Twenty-Five Years With Cornell

My name is Carly Ferguson-Hills ’03 (Anishinabeg) and I am part of the Diversity Outreach Team at Cornell’s Undergraduate Admissions Office. I started here in May 2016, but I have been a member of the Cornell community since 1993. I moved to Ithaca with my family when my father, Thomas A. Ferguson ’95, was admitted to the College of Agriculture & Life Sciences. Through the American Indian Program and Akwe:kon, we soon found a welcoming community. Akwe:kon (opened in 1991) is the nation’s first residence hall for Native Americans and other Indigenous students. My father served as one of Akwe:kon’s first resident advisors from 1993 to 1994.

The day of my father’s graduation was the day I knew I wanted to be a Cornellian. He was the first in his family to attend college and seeing him work so hard (as an adult student) was a huge inspiration to me. Cornell’s dedication to diversity convinced me that I belonged here. After researching and spending a lot of my time on campus, I decided to apply to the College of Human Ecology. I was shocked when I was admitted to Cornell. Graduation day was an even more surreal experience!

Soon after graduating, I was still convinced that I belong here, so I applied for a job in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. As a Cornell staff member, I was able to see how the university works on the “other side.” Interacting with students as a young alumna was an amazing experience. I also witnessed how much work faculty members put into their classes. They are very supportive and make sure they are available to all students as much as possible. Cornell is a research institution, so they recruit academic leaders in all disciplines to teach and mentor students.

In 2010, I decided I wanted to give back by working closer with Cornell’s Native American community, the same community that welcomed my family.

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Welcome to Our Newest Team Member

The Diversity Outreach team is excited to welcome Jennifer Wickham to Cornell’s Undergraduate Admissions Office in the role of Senior Assistant Director of Financial Aid and Admissions. Jennifer has spent the last five years working in Cornell’s Office of Financial Aid and Student Employment, where she focused on customer service, as well as financial aid counseling for under-represented student populations. This included work with Cornell’s Gates Millennium Scholars, New York State Opportunity Programs (NYSOP) students, and Posse Scholars. She continues to work closely with these groups, and now also assists prospective students of under-represented backgrounds throughout the admissions and financial aid cycles. Jennifer’s multi-faceted responsibilities include advising applicants on admissions requirements, need-based financial aid, and educational financing options. She also provides prospective student advocacy and guidance, which are hallmarks of the Diversity Outreach team. Should you or your students have questions about Cornell’s financial aid or admissions processes, you can reach Jennifer or any member of the Diversity Outreach team by email at diversity@cornell.edu or by phone at 607.255.7233.
Myth #1: “I don’t have the grades/SAT scores”.

Students often think that college admissions is a numbers game, assuming that colleges only look at their grades and test scores. Cornell looks for students who have excelled in their school’s most challenging curriculum. If your school offers Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, we want to see that students have taken these courses. Grades do not tell us how intelligent a student is, but rather how hard s/he has worked! In addition, standardized test scores are only one component of the whole application process. Of course, colleges/universities want students to strive and do their best work, but many other factors are considered. Highly selective colleges/universities practice holistic admission and ask for more than scores and transcripts. We want to learn more about your student’s intellectual interests, extracurricular passions, and gain your and their teachers’ perspectives on their character and ability to succeed at Cornell.

Myth #2: Asking for help is a sign of failure or weakness.

A Cornell Chronicle article noted that while addressing the audience of graduating first-generation students, Cornell Woodson, adviser to the First Generation Student Union and Associate Director of Diversity and Inclusion for Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) voiced that he had “been thinking a lot of how [he] got here...about the people that helped [him] get here.” Woodson pointed out what can be very easily forgotten or dismissed: students who are the first in their families to attend college need help to succeed. Most first-generation students are accustomed to being self-reliant. At Cornell, there is a motto, especially in the first-years’ North Campus living-and-learning community, that goes: “Ask anyone anything.” The idea is to ask away, so that you can receive or be directed to the needed information. Here, reaching out for help is a sign that students take themselves and their work seriously. There is no such thing as a stupid question, especially when you are new to the process.

Myth #3: “I/My family can’t afford college”.

Unfortunately, students often base their ability to pay for school solely on their family circumstance or the number next to the cost section they may read on the school’s website and say to themselves, “I can’t afford it.” This limited perspective fails students because there is indeed money out there. It just takes some digging! The financial aid process can be daunting. As a counselor it is important that you work closely with your students and their parents/guardians in the financial aid process. Students should be made aware that they should not pay anyone or for any service that assists in finding scholarships, completing the FAFSA (fafsa.gov) forms, or any other part of the financial aid process. Counselors should explain the federal aid process and its requirements to students. Students should also reach out directly to the financial aid office at each of their prospective schools/universities and ask about the financial support offered to students. Schools, particularly those with vast resources, like Cornell, have a number of financial initiatives to support students.

Myth #4: If I don’t know what career I want, I shouldn’t go to college.

Many students think that the purpose of college is to get a job. We definitely want our students to be successful post-graduation. However, our greater goal is to foster life-long learners. As an undergraduate student, the focus should be on academic and personal learning and growth. In college, students will engage with vastly different people and experiences. Counselors can encourage students to inquire about campus life and available extracurricular activities. Cornell’s 1200+ student organizations and plentiful experiential opportunities encourage students to express their full potential outside the classroom. This will make them more interesting future employees as well! When it comes to selecting a major students should focus on what they are most interested in studying rather than merely focusing on their future careers.

Myth #5: I won’t fit in/don’t belong at college.

First-generation students often feel like outsiders and question whether they can compete once on their college campuses. As a university that takes pride in its vast world-class resources and its legacy of access and equity, Cornell welcomes and supports first-generation students. Additionally, for students of multi-cultural backgrounds, there are spaces and programs on campus in which they may want to participate. From setting up a campus visit or virtual information session for your students to answering questions on the admissions process or about Cornell in general, we are here to help!
An Early Decision Experience
By Amber McKay, Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) ’19

Now that I’m in my third year at Cornell, it is surreal to look back on the process of applying Early Decision (ED). While many of my friends scrambled to get their applications in for the regular decision deadline at a myriad of schools, I was able to meticulously pore over any and all information I could find about what my life at Cornell would be like. However, before my acceptance I dealt with my fair share of stressors. Applying ED is not for everyone as it requires a significant amount of forethought and planning. However, it can provide some peace of mind in an otherwise stressful time. There are several things a student should consider before applying ED to Cornell.

One of the most important skills I learned during my application process was advocating for myself. Once a student has decided that Cornell is the place for them, it is essential to pinpoint which teachers, coaches, and advisors are willing to write strong letters of recommendation for them. It is also good for students to identify who is willing to support them in identifying their strengths, writing the personal statement, and preparing any supplemental materials.

I had to figure out how to be my own advocate and embrace talking about myself positively. Initially, it can feel weird for a student to list their accomplishments and skills. However, at a certain point, they have to realize that everyone applying to college is doing this. The Cornell admissions committee wants to know why they should accept a particular student. Part of that decision is based on the student’s self-portrayal and potential contributions to campus. Students should not think of it as bragging, but rather as their opportunity to explain what will make them a unique addition to our student body.

At Cornell, students apply to one of our seven colleges and schools. This means that they should already have an idea of what they want to study and which college or school would be the best fit for them. In all honesty, I was not even considering applying to Cornell until I learned about the ILR School. After doing some research and visiting campus, I fell in love with the ILR major. I was able to synthesize this feeling with my academic interests and write a strong supplemental essay. The admissions committee is looking for students who know what they want out of a Cornell education and how their prior education and experiences sparked that interest. By identifying what they are passionate about and writing about these things, students will be able to craft more compelling essays. And, frankly, the writing process will be easier.

Applying to college can be extremely stressful. With the multiple pressures and deadlines, it can feel like everything is happening at once. In such demanding times, students should make sure that they are taking care of themselves, mentally and physically, and not letting the admissions process consume them. Everything can feel like a life-or-death situation when applying to college, but they need to take time to evaluate how urgent their tasks are and prioritize accordingly. If after prioritizing, they still feel overwhelmed, they may want to reconsider whether applying Early Decision is right for them. It is better to wait and apply during the regular decision cycle than to submit a rushed application. Being an ED applicant requires early preparation and staying organized throughout the process. If a student realizes that they may need more time to figure out why Cornell is right for them or needs more time with the application, I would encourage them to apply Regular Decision and avoid unnecessary stress.

Seven Straight-Forward Questions for a Student Who is Unsure Whether to Apply Early or Regular Decision

1. Is s/he certain that Cornell is her/his absolute top choice for college?
2. Has s/he done everything possible to get to know Cornell (via internet/social media if not in person)?
3. What or who made her/him first consider applying Early Decision?
4. Has s/he researched all seven of Cornell’s undergraduate colleges to know which is the best fit?
5. Does her/his 9th-11th grade transcript show her/his full ability as a student or is an extra semester needed to shine brightest academically?
6. Has s/he taken all of the standardized tests in time to meet the Early Decision application deadline?
7. Would s/he and her/his family need/prefer to be able to compare financial aid packages from several different colleges and universities?
Navigating Cornell’s Undergraduate Colleges and Majors
By Alyssa Orrantia Bieneme, Associate Director

Cornell continues to operate on its founding philosophy of offering qualified students of all backgrounds an unparalleled breadth of courses (4,000) and majors (80+). Our students have access to a comprehensive and cohesive network of seemingly limitless academic opportunities. However, prospective applicants may find Cornell’s list of majors overwhelming when they are deciding which of Cornell’s undergraduate colleges and programs to pursue.

The upside of the sometimes dizzying variety of Cornell’s offerings is that it allows for academic niches and pathways that a student might not be able to find elsewhere. Biology is a great example of this. Future Cornellians with a bent toward the Biological/Life Sciences have plentiful options. Some unique programs that enable students to apply their scientific studies to some of the world’s most critical environmental, health-related, social, and other concerns are Biological Engineering (offered in both the College of Agriculture & Life Sciences and the College of Engineering) and Biology & Society (found in both the College of Agriculture & Life Sciences and the College of Arts & Sciences).

The option to apply to Cornell as an Undecided (aka Undeclared) major is now available in four of Cornell’s undergraduate colleges: the College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, the College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Engineering, and the College of Human Ecology. This is a good option for students who are interested in multiple majors offered within one of the four aforementioned colleges. A student who applies using this option, needs to maximize on the supplemental essay to clearly express why s/he is choosing this route and to show how s/he will explore and utilize the opportunities and resources within their chosen college to focus their academic direction once at Cornell. This is not a good option for students who are completely unsure of their academic interests and goals.

**Assisting Students in Finding the Right-fit College and Major**

If a student comes to you and says they want to apply to Cornell, but doesn’t know which program is a good fit and hasn’t explored all Cornell has to offer, it can be helpful to encourage her/him to:  

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**Twenty-Five Years**

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I transferred to the American Indian & Indigenous Studies Program (AIISP) as a program assistant. At AIISP, I was able to connect more with students by simply listening to and talking with them. For many Native (and first generation) students, college is their first experience being away from home. These students truly value AIISP and Akwe:kon as their home away from home. Cornell students have a lot of expectations to meet, and they really appreciate having a safe space to decompress. The AIISP utilizes the entire top floor of Caldwell Hall and is a sanctuary for all students, especially students who identify as Native American or Indigenous.

During my time there, the director re-envisioned the layout and expanded available resources. Now, students have access to top-of-the-line technology as well as healthy snacks to get them through the day. I also had the opportunity to help coordinate the 20th anniversary of Akwe:kon. The families who worked to establish the residence hall were celebrated at this event. To learn more, read this article. The program continues to grow by offering an increasing number of seminars and social events for the entire campus community. Additionally, they host an invitational program called Promising Futures, that encourages prospective Native American students to apply to Cornell University. The program is held in March and details can be found at [www.aiisp.cornell.edu](http://www.aiisp.cornell.edu).

I have seen the campus develop and change over the years. Cornell now has the newly founded SC Johnson School of Business, Cornell Health just opened its state-of-the-art health center, and our 14th President, Martha Pollack, was inaugurated during the summer of 2017. Additionally our student population is more diverse than ever before with over one third of the Class of 2021 identifying as multicultural.

Working in the Undergraduate Admissions Office over the last year has been a great experience. Our team truly cares about your students and believes they can be successful here. We want students to be confident in their abilities and push themselves out of their comfort zones. Our office is here as a resource, so please feel free to reach out if you have questions about the application process or anything specific about [life at Cornell](http://www.aiisp.cornell.edu).
1. Go with academic passion over the name of a potential major.

When students begin their exploration of Cornell’s majors with what they are most passionate about and an openness to the various possibilities that are available, it is more likely that they will find the program best for them.

2. Focus on discovering which undergraduate college or school would be their ideal home-base.

Cornellians make their primary academic home in one of seven undergraduate colleges, which vary in size, graduation requirements, and overall culture/feel. If a student sees the same/similar majors in two or more colleges, it can be helpful to explore each of the colleges more in-depth to see which would be a better fit.

3. Think about the big picture.

A student should consider what s/he wants to achieve at Cornell, and investigate their potential major(s), minor(s), study abroad/research/other desired opportunities to see how it would all fit together depending on their chosen major and college.

4. Start drafting the Cornell supplemental essay early.

A strong supplemental essay is vital to the admissions review process and will be read by a college-based committee to determine your student’s fit and enthusiasm for that particular college and major program. Beginning the writing process early ensures an appropriate amount of time and attention is spent on this short yet important essay. It also allows for significant reflection and research that will either confirm the student’s choice or cause her/him to reconsider and change directions if necessary.

Important note: A student cannot change her/his chosen college once the application is submitted. However, for enrolled Cornellians who want to change colleges, there is an advisor-supported inter-college transfer application process.

Pre-professional Advising Tracks at Cornell
Cornell prepares students well for graduate school, providing them with excellent guidance along the way, especially for professional degree programs (i.e. M.D., J.D., and M.B.A.). For your students who are considering “going pre-med,” Cornell offers a pre-med track rather than a major. We have future medical professionals in all seven of our undergraduate colleges and they receive excellent advising. The same goes for pre-law students, and students wanting to prepare for a business career.

Support for Student Success
As a reminder, regardless of their major or post-graduate plans, all students receive comprehensive academic, career, and peer advising at the university-wide level as well as within each undergraduate college. The Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives (OADI) is a great resource center for many of your students who may become Cornell students. This is one of many centers and programs on campus that support Cornellians of underrepresented backgrounds in achieving their goals.

If you or your students have questions about Cornell’s colleges/schools and majors, please email us at diversity@cornell.edu. We’re here to help!

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**News from the Cornell Chronicle**

**Students clear mud, debris from storm-ravaged homes in Puerto Rico**

“Over winter break in January, 14 Cornell Tradition undergraduates traded creature comforts for work gloves to help clean up homes in Puerto Rico, which is still reeling nearly five months after Hurricane Maria devastated the island.”
First, But Not Alone
By Luz Martes, Arts & Sciences ’20

Like many first-generation college students, I was accustomed to not being able to go to my family for guidance on anything school-related. As a result, I became very independent, never truly learning how to ask for help. This immediately became an issue when I came to Cornell, and, for the first time, couldn’t easily figure things out on my own. I was taking classes I had never even heard of before, and it felt like I was going at a snail’s pace compared to everybody else. Additionally, I began to look down on myself because I felt like I was the only one who was struggling and was first-gen. This didn’t change until I noticed that a lot of the successful students were the same ones who lived in office hours and support courses. I realized that it’s normal to ask for help, and that this didn’t make me any less of a student; it actually made me a better student for knowing when I needed help.

Contrary to first glance, there is actually a large community of first-generation students and resources at Cornell; you just have to know where to look. One example is the First-Generation Student Union (FGSU), a student-run group for students who want to stay updated on first-gen issues at Cornell and get involved with events like the First-Generation College Student Graduation. Another great resource is The Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives’ (OADI) First-in-Class program. This is a university-run program that focuses on creating events like resume workshops and networking opportunities with first-gen faculty and staff. The OADI is a nice spot to study and offers funding, academic support, and other opportunities for students who need them. These groups have been a great help to me and have become my second home at Cornell.

Now that I am almost halfway done with my Cornell experience, I can say that being first-gen is something that I have learned to take pride in. While we are first in our families to attend college, we are not alone in our journey. Each time a cohort of fellow first-gen students graduates, they give motivation to the next group to show that it is possible to graduate despite how difficult and isolating it may feel at times.

Campus Visit Options for Bus Groups
To request a campus visit for a group of students from your high school or community-based organization, please email us at diversity@cornell.edu. Please reach out to us at least two weeks in advance of your group’s desired visit date.

If you and your students would like to experience Cornell first-hand, but cannot make the trek to Ithaca, we encourage you to connect with our community virtually by watching the Glorious to View video and following us on social media!

February to March 25: Day and overnight visits
April: No visits offered
May 7 - August 30: Day visits only