



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

Jonathan Brand, President, and
Wendy Beckemeyer, Vice President for Enrollment Management

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What it takes to recruit a student

We are now in Year 3 of our current strategic plan: **Bold Approaches that Enrich Lives**. And, it probably comes as no surprise that the “north star” of that plan is student enrollment (recruitment and retention of students). In so doing, we necessarily focus on what students want and what students need in a college education. After all, our continued success as a distinguished institution of higher learning requires that we remain relevant to them and their families.

Achieving enrollment goals is not easy for most colleges and universities. No doubt, a select few institutions (e.g., schools in the Ivy League) have large applicant pools, and the job of their admission teams is to choose the best students who apply. They don't have to focus as much time on identifying and attracting students. These schools are far and away the exceptions and not the norm.

For most schools, the admission process is about identifying qualified students and then attracting them—*recruiting* them. This phenomenon is especially true because, among other challenges, the United States is about to experience a dramatic decline in the number of high school graduates—by about 15%—a trend that will continue, at a minimum, for the next 18 years. There are fewer students to go around, which makes the competition for them that much more acute. As a result, at Cornell, we don't anticipate that our central priorities, involving recruitment and retention, articulated in our current strategic plan will change anytime soon.

Recruiting students takes a lot of work by a lot of people over an extended period of time. The process is both sophisticated and complicated, beginning even when students are in the early stages of high school. We like to say at Cornell that it takes a village to educate a student. Well, it takes a village to recruit one too.

It is also true that the student recruitment landscape is so much different than even 10 years ago. For example, it might have been the case in the past that if an admission initiative worked in a given year, we could repeat it each year and experience continued enrollment success. That is no longer the case. Now, the environment—understanding student wants and needs—and *how* students wish to be recruited change so rapidly that we need to be prepared to reinvent the recruitment wheel and communication processes each year as we see what resonates and doesn't resonate with prospective students. Thus, it is axiomatic that student recruitment requires more flexibility and adaptability than was required in the past.

The admission process is complex and dynamic. And, we would like to offer you some insights into our process. In this white paper, we explain how we go about recruiting a student to Cornell from the very start.

Learning About Our Students and Cultivating Interest

There is so much information available, online as one example, about students' evolving wants and needs. We do the following in order to learn more about the students we plan to recruit. We invest in partnerships with best in class companies that assist colleges like Cornell in marketing to students. With help from our talented marketing team, these organizations both provide digital ads where students will likely view them and nurture student interest that results in visits to campus and applications. The companies also analyze our financial aid data and provide feedback on how to best leverage the resources we have to help as many students as possible find an affordable pathway to attend Cornell.

Thankfully, technology has made it possible for our team to make immediate adjustments based on what the data is telling us. Should we emphasize campus visits, job placement, affordability, or specialized majors today? Dozens of decisions are made every day to cultivate the largest applicant pool possible of qualified candidates. And, we make these decisions while on recruitment trips, in the middle of the night, and when we are on campus.

We use consultants who have been known to achieve results, both at Cornell and for peer institutions. These companies provide an array of services, and we are very discerning about how we deploy Cornell resources. We pick and choose the tools that will optimize our enrollment. Because the admissions field is such a specialized skill set, one may ask why we need consultants when we have hired professionals to do the work at Cornell. The most direct way to answer this question is to share that the field has become so sophisticated that there are many data points that are only available through vendors and we want our skilled team focused on the analysis rather than the computing.

At Cornell, we predict the likelihood of each student on the mailing list to enroll. Doing so requires a predictive model, which helps us prioritize our outreach with 25,000+ students who have not visited campus or who do not have a referral. At the same time, we never use a model score as a higher predictor than a referral from alumni or donors, a campus visit, contact with a coach, or other steps that show significant interest in Cornell.

While technology is an efficient way to deploy our limited staff time, it does not replace the need to personally recruit each student. A great deal of care and thought goes into our travel plans, individualized outreach, and the crafting of personalized campus visits. We strive for each student to feel wanted and important to Cornell—because that is genuinely how Cornell operates! Students receive personal notes from tour guides after visits, highlights about their achievements in the acceptance letters, and high fives when they make final visits to campus in the spring of their senior year of high school.

Throughout the entire recruitment process, we continue to pay attention to what motivates a student to enroll. For example, students today universally tell us that they have four priorities when they choose their college/university. First, they wish to attend a school that cares about their mental health and well-being. (This is particularly true following COVID-19.) Second, prospective students wish to attend a school that not only values diversity but actually lives those DEI values right alongside them. Third, students expect to graduate from college with little to no debt. As a result, they are very cost-sensitive. Fourth, they care about an institution that will prepare them for work after college.

Within their priorities, they also pay attention to what is distinctive about Cornell. For example, our students overwhelmingly select Cornell because they are attracted to our One Course At A Time methodology and what it uniquely makes possible for them—the ability to immerse themselves and to focus on one subject at a time. Similarly, our students feel the warmth and sense of community—our connectedness—when they come to campus. We cannot take these cultural strengths for granted either, especially because post-COVID, our students express that they need what our calendar offers them.

Prospective students who are referred by alumni and friends of Cornell matriculate at a higher percentage than students who don't have a connection to a Cornellian. So, thank you! You are making a difference. Students are definitely more likely to enroll when a Cornellian endorses Cornell. Rather than looking for needles in a haystack (recruitment mailing lists and travel), we benefit from your recommendations as you share your positive experience with a potential student. It gives us a tremendous head start. Often, prospective students have heard about One Course At A Time from you and are steps ahead of other prospective students in seeing all the positives at Cornell. In addition, those students who are referred by our graduates attend Cornell at three times the rate of our overall pool. This is a good sign about the *value* of a Cornell education.

Feedback From Families

Families also give us valuable feedback on the recruitment process. Here is what they say ...

Feedback from an entering student:

Thank you very much to everyone who spent time with my mom and me on Monday. We appreciate the time you all spent with us answering our questions, welcoming us to campus, and making sure we were taken care of throughout the day.

I really enjoyed my visit, Cornell College is a special place! It was a great day, thanks for making it memorable for us!

Feedback from a parent:

We greatly appreciate everything you have been doing to help make Cornell possible for our son. The additional aid [we truly needed] is tremendous.

Feedback from an entering student:

Through the Second Chance Program, I will get a chance to be at Cornell this fall. The program provided invaluable guidance and support, and I am grateful for the help. It brings the utmost joy to my family. Since I was a child, I saw my mother cry at home because of finances, and this time I saw tears of joy in her eyes. Thank you for giving me moments like this. Rest assured, I'll stand upon your decision and look forward to meeting with you all soon.

Feedback from a referral:

She apparently applied, was accepted, and received a financial aid commitment all within a matter of days. Her mother especially commented as to how impressed she was with that process.

Overall, they both commented on how pleasant the process was and how welcoming they felt throughout—especially compared to the other schools she visited. They said that it was very apparent that Cornell was interested in their daughter and did everything possible to answer her questions and give her a realistic vision of what her experience would be like.

Awarding Financial Aid

Financial aid is also an enormous piece of the recruitment puzzle. At Cornell, we offer over \$35 million in institutional financial aid support annually. Determining eligibility for Cornell dollars requires a great deal of evaluation of the resources required to meet the needs of the previous entering class as well as plan for the next incoming class. There are many, many complicated stories of high-achieving students who need more resources than we can offer. And, we do our best to focus our institutional resources on the most promising students with the greatest financial need. It's a balancing act, without a doubt.

It will come as no surprise that the need levels of incoming students have been rising since 2008, as a result of the Great Recession. Since then, families have questioned the rising cost of education, both in terms of their ability to pay and their willingness to part with their resources. In just the last few years, Cornell's financial aid pool has grown by \$8 million (to the \$35 million previously mentioned). This increase is primarily due to the fact that students have higher levels of need, and we are experiencing greater competition for these students.

Media outlets encourage families to negotiate with financial aid officers, and institutions one up each other to secure another student for the entering class. The process of recruiting students and distributing aid looks nothing like it did 10 years ago. Some institutions have closed due to spending so much in financial aid that there is not enough left for the costs to fund an institution. At Cornell, we are vigilant and thoughtful about the balance of the academic credentials of new students (which earn them Cornell scholarships), the size of the entering class, and the need-based aid required to enroll students. We remain optimistic that our limited financial aid dollars are making it possible for Cornell students to earn a high-quality education and do good in the world after graduation.

Given the impending decline in the number of high school students, pipelines and partnerships are increasingly an essential part of strong enrollment in each entering class. At Cornell, we have nurtured relationships with the African Leadership Academy in South Africa, Second Chance in Singapore, the Posse Foundation in New York City, and the Seidler Foundation in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Students in these pipelines have competed with other students (in some cases, thousands of students) to be members of these partnerships. They represent some of the most high-achieving students in their country and in our entering class, and also have high financial need.

Four Characteristics of Thriving Colleges

We know that the competition for students will only increase, and the institutions that not only survive but thrive, including in terms of enrollment, will have four primary characteristics: 1) they will have meaningful differentiators—significant points of distinction that are attractive, persuasive, and compelling to prospective

students; 2) they will have healthy decision-making cultures on their campuses such that those institutions can meet student wants and needs as they evolve, ensuring continued student success; 3) they will have strong financial foundations (e.g., healthy endowments); and 4) they will have energized alumni and friends who support that institution at impressive levels on an ongoing basis.

Of course, we are so fortunate to have our One Course At A Time methodology as a key differentiator. Similarly, Cornell is recognized for its culture of care, which permeates our campus. Both are true.

And, while our financial foundation is not yet as strong as we need for it to be, it is front and center as a critical priority going forward. And, fortunately, with our physical plant now greatly improved thanks to YOU, we are in a position at this time to focus on strengthening our financial foundation.

Of course, we are lucky to have our family of alumni and friends—YOU. Last year, because of you, we completed our Greater > Than Campaign by raising \$118.6 million, surpassing the goal of \$80 million. YOU did that. You supported Ingenuity—our new core curriculum for all students. You increased financial aid support for all students. You helped us renovate and expand our historic Hilltop campus with the Russell Science Center at one end to the Richard and Norma Small Athletic and Wellness Center at the other.

And, we are not yet done. Just this past summer, we received two gifts totaling \$7 million to create new endowed scholarships for our students. Those gifts are great for students and great for the endowment. At the end of the day, YOU—as alumni and friends of Cornell—are one reason why we remain so optimistic about our path and our future.

No doubt, we have more work ahead to strengthen our position, and it will take all of us. You will hear more about those efforts over this coming year. Thank you, as always, for supporting our incredible and worthy students.

As always, if you have any questions, please feel free to let us know. Thank you.

Jonathan and Wendy



Jonathan Brand
President



Wendy Beckemeyer
Vice President for Enrollment Management

This presidential white paper is part of a series on matters of importance to Cornellians.

I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper topic.

You can always reach me at 319.895.4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu

