



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

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“Teaching at Cornell provides me with an even deeper understanding of why our students are so worthy of our support.”

A Personal Reflection on Teaching at Cornell

Periodically, in my white papers, I like to write to you not so much about a significant phenomenon in higher education¹ or an exciting new Cornell initiative² but rather about a memorable personal experience. For example, in 2017, I wrote about a student-led service-learning trip³ to Waco, Texas, in which Rachelle and I participated with a group of phenomenal Cornell students.

This white paper addresses a similar experience—teaching at Cornell. Every other year since 2012, most recently in December 2024 (Block 4), I teach an intermediate-level political science class titled The Nature, Functions, and Limits of the Law. At one level, the class is a basic primer on our legal system. We study the general contours and elements of personal injury law (torts), contracts, criminal law, international civil law, and privacy rights (constitutional law), as well as the legal process that administers all of this.

At a broader, more humanistic level, the course introduces students to the law’s capacity to mediate between competing individual interests as well as the law’s attempts at furthering the common good, often at the expense of individual interests. The law, while a powerful instrument for encouraging people to work together, is not capable of resolving every problem or achieving every goal.

I also wish to provide students with the opportunity to struggle with a big philosophical question: is truth immutable, thus determining the outcome of every conflict or, rather, is **truth** an ever-changing artificial human construct that depends on the circumstances and the world views of those involved? More questions than answers.

1 crnl.co/cliff-white-paper
2 crnl.co/ingenuity-white-paper
3 crnl.co/service-white-paper

Ultimately, I hope all students who take this class will not only understand and struggle with the nature and the limits of the law but will also understand and struggle with their own views of the law and those of their classmates who may hold differing views. How does each student think about their own individual interests within the context of larger social ones?

Beyond the actual substance of the class, I also wish to help the students in my class become better writers. In fact, (re)writing and (re)thinking go hand-in-hand. It is exceptionally rewarding to admire an endpoint to your thought process—a novel thesis—that you didn’t even know existed in your head until you played with it and *struggled* with it on paper. This writing-thinking process is particularly powerful on the One Course calendar because the daily extended class time means that we can delve profoundly into topics on a daily basis and also experience writing as a deeper and more creative way of thinking. And, students are also able to regularly help each other with their writing, which only strengthens our shared purpose.

From the outset of the class, on the first day, invariably, students aren’t quite sure how to interact with me. I am not a known quantity in terms of teaching like other Cornell faculty who teach six courses per year. You can feel the uncertainty in the classroom. Some call me professor from the outset. No thank you ... you should reserve that title for our full-time faculty. Some call me President Brand. That’s fine. It’s accurate, at least. Others wonder if they should call me Jonathan as they might with others. Let’s not do that, please. Most importantly, given how the students feel on the first day of class, I give them the space and activities to put them at ease. I am like other faculty at Cornell. Students come first, and it matters that they enjoy the class. I want them to feel that their intellectual home for the next 3½ weeks is the home that they want—and that it is theirs. I aspire for them to feel a sense of community in the class, itself, and be invigorated by the conversations we have.

Houston, we have a problem

I’ll never forget the first day I taught class at Cornell in 2012. This was my first time teaching on the block system, and it is memorable. Before that class, I had considered myself a relatively solid teacher, at least, my end-of-course evaluations suggested as much. I care a lot and had always thought that that commitment, alone, was sufficient to be effective as a teacher ... until I came to Cornell. About 45 minutes into my first class, I saw two of my 14 students fall asleep in the back of the room. Not a good sign. At 11 a.m., when our class broke for lunch, I returned to my office only to see two other students dropping my class at the Registrar’s Office. What is going on?

On my way to lunch that day, I bumped into Russian Professor Lynne Ikach, who asked me how my class was going. I told her that, in fact, I was already troubled, recounting the story of those students who had quickly fallen asleep in my class and the two others who had dropped the class after only two (!) hours. Houston, we have a problem. Professor Ikach, universally recognized as a very skilled teacher and motivator, offered me some initial guidance on how to teach effectively on the block system. She noted that what I was experiencing was not unusual for teachers just learning what the block system requires and that I could do this. “You’ve got this!” she said. Hmm. Not sure about that.

Thanks to Cornell, I am a much better teacher today. (At least, my more recent end-of-course evaluations suggest this.) I learned promptly that students on the block system and in a class for perhaps four or five hours per day don’t want to be lectured at. No. Teaching on the block plan does not simply mean compressing a semester-long (15 weeks) set of materials into 3½ weeks of lectures with a traditional mid-term exam and a final. Cornell students expect to be involved and active in class, which, frankly, encourages

more effective critical thinking skills and learning as well as teaching in any instance. Our students seek greater ownership of their education. They want engagement, and that engagement produces a deeper educational experience.

Listening and learning

I recall one Sunday a few years ago during a teaching block when one of my students emailed me. The class was together in Cole Library at that very moment to discuss a current class topic, and they had specific questions for me. What is most memorable about this moment is what it says about Cornell and Cornell students. The students in the class, not solely a small subset of them, had unilaterally taken it upon themselves to get together to discuss a topic from the class. It wasn't competitive for the students. It wasn't "I win, you lose" or "you win, I lose." No. It was "we can all win together." "We can all learn together." For me, this represents classic Cornell—the genuine connectedness that permeates the college, creating an optimal learning environment.

The academic enterprise is at its best when students build off of each other's ideas. I have Idea A, and you have Idea B. How about if we bring them together and create Idea C? That is how you develop new ideas. And because our students are generous with each other—receptive to each other's ideas, even when they disagree—they are particularly agile at expanding knowledge. In fact, I noted in class this last December, the number of students who started their comments by saying: "And, to build off of what she just said, I'd like to offer this idea. ..." That impulse—to build off of someone else's idea—affirms that students are listening and learning from each other.

I am also struck whenever a student divulges that, as a result of a conversation, let's say about the absence of a general duty for people to rescue each other, they have reconsidered their position. This is particularly noteworthy because a central liberal arts learning outcome requires recognizing that you either may not know something OR you may be wrong. It leaves open the possibility that you can change your mind in the face of new information.

Thanks to our One Course schedule, we are also able to extend our sense of community to include guests. In my class, I am able to invite Cornellians who are federal and state judges, U.S. and international lawyers, as well as legal experts and scholars for extended conversations with our students. For them, these guest visits remain among the most memorable aspects of the class. Not only do these conversations deepen our students' understanding of the practical complexities of the law, they also give our students a sense of the exciting career possibilities to which they can aspire.

Making memories at the Garner President's House

One benefit of teaching at Cornell is that I am also able to speak more directly to our alumni and friends about the heart of Cornell, which is fundamentally about our students' academic experiences. I learn what our students care about. How they confront academic issues with each other. How they work together in the classroom, including when they disagree, even strongly, about something. I end up knowing students, not just knowing *about* students.

I regularly hear from alumni, decades after graduation, not only about the lifetime friendships they made at Cornell but also about the faculty who changed their lives. Many alumni remember the genuine care and attention that their faculty provided—whether it was those faculty who had students over for dinner, picked

them up at the airport at the start of the school year, or mentored them through a challenge. That is Cornell. These are the memories that last. In this respect, I feel particularly fortunate that I am able to teach my class at the Garner President's House. Students can feel more like they're home with a (very good-looking but ever-hopeful, ravenous, and shamelessly begging) dog by their sides, a fireplace, and unlimited hot chocolate. These will hopefully be lasting memories.

For my part, teaching at Cornell will surely remain one of the most satisfying professional experiences that I'll ever have. Not only do I love getting to know students in a different way, but I also feel the joy of (hopefully) making a real difference in their lives.

Through teaching, I also feel more connected to the faculty because I get to join my colleagues in our primary endeavor. And, of course, I understand our One Course schedule much more intimately, which, in turn, allows me to speak even more effectively and passionately about its innumerable benefits.

Teaching at Cornell provides me with an even deeper understanding of why our students are so worthy of our support. And, they are. Alongside faculty and staff colleagues, I regularly see the genuine and impressive care we provide our students. And, while the immersive nature of the One Course calendar strengthens that connection, I am also quite confident that Cornell has had this student-focused warmth since 1853 before we ever launched One Course At A Time.

YOU, our alumni and friends, are the ones who make this level of care—the Cornell experience—possible. Thank you. As we ambitiously strive to achieve our greatest aspirations with strong momentum, I hope you will continue to support our students. They are eminently worthy of our attention and affection.



Jonathan Brand
President

This presidential white paper is part of a series on matters of importance to Cornellians.

I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper topic.

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