



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

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My Hopes for Cornell College

It is a pleasure to write this white paper for you. Unlike my past white papers, this one is not a research paper in which I present an abundance of data and analysis. Rather, this is a thought piece in which I share my greatest hopes for Cornell College. Taken on its own, this topic is relatively lofty and can even appear detached from reality. And, as several Trustees have remarked to me in the past, hope is nice, but it is not a strategy. There is so much that can go right and so much that can go wrong.

Understanding the context for our future is also critical to achieving it. I am very proud of what we have achieved as a nationally recognized liberal arts college. Our results haven't just happened either. They have been the product of a lot of work by a lot of people—including many of you—over decades.

Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives

As we look to Cornell's future, we have been guided by three important questions in our current strategic plan: Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives. What will students need? What will students want? And, what is distinctive about Cornell, that is to say, what can we do that no one else can do? Recognizing that we need to invest in those programs that answer ALL three of these questions (and necessarily not invest, as a result, in other programs) has been clarifying and helpful.

With those very questions in mind, in the relatively recent past, we introduced new academic majors such as engineering and data science, and launched new sports such as lacrosse and women's wrestling.

We designed a new core academic curriculum—Ingenuity—which includes a common first-year seminar as well as a common second-year seminar focused on citizenship. Ingenuity also includes Ingenuity in Action, which undergirds a graduation requirement that all students have no fewer than two different applied liberal arts experiences—such as off-campus study

and internships. To support this requirement we have significant funding available for our students so that these experiences are within reach of every student. In fact, this funding is thanks to many of you who recognize that Ingenuity is a game-changer for our students and us, especially because it “leans into” our One Course At A Time calendar by taking advantage of our students’ ability to devote 100% of their time to these experiences when they have them.

We have also focused more on our students’ lives beyond the classroom. For example, we launched the Student Success Center and developed the Cornell Well-being Network.

And our spectacularly beautiful campus has been dramatically improved to meet our growing student, employee, and programmatic needs—from academic facilities such as the Russell Science Center and McLennan College Hall to student life spaces such as the Thomas Commons and athletic facilities.

All of these initiatives—exemplars of how we are focused on meeting students’ needs and wants, today and into the future, and also on leveraging what we can do that basically no other institution can—have resulted in very good outcomes for us. Last year, notwithstanding COVID-19 and the derecho, we recruited one of our largest classes in 30 years—28% more new students than the previous year, and one of the most diverse in our history. Thanks to you, at more than \$15.3 million in gifts, we raised more money in a single year than in any past year in our almost 170-year history. To be sure, we have not succeeded at everything. For example, we have had a few years of budget deficits, and we know, going forward, that we must maintain a balanced budget on an annual basis.

Driving Forces

Past success does not necessarily predict future success. After all, our environment keeps changing. As I have presented in a past white paper on demographics shifts, we know that the United States will experience smaller and more diverse pools of prospective students for, at least, 15 years beginning in 2026. In addition, the value and price of an institution will be front and center for students, especially as competition intensifies among colleges and universities. As a part of that ROI analysis, students will continue to expect an increasing number of opportunities to find their paths by walking them¹—through internships and off-campus study—and also to graduate with little to no debt.

Last but most definitely not least, COVID-19 has accelerated a massively consequential trend already apparent within higher education—the greater stratification of colleges and universities. The *divide* between the haves and the have-nots is even more pronounced now than two years ago, and this gap strongly presages additional college closures and mergers in the future.

Fortunately, at Cornell, we tend to punch above our financial weight class, and counter to the general national trend I just mentioned, our record enrollment results of the last year grouped us with the haves (which I will define as the schools with the largest endowments). This alone is noteworthy and offers optimism going forward. However, one year doth not a trend make. We have to keep fighting for our brighter future.

My Hopes for the Future

My dreams for Cornell align with the vision articulated in our strategic plan:

Cornell College faculty and staff will anticipate students’ evolving needs and confidently deliver a highly-desired, accessible education, preparing Cornellians to thrive personally and professionally in a diverse, rapidly changing world.

¹ “We find our path by walking it. No matter how much you seek the answers to life from external sources, the truth you seek can only be found within you. You must walk your own path without aid of shortcuts. And you need to acknowledge that the journey toward the authentic you is more important than the destination.” Maya Angelou

I envision a Cornell where every strategy and initiative brings us closer to the following broader realities:

1. Our students and alumni report the highest levels of satisfaction in their Cornell experiences. They value what we offer—while they are at Cornell and afterwards.
2. Employers and graduate schools universally want to recruit our students.
3. Faculty and staff express significant satisfaction in their jobs and in their compensation. People across the country wish to work at Cornell College.
4. Not only do we predict student needs and wants in advance of students expressing them, we also have the confidence and nimbleness to innovate in ways that meet those needs and wants (as well as those of employers and graduate schools) regardless of what other schools offer. Like our One Course At A Time calendar or Ingenuity, we develop new programs and pedagogies because they are right for our students, not because they are the flavor du jour or what everyone else does.
5. We, as faculty and staff, naturally respect the whole—how we collectively contribute our expertise to educating and supporting the entire student—rather than think only about our discrete areas of the college.
6. Cornell's true strength lies in its impressively spirited, diverse, and inclusive community that provides an equitable environment for all. We encourage civil discourse and dialogue while maintaining a community of care for each of our Cornell community members.
7. Other schools look to us as THE example of how a courageous and innovative higher education institution should function in educating and supporting its students.
8. Mount Vernon is a booming college town that immensely factors into the decision of students and employees to come to Cornell.
9. We are financially impregnable, always having the resources to direct to our highest strategic priorities, and we can weather any disruption.
10. As a result of #1 through #9, prospective students representing the full diversity of the country and the world long to attend Cornell College above other institutions.

The Strengths From Which We Build

I am optimistic about our ability to achieve these dreams, in part, because of our enduring strengths.

Eleven years ago, I was talking to a colleague of mine at another national liberal arts college who said: “It doesn't really matter which college you are right now. You better have something distinctive, or you will struggle mightily in the marketplace.” It is true that many schools grapple with this challenge; they are neither sure what their real points of distinction are relative to other schools, nor do they know how to communicate them in a compelling way. And, during this conversation, my internal voice said: “Ah, but not Cornell! We have significant and meaningful points of distinction.”

Our One Course At A Time as a philosophy and pedagogy is an invaluable differentiator. In fact, I am struck by how many schools reached out to us and altered their calendars because they recognized all the benefits the One Course calendar offers in a pandemic. Thankfully, we had a 40-year head start on these other schools! And, as we welcome the next generation of students, our One Course calendar offers so many benefits for them—from its flexibility to its personalization. Similarly, our institutional culture, while not perfect, is based on a genuine and shared commitment, even attachment, to our students and colleagues. And, our location in Mount Vernon, Iowa, is a strength. Our “town” and “gown” just look good together, and our students and their families feel that.

We also move relatively quickly at Cornell. Colleges and universities are not known for being quick and nimble. They are very deliberative and committed to processes that involve large groups of people. And, that takes time. It also means that schools that can move quickly are at an enormous advantage. Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives was completed in earnest in a matter of five months, thanks to the incredible leadership of John Harp, Special Assistant to the President, and Dr. Erin Davis, the Hamlin Hurlburt Freer Professor of Sociology—all while we

managed COVID-19 and continued to fly the proverbial plane. The completion of our strategic plan in such a compressed period of time was nothing short of miraculous—and quintessential Cornell.

We have now built a strong and sustainable strategic planning process that can guide future plans. We gathered extensive data and then developed potential strategies, evaluating each in terms of its ability to: 1) influence student recruitment and retention; 2) advance our vision; 3) fit within our budgetary parameters; and 4) rely on our primary points of distinction.

This summer, as another element of a strong planning process, members of the Board of Trustees, our President's Council, and the Faculty Council will engage in a longer-term strategic *scanning* process, as we identify and then understand those major driving forces that we believe will influence Cornell over the next 10 years. With those trends in mind, we will be well positioned to design our strategic plans in future years.

And, selfishly, I'll say it—I am also optimistic about our future because we have an exceptional senior leadership team in Wendy Beckemeyer, Ilene Crawford '92, John Harp, and Dan Layzell.

Some schools struggle mightily in that they lack the requisite trust in order to plan effectively and courageously. The political roadblocks obstruct progress. Fortunately, that is not Cornell. Do we question and challenge each other? Absolutely. However, at the end of the day, we are joined in our commitment to our students and in the shared responsibilities that we all have. As a result, as an institution, we are capable of making hard decisions that are good for our students, for our employees, and for Cornell's long-term health. And, this augurs well for us going forward.

Pursuing Dreams Together

No doubt, the dreams that I have articulated are lofty. However, they are not impossible. The French have a saying: “petit à petit, l'oiseau fait son nid.” Little by little, the bird makes its nest. Everything we do today brings us closer to the attainment of these dreams. I believe that our efforts and, more importantly, our results conjoined with our significant points of distinction give us—including you as alumni and friends—the motivation to hold hands, jump in together², and pursue our dreams with gusto.



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.

You can always reach me at 319.895.4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu

² I particularly thank Provost Ilene Crawford '92 who first used this expression in a meeting last year—expressing the importance of making plans—even bold and risky ones—and then holding hands and jumping in together.