PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE ON UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS
Final Report

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

The Presidential Task Force on Undergraduate Admissions was convened by President Martha E. Pollack in November 2022 to develop and recommend university-wide undergraduate admissions policies and specific principles of practice to support our eight undergraduate admitting colleges in recruiting and enrolling academically excellent classes in ways that support and advance Cornell's unique ethos and mission.

For 158 years, Cornell has been defined by its radical founding ambition: to be a world-class university distinguished both by its embrace of students from all backgrounds, and by its core belief that the educational experience of the student, and the forward progress of society, are advanced by a broadly diverse student body. That ambition coupled with Cornell's broad excellence across many fields of study have been central to Cornell's identity, and to its global reputation for academic preeminence, ever since.

The work of Cornell's admissions offices are key to realizing that vision: determining which of the tens of thousands of students who annually vie for a place in Cornell's entering class are best prepared along multiple dimensions, and to contribute the most to Cornell's academic community and to society.

While Cornell's goal for admissions as informed by this ethos has remained steadfast since its founding, a continuously changing educational landscape—reflecting changes in society, technology, and educational practice from the massive to the mundane—demands regular review of the policies and practices on which admissions decisions are based. The specific work undertaken by the task force is part of that broader commitment, and of Cornell's ongoing obligation to periodically review its admissions processes under the current legal framework. As such, the work of the task force was designed to thoroughly explore, and then recommend, the mission-directed admission policies and best practices that would most effectively and appropriately build undergraduate classes at Cornell[1]. This includes work to ensure that Cornell remains at the leading edge of an effort, now widely supported across highly competitive colleges and universities, to make topflight higher education available to individuals who have historically been excluded from that education and the lifelong advantages it confers.

The task force was comprised of Cornell faculty members and senior administrators with expertise in education and related fields, who met weekly over the course of six months. In addition to administrators, and admissions and enrollment management specialists, the task force members were selected for their expertise in a range of complementary academic fields, including behavioral research, finance and household finance, communication and social media, literature, operations research, machine learning and data science, modeling and analysis, economics (including the economics of higher education), diversity and inclusion in organizations, mathematics, income inequality, and the impact of educational decisions on young people.

The task force studied the relevant literature, including the university's previous reports on admissions, and consulted with national experts from the University of Southern California, the University of Florida, the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and the Common App. The task force actively sought feedback from the community on various aspects of admissions. In addition to soliciting input via an email address for community comments, the task force held extensive interviews with Cornell's admissions officers and financial aid office staff. Multiple surveys were also conducted: with faculty, to understand the characteristics and experiences they wish to see in the student body; with Cornell admissions officers, to gather their professional expertise; and with 170 student organizations that were recommended by the colleges to speak to aspects of a diverse student body. Results of a tabletop discussion with members of Cornell's Board of Trustees were also reviewed.

---

[1] The task force, however, recognized the changes in the current legal landscape resulting from the June 2023 SCOTUS decisions on race-conscious admission practices as it finalized this report.

In undertaking its work, the task force members were divided into three subcommittees according to the topics listed in the president's charge: characteristics of the student body; appropriate use of data analytics and machine learning in admissions work; and pipeline recruitment, and retention. Time did not allow the task force to specifically address the fourth topic in the charge: what research protocols should be designed to assess the effectiveness of the recommended principles of practice.

The task force also received a preliminary analysis of the current practices with test-free or test-optional admissions that is ongoing among Cornell's colleges. Given the very preliminary nature of the current data, the task force recommends that additional data be collected and analyzed.

2. SUMMARY OF CORNELL'S UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS CYCLE

The annual admissions cycle occurs in three phases: recruitment, selection, and yield. The primary goal of recruitment is not necessarily to cultivate more applications for Cornell, but to attract the attention of populations of students that Cornell seeks to enroll.

The Office of Undergraduate Admissions and each of the colleges/schools engage in outreach recruitment. Modes of outreach recruitment involve in-person and virtual information sessions, application workshops, and travel by admissions officers to specific regions to visit high schools and participate in college fairs. The predominant form of recruitment, however, remains email messages to a variety of constituent populations including high school students and their families; high school teachers and guidance counselors; staff of Community Based Organizations (CBOs); and prospective transfer students.

Selection is managed almost entirely within the colleges/schools. Admissions staff in each of the colleges and schools review thousands of applications in the process of making admissions decisions. Each year, there are several times more applicants whom we expect would be successful at Cornell than there are places in the incoming class; thus, admissions staff make selection decisions with an eye toward building a college/school class and overall student body comprised of students that reflect the desired diversity of strengths, backgrounds, and academic interests aligning with our mission, goals, and priorities. For Fall 2023, Cornell received 71,164 undergraduate applications to fill a target class size of 3,533.

Finally, yield involves connecting very directly with admitted students in an effort to encourage each admitted student to enroll at Cornell. Like recruitment, a variety of strategies are deployed to help admitted students understand Cornell and to inspire them to enroll. Also

similar to recruitment, yield activities and strategies include prioritizing activities that focus on building a diverse entering class.

From an organizational perspective, each college and school has their own embedded admissions unit; the university's central admissions unit is the Undergraduate Admissions Office (UAO). The colleges and schools manage their own application review and selection processes while also administering, to varying degrees, their own recruitment and yield activities. UAO oversees university-wide recruitment and yield functions, while also managing the critically important application operations unit. UAO also includes staff who develop and deploy the Slate system. Slate is the CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software system Cornell uses to manage recruitment, selection, and yield processes.

a) First-year admissions

Cornell currently deploys a well-established and widely used first-year admissions process composed of two rounds: Early Decision (ED) and Regular Decision (RD). The ED application deadline is November 1 annually, with decisions shared with applicants in mid-December. The ED Financial Aid (FA) deadline typically occurs in the third week of November so that admitted applicants can receive their FA awards shortly after being notified of admission. The Regular Decision (RD) application deadline is January 2 annually, with decision release in the final days of March.

Both ED and RD application reading seasons are intense because of the growing number of applications each Cornell college and school receives each year. The kick-off dates for the beginning of application reading season varies slightly by college/school but reading typically begins in late October or early November. All colleges and schools, large and small, read intensively through the late fall and into late March.

For RD applicants, the FA application deadline is February 15th annually. Ideally, FA begins reviewing FA applications of admitted applicants around February 1, but the bulk of FA reviews will occur in March as admissions decisions are finalized by the colleges and schools. The timeliness of FA packaging depends not just on the capacity of the office to review all applications but also on the accurate completion of required documentation by applicants.

April is yield month, with enrollment growing over the course of the month toward the May 1st RD tuition deposit deadline. "Cornell Days" are the official on-campus yield events, but a range of yield strategies are deployed in addition to Cornell Days in order to matriculate the first-year class. During the month of April, yield estimates (i.e., what is the probability that an RD-

admitted applicant will enroll?) are calculated regularly based upon a variety of yield values that vary from population to population. This assessment informs which, if any, of the colleges and schools need to utilize their waiting lists (WL) in order to meet their overall enrollment goals. The WL can be utilized as early as the third week of April and as late as early June. Applicants admitted from the WL who are not applying for FA have five business days from the date of admissions notification to enroll. Admitted WL applicants who are applying for FA have five business days from receipt of their FA award to enroll.

ACTION	ED DATES	RD DATES	WL DATES
NOTIFICATION	Typically, December 15. Accepted applicants have until 1/15 (or the first business day after 1/15 in case of holidays) to submit a deposit.	Typically, March 30.[2] Accepted applicants have until May 1 to submit a deposit (if they have received a FA award by May 1 or have not applied for FA).	Typically, between the third week of April and early June. WL offers of admission are contingent upon overall enrollment, which is monitored from the RD notification date in late March until the FY class is fully in place (which may take until June). WL offers are made as needed with offers going out on Tuesday of each week until the class is complete.
FA SENT	Shortly after admissions notification in mid-December for applicants who have a completed FA application. ED FA application deadline	Shortly after admissions notification in late March for applicants who have a completed FA application. RD FA	FA awards are delivered to admitted WL applicants as soon as possible after an official offer of admission has been made.

[2] The Cornell Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration has two RD notification dates: one in late February and one on the common Ivy notification date in late March.

	is approximately 11/20 annually.	application is 2/15 annually.	
COMMITMENT TO CORNELL, which is signaled by the submission of a deposit.	Applicants have until 1/15 (or the first business day after 1/15 in case of holidays) to submit a deposit.	Applicants have until 5/1 to submit a deposit.	Five days after receipt of FA offer or five days after an admit offer if not applying for FA.

External transfer admissions

All eight colleges and schools enroll external transfer students. Six of the colleges and schools offer fall and spring transfer admission. Two colleges (The Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management and the College of Engineering) offer transfer admission for fall only. Some enter as "transfer option" students; these are select applicants who are not offered admission during the regular admissions cycle for incoming first-year students but given an option to complete an abbreviated application to be admitted as sophomores, conditional on meeting explicit criteria during their first year of college elsewhere. For Fall 2023, 586 transfer option students were offered admission and 248 regular external transfer students were offered admission.

Internal transfer admissions

All eight colleges and schools' admissions units manage the internal transfer process whereby enrolled Cornell students migrate within the university from one college or school to another. Each year approximately 3% of the total Cornell undergraduate population (approximately 500 students) transfers internally at Cornell.

3. RECOMMENDED PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

As specified in the task force charge and informed by the university's founding principles and core values, Cornell admitting units aspire to:

- recruit a class of the appropriate size that is diverse across a range of different categories and that exhibits excellence across a broadly diverse range of attributes
- advance compliance with applicable accreditation standards
- ensure compliance with all current legal requirements

We propose the following, general **principles of practice** to help guide the partnership between central and college-level admissions offices:

> ***Recognize the need to be agile.*** Cornell must strengthen its capacity to anticipate and respond effectively to evolving external and internal demands. At a minimum, this requires:
>
> - Connecting units intentionally (both through human relationships and integrated data structures) so that expertise and vision are not siloed or obscured.
> - Identifying the functions/roles in which flexible capacity is essential for responding to changing needs to ensure business continuity (e.g., seasonal readers for admissions, reassignment of college staff to university-level duties during the off-season, etc.)
> - Investing in what professional staff need to be effective (e.g., professional development, role clarity, access to dynamic data, operational improvements, etc.)
> - Nurturing a strong and collaborative culture that supports experimentation, assessment, and iteration with full leadership support.

Many of the task force recommendations focus on principles to guide future work, with some suggestions for how to implement the principles. Further input will be needed from admissions professionals across central and college/school units to refine and prioritize these recommendations. We encourage experimentation coupled with careful data collection and analysis with the goal of evaluating the impact of pilot interventions and other changes so that the most effective strategies can be identified and augmented.

> ***Be mindful of the appropriate balance between central coordination and local discretion***. While there is much to be gained by clarifying university-wide priorities and aligning unit activities to those priorities (e.g., university- and college-level enrollment goals; recruitment of veterans; regulatory protocols; application processing), it is critical to maintain flexibility for the colleges/schools to pursue their local priorities, where appropriate (e.g., the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences' recruitment of applicants from farm families; or the evaluation of aptitude or preparedness for certain majors, such as architecture or the performing arts).

In addition, there remains a need to move away from blanket suggestions of centralization and instead develop a more nuanced, shared understanding of the

admissions goals and processes for which greater integration across colleges and UAO would be beneficial and why, and the collaborative structures that are best suited to achieve those goals. For example, some have in the past suggested that Cornell should consider centralizing admissions such that students apply for admission to the university rather than specific college/schools. Here, the underlying issue that such a reorganization would be presumed to address is not clear. Even if the admissions process were fully centralized, applications would still need to be sorted to specific readers (e.g., for their familiarity with regional conditions and high schools or their disciplinary foci) to facilitate efficient and high-quality review, thereby recreating the division of labor that currently exists across colleges.

If the underlying goal is to realize greater synergies across colleges in recruiting, alternative strategies that would be better suited should be considered, such as, for example, the creation of cross-college regional teams to oversee recruitment and yield efforts within their regions, nurture relationships with strategic partners, and serve as the primary Cornell contacts for the region.

If instead the goal is to make it easier for applicants who might in the current structure find it challenging to figure out to which college/school they should apply to study a discipline that is represented across majors and colleges/schools, a university-wide collaborative effort to develop information sessions by broad fields of interest (e.g., biological sciences at Cornell; business and economics at Cornell) rather than by college/school alone may be a better suited solution. Overall, we expect that the majority of the recommendations in this report will be best served by hybrid approaches.

Accept that new institutional investments may be needed. In an era where enrollment precision is critical to the core mission of the university, Cornell must assess where investments are needed for units to not merely function satisfactorily, but perform with excellence as the standard, not the exception. It is essential that the use of all resources be assessed and aligned clearly and explicitly with the University's core values, mission, and strategic priorities. Some of the recommendations of the task force will require historical approaches to be replaced with new ones, while others can only be implemented with new investments in staff resources and technology, particularly in light of the substantial increase in application volume over the last twenty or so years. This increase has created significant strain for admissions units, as they not only review completed applications but also field inquiries from prospective students and families, high school counselors, and external partners.

4. TASK FORCE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In her charge to the task force, President Pollack asked for a thorough and wide-ranging examination of the processes and administrative structures devoted to undergraduate admissions at Cornell. Given the extensive scope of the charge, the task force formed three subcommittees, which each worked on a major topic outlined in the charge document. Each subcommittee met in alternating weeks to discuss ideas and findings gleaned from conversations with admissions officers, education experts, and external speakers, as well as from analysis of relevant research and data. They shared their findings at biweekly, large-group meetings.

Charge #1. What applicant characteristics or indicators should be prioritized to craft a class that furthers the university's mission and yields the educational benefits of a diverse student body? How should these characteristics be determined and used as selection criteria?

In developing its recommendations on Charge #1, the task force identified attributes and life experiences that Cornell should prioritize for recruitment to fulfill its objective of crafting a diverse and exceptionally talented student body. These were informed by input from faculty response to the task force's survey, along with individual conversations and interviews with external experts. These characteristics included those identified by faculty that enhanced the educational experience in their classrooms, and that maintain and enhance Cornell's position as the "Mobility Ivy" and allow for recruiting students who have already reached exceptional levels of academic attainment and accomplishments in other areas; have demonstrated exceptional achievement given their opportunities before applying to Cornell; and demonstrate excellent potential for further academic success and growth.

The recommendations of the task force for Charge #1 are as follows:

1. Identify and recruit students who show the following attributes/life experiences that have been identified as enriching the educational experience in the classroom:

  a) Academic achievement, and achievement in other areas
  b) Inquiry: intellectual rigor, passion, curiosity, creativity, exploration
  c) Distance traveled: overcoming obstacles or barriers; experience working part time; overcoming feelings of isolation or disempowerment, headwinds, invisibility, struggles
  d) Persistence: grit, resilience, perseverance, focus

e) <u>Community orientation</u>: demonstrate kindness, demonstrate compassion, teamwork focus, impact, pride in culture or heritage, situational awareness, service, engagement

f) <u>Leadership</u>: influential, trend-setter, lights up room

g) <u>Knowledge of and appreciation for Cornell's unique history and mission</u>

Implementing this recommendation will call for comprehensive training of admissions staff and readers to consistently identify these characteristics in application materials.

2. **Implement changes to the application form** that facilitate identification and recruitment of academically talented students from broad range of backgrounds:

a) The application form currently asks students if at least one parent or caretaker has a college degree. Include a more fine-grained measure that asks students if a parent or primary caretaker has a college degree (as is currently on the application) and if a parent or primary caretaker has a graduate or professional degree.

b) Add an open-field question that asks students about the jobs or occupations of their parent(s) or primary caretaker(s).

c) Applicants should only be asked for three extracurricular activities to emphasize quality over quantity, encourage students to be more thoughtful in their essay prompts about a smaller number of extracurriculars, and reduce stress in the application process.

d) Add a question that asks applicants about how they would contribute to our core mission and/or core values. So as not to increase the burden on applicants, we recommend replacing an existing question with this question and ideally requiring a response to collect constant data. This recommendation includes ensuring that there is broad outreach on how applicants would understand and respond to this prompt.

Proposed New Cornell University Essay Question:

When creating the university in the aftermath of the Civil War, Ezra Cornell wrote, "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." We remain committed to the importance of diversity in our educational mission. Explain how your life experiences, particularly with a community that is important to you, will enrich our "... any person ..." ethos. We encourage you to think about community broadly. This could include family, school, or larger social circles.

Charge #2. What, if any, are the appropriate uses of data analytics and machine learning technology as a tool to enhance the holistic and individualized review of all applications?

The task force outlines responsible ways of using machine learning tools and data science techniques to support and optimize recruitment, admissions, and retention processes. For purposes of outreach and recruitment, data science (DS) can be used to customize information relayed to individual students to increase their likelihood of applying to and matriculating at Cornell. For instance, research shows that providing information about available financial support to high academic ability students who are underrepresented in higher education can increase their probability of attending.[3] Estimating financial support can be challenging given the absence of detailed financial information in student applications. Research shows that it is possible to draw on information gleaned from six questions on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form about family income and family composition to explain 83% of the variation in expected family contribution (EFC).[4] This means that, with only a small set of variables, aid information could be estimated effectively for individual students. With these variables, UAO could provide this information directly to students or create a simple website/interface where students could enter six variables and receive an estimate of their financial aid. Another promising approach involves using DS to reach out to students and counselors from high schools from which Cornell has not historically received applications.[5] DS can be deployed to leverage a wealth of available data on student achievement (e.g., administrative schooling data from NYS), the composition of schools, and neighborhood composition to enhance recruitment efforts at the individual and school levels.[6]

In admissions proper, DS can help staff prioritize their time and attention as they negotiate the massive increase in student applications seen at Cornell and other peer institutions in recent years. A recent study discusses the use of a predictive algorithm developed by the admissions office of a selective U.S. institution that was designed to assist staff in preparing the growing

---

[3] A number of recent studies highlight the power of recruiting, and of providing clear and transparent information about financial aid/pricing to students: Dynarski, Susan, CJ Libassi, Katherine Michelmore, and Stephanie Owen. 2021. "Closing the Gap: The Effect of Reducing Complexity and Uncertainty in College Pricing on the Choices of Low-Income Students." American Economic Review, 111 (6): 1721-56; Rodney J. Andrews, Scott A. Imberman, Michael F. Lovenheim, "Recruiting and supporting low-income, high-achieving students at flagship universities." Economics of Education Review, February 2020; Hoxby, Caroline M., and Sarah Turner. 2015. "What High-Achieving Low-Income Students Know about College." American Economic Review, 105 (5): 514-17.

[4] Susan M. Dynarski and Judith E. Scott-Clayton, "The Cost of Complexity in Federal Student Aid: Lessons from Optimal Tax Theory and Behavioral Economics." National Tax Journal 59. 2 (2006).

[5] For example, both Hoxby and Turner (2013) and Dynarski et al. (2021) use test score data from the College Board (e.g., PSATs) combined with neighborhood level data from the US Census to identify low-income, high-achieving students. Andrews, Imberman, and Lovenheim (2020) study a program in Texas that targeted schools that have large URM populations and send few students to UT-Austin.

[6] Databases that can be harnessed for this purpose include Landscape and data from the Office of Civil Rights.

pool of applications received following the college's shift to test-optional admissions.[7] The algorithm enhanced human review by optimizing time, effort, and resources in the early stages of building the incoming student class. DS algorithms of the kind described in this study are trained on, and thus reflect, patterns of decision-making displayed by admissions officers over past admissions cycles. They are, in other words, descriptive of past decision-making and not prescriptive. As the composition of the application pool changes, for instance because of changing demographics, the use of DS would need to be regularly recalibrated to ensure that techniques accurately track changing admissions staff priorities. In this regard, it is important to note that DS tools can play a valuable role in helping prepare and manage the application pool but are not suitable for recommending or predicting admissions decisions, which remain the sole purview of human staff. In admissions processes, DS can also help staff identify individual applicants who possess specific characteristics. This would involve training DS tools to glean a range of information from the application materials students submit through the Common App. Especially students' primary and supplemental essays, as well as letters of recommendations provided by teachers and counselors, offer rich textual sources that lend themselves to mining for information that reflects the university's admissions principles. Several recent studies suggest that prompts for college-specific supplemental essays can be customized to at once elicit and more easily extract information about specific student experiences from application materials.[8]

Data science can further be used to identify matriculating students who, based on their academic preparation and potential for success, are highly deserving of admission to Cornell, but would benefit from additional support to manage the transition to college during their first year. We know that positive academic experiences early on are key to a student's successful academic trajectory. By drawing on data on individual student and high school performance, data science techniques can help identify effective interventions to support strong academic performance in the first year.[9] More generally, there is an important opportunity to harness DS tools in the holistic assessment of the overall student experience at Cornell, including

---

[7] Lee, H., Kizilcec, R. F., & Joachims, T. (2023). Evaluating a Learned Admission-Prediction Model as a Replacement for Standardized Tests in College Admissions. In Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Learning at Scale.

[8] As the UAO and the individual admissions offices consider changing or refining their prompts to obtain essays that are customizable to DS uses, it is important to keep in mind that soliciting additional information to glean on student experiences may pose additional obstacles that disproportionately affect certain demographic groups of applicants. The current application process is complex and time-consuming; the complexity of its design can make it more difficult to negotiate for students with fewer resources and less sociocultural capital. It is imperative that the potential benefits resulting from changes aimed at eliciting additional information be weighed against the need to keep application processes accessible and user-friendly.

[9] For example, see Dawson, S., Jovanovic, J., Gašević, D., & Pardo, A. "From prediction to impact: Evaluation of a learning analytics retention program." In proceedings of the seventh international learning analytics & knowledge conference (2017).

evaluating how different groups of students fare in their overall academic trajectory, and to use the information to better guide recruitment and admissions processes.[10]

Given Cornell's decentralized admissions system, data science techniques will need to be customized to cater to the different missions, sizes, and student body compositions of its eight admitting colleges and schools. Ongoing evaluation and oversight of the use of data science in recruitment, admissions, and student support processes are of critical importance to validate these processes and ensure evidence-based decision making. Human coding is essential for machine learning training sets and will require resources to implement at the university and college levels.

The recommendations of the task force for Charge #2 are as follows:

1. **Data-informed decision making:** To every extent possible, decision making should be informed by data. Where critical data do not currently exist, investments should be made in gathering and integrating such data in decision making:

   a) Hire professional specialists to form a **permanent data science research and operations team**, housed in Institutional Research and Planning (IRP), whose mandate will be to develop and implement data-driven solutions to further the university's admissions and enrollment goals in support of its educational mission and ensure that our use of data is compliant with privacy and legal parameters.

   b) **Create a Cornell Advisory Board for Educational Data (CAB-ED)** tasked with:
      (1) advising on the implementation of data-driven evaluation techniques in recruitment to explore a) what data sources will be helpful, and b) what kinds of ethical, privacy, and legal ramifications will flow from their use?
      (2) advising on a) assessment of evidence of changes in admissions, yield, and other outcomes impacted by new data science processes, b)

---

[10] In this regard see Kizilcec et al, "From Pipeline to Pathways in the Study of Academic Progress," *Science,* vol. 380 (2023): 344-47. Holistic measures of student success at Cornell can be articulated by leveraging a wealth of data from different sources whose cross-referencing and integration present a unique opportunity to coherently inform recruitment, admissions, and retention, including: application data (Common App); high school data (Landscape, Office of Civil Rights); financial aid data; Cornell data (course enrollments, major/minor declaration, grades, Canvas LMS, athletics, student life, housing, internships); Incoming Freshman and Senior surveys overseen by IRP; CU surveys; first destinations survey (Cornell Career Services); external career datasets that contain information about students' post-graduation career paths (e.g. from LightCast, LinkedIn).

opportunities for further research regarding admissions data and outcomes, c) evaluation and audit of data science processes used for admissions to ensure intended outcomes are upheld.

Charge #3. Which pipeline, recruitment, and retention programs should be prioritized across the individual admitting units to generate the maximum impact on undergraduate student body diversity and the educational benefits that derive therefrom?

The task force recommends a number of ways of identifying and recruiting academically talented students from underserved communities who might not on their own consider applying to or matriculating at Cornell for various reasons (e.g., their high school has not historically sent students to Cornell; they fear that Cornell's financial package may not adequately cover their needs; the application process poses barriers; etc.). The task force provides below an extensive list of measures aimed at identifying highly qualified prospective applicants who might not otherwise apply (for instance by partnering with community-based organizations and community colleges); developing effective messaging plans (for instance by simplifying financial-aid messaging and leveraging alumni for recruitment); facilitating student readiness at Cornell, for instance through pre-college summer programs and online Cornell courses; improving yield through earlier outreach to admitted students and campus visits; and assessing interventions through an ongoing review of targeted recruitment efforts.

Foundational recommendations

The following foundational recommendations are focused on structures and investments without which the action recommendations that follow are unlikely to succeed.

1. **Develop and nurture collaborative structures for decision making.** In the absence of collaborative structures for decision making, the collective talents and expertise of the admissions community will be underutilized. There is much to be gained by using the university's strategic priorities as a guide for creating collaborative structures involving professional staff across UAO and the colleges/schools to, for example:

    a. Leverage regional expertise across colleges to refine recruiting strategies and collaboratively develop/nurture relationships with specific high schools and community partners, and staff high priority recruiting trips.

    b. Identify needed process improvements, including collaboration guidelines that clarify roles and responsibilities related to specific initiatives, shared timelines and planning structures, and professional development needs.

c. Work on special projects (e.g., provide user input about needed Slate functionality and design, and test specific pilot interventions, etc.).

2. **Data-informed decision making:** To every extent possible, decision making should be informed by expert data analysis. Where critical data do not currently exist, investments should be made in gathering and integrating such data into decision making. At the same time, it is critical to determine where privacy concerns could be infringed upon by the collection of data and/or the dissemination of data, even to decision makers whose actions could be appropriately informed by it. For the collective work of the admissions community, optimizing data-informed decision making may necessitate:

    a. The acquisition and integration of data not previously used to inform decisions (see recommendation I-A below for a specific example)

    b. Greater involvement of analysts from Institutional Research and Planning

    c. Integration of relevant data into and from Slate, both to expand information available to admissions readers and to enable more nuanced analyses (e.g., impact of recruiting interventions, relationship between financial aid and yield, etc.)

    d. More transparent and iterative data-sharing practices across units involved in admissions and enrollment management (as appropriate), with shared guides about how data will be recorded, documented, analyzed, shared, and used to inform strategic planning and regular decision making.

    e. Ensuring that there are no critical data points that are visible only to a single individual (e.g., deposit extension requests, post-offer status of financial aid packaging)

    f. Real-time analysis of admissions lifecycle

3. **Expand functionality of and increase college-level involvement with Slate.** Slate is the CRM adopted by the university to manage all aspects of recruitment, selection, yield, and enrollment planning and management.

    a. **Evaluate staff resources**: Cornell should benchmark Slate staffing needs against similarly positioned universities to better understand the investments that are needed to deploy Slate more fully and effectively. Estimates are that we are currently only using 10% of Slate's capacity. Currently, demands for the small Slate team to develop admissions structures for Cornell Tech and Weill Cornell Medicine (and likely more graduate/professional student units) seriously limit

their capacity to expand the functionality that is needed for UG admissions and enrollment management.

b. **Expand functionality**. Admissions staff across both UAO and the colleges and schools should be involved as partners in the development and design of Slate tools and functionality (e.g., similar to the user group model used in the implementation of the SalesForce Advising Portal).

c. **Increase college involvement**: Access to Slate has been tightly restricted as a means of mitigating risk. As soon as bandwidth allows, the Slate team should provide opportunities for college officers to be trained on safe Slate use and access to Slate tools and apply their specialized expertise to manipulate data to engage in more nuanced recruiting, selection, and yield activities. We envision a Slate learning community in which users are encouraged to try new things and innovate (within guardrails set by the Slate team), and in which sharing insights and expertise becomes the norm, thereby rapidly maximizing the promise of Slate.

4. **Financial Aid**: Timely, optimally packaged financial aid offers are critical for our ability to attract and yield a diverse student body. Toward this end, we recommend the following:

a. **Make immediate investments in expanding capacity.** A significant, rapid infusion of resources is desperately needed for the Financial Aid and Student Employment (FASE) office to be able to deliver FA packages at the same time as admissions offers. It is important to keep in mind the impacts of new policies and initiatives on the ability of the FASE office to meet student need in a timely manner (e.g., reducing loan debt, aiding 1,000 more students, offering summer savings expectation [SSE] waivers, responding to significant changes to federal policies). It is important to keep in mind that needed investments extend beyond staff resources and include upgrades to outdated technological and systems infrastructures. In addition, the impact on other offices such as the Office of Bursar on workload strain in FASE should be carefully considered.

b. **Develop structures for reviewing and updating FA packaging policies** on a regular basis (e.g., evaluate how variations in financial aid packaging affect yield across different groups of admitted students; implement best practices for distributing funds for summer activity; reconsider how non-liquid assets like home equity are factored into calculations, etc.) Underlying goals of such reviews are to improve yield and simplify and streamline procedures where possible. In addition to regular internal reviews, support for external reviews

when and as needed may be helpful for FASE (e.g., an external review focused on operational effectiveness specifically).

    c. **Improve communication**. This involves:

        i. Simplifying messaging to students and their families by using plain language that is easy to understand.

        ii. Integrating affordability messaging across all aspects of recruitment.

        iii. Being more transparent about the Ivy Plus matching policy (i.e., opportunity for admitted students to negotiate their FA package).

        iv. Partnering with the colleges as soon as admission decisions have been made to track students' progression through the FA process and answer questions about the financial aid process to improve yield. (By waiting until after admissions decisions have been delivered to applicants, such partnership would respect Cornell's need-blind admissions policy.)

        v. Communicating not just with admitted students but also with their families and HS counselors about the FA process (i.e., to enhance collective literacy) and possible gaps in documentation that need to be addressed in order for FA packaging to be completed.

        vi. Exploring alternative organizational structures (e.g., FA staff devoted to specific colleges, so college staff have closer relationship with FA and together can track the same set of students).

Action recommendations

The Action Recommendations encompass five aspects of recruiting students: (I) identifying prospective students; (II) messaging prospective students; (III) facilitating readiness for Cornell; (IV) successfully yielding prospective students; and (V) assessing interventions. It is important to note that several Action Recommendations will require commitment over time to reap hoped-for benefits. Building strong relationships and engendering trust, for instance with non-feeder high schools or community-based organizations, will take time and commitment and it may take several years for the impact of the interventions to be visible. With the right data collection and analysis structures in place, we will be able to continually assess the impact of pilots on different parts of the admissions lifecycle (identifying high-potential prospects, attracting them to apply, successful admission, yielding) to refine investments.

The highest-priority recommendations, which should be implemented immediately, are marked with an asterisk.

(I) Identifying prospects

Cornell currently admits and enrolls students from a static set of "feeder high schools." For the purposes of this report, a "feeder high school" is defined as one from which 30 or more total applications for fall admission were received across 2020, 2021 and 2022. Just over half of all undergraduate applications and nearly 80% of matriculants came from one of 1,450 feeder high schools out of over 23,000 high schools in the United States. We must further diversify our applicant pool by developing strategic partnerships with high schools in under-served communities from which we historically have not received many, if any, applications; by partnering with community-based organizations; developing strategic partnerships with community colleges; and creating pipeline programs to identify prospective students at a younger age.

Cornell can and should distinguish itself to potential applicants by emphasizing its founding ethos of "… any person … any study" and shared purpose of doing "the greatest good."

A. Mine data to identify prospective students not already known to Cornell

Recommendation I-A: Mine untapped sources of data to identify prospective students who have not yet been identified through existing sources.

In our outreach, we learned that traditional methods of building contact lists at elite institutions like Cornell tend to miss a large number of high school students. Research by Hoxby and Avery, for example, showed that "widely used policies—college admissions recruiting, campus visits, college mentoring programs—are likely to be ineffective ... and suggest that effective policies must depend less on geographic concentration of high achievers." [11] In fact, when the University of Michigan utilized data sources not previously used to identify high school students who met their admissions criteria, they discovered that only half of them were already in the university's contact database.[12] Historically, the contact database had been constructed by buying scores from the College Board, identifying individuals who reach out to the university through the website, and recruitment activities in select areas. These previously unknown students were the ones who responded most to new investments in recruiting.

---

[11] Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, "The Missing "One-Offs": The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2013, vol. 44, issue 1 (Spring), 1-65; here p. 1

[12] These data for the University of Michigan were collected in partnership with the state and included demographic composition of all high schools, high school transcripts, free lunch status, and SAT scores available through the state (i.e., because the state contracts directly with the College Board to have the test administered to all high school students).

An example source of data that may be worth pursuing further is the [College Board's new Big Future program](#): to attract students participating in the National African American Recognition Program, National Hispanic Recognition Program, National Indigenous Recognition Program, and National Rural and Small Town Recognition Program. National Recognition Program recipients who have added Cornell to their College Board list (N=1,000) should receive high-touch outreach. Such data-mining efforts to identify prospective individuals should be combined with efforts to identify non-feeder high schools (see Recommendation I-B below).

B. Target "non-feeder" high schools

Just over half of all Cornell applications come from high schools that sent 30 or more total applications for fall admission for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. For U.S. schools, data from "Landscape," a proprietary database purchased from the College Board, allows us to characterize the "challenge level" (an inverse correlate of socioeconomic status of high schools). On a scale ranging from zero to 100 (with a zero indicating the highest SES high school and a 100 being the lowest SES high school) the median challenge scores for those applying to Cornell is 14, the median challenge scores for those accepted to Cornell is 12, and the median challenge score of enrolled students is 11. There is room for generating more applications from high schools that represent a broader range of SES levels. The university should be recruiting, admitting, and enrolling academically talented students from a broader range of urban, suburban, and rural areas.[13]

Each Cornell college and school should have a deep but clearly identifiable array of non-feeder high schools that have high achieving students who can be recruited at Cornell. The hope is that once a few students enroll from high schools that have traditionally not sent students to Cornell, other students in these high schools will become more likely to consider applying to Cornell. Over time, as more students apply from these high schools, we will have the opportunity to develop greater familiarity with these schools and partner with matriculated students from those schools to deliver targeted recruiting messages and materials (e.g., video). Similarly, members of these high school communities (i.e., counselors, teachers, students) will develop greater familiarity with Cornell, thereby helping to demystify the application process. For example, data from the 2022 College Bound Questionnaire show that affordability is a particularly pressing concern among those students who are underrepresented in higher education from mid-SES high schools (i.e., HS with moderate "challenge" scores as calculated by the College Board's Landscape tool), but only for those from non-feeder high schools. This could suggest that students from feeder high schools have more sources of information to

---

[13] An important consideration for the university and each of the undergraduate colleges/schools is to consider our willingness and capacity to offer courses to fill gaps in preparation (e.g., accept that students will take Calculus at Cornell, not in high school). Related recommendations appear in Section III. Ideally, high schools should be able to "pipeline" students to specific academic preparedness programs at Cornell.

demystify the financial aid process. Although we recognize that this will likely be a resource-intensive exercise, it is one that is necessary for broadening the range of feeder high schools from which the university is able to recruit promising candidates from a wide diversity of backgrounds.[14]

A starting point for this effort could be to recruit from schools that are geographically close to Cornell in order to build an initial critical mass, then extend the base nationally over time. For Cornell's contract colleges, focusing on non-feeder high schools in NYS is a logical strategy. Example benefits of focusing on geographically close high schools include: ease of recruiting visits; ability to take advantage of Cornell's home state advantage (i.e., compared to other Ivy institutions [except Columbia] who may be targeting the same students); potential to leverage partnership with NYS to access more data[15]; relevance for our NYS land grant mission; and enhanced possibility of engaging faculty who lead outreach activities in K-12 (e.g., contributing to STEM education, serving as "resident scientists," etc.).

Recommendation I-B*: Mine untapped sources of data to identify a set of "non-feeder" high schools that can be developed as (new) pathway schools to Cornell from underserved communities.

Efforts should focus on identifying target high schools from which Cornell has not, but should, receive applications. Identifying target high schools effectively will require a disciplined and data-informed methodology for identifying high schools with high-performing students that best meet university/college priorities and minimum curricular standards for admission with a concentrated population of students from backgrounds that would add to the diversity of our student body. Using a data-informed approach to identify select high schools to target is critical; if the vast majority of students the university targets are rejected, this will undermine recruitment efforts and erode our credibility with the high schools. A critical step in the implementation of this recommendation will be the development of a feedback mechanism to communicate back with high school counselors about the reasons underlying admissions decisions, including about denied students so the high school can help students better prepare for application to Cornell in the future.

One way to find high schools is to capitalize upon Cornell faculty expertise to use national data sets to identify a set of high schools from across the nation that serve low-income and/or minority students (e.g., using available data about public schools such as Title I status, National

---

[14] One way to reach and support the college preparation of more high school students that historically would not consider attending a college like Cornell could be to develop recruiting partnerships with other universities (within legal parameters). This would represent a paradigm shift, but by shifting from a "win-loss" model to one that is focused on lifting students *at scale,* such partnerships could have a profound impact.

[15] For example, results of state-required Regents Examinations, by high school; data from the state's health and human services about students with free and reduced-price lunches; families on Medicaid.

School Lunch Program status, % BHI (Black, Hispanic, Indigenous), and that have strong academic programs (e.g., data from the Office of Civil Rights about the % of high school students who take AP courses) and excellent testing results (e.g., state-level data about ACT and SAT test scores as well as other tests required by each state). Examples of data sources to examine include but are not limited to the following:

- Office of Civil Rights: The Civil Rights Data Collection[16] publishes extensive data about the curriculum and student participation in college preparatory curricula by high school and high school districts, both at the overall level and disaggregated by race, sex, disability, and English learner status. Example data elements include number of students enrolled in gifted and talented programs, dual enrollment credit programs, International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, at least one AP course, at least one AP course in specific subject areas (math, science, computer science), and different types of math (geometry, algebra II, advanced math, calculus) and science (biology, chemistry, physics, computer science) classes. Also available are data about the number of different AP courses provided and whether students can self-select for participation in AP courses.

- National Student Clearinghouse: The National Student Clearinghouse® Research Center™, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works with higher education institutions, states, districts, high schools, and educational organizations to better inform practitioners and policymakers about student educational pathways and enable informed decision making.

- Niche: Refines and simplifies complex data[17] into comparable rankings, grades, and profiles for K-12 schools. Niche provides a dashboard of information about Cornell that allows students to quickly gain a reasonably accurate view of Cornell. The Niche website also has a portal where prospective students can show their interest in Cornell by entering information about themselves into an online form.

- State-level ACT[18] and SAT[19] data: in some states, all high school students are required to take the ACT or SAT. While ACT/SAT data are not as complete as they used to be and we are aware of the shortcomings, we should not ignore their

---

[16] A list of available data elements can be found here.
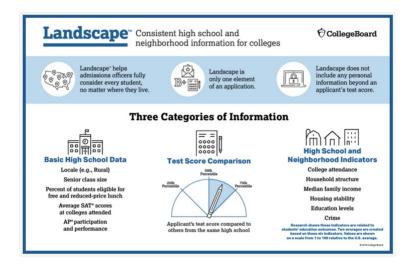
[17] See https://www.niche.com/about/data

[18] A list of states that require the ACT can be found here: List of States that Require the ACT | CollegeVine Blog

[19] Which States Require the SAT? Complete List (prepscholar.com)

utility as one of many datapoints to identify prospective students and high schools.

- ○ Department of Education: Federal and state level data about standardized tests that high school students are required to take, by state[20] (e.g., for NY state).

- ○ National Academy Foundation Schools: SC Johnson cultivates counselor relationships and conducts targeted recruitment outreach to National Academy Foundation (NAF) high schools (www.naf.org). NAF is a nonprofit organization that prepares students for college, career, and future success. SC Johnson targets engagement toward NAF high schools that offer hospitality & tourism and/or finance specializations located in urban centers with first generation/low-income student populations. NAF's programming aligns with the 16 National Career Clusters, including: information technology; engineering; agriculture, food, and natural resources; architecture and construction; arts, technology and communications; business management and administration; education and training; finance; government and public administration; health science; hospitality and tourism; human services; law, public safety, corrections, and security; manufacturing; marketing; STEM; and transportation, distribution, and logistics. Similar approaches to identify high school pathways to other Cornell colleges/schools should be explored. More generally, charter schools that "pool" students from a variety of backgrounds and that focus on specific academic areas present opportunities to attract students in strategic ways where historic pathways to Cornell do not exist. Cornell admissions staff would select strategically from a carefully constructed list of strategic high schools from which it makes the most sense to invest heavily in recruitment efforts.

- ○ Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO).

- ○ The College Board's Landscape data:

---

[20] States vary in the tests they require high school students to complete: Which States Require Students to Take the SAT or ACT? (edweek.org)

Landscape is primarily used in selection to assess the macro-concept of parameters correlated with disadvantage. It assigns a score to individual applicants based upon a range of variables (none of which include race). While the Landscape data has promise, the way it is currently displayed in Slate undermines the effectiveness of its use during the selection process. The College Board controls how this data is displayed in Slate and, currently, it is merely a visual graphic as displayed above. With massive applicant volume, the graphic, while interesting, does not allow admissions units to search or filter for students using the actual background Landscape data that populates the graphic. It should, however, be possible to create codes that capture similar data about high schools that can be assigned to individual applicants through some combination of the datasets above, Landscape, and other national education datasets such as those managed by the National Center for Education Statistics.

C. Partner with organizations

Recommendation I-C (i)*: Invest in relationships with key community-based organizations (CBOs) and other strategically important organizations. When developing these relationships, Cornell should distinguish itself by emphasizing its founding ethos of "… any person … any study" and shared purpose of doing "the greatest good."

Over the next five years, we expect that CBOs will become increasingly important for identifying promising prospective students. The reason for this is that a large number of CBOs are "pooling" information about high-performing students with strong potential who would not typically consider highly selective universities: helping them to develop both academic and socio-emotional skills necessary to succeed in college and working with them to gain admission to highly selective colleges and universities. While one generally thinks of the CBOs as expanding our applicant pool, which they do, they play a dual role: also increasing yield for the students that they bring into the pool, particularly the hard-to-yield students who are underrepresented in higher education primarily first-generation and BHI (Black, Hispanic,

Indigenous). Thrive Scholars, for example, works nationally with low-income, first-generation college students, the majority of whom are underrepresented minorities. Their goal is to work with 2,000 Thrive Scholars annually (see Appendix B for more information about Thrive's excellent program).

While Thrive Scholars is an exceptional CBO, it is not alone. There are multiple CBOs that do similar work. Partnering with CBOs increases yield for the students that they bring into the pool. As the landscape of how colleges and universities recruit, admit, and support students continues to change, these organizations will become extremely important partners. Cornell should recognize this now and be a leading partner for top CBOs willing to work in new and innovative ways to help their students consider and prepare for the possibility of a Cornell education.[21] Doing so will draw hard-to-yield students to Cornell and position Cornell as a visible institution on the national stage.

<u>Recommendation I-C (ii)</u>: Prioritize CBOs and strategic partners that work directly with high schools, beginning with first-year and sophomore students.

In identifying the CBOs with which to nurture particularly strong relationships, it is important to keep in mind that CBOs vary in the extent to which they work directly with students earlier in their high school careers. Some CBOs send staff into high schools to offer more hands-on admissions counseling to students, including clear guidance about the courses students should take in order to be eligible for admission to a place like Cornell (e.g., QuestBridge). We note that Hoxby & Turner's 2015[22] research found that low-income high achievers often lack information about college net prices, instructional resources and rigor, student bodies, and curricula. They also found that improving knowledge of this information significantly changes application and matriculation choices.

Providing clear guidance to students when they still have the time to shape their high school curriculum and co-curricular activities is critical. In addition, this clarity can also dissuade unprepared students from applying, thereby protecting the university's relationship with the CBO (which can otherwise become fraught when a CBO develops unrealistic expectations that Cornell will accept a certain number of students each year as part of the partnership). Other

---

[21] For example, Thrive is currently in the process of looking for a university partner to host a non-residential, six-week pre-college summer program in New York City. This program would serve 200 of their best high-performing, low-income, multicultural, first-generation students each summer. Students would enroll in two courses taught by college professors for example calculus and writing. While Columbia University would be an obvious choice, Cornell could have a rare opportunity to establish competitive advantage by hosting this summer program at Cornell Tech as part of CT's K-12 outreach mission.

[22] Hoxby and Turner, "What High-Achieving Low-income Students Know about College," *American Economic Review*, vol 105, NO.5, (May 2015).

CBOs recruit promising students to join their organization and participate in preparatory workshops but do not work with and develop familiarity with specific high schools.

Partnering with both types of CBOs will maximize Cornell's capacity to develop robust enrollment pathways for first-generation, low-income, and other underrepresented student groups. Cornell should leverage relationships with alumni who are actively engaged in leading and supporting CBOs.

Examples of such organizations include:

- Thrive Scholars

- SEO Scholars

- Ron Brown Scholars

- Heights Philadelphia

- STARS College Network (rural and small-town students)

- CollegeBound Foundation (Baltimore)

- SMART Scholars

- NAF Academies

- Jack and Jill Foundation

- Urban League

- Matriculate

Recommendation I-C (iii): Develop a small and efficient university office whose sole focus is establishing, developing, and capitalizing upon partnerships with strategically important organizations.

Further development and investment in relationship-building with CBOs is needed. However, early experience suggests that individual admissions units cannot fully develop the partnerships and invest in the bridge-building necessary to make Cornell-CBO partnerships as effective as possible. Cultivating, developing, managing, and maintaining these relationships and partnerships is a full-time job. Furthermore, a decentralized approach may limit the range of pathways into Cornell that are made visible to students working with the CBO. A possible solution is to create a small, highly focused, and efficient unit of two FTE staff devoted exclusively to identifying and building collaborative partnerships with CBOs on behalf of Cornell

as a whole: partnerships that will feed students from hard-to-yield populations into each of the colleges and schools.[23] Dedicated staff would have the following responsibilities:

- Invest in personal relationships with the CEOs of key CBOs and involve Cornell alumni and trustees in relationships with CBOs and their boards, as appropriate.

- Identify a set of "universal" CBOs that can feed prospective students to all colleges/schools.

- Identify CBOs that are of specific interest to each college/school. Each college/school should have CBOs that they have specifically identified as important partners.

- Identify tangible deliverables that can be exchanged in the relationship with CBOs. As an institution, we cannot merely offer admission, nor can we promise it; we must instead partner with CBOs to help their students in tangible ways. Tangible deliverables could include offering the CBO staff workshops using real applications; providing priority access to our summer programs; sending Cornell students to host a talk at the CBO; providing early credential review; offering a set of video workshops produced by eCornell that helps students, families, and communities learn more about academic paths and the application process; and offering to have one of our star faculty stop by for a guest lecture.

- Host an annual meeting that brings CBO partners together on campus, during which they would have opportunities to meet with their students, participate in lab demos, meet with senior leaders, etc. The underlying goal would be to strengthen their connection to, and advocacy on behalf of, Cornell.

- Visit CBOs where they are headquartered to learn more about their programs and develop relationships with their staff.

- Analyze partnerships annually to determine effectiveness using data-driven metrics.

While an obvious approach would be to embed such an office within the Undergraduate Admissions Office, an alternative could be to situate the office outside of UAO, with the explicit goal of adopting a more holistic approach that connects admissions-related activities with other outreach activities (e.g., faculty involvement in K-12 education, Upward Bound, etc.). This is an approach in place at Princeton.[24]

---

[23] "Hard to yield populations" includes groups of students that historically have enrolled at lower-than-average yield rates. This primarily includes BHI (Black, Hispanic, Indigenous) and first-generation college students.

[24] https://provost.princeton.edu/about/directory/kevin-hudson

D. Strategic partnerships with community colleges

Recommendation I-D (i): Adopt data-informed strategy for recruiting from community colleges.

Recruitment efforts should focus specifically on community colleges that could provide a pipeline of students who add to the broad diversity of our student body. A data-informed strategy should be applied to identify community colleges with: (a) curricula that will adequately prepare students for Cornell; and (b) a high proportion of students who would add to the broad diversity of the student population.[25] Careful attention should be paid to assessing the gap between the highest level of coursework available to students at the community college and the level required to earn credit at Cornell. Where there are gaps, Cornell should consider offering courses that close those gaps.

Direct relationships with staff at priority community colleges are essential for clarifying pathways to success at Cornell (i.e., the courses students need to take to be eligible for transfer, clarity about the courses that will transfer into Cornell credit, outline of the courses they will need to take at Cornell to graduate in two years after completion of their associate degree, etc.). Cornell should leverage the connection of its contract colleges and schools to SUNY to establish pathways from SUNY community colleges to Cornell. If legally allowable Cornell could partner with other universities, including the other Ivies. See also ITHAKA S+R (https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/playbook-for-transfer-pathways-to-the-liberal-arts/) for their work on facilitating the pathways from community colleges to four-year schools.

Recommendation I-D (ii)*: Accelerate the implementation of a transfer equivalency system (TES).

Currently, the process of reviewing syllabi for transfer credit eligibility is manual and therefore unnecessarily tedious and time-consuming. There is also a chance that transfer credit may be awarded inconsistently across cases. Furthermore, there is no way for students interested in transferring into Cornell to check (ahead of time) which of their course credits would be counted at Cornell, and therefore how long it would likely take for them to complete a degree at Cornell. A transfer equivalency system (TES) would be populated with faculty decisions about acceptable community college courses, thereby providing transparency and expediency.

While the need to implement a TES has long been recognized and efforts have begun, progress has been slowed by the departure of the project manager assigned to it, general understaffing in the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) relative to the resource-intensive policy and systems upgrades requiring OUR oversight and/or involvement (e.g., shortage of PeopleSoft

---

[25] It is important to note that the proportion of students who are Black, Hispanic, and/or Indigenous is significantly lower among transfer students compared to first-year students (across all stages: application, admission, and enrollment).

developers), and the need to complete foundational revisions to the university's transfer policies.

A needs assessment should be conducted immediately to determine the investments that are required to accelerate the implementation of the TES. It is important to note that a functional TES will also be essential for the successful launch of the part-time bachelor's degree program into which a substantial proportion of admitted adult learners are expected to transfer in college credits.

E. Develop cross-college regional expert groups

Recommendation I-E: Create regional expert groups comprising admissions officers from each college who are responsible for reading applications from particular regions.

Most admissions officers are assigned to read applications from a specific region so that they can develop deep expertise about specific high schools and school districts. By forming a collaborative group of all admissions officers who read for a particular region, this expertise can be leveraged in more strategic ways. For example, these groups could be the ones in charge of outreach to CBOs and other partnerships in that region.

F. Pipeline programs that target younger students

Recommendation I-F (i): Increase visibility to middle school and early high school students.

The university would benefit from building wider pipelines by developing prospects earlier in their K-12 education, rather than waiting until students are about to apply to college to reach out to them. Doing so would: improve awareness about how to prepare for college in general (e.g., differential emphases that colleges/majors may place on specific high school courses, how to approach testing, etc.); inspire students to consider applying to places like Cornell, which they might otherwise assume to be out of reach; increase literacy about financial aid so that low- and middle-income students understand how to interpret published tuition fees; serve as an important informational resource for students, teachers, and parents; provide role models so students see people from their backgrounds as college students; and offer exposure to Cornell's world-class faculty.

We envision two associated initiatives:

1. A broad national mailed marketing campaign that focuses on presenting Cornell as accessible to students who might not otherwise consider applying to Cornell, directed at middle schools and junior high schools in strategically important markets. The goal here is to build awareness of Cornell in areas where Cornell has minimal visibility.

2. A marketing campaign that provides a robust set of information to middle schools and junior high schools attached to high schools that are partnering or associated with each college and school at Cornell. The goal here is to build deep awareness of Cornell prior to high school for students from high schools with students we are eager to enroll <u>and</u> to offer something of value to these schools that will help their students, families, and communities prepare for college. (For examples see recommendation I-C [iii] above).

Schools would be identified using the experience of current admissions officers in combination with analysis of national education data that will identify high-performing, low-income schools.

<u>Recommendation I-F (ii)</u>: Consider developing new programs to expose high school students who might not otherwise consider applying to Cornell.

Consider using the structure of the 4H Career Exploration program. Linking a Cornell education to career exploration for young people can be a way to display the breadth of a Cornell education as it relates to so many possible career pathways. Bringing young people to the campus can also expose teens to the beauty of the campus.[26] This, of course, would be a resource-intensive recruiting and pipeline initiative both in dollars and in staff time. Before piloting a new program with a similar theme, we recommend doing a careful evaluation of how attending the 4H explorations correlates with matriculating at Cornell. The program has been in place for a long time so there should be sufficient data with enough statistical power to assess. [Cornell Expanding Your Horizons](#) is another well-developed existing program that could be supported and included in recruitment efforts.

G. Indigenous students

In the United States members of Indigenous nations hold a unique political status as citizens of those nations granted through tribal powers of self-government. The task force recognizes the importance of supporting Indigenous students and recommends developing approaches for maximizing aid for enrolled members of state and federally recognized tribes. In addition, we recommend that the Office of Undergraduate Admissions continue and strengthen its engagement with [College Horizons](#), [Graduate Horizons](#), [American Indian Science and Engineering Society](#) (AISES) national and regional conferences, college fairs, community recruiting, and professional Indigenous education networks.

(II) Develop a clear, targeted messaging plan that will attract prospective students to Cornell

Core to Cornell's strengths as a world-class institution is its unique combination of breadth and depth of scholarship underlying the undergraduate experience. However, for many admissions

---

[26] See Princeton's [PUPP program](#) for an example.

constituents—high school students and their families, teachers, and guidance counselors--navigating the complexity of Cornell can be daunting. Therefore, it is important to continue investing in processes and systems that help prospective students explore the range of exciting pathways that could be available to them into and through Cornell.

To accomplish this, it will be important to inventory all current sources of prospective student data to fully understand the spectrum of sources of prospective student data and, importantly, to develop strategies for the most effective use of that data.

A. Targeted messaging to prospective students

Recommendation II-A: Customize recruiting messages to appeal to various student populations.

In recruiting, it is critical to establish credibility with prospective students, particularly those from non-feeder schools, so that they can imagine coming to a place like Cornell. Ideas for content that should be emphasized in messaging to student populations include:

a. Cornell's commitment to community-engaged learning. Today's prospective students are attracted to community-engaged learning opportunities: 56% of students admitted to Cornell in 2022 who responded to the College Bound Questionnaire indicated that public engagement opportunities were very important in their college decision. In 2018, the figure was 38%.

b. Founding ethos ("… any person … any study")

c. Clear and simple messaging about affordability (see II-B below)

d. Proudly highlighting the career paths or our alumni.

In addition to customizing recruiting messages, it is important to consider where the university targets its messages. Our prospect messages, which are mainly in email form, are sent to high school students, teachers, guidance counselors, parents, CBOs etc. It would be important to develop a cohesive strategy that details message topics, target audiences, university-relative-to-college messaging, and end goals.

B. Remove obstacles to attracting low-income applicants

Recommendation II-B: Pilot a program to revamp financial aid messaging and presentation to encourage promising students from low-income backgrounds who are guaranteed to receive full financial aid to accept the offer.

The University of Michigan found that compared to typical financial aid messaging (e.g., availability of full financial aid for low-income students), unambiguous messages about the guarantee of receiving a "full ride," if accepted, without having to complete the FAFSA, are

more effective for increasing applications from (and enrollment of) low-income students. They accomplished this by sending targeted messages to high-performing students who were identified by the state as being low-income, and following up with complementary messages to the high schools in which those students were enrolled. Cornell should consider piloting a similar program, especially in light of data that shows that concerns about affordability are a significant impediment to yielding (and, in fact, to even getting low-income students to apply to a place like Cornell).

C. Expand capacity to visit high schools

Recommendation II-C: Restructure visits to high schools and to campus to leverage all members of the admissions community.

Currently, Cornell's capacity to visit and recruit at target high schools is limited by the fact that recruiting visits are staffed primarily by UAO. The successful implementation of recommendation I-B (i.e., recruit from non-feeder high schools) is likely to require more intentional collaboration with college admissions officers, beginning with training for all members of the admissions community to be able to represent not just their own college/school but the university at large in high school recruiting visits.[27] Underlying these efforts should be a clear protocol for optimizing impact.

D. Facilitate exploration of possible academic pathways at Cornell

Recommendation II-D: Invest in innovative ways to facilitate (and simplify) prospective students' exploration of possible academic pathways at Cornell.

"Admissions" and "Academics," the two sections of the cornell.edu website that are likely to be of greatest interest to prospective applicants attempting to figure out how and to which college/school they should apply, are laborious to navigate. Within the "Admissions" section, information about possible pathways is buried within a link for prospective students that leads to a list of links to Cornell's undergraduate colleges/schools.

---

[27] Because many college admissions staff lack experience with high school recruiting visits, training that establishes a comprehensive structured approach is needed for: meeting with students; providing input into high school curricular development; discussions with teachers/counselors; developing relationships with the senior leadership of the high school(s).

Explore Cornell:

- College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- College of Architecture, Art, and Planning
- College of Arts and Sciences
- Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
  - Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration
  - Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management

- College of Engineering
- College of Human Ecology
- Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy
- School of Industrial and Labor Relations
- Cornell A-Z – From Cornell's American Indian Program to the Women's Resource Center, you'll find it all here.
- Caring Community – A gateway for all of the support services Cornell has to offer.
- CornellCast – Check out this interactive look at Cornell.
- Events Calendar – See a play, attend a concert, support a cause.
- The Cornell Daily Sun – Read all about it!
- Academic Programs – Satisfy your intellectual curiosity.
- Cornell Athletics – Become a fan.
- The Cornell Commitment – Learn about three programs that recognize, reward, and encourage further development of a select group of students.

Prospective applicants are expected to work their way through the long list of links that lead to separate college/school websites that are formatted differently, making it difficult to find and compare information about different majors.

Within the "Academics" section, prospective applicants can choose from among three extensive lists of links (fields of study, colleges and schools, or departments) but without any context or explanation. The lists are daunting rather than exciting and may leave prospective applicants overwhelmed. This is especially likely for students who know nothing about Cornell and/or have limited cultural capital and support in the college search process. We must make it much easier for visitors to our website to develop a mental map of the opportunities available to them, given their interests, within Cornell's vast undergraduate landscape. This likely necessitates that we think outside of our formal organizing structures and instead anticipate the lenses through which prospective applicants approach their search.

We recommend piloting tools that allow prospective applicants to begin their search from starting points that are familiar to them, such as high school subjects they most enjoyed or topics in which they are interested. These tools would then help to illustrate the different ways these subjects are reflected across Cornell's majors. In cases where their exploration might lead them to multiple majors nested in different colleges/schools, an ideal tool would then help them distinguish between the broader context of the colleges/schools (i.e., in terms of its graduation requirements, college-specific experiential learning opportunities, mission and culture, etc.).

An excellent place to start would be the successful Cornell Pathways platform (designed by CIS professor René Kizilcec), which invites current Cornell students to input topics that they are interested in learning and uses those inputs to reveal five course schedules of students with those same interests. This platform could be piloted with local high school students who could input topics of interest and see real Cornell classes in which they could enroll once admitted.

Their reactions could then inform the adaptations that should be made for high school audiences prior to its introduction in high school visits and other information sessions.

E. Leverage alumni for recruiting

The goal is for prospective students to see people like them at Cornell so they can imagine attending. The closer the source of recruiting messages, the more credible (e.g., video message from, or zoom sessions with, a student from the same high school who is now at Cornell or recently graduated from Cornell).

Recommendation II-E: Utilize the power of LinkedIn to connect students with Cornell.

LinkedIn is a powerful social media tool that Cornell has not utilized in recruitment or yield, yet LinkedIn provides a rich database of Cornell alumni that could be used as a tool to connect alumni across all of Cornell's colleges and schools with prospective students. The goal would be to develop an alumni volunteer corps (e.g., by leveraging the members of the CAAAN alumni program) and use LinkedIn as a way for them to connect with specific students who might not otherwise consider applying to Cornell. Roles for alumni could include providing information about academics at Cornell and how they lead to specific careers or professions, mentorship, internship opportunities and, ultimately, permanent employment.

Of course, other social media platforms and structures for linking alumni and prospective students should be considered.

F. Simplify financial aid messaging

Recommendation II-F: Revise Cornell's Financial Aid messaging to ensure that the true cost of attending Cornell is easily understood by communities, families, and individual students.

Despite Cornell's generous financial aid practices, data from the College Bound Questionnaire shows that affordability is much more likely to be listed as a reason for not attending Cornell than it is a reason why admitted students decide to attend Cornell. There is no doubt that Cornell loses promising students at the prospect stage before they even apply for admission because communications about the true cost of attendance is difficult to understand. This is a fixable problem. Building on foundational recommendation #4, we recommend the following:

1. An annual affordability marketing campaign that is a collaborative effort between Cornell's financial aid unit and the full Cornell admissions community (i.e., UAO plus all colleges and schools), directed not just to prospective students but also to CBOs, high schools, and other partners. The campaign must clearly communicate both the affordability of a Cornell education and the value of a Cornell degree across all undergraduate majors and degrees. The goal is to

ensure that prospective applicants do not rule themselves out based on "sticker shock."

2. All Cornell admissions staff should be well versed in clear affordability messages so that they incorporate them into their recruitment pitches. Admissions staff must be as capable as financial aid staff in explaining the basics of Cornell's financial aid offerings and processes.

3. For prospective students, better financial aid calculators should be made available, for example using MyinTuition rather than the current calculator.

4. Cornell should develop an eCornell module on affordability which, if produced well, could build trust with partner high schools, CBOs, communities, and families, and draw students to Cornell (and peer institutions). We recommend two modules: one that focuses on building literacy around the affordability of Cornell and the return on investment that comes with a Cornell degree, and a second module that explicitly walks families through the financial aid application and review processes.[28]

5. For admitted students, financial aid offer letters should be revised so that they are easier to understand. Messaging should be revised using recommendations from Aspire (www.uaspire.org).

6. All financial aid information should be published and produced in English, Mandarin, and Spanish, to increase accessibility. Consider also providing the university's admissions websites in English, Mandarin, and Spanish.

7. Parents/legal guardians should always be included in financial aid messaging at all phases (during recruitment, selection, and yield).

Marketing and messaging about Cornell's affordability will be unproductive without an effective and efficient financial aid unit that can rapidly and accurately assist families through the financial aid review and award process. As described in the Foundational Recommendations section (#4), the importance of making significant and rapid investments to address Cornell's current financial aid limitations cannot be overstated.

---

[28] These courses could be combined with additional modules on the college search and application process with the dual purposes of public service and recruitment. Topics might include preparing for college, how to research college options, applying for college, and transitioning to college. For an example of similar content, see resources offered by CBO Heights Philadelphia: https://heights.org/issues/SUTC_2022/index.html?page=1. Providing links on UAO's website to short webinars on preparing for and applying to college, ideally in multiple languages, would be another option to consider (see the New York State Association for College Admission Counseling for an example of an organization that provides college application support in Spanish).

(III) Facilitating readiness for Cornell

    A. **Pre-college summer programs**

Recommendation III-A: Leverage pre-college summer programs for recruiting by providing priority access to students from partner high schools.[29]

Existing pre-college programs[30] as well as programs yet to be developed can serve as an effective tool for building pipelines of talented high school students. While residential programs have the advantage of introducing high school students to Cornell's beautiful campus and impressive facilities, the potential benefits of high-quality online and/or non-residential programs offered in urban locations in partnership with other entities should also be considered. The underlying goals are twofold: piquing prospective applicants' interest in Cornell and offering college-level coursework to students from underserved high schools who might not otherwise have the opportunity to demonstrate their readiness for Cornell-level coursework. To achieve the university's goals of maintaining a diverse student body, priority access should be provided to students from partner high schools (as identified in recommendation I-B). As part of the program, high school counselors could nominate their most promising students for an opportunity to take a course in a subject not available to them in high school. In addition to expanding access to Cornell coursework and providing an opportunity for prospective applicants to interact directly with Cornell, offering grant-based aid for pre-college coursework[31] offers the added benefit of strengthening trust and relationships with high school counselors whose students are supported through such pre-college programs. Such efforts could be supported through fundraising (e.g., Hilton Foundation funding for Nolan).

Of course, to be optimally useful, legally compliant data about student participation and performance must be linked back to databases maintained by UAO (e.g., in Slate). A feedback loop should be embedded into Slate so that readers can easily identify students who participated in these courses and the grade(s) earned. To take this one step further, those who perform well in these Cornell courses could be offered "likely letters" (as is done for recruited athletes) together with a clear message about Cornell's affordability.

---

[29] We acknowledge that any residential pre-college program must adhere to the risk management guidelines developed in 2023.

[30] See the Cornell Future Architects Award program for an example.

[31] This is similar to the University of Michigan's "Watson A. Young Scholarship Program," which is mentioned in University of Michigan, Amicus Curiae Brief, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. President and Fellows of Harvard College; Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. University of North Carolina, Nos. 20-1199 & 21-707, U.S. Supreme Ct., August 2022. (p.14-15).

Although the primary goal of these efforts is of course attracting high-performing students to apply to Cornell, pre-college educational opportunities also serve Cornell's goal of "doing the greatest good" for communities, schools, and families. There is research suggesting that summer programs in STEM lead to enrollment and success. Using a randomized design, Cohodes et al (2022) find that underrepresented students offered seats in STEM summer programs were more likely to enroll in, persist through, and graduate college.[32]

B. Online Cornell courses

<u>Recommendation III-B</u>: Offer high-performing high school students in under-resourced high schools access to credit-bearing online summer courses.

For high-achieving students in high schools that lack rigorous curricula, the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to succeed in Cornell-level courses can boost their chances of being admitted. Recognizing that in-person pre-college programs will be limited in their reach because they are resource-intensive and some high school students may not be able to leave their homes for the duration of a summer program, a suite of online courses should be developed through eCornell specifically to recruit high-achieving high school students. Instructors of these courses would be in a position to provide admissions staff with first-hand insight about course participants who have the potential to thrive at Cornell and therefore should receive focused follow-up communications and be tagged within Cornell's applications processing system (Slate) should they ultimately apply. We envision two categories of credit-bearing, college-level courses for this purpose:

- ○ Preparatory courses: Courses that provide an opportunity for students to fill known academic gaps (e.g., in advanced STEM and writing) between the highest-level coursework offered in their high school and the preparatory threshold expected of matriculants to Cornell, thereby enhancing their readiness for Cornell-level academics. Courses should produce an official Cornell score, grade, or writing sample that applicants can submit with their college application, "certifying" their proficiency; doing so would elevate the confidence of admissions reviewers that students do not have gaps in their knowledge in key areas needed for academic success in college.

  These courses would benefit students, even outside of the goal of successful application to Cornell, because their outputs could be submitted to any college or university applied to, bolstering the students' odds of being admitted. When relatively affluent students apply from well-resourced high schools, there is little

---

[32] Cohodes, S.R, Ho, H., & Robles, S.C. "STEM Summer Programs for Underrepresented Youth Increase STEM Degrees," NBER Working Paper, 30227, DOI: 10.3386/w30227, July 2022.

ambiguity about what they have covered in classes. This is not the case with students from lower-SES schools and communities. The ambiguity is universal whether the student is applying to Cornell, Oberlin, or MIT; anything that bolsters admissions' confidence in the student's capabilities strengthens the student's application significantly.

○ Exploration courses: Courses that provide exposure to topics not usually taught in a less well-resourced high school, in which Cornell has great strength and which can be taught through multiple disciplinary lenses. Special emphasis should be placed on courses that embody core Cornell values,[33] such as free and open inquiry and expression, a community of belonging, public engagement, exploration across boundaries, and respect for the natural environment, and are likely to be attractive to students underrepresented in higher education (e.g., health equity, Latinx studies, American Indian and Indigenous Studies, social inequality, environmental justice, human migration). It will be important to consult with high schools and CBOs to understand which topics would be most attractive to them and their students.

A great example of an effective high school exploration course is *Big Data for Big Problems*, recently introduced and delivered by prominent Cornell faculty (through eCornell) to a set of high school students in low-resourced schools.[34] Consistent with our public impact mission, expanding this type of programming would expand access to Cornell-caliber courses, while also increasing the visibility of Cornell to students in these non-feeder high schools.

C. Faculty-led instruction in high schools

<u>Recommendation III-C</u>: Strategically leverage faculty involvement in K-12 education.

There are Cornell faculty who, as part of grant-funded projects, deliver educational support to students in underserved school districts[35] (e.g., by pairing graduate students with teachers for

---

[33] https://www.cornell.edu/about/values.cfm

[34] See related Cornell Chronicle article by Jim Hachett, "Underserved high schoolers now thriving in college credit Cornell program." Cornell Chronicle April 28, 2022, accessed August 27, 2023.

[35] An excellent example is an NSF-funded project led by Professor Chris Schaffer in the College of Engineering who paired graduate students with high school teachers in small but open-ended research projects in which the two worked together to develop an inquiry-based curricular module to teach a topic that was otherwise difficult for the teacher to teach. During the following academic year, teachers mentored the graduate students in communication and teaching skills when the graduate students served as "resident scientists" in the classroom. For example grants, see: https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=0841291&HistoricalAwards=false; https://stemcell.ny.gov/stem-cell-research-experience-pre-college-teachers-2014#2; https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1045513&HistoricalAwards=false.

an entire year, visiting schools as "resident scientists" and helping teachers to develop curricular content). Additionally, the Graduate School has a volunteer program called Grasshopr in which graduate students are paired with K-12 teachers to teach mini-courses on topics related to the graduate students' interests. Although the NSF sunsetted its GK-12 program, the Science Education Partnership Award (SEPA) program, sponsored by NIH, could be an alternative source of funding to motivate faculty and graduate student engagement in K-12 educational projects. There are likely many other great examples of faculty engaging in educational outreach, and yet this activity is currently not connected to recruiting initiatives by admissions staff in an intentional way. This is a lost opportunity, as the regular visibility of Cornell faculty and students in high school programs provides an excellent opportunity for recruiting (e.g., by combining with a visit by admissions staff to do a college-bound workshop).[36]

(IV) Yielding

A. Campus visits

Given the high yield rates associated with prospective students who visit campus, excellence in the coordination of campus visits is essential.

Recommendation IV-A(i): Implement mechanisms to ensure that the campus tours program fully meets the recruiting and yielding needs of UAO and the colleges/schools.

At most institutions, campus tours are overseen by the admissions unit to ensure close alignment of recruiting efforts (e.g., adapting messages based on evolving applicant demographics and interests) and tour logistics. At Cornell, campus tours are administered by University Relations and, as a result, are disconnected from the work and needs of UAO in unfortunate ways. For example, visitor meta-data, including such basic information as name, contact information, and interests, are unavailable to UAO and therefore not incorporated into Slate; the supply of campus tours does not meet seasonal demand; and recruiting messages shared by tour guides are not consistently up to date.

At a minimum, the above recommendation will necessitate setting clear goals, data sharing, and closer coordination of event scheduling and staffing. New means of meeting peak demand over the summer (recruiting) and in April (admitted students) should be explored, such as engaging student ambassadors and developing self-guided tours.

Recommendation IV-A(ii): Include space needs for admissions events in the list of institutional room scheduling priorities.

---

[36] If recommendation I-C(iii) is followed, staff in this unit could be charged with integrating these activities.

In our outreach, lack of access to suitable spaces to host admissions events was repeatedly raised as an obstacle. Due to restrictions imposed by the administration of 25Live, large auditoria (e.g., Biotech G10, Klarman, Uris) can no longer be reserved sufficiently in advance to schedule and advertise admissions events, and when they are, they are sometimes bumped to accommodate other events. Better space scheduling protocols are needed to support the university's admissions activities.

(V) Assessing interventions

Recommendation V: Continual analysis of data related to recruiting efforts.

Some of the action recommendations presented above are best thought of as pilot interventions, with the expectation that the university's admissions strategies will continue to evolve over time based on assessments of impact. As described in Foundational Recommendations #2 and #3, investments in data collection and integration through Slate are essential to our ability to iterate effectively. These investments will allow us to answer key questions, e.g.:

- Which touchpoints (email outreach, in-person or virtual events, targeted marketing campaigns, etc.) matter the most and for whom?
- Where does the admissions pipeline "leak"?
- What is the impact of reaching out to prospects when they are sophomores vs. when they are seniors?
- Which investments in target high schools have the greatest impact?

Conclusion

Cornell University was conceived as a university based on a new, unique ethos: "an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." That founding idea of "any person" recognizes that a diversity of experiences and ideas is indispensable for a university education; and that our teaching, our research, and our engagement all benefit from a Cornell that welcomes many different perspectives; and creates for them in an environment where they can learn with, and from, each other.

The cooperative, flexible, and analytical approach outlined in this report is designed to enable Cornell to respond in a confident, timely, and effective manner to developing trends in higher education, and position itself as a model American university for the 21st century: with the depth and breadth of understanding and expertise to address the complex technological and social challenges to come. Through individualized, holistic admissions review, we create a class of Cornellians with the different perspectives and backgrounds that will enable them to spark

insight in each other: challenging assumptions, strengthening arguments, advancing knowledge, and becoming a new generation of global citizens and leaders.