

THE ROLE OF ATHLETICS IN CORNELL COLLEGE'S EDUCATIONAL MISSION

A Presidential White Paper
From Jonathan M. Brand

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Periodically, as was done by my predecessors, I will produce papers on matters of importance to Cornellians. This white paper intends to address not only the vital role of athletics and regular physical exercise within the residential liberal arts college experience but also, more specifically, the central role that they hold at Cornell—past, present, and future. Subsequent white papers will address Cornell's academic mission and learning outcomes (which will dovetail with the development of our strategic plan) as well as Cornell's role in community engagement. 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.

“Part of the culture we’re trying to change is knowing that we can win. Average can be contagious, and we don’t want to be average.” Coach Vince Brautigam, Head Coach, Cornell College Football

“You are what you repeatedly do. Excellence is not an event – it is a habit.” Aristotle

While it might seem odd to juxtapose quotes by Aristotle and Vince Brautigam, these foregoing quotes, together, provide a justification for strengthening opportunities for our students to engage in athletics and physical activity at Cornell. The data are clear that regular exercise has significant long-term benefits for individuals—not only physical ones but, equally important, psychological and emotional ones. These educational benefits are further enhanced by team activities, such as intercollegiate athletics. Sports are not merely a competitive endeavor. They recognize and facilitate general fitness and learning. Thus, consistent with our educational mission we can help our students to become effective and courageous lifelong learners and leaders, in part, by encouraging them to develop habits of the body and to engage in sport. In addition, excellent athletic and fitness facilities are important in attracting and retaining students, faculty, and staff to Cornell (and Mount Vernon).

Valuing our History

Before President William Fletcher King, “athletic contests ... were between groups of Cornell students who more or less spontaneously organized teams that might represent a literary society, a college or preparatory class, or simply a pick up group of students.” (*Cornell College: A Sesquicentennial History*, Vol. 1, by William Heywood, p. 143.) There were clear exceptions.

For example, though not technically sanctioned by the faculty and the College, the first recognized intercollegiate baseball game in Iowa occurred between Cornell and the University of Iowa in 1876. (We won 35-18.) In 1887, according to *The Cornellian*, students engaged in baseball, football, lawn tennis, boxing, and Indian Club Drills¹.

Under President King, athletics begin to take on a more prominent role. In fact, in 1888, students created the Cornell Athletic Association and the Cornell Lawn Association. These groups also began to fundraise for athletics and created the first tennis courts. That same year, Cornell joined the Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Association. Athletic competitions began with some regularity, and athletic fields in Ash Park shortly followed in the 1890s. During this period, in 1891, we played our first football game against Coe—a rivalry that continues to this day.

In 1921, Cornell was one of the founding members of the Midwest Collegiate Athletic Conference. Most importantly, women’s athletics thrived during this period in Cornell’s history, even though as intramural sports (several decades before Title IX!).

What followed has been continuous growth in athletics and athletics offerings. We now offer a range of indoor and outdoor facilities, 17 intercollegiate sports, a number of club sports, a range of intramurals, and additional opportunities for our students to engage in physical activity. We have celebrated 67 Midwest Conference championships in 14 different sports, several Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Championships, AAU and NCAA national wrestling championships, and, at an international level, we have had 8 Olympians in wrestling.

Our history provides ample evidence of two truths about Cornell athletics: 1) it is woven into the Cornell experience; and 2) we have had significant success on which to build. Our future requires that we build on our past—commitment to success that comes with teamwork and persistence.

Understanding why physical activity is important

Why is physical activity so important to the Cornell experience? There are multiple reasons:

1. At a basic level, physical activity enhances mental acuity and general wellness. Research shows that exercise contributes to brain health as well as general health and well-being.

¹ Indian Club Drills were popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe, the British Commonwealth, and the United States. As a part of exercises, groups would swing these “clubs,” which looked like bowling pins made of wood.

2. Those who engage in physical activity learn to set goals and work to achieve them. Those who exercise learn the importance of building habits that serve them well as they pursue excellence in every endeavor throughout their entire lives.
3. Sport helps develop the whole person.
4. Athletics teaches resiliency and the ability to confront adversity. Student athletes gain experience accepting success and failure with dignity and resolve.
5. Sports develop team building skills that are applicable in virtually any setting. Our students learn that everyone has a role to play and that maximizing the performance of a team requires each participant to play his or her role as well as they can.
6. Sports teach our students how to be coachable (e.g., take direction without insecurity) and prepares them to be good mentors as well.
7. Through athletics, our students deepen their relationships with each other and with their coaches, through the highs and lows of competition and training. As our alumni themselves report, many of their deepest and most enduring relationships were forged through their athletic experiences.
8. Athletics develops a sense of campus spirit that motivates students, faculty, staff, and alumni. At Cornell, it ties our past, present, and future together.
9. Like art, music and theatre, athletics helps connect Cornell to Mount Vernon and to Iowa, in general. There is a natural overlap of shared interest.
10. Finally, athletics and sport are simply fun and enjoyable.

In the aggregate, if every Cornell student graduates having learned the importance of engaging in regular physical activity, Cornell will have contributed to the achievement of its mission to offer students “an innovative and rigorous learning community where faculty and staff collaborate with students to develop the intellectual curiosity, creativity, and moral courage necessary for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship.” After all, physical activity, as one dimension of human existence, is an essential aspect of life and thus an important part of liberal arts learning. Further, the data are clear that physical activity enhances peoples’ lives. And, thus, regular physical activity contributes to the attainment of our mission.

Deepening our commitment

There are several concrete steps that we can take over the next decade. At one level, we will need to continue to develop additional opportunities for our students (and faculty and staff) to engage in physical fitness. This could take the form of additional club sports or intramurals. At another level, it could also mean the construction of a swimming pool (perhaps shared with the Mount Vernon community) to accommodate not only general swimming (a terrific life activity) but also the recommencement of competitive swimming and diving at Cornell.

In fact, having new athletic facilities is one central part of a multi-faceted strategic plan to advance Cornell College. This explains why, for example, we are presently raising the necessary financial support to rebuild Ash Park, which includes new artificial turf for the football field and improvements to the baseball field. More athletics and fitness facilities work will need to follow. It is a challenge for Cornell to expect to successfully recruit athletes and students interested in physical fitness if they are coming to Cornell from high schools with superior athletic and fitness facilities (which is regrettably the case in many instances). Cornell will need the support of all its alumni, especially past athletes, to make these plans a reality.

In addition, improved and enlarged recreation and athletic facilities are vital to enhancing Mount Vernon, which lacks sufficient recreation and athletic space. Cornell's long-term success is wrapped up with Mount Vernon's long-term ability to attract and retain families and businesses—and that requires better recreational and athletic opportunities. Further, Cornell would be better able to accommodate Iowa-wide public school events, such as high school basketball or volleyball tournaments, which is another important way to bring prospective students from throughout Iowa and the region to campus and recruit them.

We should remain mindful of the important role that physical fitness and athletics can play at Cornell. One of our institutional goals is to be excellent in everything we do—not just in the classroom but also in areas such as athletics, other co-curricular activities, and residential life. We have further progress we wish to make in encouraging more of our students to appreciate the human value of regular physical activity and the enduring and powerful lessons to be learned through athletics. This level of excellence to which we aspire will require all of us to work together in order to get there.