

Cornell College

W H I T E P A P E R S E R I E S

RATIONALE FOR COMPREHENSIVE GROWTH

A Presidential White Paper
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RATIONALE FOR COMPREHENSIVE GROWTH

Periodically, as was done by my predecessors, I will produce papers on matters of importance to Cornellians. This white paper explains why comprehensive growth is essential to Cornell's future. Subsequent white papers will present Cornell's strategic plan (which provides a more detailed framework for achieving that growth) as well as the evolution of our student learning outcomes. I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper. You can always reach me at 319-895-4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu.

Over the last few years, there has been significant conversation at our college about the importance of growth. At the highest level, nothing could be more pressing than the reality that our future requires this growth, especially in light of the challenging economic environment. Simply put, growth is central not only to Cornell's long-term viability but also to its long-term "thrivability." Sustaining Cornell is not enough; we also wish to thrive in even more profound ways as a residential liberal arts college of the highest caliber. This will only be possible as a result of strategic growth, achieved in a manner that retains what is distinctive and special about us. Without such growth, we risk the future of Cornell College.

The first sentence of our reaccreditation proposal of 2010 aptly stated, "Cornell College enters this new decade with the recognition that growth—both in terms of enrollment and distinctiveness—are essential to its continued viability." In fact, the goal of comprehensive growth is so important that it anchors our ongoing strategic planning process as well. This document seeks to delineate why growth is essential to Cornell's future.

It all begins with attracting and retaining more students. We know that prospective students' opinion of what constitutes a "small" school has evolved over the last 20 years. Most prospective students believe that a school of 2,500 students is a "small" school. At 1,200 students, Cornell falls dramatically below what an average prospective student would even call "small." Thus, growth, not only in students but also programs and offerings, is central to improving our "marketplace attractiveness." In a report to the Board of Trustees in May 2010, we wrote:

"Currently, Cornell is smaller than its competitors, which have been systematically increasing enrollment over the past several decades. Furthermore, prospective students' perceptions of the ideal size of a national liberal arts college have evolved from the traditional size of 1,000 to 1,200

students twenty-five years ago to more than 1,350 and increasingly toward institutions of even 2,000 or more students today. In a recent survey (2009), Dehne and Associates reported that 1 of 7 students prefers a college of 2,500 or fewer students as being an ideal size. Only 1 of 15 reports a college of 1,200 or fewer as being an ideal size.”

The size of a school’s student body also influences that school’s national reputation, which contributes, in turn, to its “marketplace attractiveness.” Cornell is currently the second smallest school in the ACM (the “Associated Colleges of the Midwest”). Among *U.S. News and World Report* national liberal arts colleges, based on 2011 figures, the average enrollment of schools ranked from 1-40 is 2,319; from 41-80 is 1,921; from 81-120 is 1,654.

To be sure, growing Cornell will permit us to offer a richer array of curricular and co-curricular programs for our students. This wider range will, in turn, help us to highlight further our points of distinction and strengths, create an even more dynamic learning environment, and increase our attractiveness to prospective and current students.

If an institution lacks sufficient “market attractiveness” to attract a greater number of students (or even prevent a diminution in students), it will also struggle to generate the necessary revenue on an annual basis to fund its operations. This is an enormous risk. In fact, the reality is that colleges of smaller student bodies and smaller endowments are the most at risk, long-term, with significantly smaller operating margins. That is to say, if a school with such a profile misses its enrollment and/or retention goals, that school is often unable to absorb the revenue loss, which leads to reductions in programs and people. This, in turn, can lead to lower prospective student interest—a dangerous downward spiral which is hard, if not impossible, to reverse. Compounding this risk is the reality that Cornell is competing for students among the top 100 liberal art colleges in America, most of which have larger endowments and enrollments and are thus able to offer more programming and enhance facilities.

Cornell has lived on the proverbial financial edge for years, perhaps its entire history. At one level, we can be proud of who we are and what we have accomplished with limited resources. However, at another level, our finances have, at times, negatively influenced our culture, preoccupying and distracting us from our more ambitious goals. Sustainable growth will require a strong financial profile that permits us to overcome this narrative and move forward with confidence.

Through growth, we will be able to achieve better economies of scale, which simply means that we will be better able to absorb certain fixed-costs that do not dramatically change as

the size of the student body changes (e.g., information technology infrastructure). For example, a college like Cornell obviously needs a library with a minimum collection of books. The size of that library would likely not change much in terms of that between a student body of 1,200 and 1,500.

It is also true that, as the College grows, we will graduate more Cornellians. Over time, this will mean that the network of alumni around the world who can help younger alumni will grow as well. It should also be the case that philanthropic support for Cornell will increase too—something that is equally vital to the Cornell of today and tomorrow.

By raising our profile and position among other national liberal arts colleges, we will not only increase our ability to attract students, we will also stand to influence more significantly the growth and direction of the liberal arts sector as a major institutional player. We feel particularly well positioned to contribute in this manner, given our history, academic seriousness, and commitment to a distinctive learning philosophy (i.e., One Course At A Time, aka OCAAT). And, it stands to reason that, as we are increasingly recognized for our leadership role in higher education, employers and graduate schools will place a greater value on a Cornell College degree (to the benefit of all Cornell College alumni).

In sum, comprehensive growth is essential at Cornell because:

1. We will increase our attractiveness to prospective students and their families, especially for those who view Cornell as too small (under 2,500 students).
2. We will be able to offer a richer array of curricular and co-curricular programs and offerings for current and prospective students.
3. With more students, we will experience an even more exciting and dynamic learning environment.
4. We will be better able to withstand financial and operational shocks, thus strengthening our ability to prevent any challenging downward spiral.
5. We will replace a harmful cultural narrative around viability with a greater focus on thriving.
6. We will achieve vital economies of scale.
7. We will have more alumni, resulting in a stronger alumni network for our graduates (that is, the availability of even greater help for them as they graduate) as well as improved advancement of Cornell.

8. We will strengthen our ability to achieve greater external recognition through our points of distinction, such as our vision to reimagine the liberal arts experience, OCAAT, and our academic centers focused on experiential learning. This will result in an improved profile among higher education institutions, particularly among national liberal arts colleges.

While comprehensive growth is essential to our future success, we do not wish to fundamentally alter the spirit or essence of Cornell as a residential liberal arts college. In other terms, any planned growth must advance our mission and values as an intimate community that prizes close and personal interactions. One of Cornell's great strengths is that its students, faculty, staff, and alumni have a strong sense of its mission; it would be a tragedy if we lost that shared sense of purpose.

There are also real risks associated with growth. From a financial perspective, growth in the short-term will require a significant initial investment (before we can realistically even hope to increase the number of students). More specifically, because we do not currently have the infrastructure or resources to accommodate student growth, we need additional capital up front in order to be able to build the infrastructure so that we can then grow. Thus, at an implementation level, we must take on the financial risk of building residence halls (or have in place some type of creative housing strategy) even before we enroll a greater number of students. We will likely need to increase our staff in Enrollment (in order to attract more students) as well as Advancement (in order to attract more donors to fund our growth)—all prior to increasing the number of students. We also run the risk of investing in order to increase our capacity for additional students but then not successfully attract them.

Longer-term, we will need additional faculty, staff, and classrooms for more students—if we wish to preserve the same personalized experience for our students—and that comes at a cost. In addition, absent strong fundraising, our endowment on a per student basis may decline, making us more susceptible to changes in the economy. At the end of the day, we must take on these risks because they can be managed, and the risk of doing nothing is far greater than the risk of growth. Our alumni and friends must help us to mitigate them by supporting Cornell at greater levels than ever before during our growth period. Doing so will ensure that Cornell and Cornellians thrive well into and beyond the 21st century.