

The New York Times

Cornell Applicants Are Drawn to Its Prestige. Will They Now Think Twice?

Many alumni and some prospective parents are rethinking their relationships with Cornell. But as one admissions consultant said, “Prestige is a powerful draw.”



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By Troy Closson

Oct. 1, 2026

For some overachieving 17-year-olds at New York City’s hardest-to-get-into public school, the mention of Cornell University evokes pure excitement.

There’s the Ivy League cachet, the esteemed engineering program and the sheer numbers: Every fall, about 50 to 60 seniors from the acclaimed high school — Stuyvesant, in Lower Manhattan — start their college careers in Ithaca, N.Y.

But over the last few days, at least some have started to say: Count me out.

“It’s kind of an epidemic at Stuyvesant of just not wanting to apply to Cornell,” said Robert Schwartz, who works with students at his New York admissions essay consulting firm. “In the last three days, I’ve asked, ‘What about your friends?’”

“And they’re going, ‘My friends, too,’” Mr. Schwartz said.

Two weeks since a woman’s explosive lawsuit accused several men of raping her at a campus fraternity house — and questions began swirling about the response by the authorities — an upstate New York college town remains in crisis. (None of the men has been charged with a crime; lawyers for at least three have issued statements denying criminal wrongdoing.)

But the tremors are evident far beyond the environs of Cornell's isolated campus. At least 600 alumni vowed this week to halt donations until the university offers a full accounting of its handling of the case.

Hundreds more signed onto a planned letter for the campus newspaper, pleading with their alma mater to confront "the proliferation of sexual violence." Chief executives and Class of 2026 grads alike shared a sense of betrayal in Facebook groups and LinkedIn essays, saying trust was broken — and sometimes debating whether to pull back their support, too.

And in recent days, college counselors and admissions consultants have fielded frantic messages from shaken parents, questioning whether the university should remain on their campus tour lists. Would my daughter be safe? Is Greek life less entrenched at other colleges?

But sometimes they're asking: Will it actually be easier to get into Cornell this year?

Even amid the national outrage and scrutiny, experts said, it remains unclear whether those reluctant high school students in Manhattan will become the norm — or an exception.

Cornell is a platinum brand institution with international standing, which — like many of its highly selective peers — can be shielded from its troubles by an elite school halo. It received more than 67,000 applications last year and admitted roughly 9 percent.

"The extraordinary value and prestige attached to their names, it feels like it gives them a certain insulation from scandals," said Charis Ralko, a senior admissions consultant at Ivy Coach, a college admissions consulting firm.

"Students and families often just aren't that quick to walk away," Ms. Ralko, a former associate director of admissions at Washington University in St. Louis, said. "And people forget, unfortunately."

It tends to be tougher to track whether convulsive episodes at universities trigger large-scale declines in donations, researchers said. But some alumni see a breaking point.

Sami Sage, who graduated from Cornell in 2011, said that the school had “destroyed its brand proposition.”

She started a petition on Sunday calling for donations to be withheld until several demands are met. Those include a public apology and the removal of school officials who might be deemed to be complicit after an investigation. The petition has picked up more than 25,000 signatures.

“They would love for people to forget this,” Ms. Sage, the co-founder of a women’s media company, said. “But I do think this scenario is salient enough that it will stick to their name.”

For its part, Cornell has insisted that “a continuation of the false narrative that there were minimal consequences” for the accused men is “irresponsible, will make survivors feel less safe and supported and will perpetuate the underreporting of sexual assault.” The university has said that it gave the men “a range of sanctions, which included expulsions and suspensions.”

Several admissions consultants said that they hadn’t heard of a retreat from Cornell; others said many of the students they advise were pulling back. One noticed that young women were rethinking their application plans more often than young men.

And many openly wondered whether the school would see a drop in students applying for early decision. The consultants said that some teenagers seemed to be scrapping or rethinking their plans to apply early, while still keeping the school on their lists.

“I don’t expect these students are going to abandon Cornell completely,” said Elizabeth Doe Stone, who leads Top Tier Admissions, another admissions consulting firm.

In research from the Harvard Business School, a team of scholars studied dozens of scandals including hazing, sexual assault and murder at the country's top 100 schools between 2001 and 2013 — before #MeToo and the modern social media boom.

They discovered that when a high-profile case prompted waves of national headlines, a college could see as much as a 10 percent decline in applications in the next admissions cycle.

“The biggest impact was right away — the year after,” said Jonathan Smith, an associate professor of economics at Georgia State University and one of the researchers.

Applications fell by about 10 percent at Penn State University, which is far less selective than Cornell, after a child sex abuse scandal involving Jerry Sandusky, a football coach.

Applications dropped about 8 percent at Michigan State University after it was rocked by the sex crimes case of Larry Nassar, the former U.S.A. Gymnastics team doctor whose sentencing hearings were watched across the globe.

And at one of Cornell's Ivy League peers, Dartmouth College, a former president blamed a 14 percent decline in applications a decade ago on a growing — and widely documented — notoriety for sexual assault, hazing and a toxic Greek culture.

Steven Mercer, a college consultant in the Los Angeles area, said that families' concerns ebb and flow. He had noticed a wave of parents pulling back from colleges in those states that restricted abortion access a few years ago; he's not hearing that as much this year. And for many, “prestige is a powerful draw.”

“We've all heard a family say something like, ‘Yes, if my son was accepted to — you name the Ivy — we'd pay for that. With anything else, we'd have to be more careful.’ ”

And often, even when a campus crisis breaks through: “It hits — and then the pendulum swings back a bit.”

Troy Closson is a reporter for The Times covering children, teenagers and young adults in New York City.