generally defined leadership as a way to make a positive change and give back to the community. Students described leadership qualities such as responsibility, humility, self-direction, respect, determination, and the desire to make a difference. The students all referred to someone in their family, either a parent or a relative, as a leader they admired (Sherif, 2018).

Students at rural schools may have the ability and potential to shine in college leadership programs but don't initially stand out in the selection process and may be overlooked. Rural schools may have lacked access to higher institution partnerships and resources to help exceptionally talented or gifted students develop (Lynn & Glynn, 2019). Distance and transportation may have hindered students' ability to participate in extra-curricular programs. As a result, students' leadership experience may not have revolved around education (Lynn & Glynn, 2019).

Students' school engagement could influence their leadership opportunities and skills (Lee, 2012). However, rural schools and communities often had fewer opportunities for their students than their metropolitan counterparts (Bauch, 2001). This could lead to rural youth being less prepared to be competitive applicants for leadership positions at higher institutions, less likely to apply for leadership positions, and less knowledgeable about these opportunities. Rural youth could miss out on both leadership opportunities and scholarships because of their high school extracurricular activities (or lack thereof) or lack of awareness of programs and knowledge about higher education in general.

## Understanding the Application and Rubric

The USU Ambassador Application is an online application that generally opens in August and closes mid-way through January. Students must be admitted to the University to apply for the program. The selected applicants will begin their ambassadorship the following school year unless they choose to defer their admission, in which the scholarship defers like all other admissions scholarships. The following includes the details for the Logan campus application and selection process.

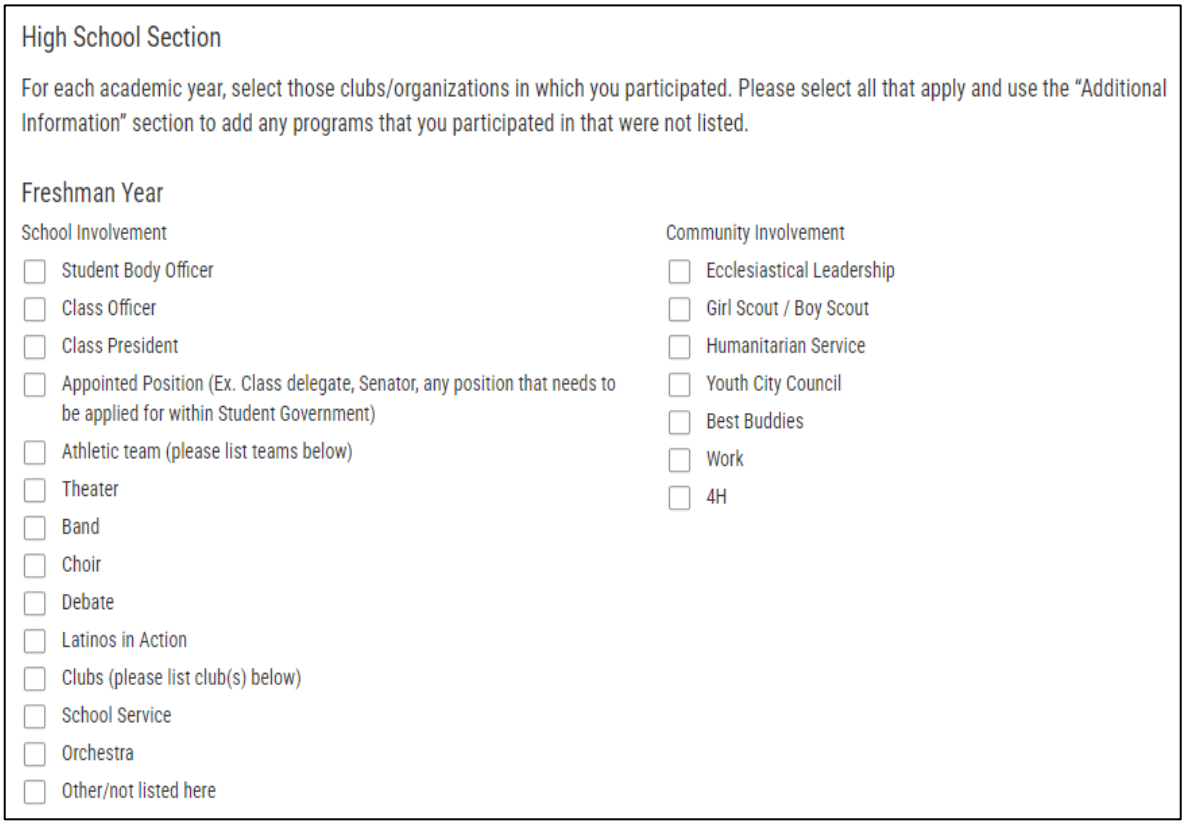
The application has four components: the resume, three short essay questions, two letters of recommendation, and a four-page digital leadership portfolio. Executive Director North indicated the importance of the application components, stating, “We’re trying to get the best view of a student. By doing a portfolio, essay questions, and a resume, we’re getting different aspects through all those things” (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

The application verifies that the student will be a new incoming student to USU starting the following Summer or Fall and lists the GPA requirement, which is a 3.5 on a 4.0 unweighted scale. The ACT/SAT is not required for the application. The application also lists the scholarship parameters. Figure 5 shows the resume section of the application. The system uses logic, so when a student selects an activity, it expands to ask about leadership positions within the activity. Students fill out a section for each year of high school.

The rubric in Appendix B (Table 13) explains how the resume is evaluated. Exact point totals have been removed from variables not directly associated with the research to protect the confidentiality of the scoring system at the request of Executive Director North. The resume section of the application was chosen as the focal point of this research because it is standardized across the students, and there are set criteria that students are reviewed on within the resume portion. As explained by Executive Director North:

**Figure 5**

*Resume Portion of Ambassador Application*




The resume is where the rubric has really come in. You'll see on the resume that we've really tried to create a balance so that, yes, you get points for student government, but you also get points for sports, for debate, for drama, for music, for all the ways students can be involved. We've added points for community service, for work, and for church service. One of the things I didn't want was student government to be the only thing students got points for, and if you're in student government, you get selected. I think, obviously, a lot of those students rise to the top because their level of involvement is high. But, we tried to use the

> rubric on the resume to capture those students who spend all their time working, so they can't do student government. Or there are students who play sports, but they do everything in sports, and so we wanted to create the balance where something like sports is equal to student government in our rubric (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

After calculating all rubric sections, applicants are given three final point scores: School Involvement, Community Involvement, and Students in Senior Class. Using those scores, in addition to the essays, the leadership portfolio, and the letters of recommendation, the reviewers personally evaluate each applicant and decide if they should move to the next round. An informal survey of reviewers was conducted to understand how much weight different reviewers give to each category since there is no official standard. The answers for the resume section, given as a percentage out of 100, ranged from 15% - 40%, with the average answer being 26%.

After each application has been graded individually, two reviewers meet to compare scores and choose which applicants to advance to the next round. According to Executive Director North, assigning two reviewers to each applicant was chosen to create a manageable workload and meet the turnaround time. First-time reviewers are paired with veteran reviewers. The hope is that no matter how reviewers score applicants, they will be consistent with themselves. After students pass the initial application stage, they proceed through the rest of the application process, where they will be reviewed by a smaller body of the Ambassador Selection Committee for the remainder of the stages.

Executive Director North acknowledged that reviewers are drawn to certain things and may choose applicants who mirror their own values, skills, and interests. There are

no official, explicit criteria for advancing an applicant; thus, room for unintentional bias and subjectivity by the reviewers could lead to certain factors being significant predictors of an applicant's advancement (personal communication, October 16, 2023).

## Conclusion

This research filled a gap by looking specifically at predictive factors for acceptance into a college leadership and scholarship program. Prior literature showed that college admissions offices must deliberately consider their outreach to rural communities. Visiting rural schools, sending recruitment materials, and hosting students on campus were all important to recruiting these students. Communication with counselors at these schools could help institutions cater their messaging and support to the access and enrollment needs of the students (Means, 2018). Rural youth across Utah and the United States literally cannot afford to be overlooked for scholarships, as data showed they were disproportionately more likely to be either first-generation college students or come from low-income families.

According to the USU History and Traditions webpage, USU has a strong agricultural heritage. Originally called the Agricultural College of Utah, it was founded in 1888 through the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act as Utah’s land-grant university (USU, n.d.). Creating a space where rural students feel supported and welcomed should be a priority for USU recruitment to maintain the tradition of the Aggies.

# CHAPTER III

# METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study aimed to determine if factors significantly predicted a student's acceptance into the USU Ambassador Program and to recommend, if needed, changes to the application process to make it more equitable to students of various backgrounds and experiences.

The research questions that drove this study were the following:

1. What variables significantly predict student selection for the USU University Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?
2. Is there a significant relationship between high school size and acceptance into the Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?

This chapter discusses the participants, research design, and data analysis.

## Methodology

### Participants

The study was conducted in Logan, Utah. The pre-existing data used for this research was the entire population of in-state and out-of-state first-year applications for the Logan Ambassador Program from 2019-2023 ($N$ = 2,724). The data were retrieved from the USU Admissions Office with permission from Executive Director North. When

the data was initially collected, it had an application number that was only traceable if located through the secure USU application database. No names or student identifications (i.e., A#) were associated with the data when collected by the researcher. The application number was deleted, so there was no identifiable information, and the data were stored in Excel spreadsheets in password-protected and encrypted Box® files. PI Dr. Judd-Murray owned the Box® files, and after five years, in compliance with the Internal Review Board agreement, the data will be destroyed.

The study required the approval of the Internal Review Board to ensure the ethical use of information from past program applicants. We sought an exemption related to de-identified pre-existing data. Certificate of Exemption #13951 was granted (see Appendix C).

## Research Design

The longitudinal study examined which independent variables predicted a student's selection for the Ambassador Program from 2019-2023. The benefits of conducting a five-year study included finding consistency and patterns over time (Caruana et al., 2015).

In the Ambassador selection process, there are four stages of application advancement:

1. Initial application review
2. Video interviews
3. Ambassador Academy (on-campus interviews and presentations)
4. Final ambassador selection

The initial application comprises four parts: a resume, three short essay questions, two letters of recommendation, and a four-page digital leadership portfolio. This study focused exclusively on the variables found on the resume portion of the initial application and whether those significantly predicted a student's eventual selection into the Program. There are subjectivity and qualitative data elements throughout all the application stages, but the initial application resume section and point system from the rubric could be quantified. While this portion could be the most objective, this research attempted to determine if subjectivity remained within the evaluation of this section.

The quantitative, dichotomous, independent variables from the resume section were the following:

1. Maximum extracurricular points (Yes/No)
2. Maximum club points (Yes/No)
3. Maximum community involvement points (Yes/No)
4. First-generation student (Yes/No)
5. Class officer at least one year (Yes/No)
6. Student body officer (Yes/No)
7. Student body president (Yes/No)

The final independent variable was quantitative and categorical:

8. High school size (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 to align with the scoring system)

An explanation of what activities fell under each category and the high school size scoring system can be found on the rubric in Appendix A.

These variables were chosen because we wanted to know if bias was given to one type of involvement over another, along with bias given to a particular high school size.

These variables were speculated to be the factors of most significant influence when the reviewer decided whether a student should continue through the selection process because they are the most common areas of involvement seen on the applications. A reviewer may be unintentionally biased to move an applicant onto the next round if they fit a specific criterion, even though the applicant still has outstanding involvement and leadership in other aspects.

Max value measures were chosen because applicants could "max out" points in a category if they were reasonably involved in that area throughout high school (for exact details on what involvement met the criteria to "max out," see Appendix B). Additionally, if points on rubrics changed slightly from year to year, I was still able to use the uniform measure of whether an applicant maxed out points in a category.

The dependent variable was student selection for the Ambassador Program, which was dichotomous (selected/not selected). Results from the study showed if independent variables significantly contributed to Ambassador selection ($p < .05$). With the data from the final variable, I also determined if students from rural high schools were represented in the findings.

## Data Analysis

### Research Question #1

For the first research question, if an applicant was an in-state or out-of-state first-year student who turned in a completed application and met the application requirements, they were included in the study ($N = 2{,}724$).

Starting in 2023, the applicant data from the resume was automatically converted to points based on the rubric using ServiceNow (an online program used by USU). That information was given to me by the admissions team. However, from 2019-2022, the tallying of points had been done individually by reviewers and had not been saved. So, I reviewed each application and totaled the participants' points in each category based on the rubric to determine if they maxed out. I also used the responses on the applications to discover if the applicant was a class or student body officer, student body president, or if the student identified as first-generation. Whether or not the applicant had been selected for the program was previously noted in the data before it was deidentified and given to me to protect confidentiality.

I used Excel to code the pre-existing data. Each variable response was coded as 0 for No or 1 for Yes, and whether an applicant was selected for the program was coded as 0 for Not Selected or 1 for Selected. All analyses were completed in SPSS (Version 29). First, a chi-square was used for the first seven independent variables to test for significance and homogeneity. If variables were significant, a binary logistic regression was run to test for further significance. The odds ratios were evaluated for effect size. Peduzzi et al. (1996) suggest ten participants for every independent variable when running logistic regression. The sample size for this study was $N = 2{,}724$. The significance was determined by examining the $p$-value ($p < .05$). If $p$ was significant, the null hypothesis that the variables listed were not predictors for acceptance into the program was rejected.

A binary logistic regression was used because the predictor variables were dichotomous, and the outcome variable was dichotomous (Pampel, 2009). Additionally,

the outcome was identified as a probability rather than a score. Assumptions of a logistical regression include that the outcome is binary, which was true, as students could either be selected for the Program or not. A second assumption is that the data are independent of one another. We know this was true because students could not apply for the Program as first-year students more than once.

**Research Question #2**

For the second research question, eight applicants had an unlisted high school, so those applications could not be included in the analysis. Therefore, the sample size was *n* = 2,716.

On the rubric, students were given points for their high school size:

- 1-100 students = 1 point
- 101-200 students = 2 points
- 201-300 students = 3 points
- 301-400 students = 4 points
- 401-500 students = 5 points
- 500+ students = 6 points

Starting in 2023, students self-reported their high school class size and were automatically assigned the correct point value by ServiceNow (this was double-checked for accuracy by the reviewers). Before 2023, students only reported their high school, and the reviewer entered the points for class size after looking up the high school class size on the U.S. World and News Report. Since this information was not saved with the applications, I repeated the same process done during the application review by looking

up the schools on the U.S. World and News Report. If the school was international, the class size was found by researching the school online, where the school website often listed it. Each application was given a one through six to correspond to the class size.

For the data analysis of the eighth independent variable, I dummy-coded the high school size categories (dummy codes were 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) and ran a logistic regression using the odds ratios to measure effect size. The significance was determined by examining the *p-v*alue ($p < .05$). If *p* was significant, the null hypothesis that high school size did not affect acceptance into the program was rejected.

## Conclusion

This longitudinal study analyzed if there were factors that significantly predicted acceptance into the USU University Ambassador Program. Variables included student government involvement, school, and community involvement, first-generation status, and high school size. Applicant data from the past five years were analyzed using chi-square and logistical regression. If specific factors were highly significant in predicting acceptance, particularly factors out of an applicant's control, such as high school size, recommendations for change were made to increase the equity of the application process.

# CHAPTER IV

# RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study aimed to determine if factors significantly predicted a student's acceptance into the USU Ambassador Program and to recommend, if needed, changes to the application process to make it more equitable to students of various backgrounds and experiences.

The research questions that drove this study were the following:

1. What variables significantly predict student selection for the USU University Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?
2. Is there a significant relationship between high school size and acceptance into the Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?

In this chapter, the findings for each research question are discussed.

## Descriptive Statistics

Tables 2-4 report the descriptive statistics of the sample. In total, 2,724 applications were received for the Logan Ambassador Program from 2019-2023. There were 1809 in-state applicants and 915 out-of-state applicants. Of the 109 total students selected for the Program, 80 were in-state students, and 29 were out-of-state students (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Total Applications Received vs. Number Selected for Program (2019-2023)*

| Applicant type | Applications received | | Selected for Ambassador Program | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| In-state first-year | 1809 | 66.41 | 80 | 73.39 |
| Out-of-state first-year | 915 | 33.59 | 29 | 26.61 |
| Total | 2,724 | | 109 | |

The data for the in-state applicants showed the most common predictive factor among total applicants was having been a class officer for at least one year. Having been a class officer was also the most common predictor among applicants who were selected for the Program. The second most common predictive factor among applicants who were selected for the Program was having been student body president, but having been a student body president was one of the least common predictive factors among the total applicants (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Breakdown of Predictive Factor Data for In-state First-Year Applicants (2019-2023)*

| Predictive factor | Total applicants with the predictive factor | | Applicants with predictive factor who were selected for the Program | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Maximum extracurricular points | 101 | 5.58 | 6 | 7.5 |
| Maximum club points | 207 | 11.44 | 11 | 13.75 |
| Maximum community points | 367 | 20.29 | 18 | 22.5 |
| First-generation student | 360 | 19.9 | 12 | 15 |
| Class officer at least one year | 614 | 33.94 | 57 | 71.25 |
| Student body officer | 467 | 25.82 | 36 | 45 |
| Student body president | 147 | 8.13 | 43 | 53.75 |

*Note.* In-state applications $n = 1809$; In-state applicants selected for Program $n = 80$.

Likewise, the data for the out-of-state applicants showed the most common predictive factor among total applicants was having been a class officer for at least one year. Having been a class officer was also the most common predictor among applicants who were selected for the Program. The second most common predictive factor among applicants who were selected for the Program was equal between having been student body president and having been a student body officer. However, having been student body president was the least common predictive factor among the total applicants (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Breakdown of Predictive Factor Data for Out-of-state First-Year Applicants (2019-2023)*

| Predictive factor | Total applicants with the predictive factor | | Applicants with predictive factor who were selected for the Program | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Maximum extracurricular points | 99 | 10.82 | 6 | 20.69 |
| Maximum club points | 114 | 12.46 | 6 | 20.69 |
| Maximum community points | 177 | 19.34 | 7 | 24.14 |
| First-generation student | 135 | 14.75 | 3 | 10.34 |
| Class officer at least one year | 305 | 33.33 | 15 | 51.72 |
| Student body officer | 135 | 14.75 | 11 | 37.93 |
| Student body president | 75 | 8.2 | 11 | 37.93 |

*Note.* Out-of-state applications $n = 915$; Out-of-state applicants selected for Program $n = 29$.

Tables 5 and 6 show the number of applications received from each high school size and the number of students selected from that group. For in-state applicants, the largest group was 36.67% of the applicants, who came from a high school with 500+

students in the graduating class. Of those selected for the Program, 41.25% came from a high school with 500+ students in the graduating class (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*In-State First-Year Applicants Grouped by High School Size (2019-2023)*

| Number of students in graduating class | Total applicants from high school size | | Applicants from high school size selected for the Program | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| 1-99 | 72 | 3.98 | 1 | 1.25 |
| 100-199 | 55 | 3.04 | 1 | 1.25 |
| 200-299 | 132 | 7.3 | 4 | 5 |
| 300-399 | 460 | 25.44 | 24 | 30 |
| 400-499 | 426 | 23.56 | 17 | 21.25 |
| 500+ | 663 | 36.67 | 33 | 41.25 |

*Note.* In-state applications with usable high school information $n = 1808$; In-state applicants selected for Program $n = 80$.

For out-of-state applications, applicants were distributed rather evenly between each high school size; there was less than a 3% size difference between each high school group. There were as many students selected from high schools with 100-199 students in the graduating class as there were selected from high schools with 400-499 students and 500+ students in the graduating class (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Out-of-State First-Year Applicants Grouped by High School Size (2019-2023)*

| Number of students in graduating class | Total applicants from high school size | | Applicants from high school size selected for the Program | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| 1-99 | 137 | 15.09 | 4 | 13.79 |
| 100-199 | 169 | 18.61 | 5 | 17.24 |
| 200-299 | 148 | 16.3 | 6 | 20.69 |
| 300-399 | 160 | 17.62 | 2 | 6.7 |
| 400-499 | 148 | 16.3 | 6 | 20.69 |
| 500+ | 146 | 16.08 | 6 | 20.69 |

*Note.* Out-of-state applications with usable high school information $n = 908$; Out-of-state applicants selected for Program $n = 29$.

## In-State Results

A summary of the chi-square test of independence tests for in-state first-year students showed that having been a class officer for at least one year, having been a student body officer, or having been a student body president were the only predictive factors that were significant at the $p < .05$ level (see Table 7).

For students who received maximum extracurricular points, observed frequencies indicated that 95 applicants were not selected for the Program, and six were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 96.5$, Selected $f = 4.5$). For students who did not receive maximum extracurricular points, 1634 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 74 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 1632.5$, Selected $f = 75.5$). Because the expected cell count was less than five, a Fisher's exact test was calculated. The results of Fisher's exact test ($p = .449$) did not indicate a significant

association between maxing out in extracurricular points and selection for the Ambassador Program.

**Table 7**

*In-State Chi-Square Results*

| Predictive factor | $\chi^2$ | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| Maximum extracurricular points | | .449[a] |
| Maximum club points | .44 | .507 |
| Maximum community points | .25 | .615 |
| First generation student | 1.26 | .261 |
| Class officer at least one year | 51.96 | <.001* |
| Student body officer | 16.09 | <.001* |
| Student body president | 233.37 | <.001* |

[a] Fisher's exact test; * indicates significance

For students who received maximum club points, observed frequencies indicated that 196 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 11 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 197.8$, Selected $f = 9.2$). For students who did not receive maximum club points, 1533 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 69 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 1513.2$, Selected $f = 70.8$). The relationship between these variables was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1809) = .44$, $p = .507$).

For students who received maximum community involvement points, observed frequencies indicated that 349 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 18 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 350.8$, Selected $f = 16.2$). For students who did not receive maximum community involvement points, 1380 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 62 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f =$

1378.2, Selected *f* = 63.8). The relationship between these variables was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1809) = .25, p = .615$).

For students who reported themselves as first-generation, observed frequencies indicated that 348 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 12 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected *f* = 344.1, Selected *f* = 15.9). For students who did not report themselves as first-generation, 1381 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 68 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected *f* = 1384.9, Selected *f* = 64.1). The relationship between these variables was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1809) = 1.26, p = .261$).

For students who were class officers for at least one year, observed frequencies indicated that 557 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 57 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected *f* = 586.8, Selected *f* = 27.2). For students who were not class officers for at least one year, 1172 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 23 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected *f* = 1142.2, Selected *f* = 52.8). The relationship between these variables was highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1809) = 51.96, p < .001, \phi = .17$). The Phi coefficient reported a small effect size (Lee, 2016). A logistic regression was performed to determine the effect being a class officer had on the likelihood of being selected for the Ambassador Program. The model explained approximately 8.7% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke $R^2$ value) and correctly classified 95.6% of the cases. The model showed that 2% of students who were not class officers made the Program, while 9.26% of students who were class officers made the Program. The model predicted the odds that students who were class officers for at least one year were 5.22 times more likely to be selected for the Program (see Table 8).

For student body officers who applied, observed frequencies indicated that 431 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 36 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 446.3$, Selected $f = 20.7$). For students who were not student body officers, 1298 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 44 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 1282.7$, Selected $f = 59.3$). The relationship between these variables was highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1809) = 16.09$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .09$). The Phi coefficients reported a small effect size (Lee, 2016). A logistic regression was performed to determine the effect being a student body officer had on the likelihood of being selected for the Ambassador Program. The model explained approximately 2.6% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke $R^2$ value) and correctly classified 95.6% of the cases. The model showed that 3.28% of students who were not student body officers were selected for the Program, while 7.72% of students who were student body officers were selected for the Program. The model predicted the odds that students who were student body officers were 2.46 times more likely to be selected for the Program (see Table 8).

For student body presidents who applied, observed frequencies indicated that 104 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 43 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 140.5$, Selected $f = 6.5$). For students who were not student body presidents, 1625 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 37 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 1588.5$, Selected $f = 73.5$). The relationship between these variables was highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1809) = 233.37$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .36$). The Phi coefficient reported a medium effect size (Lee, 2016). A logistic regression was performed to determine the effect being a student body president had on the

likelihood of being selected for the Ambassador Program. The model explained approximately 21.6% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke $R^2$ value) and correctly classified 95.6% of the cases. The model showed that 2.23% of students who were not student body presidents were selected for the Program, while 29.25% of students who were student body presidents were selected for the Program. The model predicted the odds that student body presidents were 18.16 times more likely to be selected for the Program (see Table 8).

**Table 8**

*Logistic Regression Results for Significant In-State Predictors*

| Predictive factor | *B* | *SE* | Wald | OR | 95% CI | | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | LL | UL | |
| Class officer | 1.65 | .25 | 42.84 | 5.22 | 3.18 | 8.55 | <.001* |
| Student body officer | .9 | .23 | 15.17 | 2.46 | 1.57 | 3.88 | <.001* |
| Student body president | 2.9 | .25 | 138.9 | 18.16 | 11.21 | 29.41 | <.001* |

* indicates significance; *df = 1*

## Results for Research Question One

A chi-square test of independence was performed to evaluate the relationship between the first seven independent variables and selection for the Ambassador Program for both in-state and out-of-state first-year applicants. Significance was tested at the $p < .05$ level. If the chi-square test results were significant, a logistic regression was

performed to further assess the impact of the significant dependent variables. The variables in this study were:

1. Maximum extracurricular points (Yes/No)
2. Maximum club points (Yes/No)
3. Maximum community involvement points (Yes/No)
4. First-generation student (Yes/No)
5. Class officer at least one year (Yes/No)
6. Student body officer (Yes/No)
7. Student body president (Yes/No)

In some cases, the expected cell count was less than five, and Fisher's exact test was performed instead. Those situations are noted.

**Out-of-State Results**

A summary of the chi-square test of independence tests for out-of-state first-year students showed that having been a class officer for at least one year, having been a student body officer, or having been a student body president were the only predictive factors that were significant at the $p < .05$ level (see Table 9).

For students who received maximum extracurricular points, observed frequencies indicated that 93 applicants were not selected for the Program, and six were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 95.9$, Selected $f = 3.1$). For students who did not receive maximum extracurricular points, 793 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 23 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 790.1$, Selected $f = 25.9$). Because the expected cell count was less than five, a Fisher's exact test was

calculated. The results of Fisher's exact test ($p$ = .117) did not indicate a significant association between maxing out in extracurricular points and selection for the Ambassador Program.

**Table 9**

*Out-of-State Chi-Square Results*

| Predictive factor | $\chi^2$ | $p$ |
|---|---|---|
| Maximum extracurricular points | | .117[a] |
| Maximum club points | | .161[a] |
| Maximum community points | .44 | .507 |
| First generation student | | .798[a] |
| Class officer at least one year | 4.56 | <.033* |
| Student body officer | 12.79 | <.001* |
| Student body president | | <.001*[a] |

[a] Fisher's exact test; * indicates significance

For students who received maximum club points, observed frequencies indicated that 108 applicants were not selected for the Program, and six were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f$ = 110.4, Selected $f$ = 3.6). For students who did not receive maximum club points, 778 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 23 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f$ = 775.6, Selected $f$ = 25.4). The results of Fisher's exact test ($p$ = .161) did not indicate a significant association between maxing out in club points and selection for the Ambassador Program.

For students who received maximum community involvement points, observed frequencies indicated that 170 applicants were not selected for the Program, and seven were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f$ = 171.4, Selected $f$ = 5.6). For

students who did not receive maximum community involvement points, 716 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 22 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 714.6$, Selected $f = 23.4$). The relationship between these variables was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 915) = .44$, $p = .507$).

For students who reported themselves as first-generation, observed frequencies indicated that 132 applicants were not selected for the Program, and three were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 130.7$, Selected $f = 4.3$). For students who did not report themselves as first-generation, 754 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 26 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 755.3$, Selected $f = 24.7$). The results of Fisher's exact test ($p = .789$) did not indicate a significant association between first-generation status and selection for the Ambassador Program.

For students who were class officers for at least one year, observed frequencies indicated that 290 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 15 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 295.3$ Selected $f = 9.7$). For students who were not class officers for at least one year, 596 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 14 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 590.7$, Selected $f = 19.3$). The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 915) = 4.56$, $p < .033$, $\phi = .07$). The Phi coefficient reported a small effect size (Lee, 2016). A logistic regression was performed to determine the effect being a class officer had on the likelihood of being selected for the Ambassador Program. The model explained approximately 1.9% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke $R^2$ value) and correctly classified 96.8% of the cases. The model showed that 2.3% of students who were not class officers made the Program, while 4.29% of students who were class officers made

the Program. The model predicted the odds that students who were class officers for at least one year were 2.2 times more likely to be selected for the Program (see Table 10).

For student body officers who applied, observed frequencies indicated that 124 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 11 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 130.7$, Selected $f = 4.3$). For students who were not student body officers, 762 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 18 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 755.3$, Selected $f = 24.7$). The relationship between these variables was highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 915) = 12.79$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .12$). The Phi coefficients reported a small effect size (Lee, 2016). A logistic regression was performed to determine the effect being a student body officer had on the likelihood of being selected for the Ambassador Program. The model explained approximately 4.3% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke $R^2$ value) and correctly classified 96.8% of the cases. The model showed that 2.31% of students who were not student body officers were selected for the Program, while 8.15% of students who were student body officers were selected for the Program. The model predicted the odds that students who were student body officers for at least one year were 3.76 times more likely to be selected for the Program (see Table 10).

For student body presidents who applied, observed frequencies indicated that 64 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 11 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 72.6$, Selected $f = 2.4$). For students who were not student body presidents, 822 applicants were not selected for the Program, and 18 were selected (Expected frequencies: Not Selected $f = 813.4$, Selected $f = 26.6$). The results of Fisher's exact test ($p < .001$) indicated a highly significant association between being a student

body president and selection for the Ambassador Program. The Phi coefficient ($\phi = .2$) reports a small effect size (Lee, 2016). A logistic regression was performed to determine the effect being a student body president had on the likelihood of being selected for the Ambassador Program. The model explained approximately 9.2% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke $R^2$ value) and correctly classified 96.8% of the cases. The model showed that 2.14% of students who were not student body presidents were selected for the Program, while 14.67% of students who were student body presidents were selected for the Program. The model predicted the odds that student body presidents were 7.85 times more likely to be selected for the Program (see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Logistic Regression Results for Significant Out-of-State Predictors*

| Predictive factor | *B* | *SE* | Wald | OR | 95% CI | | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | LL | UL | |
| Class officer | .79 | .38 | 4.35 | 2.2 | 1.04 | 4.623 | .037* |
| Student body officer | 1.32 | .4 | 11.24 | 3.76 | 1.73 | 8.14 | <.001* |
| Student body president | 2.06 | .4 | 26 | 7.85 | 3.56 | 17.33 | <.001* |

* indicates significance; *df = 1*

## Results for Research Question Two

The second research question was: Is there a significant relationship between high school size and acceptance into the Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?

### In-State Results

A logistic regression tested the final variable: High school size (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 to align with the scoring system). The relationship between in-state applicants' high school size and selection into the program was not significant, $\chi^2(5, N = 1808) = 5.234$, $p = .388$. Table 11 shows the logistic regression results for each high school size.

**Table 11**

*Logistic Regression Results for In-State High Schools*

| Number of students in graduating class | *B* | *SE* | Wald | OR | 95% CI | | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | LL | UL | |
| 1-99 | -1.22 | 1.01 | 1.45 | .3 | .04 | 2.15 | .23 |
| 100-199 | -.94 | 1.02 | .85 | .39 | .05 | 2.87 | .36 |
| 200-299 | -.42 | .52 | .65 | .66 | .24 | 1.83 | .42 |
| 300-399 | .24 | .25 | .91 | 1.27 | .78 | 2.07 | .34 |
| 400-499 | -.14 | .28 | .25 | .87 | .5 | 1.5 | .62 |
| 500+ | .2 | .23 | .75 | 1.22 | .78 | 1.93 | .39 |

*df = 1*

**Out-of-State Results**

A logistic regression showed that the relationship between out-of-state applicants' high school size and selection into the program was not significant, $\chi^2(5, N = 908) = 3.613$, $p = .606$. Table 12 shows the logistic regression results for each high school size.

**Table 12**

*Logistic Regression Results for Out-of-State High Schools*

| Number of students in graduating class | *B* | *SE* | Wald | OR | 95% CI | | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | LL | UL | |
| 1-99 | -.11 | .55 | .04 | .9 | .31 | 2.62 | .84 |
| 100-199 | -.1 | .5 | .04 | .91 | .34 | 2.42 | .84 |
| 200-299 | .3 | .47 | .42 | 1.35 | .54 | 3.39 | .52 |
| 300-399 | -1.09 | .74 | 2.16 | .34 | .08 | 1.44 | .14 |
| 400-499 | .3 | .47 | .42 | 1.35 | .54 | 3.39 | .52 |
| 500+ | .32 | .47 | .47 | 1.38 | .55 | 3.44 | .49 |

*df = 1*

## Results Summary

The null hypothesis that maxing out in involvement in extracurricular activities, club involvement, community involvement, and first-generation status were not predictors of acceptance into the Logan USU Ambassador program for both in-state and out-of-state first-year students was accepted.

The null hypothesis that being a class officer, a student body officer, or a student body president was not a predictor of acceptance into the Logan USU Ambassador program for both in-state and out-of-state first-year students was rejected.

The null hypothesis that high school size had no effect on acceptance into the program for both in-state and out-of-state first-year students was accepted.

# CHAPTER V

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to determine if factors significantly predicted a student's acceptance into the USU Ambassador Program and to recommend, if needed, changes to the application process to make it more equitable to students of various backgrounds and experiences.

The research questions that drove this study were the following:

1. What variables significantly predict student selection for the USU University Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?
2. Is there a significant relationship between high school size and acceptance into the Ambassador Program for in-state and out-of-state first-year students on the Logan campus?

## Conclusions and Discussion

The ratio of in-state and out-of-state first-year applications was almost exactly 2:1, respectively. However, the ratio of in-state to out-of-state students selected for the Program was almost 3:1.

**Research Question One**

The null hypothesis that maxing out in involvement in extracurricular activities, club involvement, community involvement, and first-generation status were not predictors of acceptance into the Logan USU Ambassador Program for both in-state and out-of-state first-year students was accepted. These factors did not significantly predict acceptance into the Program.

From the standpoint of the application reviewers, it was positive that there was no statistically significant bias to a specific type of involvement between extracurricular, clubs, or community involvement for in-state and out-of-state students. There weren't many students selected for the program that had maxed out points in these categories either, suggesting that a very high level of involvement in these areas is not necessarily what the committee was looking for. There was also no significant relationship between a student's status as a first-generation student and selection into the program for in-state and out-of-state students. That points to the conclusion that first-generation students did not appear to have an advantage or disadvantage in the selection process.

The null hypothesis that being a class officer, a student body officer or a student body president was not a predictor of acceptance into the Logan USU Ambassador Program for both in-state and out-of-state first-year students was rejected. These factors did significantly predict acceptance into the Program.

Students in student government positions dominated the application process. Of the in-state students selected for the Program, over 70% were class officers, and 45% were student body officers. Over half of the students chosen were student body presidents. Class officers also comprised the largest group of out-of-state students

selected, as over half of the applicants selected were class officers. There were equal numbers of student body officers and student body presidents selected among out-of-state students (37.93%).

Since this is a leadership scholarship, it should not be surprising that students in leadership positions were significantly selected more often. However, the data showed that only students in formal student government leadership positions were selected at significantly higher rates. So, a student with leadership experience outside of student government was not significantly more likely to be selected for the Program.

There were many other ways applicants could be involved in leadership (i.e., sports team captains, organization or club presidents, or community involvement leadership) that were combined with non-leadership involvement in those categories on the rubric. None of those categories were significant predictors of selection into the program. For example, if a student was involved in soccer and was a team captain, that would show up as extracurricular points. If a student was a club president, they got additional club points. Pulling leadership out of standard involvement for these activities and changes to how leadership is reported and scored on the rubric could better showcase all types of leadership.

Additionally, the focus on student body presidents and their high selection rate appeared to be taking attention away from other student body officers for in-state students. Students who were class officers were more than twice as likely to be selected than student body officers.

**Research Question Two**

The null hypothesis that high school size had no effect on acceptance into the Program for both in-state and out-of-state students was accepted.

This study defined rural high schools as having up to 299 students per graduating class. During the years studied (2019-2023), students from rural high schools out-of-state applied at higher rates than rural high school students in-state. For high schools with a graduating class of 1-99 students, there were 72 in-state applicants compared to 137 out-of-state applicants, and for high schools with a graduating class of 100-199 students, there were 55 in-state applicants compared to 169 out-of-state applicants. In total, there were 259 applications from rural in-state schools, and there were 1,549 applications from non-rural in-state schools. In contrast, the out-of-state schools were split exactly in half. There were 454 applicants from rural schools and 454 applicants from non-rural schools.

Six in-state students from rural high schools were selected for the Program, and 74 were selected from non-rural schools. Out-of-state, 15 students were selected from rural high schools, and 14 were selected from non-rural high schools.

In Utah, one student was selected for the Ambassador Program from a high school with less than 100 students and one student was selected from a high school with 100-199 students. One of these students was homeschooled, and the other went to a charter high school. This means that in the five years of the study's review, there were no students selected from a traditional public school in Utah that had less than 200 students. These high schools fall under the 1A and 2A classification. However, having just a single student selected from each of those high school sizes was not statistically significant. This turns the conversation to the fact that there was a deficient number of applicants

coming from those high school sizes. The state has 83 rural high schools and 76 non-rural high schools. A lack of applications from over half of the high schools in Utah should be a concern. While further research is needed to diagnose the reason for the application deficit, a possible remedy could be to increase the advertisement of the program and conduct direct contact with high school counseling staff in those high schools to encourage more applications.

Caution should be taken to avoid presuming students from rural high schools should instead apply to be an ambassador at USU Eastern or a Statewide campus since there are fewer students at those campuses, and the applicant pool is much smaller for their Ambassador Programs. Additionally, it should be noted that the Statewide Ambassador Program officially launched in the Spring of 2023 to start in the Fall of 2023 and was not an option for most of the applicants in this dataset. There are programs and opportunities that are only offered on the Logan Campus, and it should not be assumed that a student would be better served at a Regional campus. A student should have an equitable chance of selection for the Logan Program as any other Statewide Program, despite their school size and location. It is true that these students may not hold as much weight when it comes to recruitment power, especially when considering the number of students they could recruit from their school. However, students from this population can relate to a specific demographic of students. They cannot be looked over in the higher education scene as research has proven they have been in the past.

## Limitations

While certain variables proved statistically significant, some effect sizes were small, so caution should be taken when making assumptions about the data. Additionally, as was noted earlier, there are three other components of the initial application and additional stages of the selection process where other factors and biases could affect an applicant's chance of selection. Because this Program does have a recruitment component, arguments as to the weight a student has in their potential to recruit additional students to attend USU, especially from their high school, could be made.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for the Ambassador Application Process

1. Create a separate category on the rubric for all types of leadership. Since only formal student government leadership positions were significant predictors of selection into the Program, there are other ways that students are leaders in their school and community that could be missed. We recommend to the Ambassador Selection Committee to create a separate section on the rubric to showcase the points students get for being a sports team captain, organization or club president or community leader. That way, the reviewer can see if a student was involved in leadership positions in their after-school activities.
2. Automatically advance students to the next round of the selection process if their leadership and/or involvement score reaches a specific benchmark. Taking the above recommendation a step further, another recommendation

would be to have a section on the rubric where all leadership points, including points from student government positions and leadership points from extracurricular, club, and community leadership, are tallied. Then, the Committee would set a benchmark number. If a student reached the benchmark level of leadership points, regardless of school or school size, they would automatically move on to the next round of video reviews. This recommendation could be extended to all involvement points as well. This would give students who were particularly involved a guaranteed second look. Having it based solely on points would keep that part of the process objective. This would also minimize the applications in the initial review portion, so the reviewers could take more time selecting the other applicants.

3. Intentionally advertise the Logan Ambassador Program in rural schools in the state. As the land-grant university of Utah, having program representation across the state should be a priority. Because the larger schools are primarily geographically focused in one central area of the state, if students are only coming from those schools, some areas of the state are not represented in the Program. Making a more considerable effort to promote the program to rural students may increase application yield.
4. When reviewing the initial applications, have a pair of reviewers review the applicants who are all from the same school size for side-by-side comparisons to their peers of similar school experiences. Or remove the high school from the application before the initial review so the school or school size would be unknown to the reviewer and would not play a factor. Also, eliminate points

based solely on high school size, as that is a factor out of a student's control. The data has shown that coming from a large high school doesn't disadvantage those students in terms of involvement or Program selection.

5. Combine points for student body presidents with student body officers on the rubric. This may help eliminate the focus and attention one leadership position is getting in the selection process. An even more radical move would be combining student body presidents with student body officers and class officers and crafting a point benchmark for total student government. This would remove bias toward a singular position and level the playing field for all student government efforts.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

1. Future studies should use this research model for other USU leadership and scholarship programs, such as the Honors Program, the A-Team, or college ambassador teams. The model for this study could serve as a model for other land-grant institutions and other universities with similar leadership/recruitment programs, so they can review their own processes to see if there are reoccurring predictive factors. Recommendations from the study could also be relevant to these populations to help improve their selection processes to be more inclusive to students of all backgrounds and experiences.

2. Since the Ambassador Program has been operating for almost 41 years, this longitudinal research could be expanded to see if predictive factors emerge over a longer period of time that differs from our results.
3. Further research should explore why rural students are not applying for the Ambassador Program. Perhaps it is due to a lack of awareness of the scholarship or that students do not feel competitive for the scholarship. A future study could survey students in rural high schools to determine their understanding of leadership and scholarship opportunities at the college level and identify their level of confidence to be competitive applicants for these opportunities. Other areas of expansion include determining ways for the USU Admissions Office to increase potential applicant confidence, which may include accessible application tutorials or highlighting rural student success at USU. Research should be conducted about how college admissions officers and high schools can better prepare these students for leadership positions in college. Focus groups with rural students, their parents and teachers, and counselors would give invaluable information.
4. A predictive factor analysis could be conducted on the high school or school district to see if there was a relationship between those factors and selection into the Program. This study could also be repeated on the ambassador selection process on the USU Eastern Campus or the Statewide Campuses to determine if there were similar or different predictive factors for ambassador selection on those campuses.

**Recommendations for In-state Rural High School Communities**

1. The Utah State Admissions Office has an Admissions Specialist assigned to every high school in Utah. The Admissions Specialists can answer questions about the admission process, scholarships, and the Ambassador Program. Students, parents, and high school counselors should know who their Admissions Specialist is and use them as an asset. Especially if a parent did not attend college, they may not know where to look for resources and cannot speak to a college experience (Ardoin, 2018). For counselors at rural high schools, understaffing and high employee turnover rates can make it difficult to spend adequate time preparing students for higher education (Showalter et al., 2019). USU Admissions Specialists are available to students, parents, and counselors via email, phone, Zoom, or in person to answer questions and help explain the college admissions process and scholarships. With advanced planning with high school counselors, the Admissions Specialists are willing to make school visits to do presentations or meet individually with students. The admissions specialists' school assignments and contact information are found at www.usu.edu/admissions/contact.
2. There are multiple free on-campus events hosted by the USU Admissions Office for students each year, but two events would be beneficial for students in this population. Leadership Day is an event run by current USU Ambassadors where attendees receive leadership training. All seniors interested in the Ambassador Program would benefit from attending this event because they would get in-person interaction with current ambassadors and

could ask questions about the Program and application process. The second event is College Access and Inclusion Day. This event caters to first-generation students, and attendees participate in activities and workshops that teach about higher education and college preparation. Current ambassadors assist in running this event as well. A College Access and Inclusion Day is also held at the USU Eastern Campus. If traveling to Logan was not a feasible option for a student, but they wanted to attend the Logan Campus as an eventual college student, they could participate in an event at USU Eastern, as staff are trained to talk about all campuses in the USU system. The USU Admissions event schedule can be found at www.usu.edu/admissions/events.

3. Ten USU Open Houses are held across the state each year for high school seniors. Students, parents, and counselors can attend the open houses, talk with Admissions staff about Utah State University and learn about majors and scholarships. Admissions staff are available to help students apply for admission on the spot at these open houses. Current ambassadors are also present at these open houses to talk with students interested in the Program. There is a virtual open house option if students cannot attend an open house in person. Open houses can be found at www.usu.edu/admissions/openhouse.
4. The USU Admissions Office holds one-day counselor conferences for high school counselors at the beginning of each school year. At these conferences, counselors can learn about policy and admission updates for the coming year. There are five conference location options, including a virtual option (www.usu.edu/admissions/counselor/conference). The Admissions Office also

has a resource page specifically for high school counselors and a newsletter with monthly updates that counselors can sign up for (www.usu.edu/admissions/counselor/).

5. Students from rural high schools who desire to attend college and apply for the Ambassador Program will be most successful with support from their community. Support to attend college from parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, and peers increased the likelihood that rural students would enroll and be successful in college (Byun et al., 2012; Means, 2018). Counselors should encourage their students to apply for scholarships and the Ambassador Program, as rural students are more cautious about the cost of higher education (Yang & Venezia, 2020). Students who get a scholarship are more likely to succeed in college (Zacharias & Ryan, 2021). A degree will benefit students for the entirety of their lives. A college degree leads to a higher average income, lower unemployment rates, and more community involvement (Perna, 2005; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017; Ma & Matea, 2023). There were only two in-state students from high schools with up to 199 students in their graduating class who were selected for the Program, but on average, there were only 25 applications (out of an average of 361 total in-state applications) submitted from these school sizes each year. The data showed that out-of-state students from rural high schools applied at approximately the same rate as non-rural out-of-state high school students and were selected for the Program at roughly the same rate. This suggests that if

more in-state students from rural high schools applied, there would be more representation in the Ambassador Program.

## Summary

The University Ambassador Program is a USU leadership, service, and recruitment scholarship program. This longitudinal study determined factors that predicted in-state and out-of-state first-year applicants' selection. Student government involvement was the only type of leadership that predicted acceptance into the Program. Recommendations were made to create a separate category on the rubric to showcase all types of leadership and involvement. While high school size was not a significant predictor of selection, the data showed a deficit of applications from students from rural high schools in Utah. Recommendations were made for rural communities to become more involved with the resources and programs the USU Admissions Office offers and encourage more students to apply for the Ambassador Program. Higher education provides lifetime benefits, and university scholarships should be accessible and attainable for all populations.

# REFERENCES

Ardoin, M. S. (2018). *College aspirations and access in working-class, rural communities: The mixed signals, challenges, and new language first-generation students encounter*. Lexington Books.

Bauch, P. A. (2001). School-community partnerships in rural schools: leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education, 76*(2), 204-221. https://doi.org/ 10.1207/S15327930pje7602_9

Buddin, R. (2014). *First-generation college and low-income families by school location* [Information Brief 2014-16]. ACT. https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Info-Brief-2014-16.pdf

Byun, S-y., Irvin, M. J., & Meece, J. L. (2012). Predictors of bachelor's degree completion among rural students at four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, *35*(3), 463-484. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0023

Byun, S., Meece, J.L. & Agger, C.A. (2017). Predictors of college attendance patterns of rural youth. *Research in Higher Education, 58*, 817–842. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9449-z

Campbell, K. C., & Fuqua, D. R. (2008). Factors predictive of student completion in a collegiate honors program. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 10*(2), 129–153. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.10.2.b

Caruana, E. J., Roman, M., Hernández-Sánchez, J., & Solli, P. (2015). Longitudinal studies. *Journal of Thoracic Disease, 7*(11), E537-540. https://doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2015.10.63

Headden, S. (2019, September 20). In rural America, too few roads lead to college success. *Focus*, (Fall 2019), 2–3. Retrieved March 26, 2024, from https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/focus-fall-2019.pdf.

Hutchins, B. C., Meece, J. L., Byun, S., & Farmer, T. W. (2012). Planning for the future: An investigation of work-bound rural youth. *The Rural Educator, 33*(2), 7-19. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v33i2.414

Lee, C. S. (2012). Influence of community participation of rural students on leadership skill. *Journal of Agricultural Extension & Community Development, 19(*2), 355-380. https://doi.org/10.12653/jecd.2012.19.2.355

Lee D. K. (2016). Alternatives to P value: confidence interval and effect size. *Korean Journal of Anesthesiology, 69*(6), 555–562. https://doi.org/10.4097/kjae.2016.69.6.555

Lynn, R., & Glynn, J. (2019). *Small Town, Big Talent: Identifying and Supporting Academically Promising Students in Rural Areas*. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

Ma, J., & Matea P. (2023). *Education Pays 2023*, New York: College Board. 2023 College Board.

McCarron, G. P., Zhou, S., Campbell, A., Schierbeek, E., & Muscente, K. K. (2022, January). We're not working with a blank slate: Students' pre-college leadership activities and perceived parenting behavior as predictors of college-based leader

emergence and leader self-efficacy. *Journal of Leadership Education, 21*(1), 33-52. https://doi.org/10.12806/V21/I1/R3

Means, D. R. (2018). *Supporting The Pathways to Postsecondary Education For Rural Students Challenges*. National Association for College Admission Counseling. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED611921.pdf

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2019). High School Benchmarks: National College Progression Rates. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019_HSBenchmarksReport_FIN_04OCT19.pdf.

Newlin, M. (2020). Resource guide: Creating an inclusive experience for rural first-generation students. *Center for First-Generation Student Success.* https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/Full_Rural-Student.pdf

Pampel, F. C. (2009). *Logistic regression: A primer*. Sage Publishing.

Park, J.J., & Denson, N. (2013). When race and class both matter: The relationship between socioeconomic diversity, racial diversity, and student reports of cross–class interaction. *Research in Higher Education*, *54*, 725–745. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-013-9289-4

Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2022). 2: Disrupting the discourse of under-representation: The place of rural students in Australian higher education equity policy. In D. Farrugia & S. Ravn (Eds.), *Youth Beyond the City* (pp. 40-56). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529212037.ch002

Peduzzi, P., Concato, J., Kemper, E., Holford, T. R., & Feinstein, A. R. (1996). A simulation study of the number of events per variable in logistic regression

analysis. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, *49*(12), 1373–1379. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0895-4356(96)00236-3

Perna, L. W. (2005). The benefits of higher education: Sex, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic group differences. *The Review of Higher Education*, *29*(1), 23-52. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2005.0073

Petrin, R. A., Schafft, K. A., & Meece, J. L. (2014). Educational sorting and residential aspirations among rural high school students: What are the contributions of schools and educators to rural brain drain? *American Educational Research Journal, 51*, 294-326. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214527493

Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2024). *Rural Students in Higher Education.* https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/RuralStudents_FactSheet_Feb24.pdf

Schultz, P. (2004). Edward W. Chance dissertation award: Upon entering college: First semester experiences of first-generation rural students from agricultural families. *The Rural Educator*, *26*(1), 48 - 51. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v26i1.521eric

Sherif, V. (2018). Voices that matter: Rural youth on leadership. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 3* (2), 311-337. https://doi.org/10.30828/real/2018.2.8

Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). (rep.). *Why Rural Matters 2018-2019: The Time Is Now. A Report of the Rural School and Community Trust.* The Rural School and Community Trust, College Board, School Superintendents Association. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604580.pdf.

Slocum, A., Weekley, B., & Sherfinski, M. (2019). Mind the gap: Parents' efforts to support college-bound students in Appalachia. *High School Journal, 103*(1), 18 - 37. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2020.0001

United State Zip Codes. (2023). *Cities in ZIP code 84329.* https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/84329/

U.S. Department of Agriculture (2017). Rural education at a glance: 2017 edition. *Economic Information Bulletin, 171* (April 2017). https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/83078/eib-171.pdf?v=42830.

USU. (n.d.). *History and Traditions.* Utah State University. Retrieved March 20, 2024, from https://www.usu.edu/about/history/

USU. (n.d.). *Mission statement.* Utah State University. Retrieved March 31, 2023, from https://www.usu.edu/president/mission-statement/

Utah High School Activities Association. (2023). *Regions & Classifications*. UHSAA regions and classifications. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/

Utah State Legislature. (2019, May 14). *Public School Membership in Associations*. Public Education System Local Administration. Retrieved April 15, 2023, from https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title53G/Chapter7/53G-7-S1101.html

Utah State University. (2024). *About USU Ambassadors*. Utah State University Ambassadors. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from https://www.usu.edu/admissions/scholarships/ambassador

Utah System of Higher Education. (2023, March 15). Utah Board of Higher Education Strategic Plan. Retrieved March 31, 2023, from https://ushe.edu/board/strategic-plan/

Yang, L., & Venezia, S. (2020). The impact of financial aid on associate degree attainment for rural community college students: A comparison of rural, urban, and suburban patterns. *Community College Review, 48*(4), 423-454. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552120935975

Yang, S. O. W. (1981, August 19). *Rural Youths' decisions to attend college: Aspirations and realizations.* National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972. Retrieved February 3, 2023, from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED207765

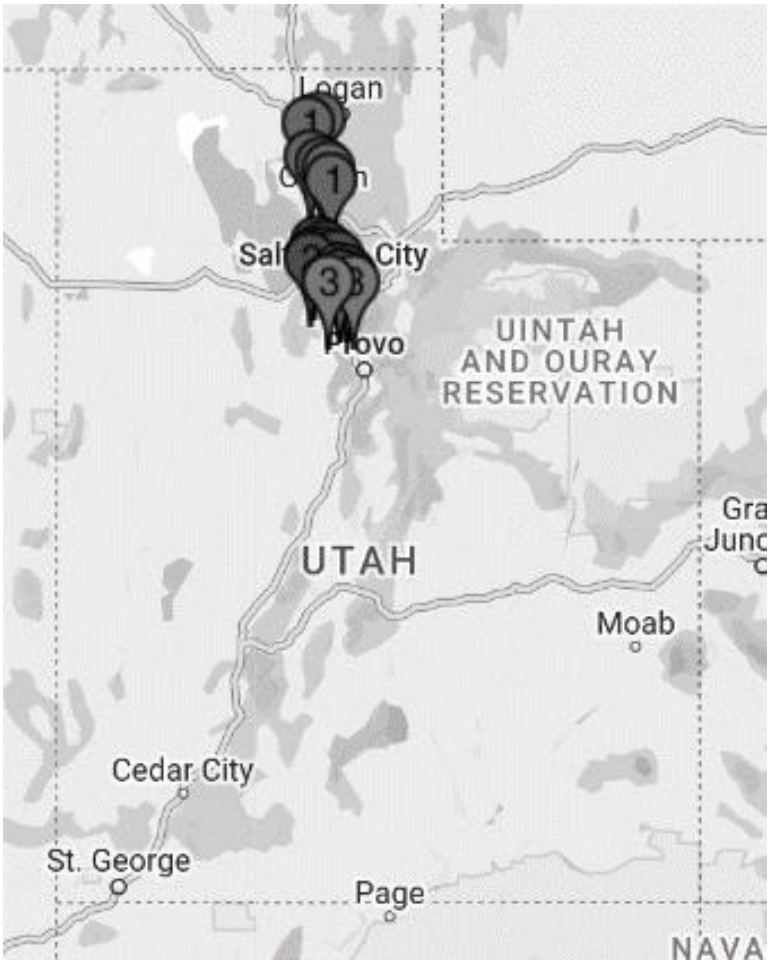
Zacharias, N. & Ryan, J. (2021) Moving beyond ‘acts of faith’: effective scholarships for equity students. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 43*(2), 147-165. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1777499

# APPENDICES

# Appendix A

## Figure 6

*The 16 High Schools in Utah with a 6A Classification*

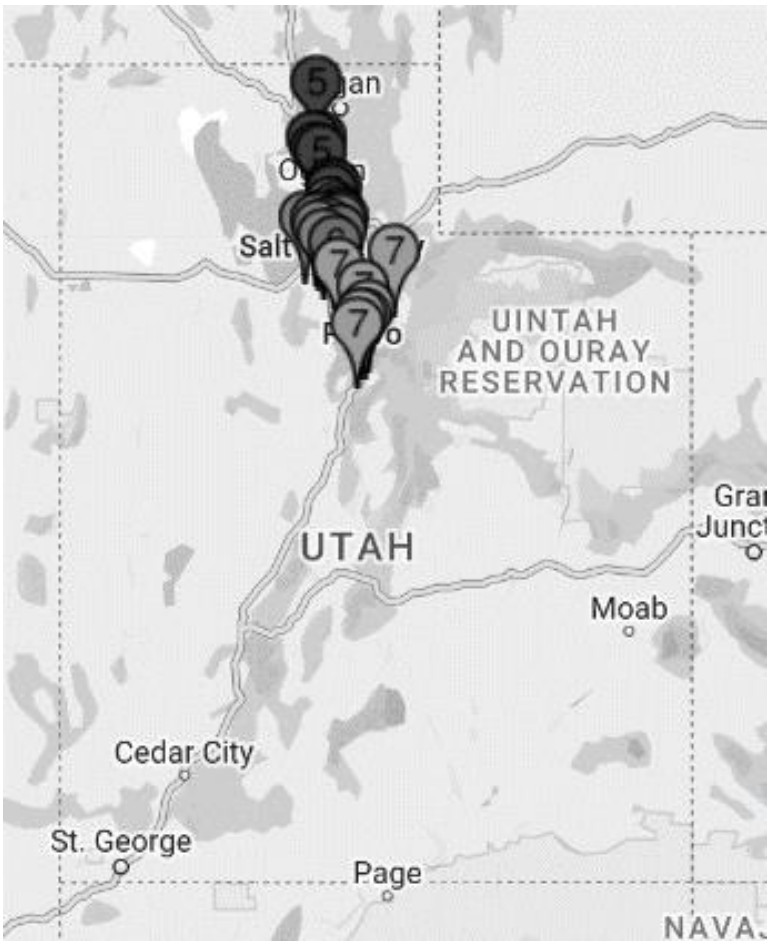



*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region.

From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

**Figure 7**

*The 30 High Schools in Utah with a 5A Classification*

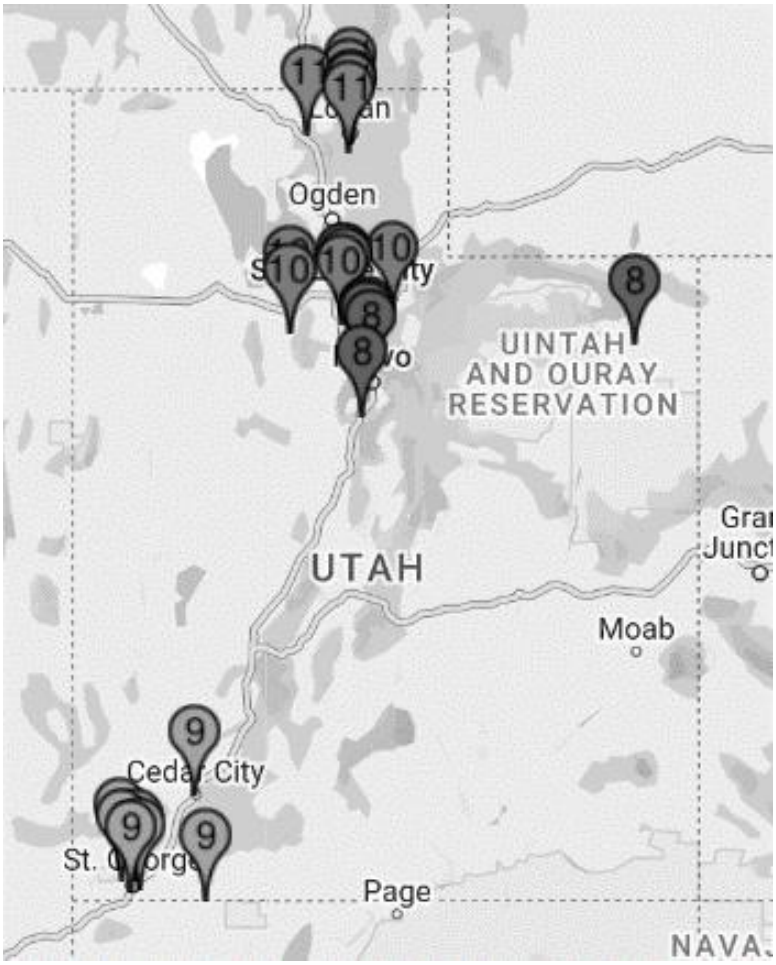



*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region.

From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

**Figure 8**

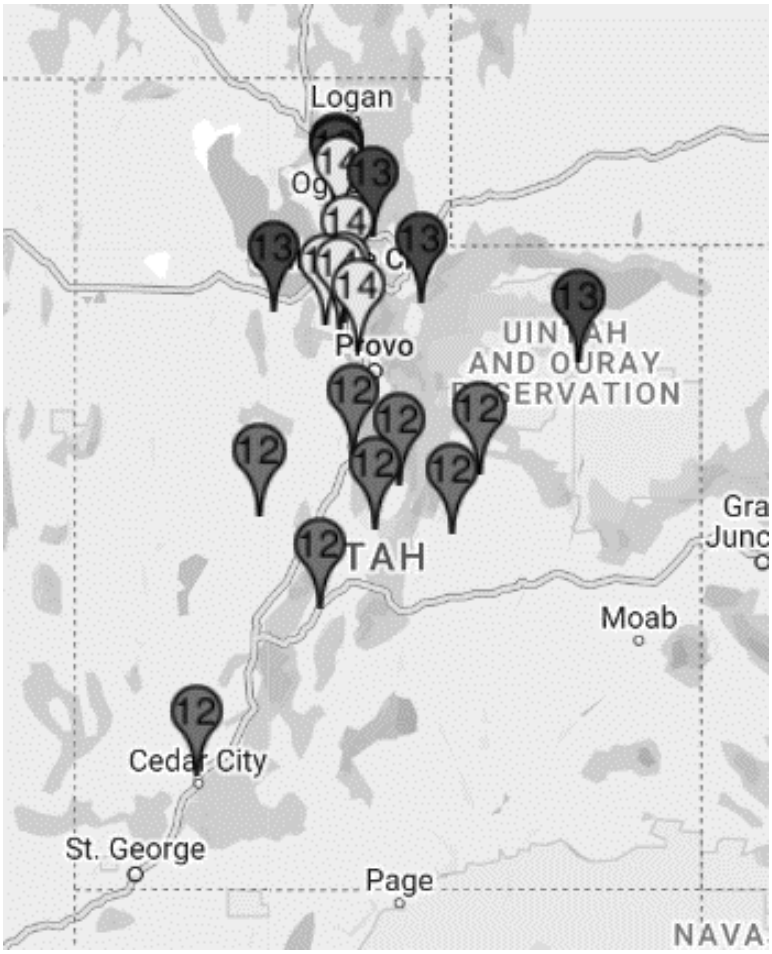
*The 28 High Schools in Utah with a 4A Classification*




*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region.
From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

**Figure 9**

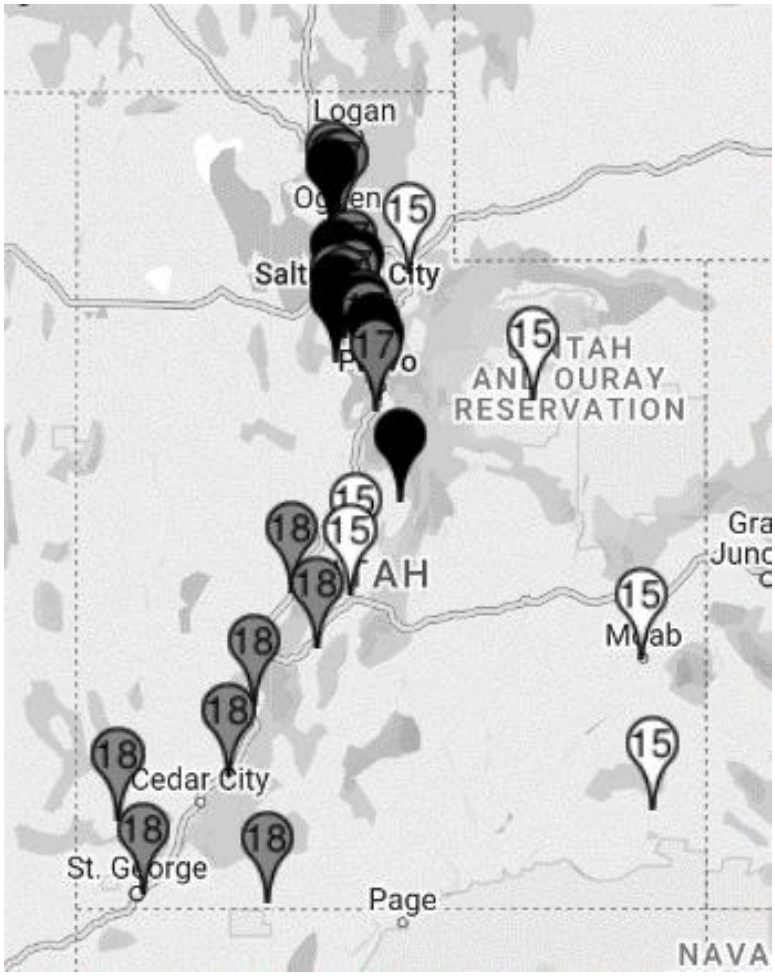
*The 20 High Schools in Utah with a 3A Classification*




*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region.
From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

**Figure 10**

*The 34 High Schools in Utah with a 2A Classification*

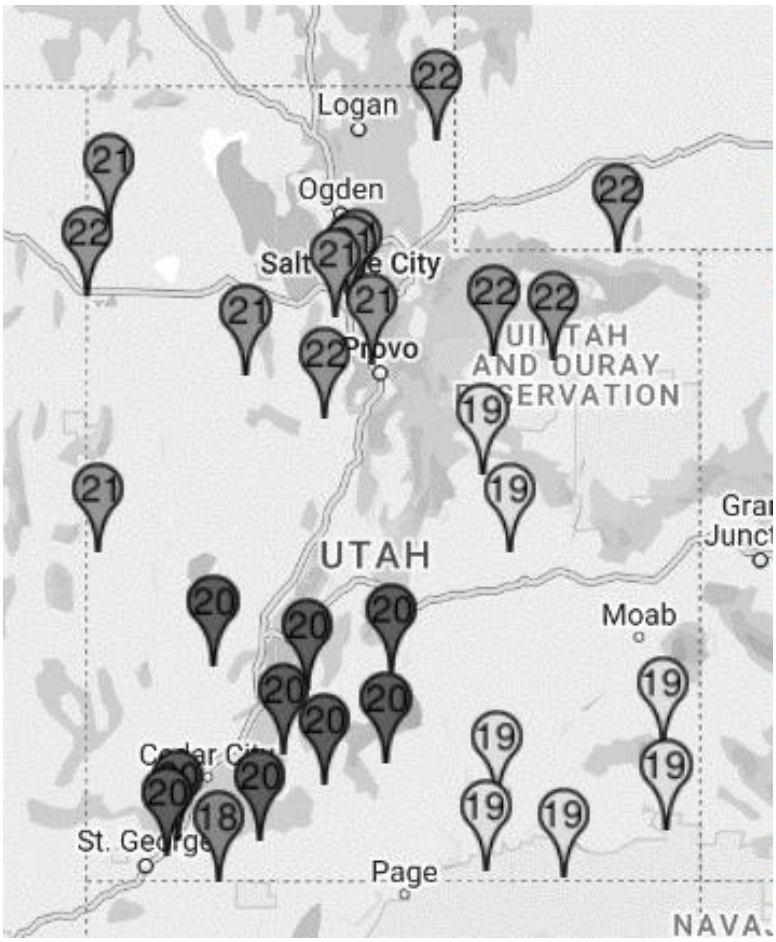



*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region.

From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain.

**Figure 11**

*The 29 High Schools in Utah with a 1A Classification*




*Note.* The numbers represent the high schools' UHSAA region.

From "Regions & Classifications" by Utah High School Activities Association, 2023 (https://www.uhsaa.org/regions/). In the public domain

# Appendix B

**Table 13**

*2024 USU Ambassador Program Application and Rubric*

| Application | Evaluation on rubric |
|---|---|
| Basic applicant information<br>Contact information<br>Parent/Guardian Information | N/A |
| Program Requirements (Resume Section) | |
| Admission Type | Divides student by Admission Type: Incoming First year vs. Incoming Transfer |
| First Generation Status | Not directly evaluated by points on rubric but could play a role in reviewers' decision to advance a student through the process. |
| Number of students in the applicant's senior class | 1-100 = 1 point<br>101-200 = 2 points<br>201-300 = 3 points<br>301-400 = 4 points<br>401-500 = 5 points<br>500+ = 6 points |
| High School and GPA (Auto populated from applicant's USU application, as all students that apply to the program must have previously applied to and been admitted to USU). | Not directly evaluated by points on rubric but could play a role in reviewers' decision to advance a student through the process. |
| Short Essay Questions (2000-character limit)* | |
| What leadership experience has been the most impactful to you? | |
| What leadership quality do you most exemplify? | |
| Why do you want to be an Aggie? | |

| Application | Evaluation on rubric |
|---|---|
| High School Section – School Involvement (Students answer each of the following for Freshman-Senior year) | Students may receive 20 points max for School Involvement. Points do not automatically advance students, but reviewers have been instructed to make it part of the decision to advance a student through the process. Executive Director North said maxing out points helps to balance out students' involvement and helps the committee see if the student is well rounded (personal communication, October 16, 2023). |
| Student Body Officer | 4 points per year, 8 points max |
| Student Body President (Senior year only) | 5 points |
| • Class Officer<br>• Class President | 3 points per year for class officer, 1 additional point per year for class president, 12 points max |
| Appointed Position (Ex. Class delegate, Senator, any position that needs to be applied for within Student Government) | Awarded points per year with a point max |
| Sports:<br>• Athletic team<br>• Team Captain | 1 point per sport, 1 point per team captain, 8 points max |
| Organizations:<br>• Theater<br>• Band<br>• Choir<br>• Debate<br>• Latinos in Action<br>• Orchestra<br>• Leadership Position in any of these organizations | 1 point per organization (3 points Senior year), 1 point per leadership position, 8 points max |

| Application | Evaluation on rubric |
|---|---|
| Clubs:<br>• Clubs (students list clubs)<br>• Club President | 1 point per organization, 1 point per leadership position, 10 points max |
| School Service | Awarded points per year with a point maximum |
| State Officer for State Organization (Senior year only) | Awarded points |
| Other/not listed | Discretionary points can be added by reviewer. |
| High School Section – Community Involvement (Students answer each of the following for Freshman-Senior year) | Students may receive 10 points max for Community Involvement. Points do not automatically advance students, but reviewers' have been instructed to make it part of the decision to advance a student through the process. |
| Ecclesiastical Leadership<br>Girl Scout / Boy Scout<br>Humanitarian Service<br>Youth City Council<br>Best Buddies<br>Work<br>4-H | Awarded points per year per activity with a point maximum |
| Recommendations | |
| High School Counselor | |
| Email of Recommender #1<br>Email of Recommender #2 | |
| Digital Portfolio | |
| Applicants attach a four-page maximum digital/electronic portfolio to their application. Applicants can include pictures, accomplishments, etc. to allow the portfolio to showcase their personality and interests. Videos are not accepted. | |

| Application | Evaluation on rubric |
| --- | --- |
| Additional Information<br><br>Applicants can add any additional information they would like the selection committee to consider. (500-character limit) | |

*Note.* The resume section of the application is highlighted, which housed the data analyzed in this research.

*Questions may change from year to year. These are the questions listed on the 2024 application.

# Appendix C

Research UtahStateUniversity

Certificate of Exemption

From: Ronald Gillam, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Nicole Vouvalis, J.D.
Director of Human Research Protections

To: Marianne Rose Judd-Murray
Date: 2023-11-08
Protocol #: 13951
Title: The USU Ambassador Program: Predictors of Acceptance and Rural High School Representation

Your proposal has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board and is approved under Exempt procedure(s) Exemption 4 (based on the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human research subjects, 45 CFR Part 46, as amended to include provisions of the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, January 21, 2019):

> Secondary research using identifiable private information or biospecimens, if publicly available, unidentifiable or de-identified, or involving only the investigator's use of identifiable health information when that use is regulated under HIPAA or FERPA.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file for the period of approval specified in the protocol. The expiration date matches your project completion date set in the Procedures section of your protocol. It is eligible for up to five years of exemption, at which point, it will be closed and a new exemption will need to be requested.

Any change affecting human subjects, including extension of the expiration date, must be approved by the IRB **prior** to implementation by submitting an Amendment request. Injuries or any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board. If Non-USU Personnel will complete work on this project, they may not begin until an External Researcher Agreement or Reliance Agreement has been fully executed by USU and the appropriate Non-USU entity, regardless of the protocol approval status here at USU.

Prior to involving human subjects, properly executed informed consent must be obtained from each subject or from an authorized representative, and documentation of informed consent must be kept on file for at least three years after the project ends. Each subject must be furnished with a copy of the informed consent document for their personal records.

Upon receipt of this memo, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (435) 797-1821 or email to irb@usu.edu. The IRB wishes you success with your research.