Cornell's Worried Image Makers Wrap Themselves in Ivy

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ITHACA, N.Y. — Cornell has been a member of the Ivy League for decades, but some of its students have Ivy envy.

They did away with new logos and used marketing and public relations strategies to stress the school's Ivy League identity.

Their fear is being viewed as a country cousin to Harvard, Yale and Princeton, more like a Midwestern flagship state university than a core member of a prestigious club.

"Because of when most people go to college, their identity becomes closely associated with the identity of their university," said Peter Cohl, a committee founder who graduated last spring and is now working on Madison Avenue.

Let the college's standing drop in publications that rank universities, he said, and "my value as a human being feels like it's dropping." (Cornell is now ranked 13th among national universities by U.S. News & World Report.)

"We deserve more respect," said Heather Grantham, a senior who is now co-chairwoman of the image committee. "I am glad I came here," she added, "and it saddens us if it's not properly marketed."

It is an odd bit of role reversal. Marketing and honing an image have become commonplace among university presidents and admissions deans these days. But it is rare to hear students speaking the same language.

In this case, the committee, which was formed four years ago and now has about 50 members, successfully lobbied administrators to jettison a relatively new logo, which featured a large, bright red box with the word Cornell in modern typeface, and to revert to a simplified version of the old circular logo, with a crest and other traditional symbols.

The committee also persuaded the bookstore to stock a line of vintage hats and sweatshirts that decidedly emphasize Cornell's Ivy League roots. Next up is an assault on class size. "If they can reduce class size, they can be a Top 5 school," said Mr. Cohl, a nontraditional student who was 38
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Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Peter Cohl graduated last year and now works in product branding.

Some recent developments have bolstered the students' view that Cornell was not putting its best foot forward, committee members say, and that changing its image has helped. Applications have increased by 35 percent in the last two years, and so it has been able to become more selective, with the proportion of applicants offered admission declining to 24.7 percent this year from 31 percent three years ago.

Many elite universities also experienced increases in applications this year, but few if any have been as large as Cornell's. Its rate of admissions, while declining, is still higher than the seven other Ivy League universities.

Doris Davis, the associate provost for admissions and enrollment at Cornell, cited several factors in the sharp increase in applications, from a revamped timetable for sending mailings to potential applicants to an expansion of its recruitment trips to eight primary market areas. The image committee was not prominent on her list.

Other Cornell officials, though, gave the committee credit. "There's no doubt in my mind that it's directly related," said Thomas W. Bruce, vice president for university communications. "They were enormously important to the process."

Image committee members say that students' morale and sense of self-worth is caught up in the university's standing, though they deny that they see the school as the Rodney Dangerfield of the Ivy League.

"I don't have an inferiority complex," said Daniel Cohen, an image committee co-chairman who is now a graduate student in mechanical engineering at the university. "I just want to see my school improve, and I don't see why it can't."

The committee's roots lie in a Cornell-Yale football game in Ithaca four years ago. Yale fans in the stadium were wearing hats and other neat gear unlike anything Cornell offered for sale, Mr. Cohl said. He talked about that with students sitting nearby, including leaders of the campus Republicans and Democrats.

All were in agreement, he said. "Nobody was wearing our stuff," he said. "We didn't have cool hats, we didn't have cool hoodies."

The committee's first effort was at the bookstore, which proved responsive. Bookstore managers agreed to produce a new line of hats and sweatshirts that looked vintage and emphasized Cornell's Ivy tradition. A blue fitted hat with a simple red C became a big seller, as did a red hooded sweatshirt with a small C on the front.

But when committee members first approached administrators to talk about their concerns — including what they saw as the university's passive response to a slight drop in some ranking guides — they met with resistance.

That changed three years ago, they said, with the arrival of a new president, Jeffrey S. Lehman, and the subsequent appointment of Mr. Bruce, who took their critique seriously, particularly their thoughts about the so-called view book for potential applicants and about the Web site. (Mr. Lehman resigned last June over differences with the board.)

"Today, a Web site is the face of the university," Mr. Cohen said. "It's often the first way that high school students see Cornell. Not all administrators understood that."

The university redesigned the Web site and the view book more than a year ago, and the students think the new versions are more traditional and more elegant.

Committee members who carefully analyzed college rankings are now focused on class size. They have concluded that if Cornell could diminish the number of classes with more than 50 students, and increase the number with fewer than 20, it could significantly improve its U.S. News & World Report standing.

"It's the issue that most affects the rankings and the quality of student life here," Ms.
Grantham said.

But this would involve major new expenditures by the university, whose large lecture classes include a celebrated introductory psychology course that draws as many as 1,500 students to a huge lecture hall.

Committee members are also lobbying Cornell to offer more generous financial aid packages to low-income students, comparable to those at Harvard and other elite universities. They say it is necessary to foster more diversity on campus.

Moving up in the rankings would cement Cornell's standing among its peers, Mr. Cohl said. "Much of the Ivy League has looked at us and said, 'Oh, you're the farm school,' " he said, referring to Cornell's agricultural college, one of several at the university that are run by the state.

"One thing I think the image committee has done is to say, we are an Ivy League school, and it's O.K. to be an Ivy League school," Mr. Cohl said. "I think it's Ivy and more. If I were doing strategic positioning, I would say it's Ivy and more."

And he should know. These days he works in strategic branding, in part, he says, because a principal of the firm is an alumnus and read about the image committee in the student newspaper, The Cornell Daily Sun.