

# Cornell College

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

## **WHY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IS VITAL AT CORNELL COLLEGE**

A Presidential White Paper  
from Jonathan Brand

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# WHY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IS VITAL AT CORNELL COLLEGE

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*This white paper is part of a series on matters of importance to Cornellians. In this paper, I address experiential learning, a focus of our strategic plan and an area of strength for Cornell College. 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.*

Residential liberal arts colleges are sometimes criticized for graduating students who hold high ideals about the world, but who otherwise lack the skills and specific knowledge in order to act on those ideals in ways beneficial to employers. Employers, after all, need individuals who understand how the world operates and who have the knowledge and skills to jump in and contribute immediately. Fortunately, the vast majority of business, industry, and community leaders responding to a survey by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) indicated that they sought employees with the skills imparted by a liberal education. The sentiment of business leaders, conjoined with the general and wholly misguided criticism directed at institutions like Cornell College, serve to further justify our strong commitment to enhance our high-quality liberal arts education with increased opportunities for students to learn through active experiences. These opportunities deepen the impact of that learning and also connect students in meaningful ways with the world beyond the classroom.

What is experiential learning in the first place? As succinctly stated by an on-campus task force recently charged with evaluating experiential education at Cornell, “[a] solid liberal arts education combined with experiential learning and its precursor, intentional professional preparation, ultimately contributes to the (broadly defined) success of a student during and after college. The working definition for experiential learning at Cornell College ... is:

*Experiential learning is an active and reflective process whereby students build upon their liberal arts education through its application to a real-world context to advance their personal and professional development.”*

And, such learning occurs in multiple, exciting ways and formats, both to introduce students to possible areas of interest and important skills.<sup>1</sup> It also helps them further deepen knowledge and abilities that they already possess and in ways that are self-directed.

Many prestigious institutions like Cornell College have strengthened programs that enhance more traditional academic learning (e.g., in the classroom), particularly with guidance from influential national organizations. For example, through its LEAP initiative, the AAC&U, one of the most respected national academic associations focused on developing best practices in learning, has highlighted the critical importance of experiential learning. First-year seminars, collaborative assignments/projects, service learning, and research are among the high-impact educational practices that AAC&U links to higher student retention and student engagement.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, a central component of Cornell College’s Strategic Plan, experiential learning plays spectacularly to our core point of distinction and all that it makes possible for our students—our One Course curriculum. Ultimately, our mission as an academic institution is to develop, in partnership with our students, their intellectual curiosity, creativity, and moral courage necessary for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship. To be sure, we accomplish this mission in myriad, highly personalized ways. However, in real terms, achieving our mission means that our students need not only the firm foundation that comes with a broad education, they also need opportunities to connect that learning with its application in settings beyond the traditional classroom. This is the hallmark of a liberal education and is where experiential learning comes in.

Experiential learning occurs in powerful ways as a part of the classroom experience. And, while other schools can offer similar opportunities, our One Course At A Time calendar allows for intensely rich and deep experiences uncommon elsewhere. Ultimately, from their very first block, taking one course at a time creates unique opportunities for students to dive in, focus intensely, and learn authentically. Consider

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<sup>1</sup>These experiences are offered through numerous Cornell College academic centers, including the Berry Center for Economics, Business, and Public Policy; the Career and Civic Engagement Center; the Center for Law and Society; Cornell Fellows; Dimensions: The Center for the Science and Culture of Healthcare; the Cornell Institute for Summer Research; and the International and Off-Campus Studies Office.

<sup>2</sup>High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter, by George D. Kuh (AAC&U, 2008).

the following examples:

When Professor Hans Hassell of Cornell's Politics Department offers "Campaigns & Elections," a course that allows students to become immersed in the democratic process at the peak of the election cycle, that is a form of compelling experiential learning. Our students are able to run complete simulations, in real-time and with the use of early polling numbers in Senate campaigns, to allocate limited resources for advertising and other campaign activities, so they can get a basic understanding for themselves of how parties allocate funds.

Where else to study Dante's *The Divine Comedy* but his native Florence, Italy, the city that first inspired, then exiled him? Students enrolled in English Professor Kirilka Stavreva's Medieval Literature course integrated travel, study, and the digital liberal arts. They reflected on their experiences through regular blog posts, compared the topography and architecture of Dante's Hell and Purgatory to those of the Tuscan landscape and several Italian cities, and engaged in creative final projects that were presented on the course website. In her blog, Rachel Cowell '14 poignantly wrote: "To reflect back on this course and say that it was a wildly enriching experience would still be an understatement. The incorporation of cultural, historical, literary, and even art lessons into each and every day is an unrivaled experience. You just can't get the full experience of *The Divine Comedy* in a classroom. The story is of the "journey of our lives," after all, and we made that journey, out of our comfort zones and into new experiences that will shape our lives forever."

Another impressive example of experiential learning happens through our Department of Economics and Business. Since 2007, Economics & Business Professor Santhi Hejeebu has offered a course entitled: "Economics of Organizations," which relies on the live case method of learning. In this class, Professor Hejeebu and her students have the opportunity to "unravel" a specific managerial problem that a business is confronting. Those problems could involve, as examples, issues related to product development, logistics, business operations, or pricing—virtually anything really. At the beginning of the class, the students travel to meet with and interview the business's leadership. They learn more about the company. They may review confidential business documents. And, they gain greater clarity around the specific issue that they will seek to resolve for the business. Then, working in teams, often day and

night, the students take the next two weeks of the block to research and develop creative and practical solutions. Finally, the executives of the business come to campus to hear final presentations from our students on the solutions that they developed. As Professor Hejeebu, herself, wrote: “This is real immersion learning for business students. In just a few short weeks, students grow in knowledge and maturity through intense, immersive projects like live business cases.”

The first time that Professor Hejeebu offered this course in this format, students visited with John Smith '71 of CRST, a family-owned national trucking company in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The central question that Professor Hejeebu and Mr. Smith developed for the students was: “how should the CRST Board of Directors respond to recent questions about profitability and the forecast for further challenges (particularly in light of the then-imminent global recession)?” In this business strategy case, students were provided with confidential documents, which they agreed to keep confidential. Ahead of his visit, students reviewed Mr. Smith’s PowerPoint slides and the company documents. They then answered the following questions to organize their thoughts:

1. What factors bear upon the operating ratio?
2. Are these variables demand drivers or supply drivers?
3. Which variables can management control, which can they influence, and which must they accept?

To be sure, the experience is intended to have recognizable value for the participating company. In this case, CRST was in the middle of several major decisions. And, the company recognized that it would likely face several business challenges that did not have obvious solutions, but rather a range of plausible ones. Here, as one element of a larger solution, our students suggested that CRST could make greater use of its idle capacity (e.g., trailers) by leasing them. Further, having input from the Cornell class was particularly valuable, because, thanks to the One Course curriculum, the students could offer solutions quickly, which Mr. Smith noted: “fit the needed pace in the real world.” Mr. Smith also commented that this class affirmed the true value of the liberal arts focus in that our students “could make quick connections between issues and facts and develop creative solutions.” He finally commented: “And, we need to teach them because they are our future leaders who will be taking over what we leave them, as they should.”

Experiential learning at Cornell often blends off-campus course experiences with longer-term projects. For example, senior studio art majors combine an off-campus seminar experience with a year-long project completed in a dedicated studio: this combination encourages individualized creativity and artistic growth. The group spends a full week in Chicago at the McLennan Center, visiting museums, galleries, and artists' studios during the first term of the academic year. This inspiring trip gives the students a firsthand encounter with contemporary art in one of the world's most vibrant art cities. The students then return to their assigned private and secure studio work spaces in McWethy Hall (the campus art building). These studios are available to students 24/7 during the academic year, allowing our student-artists to be consistently productive, even if they are enrolled in non-art courses in subsequent terms. Each senior studio art major presents a new body of work in one of our campus galleries at some point late in the spring semester. The criteria for the student projects are loosely defined in order to foster the development of creative student artists. The expectations are high, the pressure may be great, but the results are extraordinary.

Research is another example of robust experiential learning, providing an avenue for our students to deepen their understanding of specific academic disciplines and also a variety of other non-discipline-specific skills so highly valued by employers. Students conducting chemistry research with Chemistry Professor Craig Teague receive a firsthand taste of the life of a professional research scientist. Teague's ongoing research collaboration with scientists at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (a U.S. Department of Energy facility focused on cutting-edge science) allows Cornell students to apply chemistry research to environmental problems. As a part of this collaboration, a Cornell College student worked alongside lab scientists for a full summer of research at Oak Ridge, followed by a block of full-time research with Professor Teague on campus this fall. Another Cornell College student is continuing the research on site at Oak Ridge this fall as a participant in the prestigious Oak Ridge Science Semester program.

Student-faculty collaborative research extends to field-oriented projects as well. Students conducting marine geologic research with Professor Ben Greenstein have traveled to the Bahamas, Caribbean, and Indian Ocean to document changes occurring to coral reefs and to study the ways in which the fossil record of coral reefs may inform current reef management strategies. In addition to providing opportunities for students

to *acquire* as well as *produce* knowledge, immersive research experiences such as these permit students to hone a range of non-discipline-specific skills that are in high demand by employers and will serve them throughout their careers. It is through research that our students learn to undertake self-directed work toward a single outcome, set internal hard deadlines and meet them, and communicate results in written and oral formats, often in professional settings.

Participating in an internship experience is high on the list of what employers use to determine whether students are bringing skills to the workforce, and this is another form of important experiential learning. For example, as a Cornell Fellow, Caryn Shebowich '15 interned with Project Transitions, a nonprofit transitional housing and hospice program for people living with HIV/AIDS in Austin, Texas. As a Programs and Development intern, Caryn undertook a wide range of tasks, including event planning, graphic design, grants, public relations, and case management with the housing program. The experience allowed her to solidify her interest in pursuing a career managing a nonprofit organization that provides direct service to clients. As she wrote: “As I strove to become a professional myself, this fellowship has allowed me to articulate decisions about what kind of a professional I would like to be...I plan to work in a nonprofit in a capacity where I directly serve people and [which] requires that I utilize my ability to synthesize. I am strongly considering case management as a place to start my future career.”

The on-campus task force also identified civic engagement as yet another form of experiential learning. Here, service learning, such as through Alternative Spring Breaks<sup>3</sup> is one such example of civic engagement. Erin Vick '15 has participated in Alternative Spring Break every year at Cornell. Erin's most recent trip had her working with a nonprofit, after school, youth development program called Create Your Dreams, which works to break the cycle of poverty, crime, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy. Volunteering included tutoring, offering life lessons, playing games, going into schools, and helping plan curriculum, along with being a mentor to a number of students from 3rd grade to seniors in high school. For Erin's Senior Practicum, she will be tying education with social issues, after having spent the first semester student teaching in

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<sup>3</sup>In fact, our Alternative Spring Break Program is the third most active in the nation per-capita, according to Break Away, the organization that supports Alternative Spring Break programs nationally.

Chicago. “Service will always be a part of my life. Going into these schools...I’ve always found that to be more meaningful. I want to teach in an urban area. Being involved in service at Cornell has made me definitely consider working with nonprofits that serve youth.” Ultimately, as with other forms of experiential learning, through civic engagement, our students apply their knowledge and skills to new contexts—often ones that involve pressing social issues.

Fundamentally, all of these examples of experiential learning reveal why they are such optimal academic endeavors. Moreover, they are delivered in a particularly efficacious manner at Cornell College. This method of learning benefits our students in that it connects the liberal arts to a specific application. They create new knowledge, which is a part of our educational mission. These experiences advance the application of our educational priorities and outcomes revolving around critical thinking, creative and ethical decision-making, pithy communication, and teamwork in a “real” setting.<sup>4</sup> They encourage our students to begin thinking more deeply about the next stage in their lives. In so doing, these experiences often help our students to make vital business connections that will benefit them after they graduate. And, finally, experiential learning leverages fully the benefits of our One Course curriculum in a way that virtually no other school can.

As a macro-institutional goal, we seek to invest in strategic initiatives that 1) meet current and future student needs as we understand them today, 2) advance our core mission of developing students who lead with moral courage as engaged responsible citizens, and 3) make the absolute most of our primary points of distinction created by One Course At A Time. Experiential learning advances all three of these goals, making it

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<sup>4</sup>The Mission and Core Values guide learning at Cornell College. The College recognizes that meaningful education occurs in multiple formats and venues, and encompasses a wide variety of disciplines and learning objectives. As an intentional learning community, the college has chosen to emphasize the following Educational Priorities and Outcomes for all students. In order to achieve these Outcomes, the Educational Priorities are embedded in curricular, co-curricular, independent, and collaborative contexts across the campus. Faculty and staff provide opportunities for learning in a supportive environment where students ultimately take responsibility for their own education.

Our educational priorities focus on helping our students learn to integrate and apply knowledge; respond to the complexities of contemporary and enduring problems; evaluate evidence and interpret data; communicate with others in artful and captivating ways; connect with diverse ideas as well as people whose experiences differ from their own; recognize how to act ethically; collaborate with others; discover and prepare for a range of opportunities and challenges that await them beyond their college experience; and respect the ways that well-being contributes to a balanced life.



a wise choice for our investment. As we explore a possible capital campaign and the pillars of any such endeavor, strengthening our students' experiential learning opportunities has resonated with our alumni and friends. They recognize the timely and unique value of experiential learning for our students as well as for the attainment of our larger institutional goals. With this encouragement and support, we plan to expand Cornell College students' opportunities for experiential learning.