



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

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“The success of this plan depends on both individual responsibility and collective resolve. Each one of us has a role in helping students persist, succeed, and thrive.”

Cornell College’s Retention-Focused Strategic Plan 2026-2028

In my last white paper, I shared with you the high-level framework for our next strategic plan focused on improving student persistence to graduation, which necessarily means improving student success and their preparation for future careers. I also committed to you in my last white paper that I would share more as the plan evolved. Thus, I am pleased—in partnership with Kate Kauper, our Vice President for Student Life as well as Interim Provost last year—to provide to you our more developed strategic plan, which was largely conceived as the result of a very successful all-employee planning session and campus conversations in the spring.

As you know, we experienced a challenging period on campus last fall, not unlike so many other colleges and universities across the United States as we positioned ourselves for the next 173-plus years. Throughout and since then, we have remained focused first and foremost on our students, who thankfully moved through the spring with renewed vigor, culminating in the celebration of our Class of 2026 graduates. And, it showed. Now, we plan ambitiously to improve their experiences further.

Three Pillars Supporting Three Strategic Initiatives

DOING	PREPARING	THRIVING
Active, engaged, and experiential learning	Connecting a liberal arts education to career, graduate study, and a life of purpose after Cornell	Community-wide shared experiences that encourage habits of wellbeing
ADVISING AND MENTORSHIP		
COMMUNITY BUILDING		
COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION		

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Purpose of the Plan

This two-year strategic plan focuses Cornell College's next phase of institutional work on student retention, students' success, as well as the conditions that help students persist, graduate, and thrive. The plan builds from *Our Strategic Path Forward* framework and organizes our work around three connected retention pillars: **Doing, Preparing, and Thriving.**

Retention is not a narrow enrollment measure. It reflects whether students experience Cornell as a place where they are meaningfully engaged, well guided, connected to others, and able to imagine a purposeful future for themselves. When students persist, it is often because the academic, social, developmental, and practical dimensions of their experience are working together.

This plan identifies the broad initiatives that will shape implementation planning over the next two years.

The plan also recognizes that, like every other school, our strategic resources are finite. While this includes dollars for new programs, staffing, facilities, or purchases, it also includes time. In many respects, time is the resource most directly within our control and the one most likely to determine whether this plan succeeds. Improving the student experience will require us to attend carefully to how faculty, staff, and students use time across the institution.

This means the plan cannot simply add new expectations on top of existing work. It will require disciplined choices about where institutional time is best invested, which activities most directly improve the student experience, and where current uses of time may be fragmented, duplicative, or less effective than they need to be. As implementation planning proceeds, we will need to ask not only what new work should begin, but also what should be simplified, coordinated differently, or discontinued so that time can be focused on the elements most likely to strengthen student persistence, belonging, and success. This will require collective action as well as a willingness on everyone's part to do things differently at an individual level.

Particularly given the dynamic external environment, this plan requires that we move with urgency, clarity, and shared commitment. The challenges before us require more than continued planning. They require focused action, thoughtful adaptation, and a willingness to do some of our work differently. As we move forward, we need to examine practices and structures that no longer serve our students as well as they once did, while preserving traditions and strengths that continue to define our distinctive educational experience. The success of this plan depends on both individual responsibility and collective resolve. Each one of us has a role in helping students persist, succeed, and thrive.

Guiding Assumptions

1. This is *only* a two-year plan. This time horizon reflects that the environment is so dynamic that any longer-term plan developed today could not adequately contemplate the likely changing external environment of the future. A two-year period also means that Cornell's new president can take their first year to get to know Cornell and contemplate, with the campus community, the appropriate vision and next strategic steps for Cornell.
2. This plan focuses on what we do exceptionally well; that no other school can do (e.g., One Course At A Time); that meets what students broadly want and need—and then unapologetically and confidently does THAT to the best of our ability. We are the best version of ourselves in meeting those student needs and wants. Ultimately, this plan invests in those areas where student demand and our distinctive strengths align, and then commits to doing those exceptionally well and nothing else.
3. We are not singularly focused on new programs. Students' needs and wants change and not everything that we do can, or should, continue indefinitely. Thus, this plan questions everything that we currently do and offer to ensure that we meet students' needs and wants.

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4. This plan contemplates what all or a critical mass of students want and need, not just a subset of them. We cannot be everything to everyone.
 5. This plan singularly focuses the entire Cornell community on improving student success and student retention because we have the most control over the experiences of matriculated students. In focusing on current student success and retention, we will also improve the attractiveness of Cornell and, thus, new student recruitment too.
 6. This plan recognizes that the one truly limited resource is not money. It is our TIME. We must use it wisely—focusing our energy on the implementation of this plan to the exclusion of anything else. We are capable of prioritizing the foregoing areas of focus above any other activity that we do.
 7. This plan requires each and every employee to be receptive to doing their work differently, particularly because this plan includes a stronger unified community. A successful plan requires an entire community's engaged commitment.
 8. While we implement this retention-focused plan, we will also improve our culture around decision-making, which makes the implementation of this strategic plan possible.
 9. In addition to this plan, we continue to take critical steps through philanthropy to build our endowment so that Cornell is one day financially untouchable.

Strategic Aim

Cornell College will strengthen student retention by creating a more coherent and connected student experience, one in which students are engaged in meaningful learning, guided toward purposeful futures, and rooted in a campus community that supports wellbeing, belonging, and vitality.

Students are more likely to stay and succeed when they can answer three questions:

1. **Am I doing meaningful work here?**
2. **Am I preparing for a purposeful future?**
3. **Am I thriving as part of this community?**

These questions correspond to the three retention pillars that organize this plan.

The Three Retention Pillars

Doing

Active, engaged, and experiential learning

The block plan remains one of our most distinctive assets. The immersive structure of One Course At A Time allows students to engage deeply in research, fieldwork, creative work, laboratory learning, community-based learning, internships, performances, and applied problem-solving.

The strategic priority is to make this advantage more visible, consistent, and connected to student success. *Doing* is about ensuring that students experience Cornell not only as a place where they take courses, but as a place where they actively practice, create, investigate, collaborate, and contribute.

Preparing

Purpose, career, graduate study, and life after Cornell

Preparing means helping students connect their liberal arts education to life beyond Cornell. Students need more than a major. They need guidance, reflection, relationships, mentoring, career preparation, and the ability to tell the story of their Cornell education with confidence.

As part of this work, we will also clarify and simplify the educational priorities and outcomes that define what we

most want for our students. We currently name nine educational priorities and outcomes: knowledge, inquiry, intercultural literacy, reasoning, communication, vocation, wellbeing, citizenship, and ethical behavior. Each remains important to a Cornell education. We need to simplify them by focusing on the most essential outcomes. In so doing, these outcomes will also be easier for students, faculty, and staff to understand, measure, and use. A more focused set of outcomes would allow the college to maintain the core of its mission while directing more attention to the larger question of whether students are persisting, thriving, and preparing well for life beyond Cornell.

This pillar includes developmental advising, career and graduate school preparation, vocation, and purpose. It also includes preparing students to understand and navigate the ways generative AI and other emerging technologies are shaping learning, work, creativity, and civic life. This should not be treated as a single workshop or a separate technical topic. Instead, students should encounter AI literacy, ethics, and emerging technologies in a structured and developmentally appropriate way across the curriculum: first through broad introductions in their first-year experience and later through discipline-appropriate engagement within their academic pathways.

At its best, *Preparing* reflects the strength of the liberal arts. Cornell students should be prepared not only to use tools, but to ask better questions about evidence, authorship, bias, creativity, responsibility, human judgment, and the kind of lives and work they want to pursue.

Thriving

Well-being, belonging, community, and vitality

Students are more likely to persist when they experience belonging, connection, and well-being as part of daily campus life. *Thriving* is not separate from academic success. It is one of the conditions that makes academic success possible. This pillar focuses on shared experiences, reflection, balance, connection, and vitality for students and employees. It also recognizes that the pace of the block plan can be both powerful and intense. We will use our distinctive calendar, spaces, traditions, and relationships to support students as whole people.

From Pillars to Initiatives

The initiatives in this plan emerged from campus-wide strategic planning conversations and have been refined through ongoing discussion with faculty, staff, students. Although they are organized here under three broad initiative areas, they are intentionally overlapping. They should not be understood as isolated projects or separate administrative buckets.

Together, the initiatives describe the kind of Cornell experience we are trying to build:

- Students should know where to turn for guidance.
- Students should be connected to mentors, faculty, staff, peers, and alumni.
- Students should encounter a campus community with visible traditions, shared rhythms, and meaningful opportunities for belonging.
- Students should experience clear communication, fewer unnecessary handoffs, and better coordination across offices and roles.
- Faculty and staff should have clearer expectations, stronger coordination, and a more shared understanding of how their work contributes to retention.

The three initiative areas are:

1. **Advising and Mentorship**
2. **Community Building**
3. **Communication and Coordination**

Each initiative advances all three pillars, even where one pillar is most visible.

Initiative One: Advising and Mentorship

Strategic Intent

Advising and mentorship are among our strongest levers for improving retention. Students often experience advising unevenly: some develop strong networks of support, while others are less certain where to go, whom to ask, or how to navigate next steps.

Faculty advising is a core dimension of faculty work, alongside teaching, curriculum development, assessment, and service to the academic program, and it must be universally exceptional. Faculty advisors help students understand the curriculum, make purposeful academic choices, and connect their learning to larger goals. Because students' needs extend beyond academic planning, this initiative seeks to strengthen faculty advising within a broader mentorship ecosystem that includes staff, coaches, supervisors, alumni, and peers. The goal is a coordinated model in which roles are clear, resource pathways are visible, and students experience advising and mentorship as accurate, supportive, developmental, and holistic.

Key Components

Strengthened Advisor Development

We will develop more intentional advisor training and support, with attention to referral practices, resource awareness, student development, academic planning, and life-design-informed conversations. The goal is not for every advisor or mentor to serve the same role, but for students to experience a coordinated network of support.

Advisor development should clarify what belongs primarily to faculty advisors and what is better held by student life staff, academic support professionals, counselors, coaches, career staff, and other mentors. This clarity will help reduce confusion for students and make advising more sustainable for faculty and staff. Achieving this goal means that faculty will need to examine how they prioritize their work, ensuring that the ways they invest time and energy align with what most directly benefits students, such as advising.

NetVUE Partnership and Life Design

The college's partnership with NetVUE provides an important opportunity to deepen advising conversations around vocation, purpose, meaning, and discernment. A life design model can help students reflect on their values, interests, choices, and next steps in ways that are both practical and developmental.

This work should be integrated into advising and mentorship without overloading any one person or office. It should help students connect what they are learning with who they are becoming.

Alumni Pathways

Cornell graduates are one of the college's strongest underused assets for student learning, career exploration, and belonging. Alumni can help students see possible futures for themselves and better understand how a liberal arts education translates into work, graduate study, civic life, and personal purpose.

The alumni pathways component will seek to make alumni engagement more visible, regular, and educationally meaningful. Possible forms include classroom visits, mentoring conversations, career panels, networking opportunities, alumni spotlights, project-based partnerships, and discipline-specific or region-specific connections.

This work should be designed carefully so that alumni engagement is meaningful and sustainable. The goal is not

simply to increase the number of alumni events, but to create repeated opportunities for students to connect their Cornell experience with life beyond Cornell.

Clearer Resource Navigation

Students need clearer pathways to support. A more visible student resource hub, anchored in Cole Library, may help students navigate academic, personal, and practical support. This question is partly about the physical space where students seek help, but it is even more about process: where students begin, what happens next, and who helps them move forward.

Initiative Two: Community Building

Strategic Intent

Retention is strengthened when students experience Cornell as a connected community rather than a set of separate courses, offices, and events. Community cannot be built only through occasional programming. Students as well as employees all need greater sustained opportunities to purposefully gather, participate, reflect, and feel part of something larger than themselves.

Our block plan provides a distinctive rhythm that can support repeated patterns of connection, tradition, reflection, and shared experience. This initiative will use that rhythm more intentionally to strengthen belonging, well-being, and campus vitality.

Key Components

Intentional Use of the Block Plan Schedule

Common Afternoons, block breaks, and other features of the block plan calendar should be treated as institutional assets. Used intentionally, these moments can support connection, reflection, well-being, and participation across the college.

This work will require coordination rather than simply more programming. It asks how we as faculty and staff can use time differently so that community-building opportunities are not incidental, overly fragmented, or dependent on one-off promotion.

Shared Traditions and Campus Rhythms

We will identify, strengthen, and elevate a manageable set of traditions and recurring experiences that bring the full community together. These may include existing traditions, new shared experiences, college-wide conversations, performances, athletic events, interdisciplinary gatherings, wellness activities, shared meals, and other recurring points of connection.

The goal is not to add endless events. It is to make the right experiences more visible, meaningful, and consistent, so that students begin to understand them as part of the Cornell experience.

Third Spaces¹ for Connection and Well-being

Students need places outside classrooms and residence hall rooms where they can study, rest, gather, and connect.

¹ “Third Space” refers to a concept developed by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) to describe social environments distinct from home (first place) and work (second place). Third places are informal, welcoming community spaces where people relax, encounter familiar faces, and build new connections. Characterized by their accessibility, inclusivity, and conversation-centered atmosphere, they serve as vital anchors of community life.

Third spaces do not necessarily require major construction. We can begin by identifying existing spaces that could be refreshed, repurposed, better publicized, or made more welcoming and accessible.

Third spaces matter because daily campus life shapes belonging. A student's sense of connection is influenced not only by formal programs, but by where they can go between commitments, where they can gather with others, and whether campus feels usable and alive throughout the day and evening.

Well-being and Vitality

Community building should be connected intentionally to the eight facets of well-being: physical, emotional, social, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, occupational, and financial. This does not mean treating well-being as a separate program or an individual responsibility alone. Rather, we should map well-being opportunities to the shared experiences, spaces, schedules, and traditions that shape campus life.

This approach can promote student persistence by making reflection, balance, connection, and vitality more visible in the daily experience of campus.

Initiative Three: Communication and Coordination

Strategic Intent

Communication and coordination affect nearly every dimension of student retention. Students, faculty, and staff do not simply need more information. They need information that is relevant to their work, accurate, timely, clearly owned, easy to find, and connected across offices and roles.

This initiative will improve communication flows and coordination protocols so that students and employees experience fewer unnecessary handoffs and the institution operates with greater clarity, predictability, and follow-through. Communication must move in multiple directions: from administration to campus, from campus to administration, across divisions, within academic and co-curricular areas, among offices, and between students and the people who support them.

Key Components

Clearer Communication Protocols

We will work toward clearer expectations for who communicates different kinds of information, through which channels, on what timeline, and for what purpose. This is not about ensuring that everyone knows everything. It is about ensuring that the right information reaches the right people in ways that help students and the institution move forward.

Improved Student Resource Communication

Students need to know where to begin when they need help. Resource communication should be clearer, more consistent, and easier to navigate. This includes better coordination of student support information, clearer points of contact, and fewer moments when students are passed from one office to another without clear resolution.

Multimodal Event Marketing and Calendar Coordination

Strong events and programs are less effective when the campus community does not know about them, when information is delivered too late, or when events compete unnecessarily with one another. We will strengthen event communication through multimodal marketing, more consistent calendar practices, and better coordination across departments and offices.

Closing the Loop

A recurring theme in campus conversations is the need to close the loop after major decisions, consultations, and planning processes. People are more likely to trust and participate in institutional work when they understand what was heard, what was decided, what will happen next, and who is responsible for follow-through.

Metrics and Indicators of Progress

This plan could make a meaningful, positive difference in the student experience immediately, and its full effect will also take time.

The college will track a small number of meaningful indicators rather than create a burdensome assessment structure. Initial measures will include:

Primary Outcome Measures

- Improved overall student retention and persistence.
- Improved fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention rates.
- Increased student satisfaction, as evidenced by the Student Satisfaction Inventory and related instruments.
- Improved student perceptions of belonging, advising, communication, support, and campus vitality.

Participation and Engagement Measures

- Increased participation in community-wide events and traditions.
- Increased student participation in advising, mentoring, alumni engagement, vocation, and career pathway opportunities.
- Increased use of identified student resource pathways or hubs.
- Increased visibility and use of third spaces.

From the two of us (Jonathan and Kate), we are thrilled to share this strategic plan with you. And, we are particularly pleased that it does not offer a scattered “thousand points of light” but rather is strategic and focused, with our primary points of distinction in mind, namely, our One Course calendar. The plan also recognizes our reality—that resources are finite and that time is precious and limited. The widespread campus participation and engagement in the plan’s development are also noteworthy. We hope that you share our enthusiasm.

With the rest of the Executive Team, everyone else on campus who has devoted their lives to our students, we also hope that you, as alumni and friends of Cornell, will rise up to this moment for Cornell. We have made important progress to date, and we have more progress to make—and that will require your active support and engagement.

Onward!



Jonathan Brand
President



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