



# Cornell College

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## WHITE PAPER SERIES

Jonathan Brand, President

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### Our Strategic Path Forward

I have always enjoyed contemplating and then writing these white papers as an opportunity to share *directly* with you my greatest hopes and dreams for Cornell College. Of course, hopes and dreams, while energizing to consider as ideas in and of themselves, are primarily valuable to the extent that they can be developed and then implemented.

In that spirit, as you know, we have had a challenging stretch at Cornell College—not unlike so many other colleges and universities across the United States—in positioning ourselves for the next 173 years-plus. This period has been extremely hard on all of us at Cornell, as we decided in the fall to end several academic programs that many have considered central to our identity as a residential liberal arts college. The last few months have tested our collective ability to dream and to move forward with confidence. But, we must. And, we continue to have much to be thankful for and optimistic about.

When I wrote to you in December, I committed to you that I would update you early this spring on the new pathways for student success and preparation for future careers that we—the faculty and staff—are developing on campus. That is where our attention needs to turn—our future. While this strategic planning remains a work in progress, I am excited to share with you an update on our progress.

### Culture and decision-making

In our 2021-2024 Strategic Plan—Bold Approaches that Enrich Lives, we articulated the following vision: “We 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.”

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This vision is as relevant today as it was in 2021 in that it does not focus so much on the specific programs that we will offer students, but rather the ways that we go about determining what those programs need to be on an ongoing basis. Culture is what makes strategic thinking and its implementation possible in the first place. In fact, particularly in light of the challenging few months that we have had at Cornell, a focus on our culture and how we make decisions as a college is that much more important for Cornell's future.

Through this part of our planning, we will:

- Enhance trust, engagement, and satisfaction
- Simplify and clarify decision-making structures
- Align participation with strategic priorities and effective use of time

I know how important these goals are to Cornell's ability to achieve its mission into the foreseeable future, and so they must be a focus for us.

### **Strategic planning assumptions**

Over the last couple of years, I have spoken widely about the need for a fundamentally different philosophical approach to strategic planning at Cornell. Put another way, it is commonplace, at least in higher education, to develop strategic plans that focus on ways that a college will *grow* into the future with new and exciting programs. In so doing, the assumption is that everything we are currently doing will largely continue. This perspective appears rational in that it doesn't overly tax the current system. We don't need to question the value of what we currently do or offer, and that is easier for people to contemplate. And, new programs are exciting because they are, well, new.

This approach, though, is fundamentally misguided. A singular focus on new programs and not on evaluating current ones ignores the fact that student needs and wants change, and that not everything we do should, or can, continue indefinitely. Nor does a focus on exclusively adding new programs encourage a courageous culture that embraces continuous change and improvement—a culture that recognizes that programs must evolve and even sometimes end.

Of course, I am not saying that new programs are unimportant. They are important. The evolution in the liberal arts that we have enjoyed to date at Cornell is only possible *because* we recognized new opportunities—engineering, business, and computer science, just to name a few. And, we will surely embrace new programs in the future, but that growth must come from a position of strength—that we can confidently first say that everything we decide to keep doing is essential to the Cornell student experience. That is the most financially responsible and logical approach.

Another fundamental flaw in higher education strategic planning is that, at its base, many colleges and universities primarily consider discrete new programs as the way to add new students. If we add X new academic program, Y athletic team, or Z co-curricular activity (that we haven't previously offered), 5-10-15 more students will come to Cornell for that program. This approach has its merits as one way to build a class. However, a focus on individual programs cannot be the primary driver of enrollment growth, especially if it means that an institution doesn't also evaluate what is or is not *currently* working to meet the needs of **all** students and not just a subset of them.

Finally, it is often the case that a college will focus on student recruitment in one part of a strategic plan. It will focus on student retention in another part of the plan. And, in this way, the efforts are considered severable, as if they are not related to each other. This too is misguided. In fact, I have come to believe that

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those improvements to the student experience that will increase student retention are those that will also improve recruitment of new students. And, we have the most control of student retention because our students are with us every day. Thus, we must make student retention our primary strategic focus.

Thus, I have advocated for a different strategic planning perspective at Cornell at this time—that we focus on our macroeconomic engine: what do 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 do THAT to the best of our ability. We need to be the best version of ourselves in meeting those student needs and wants.

We should invest in what we can offer because of our One Course calendar, which few others can replicate. We cannot be everything to everyone. We should invest in those areas where student demand and our distinctive strengths align, then commit to doing those exceptionally well and nothing else. These are the critical assumptions guiding our retention-focused strategic planning.

### **Strategic planning framework**

What follows are high-level areas that will guide our strategic planning, as it evolves. I'd like to share two important caveats here. First, this framework remains very much a draft. We have made progress on campus, but we are not quite there yet with this framework. We have an upcoming all-day, all-employee strategic planning session during which we will review this framework, revise it accordingly, and then finalize it. What is below may still change. Second, this is a framework. It does not contain specific actions. Once the framework is finalized by mid-May, we will develop an actionable plan—the specific initiatives (tactics) that fit under each high-level area consistent with the guiding assumptions above.

#### *Doing: Experiential, active, and engaged learning*

In a moment when emerging digital technologies (such as generative artificial intelligence) can generate information instantly, they cannot replace the formative work of doing and engaging deeply. Active and engaged learning, alongside experiential learning, is therefore one of our greatest strengths, not only because it reflects our values but because the block system supports the sustained attention that meaningful learning requires. Cornell should expand and deepen regular opportunities for active, engaged, and immersive learning that includes research, internships, civic engagement, global and intercultural work, creative practice, and hands-on exploration within and beyond each block—for ALL students—as a bedrock of the Cornell experience. Paired with strong, interdisciplinary commitment to digital literacy, these experiences help students develop discernment, creative and critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. They also build the confidence and agency students need to navigate a rapidly changing world.

#### *Preparing: The liberal arts as the foundation for careers and graduate study*

Our students' liberal arts education **must** prepare them for meaningful careers and advanced study. This commitment requires that we place knowledge, inquiry, communication, quantitative reasoning, and intercultural literacy (which includes learning how to work with others) at the center of our curriculum, and that we pair that curriculum with advising strong enough to help students make meaning of their Cornell experiences. Faculty advising is, thus, central to this work. Through ongoing conversations grounded in life-design principles, advisors help students connect what they are learning to what they value, what they are practicing, and who they are becoming. Through intentional design, advising, partnerships, and integrated

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experiences, we envision Cornell College as a place where students clearly see and confidently communicate the connection between what they learn and the pathways they pursue.

*Thriving: A community rooted in wellness and shared vitality*

Well-being is a condition for learning and thriving. Thanks to our One Course calendar, we can intentionally build wellness into the rhythm of each day so it becomes a steady anchor for our students, as well as for faculty and staff, rather than episodic events. Our predictable daily schedule and regular breaks, including Common Afternoons and block breaks, give us a distinctive opportunity to support well-being in consistent and meaningful ways. We can create regular high-impact wellness touchpoints that support the development of healthy habits and opportunities for reflection, balance, and connection.

A vibrant campus is built when students, faculty, and staff can reliably find community, participate in shared experiences, and lead with confidence. It is also a campus where faculty and staff feel both connected to each other across the college, and supported in ways that positively ripple through student life. Building on the programming that already exists, we can improve the planning, coordination, and promotion that helps great events land well and reach all parts of our campus community; re-establish and grow visible traditions throughout the year; strengthen block break activity so that the campus doesn't "empty out"; and deepen a sense of belonging from the very start of the student experience.

We must focus on these few areas and do them, and just them, exceptionally well. We cannot create a plan that is a thousand points of light. In a financially constrained period of time, our strategic plans must chart a focused path. We should commit to a small number of high-impact initiatives that we can execute well and sustain over time. Guided by the three aims of Doing, Preparing, and Thriving, we will design a student experience that serves all students, not a select few. We will prioritize what students consistently say they need and want, align our resources accordingly, and commit to doing a few things exceptionally well.

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**The foundational structure for growth: The endowment**

I have often noted that, of course, Cornell College needs students in order to succeed. However, a healthy enrollment will not be enough. We also need to dramatically strengthen our financial foundation. As a result, while we on campus develop our strategic plans related to the student experience, we also must continue to build our endowment so that we are financially untouchable.

As I wrote in a previous white paper:

“However, focusing on enrollment growth as *the* path to a stronger financial profile is unrealistic, especially in a declining market environment that will continue for, at least, the next 15 years. Schools, including Cornell, will not grow their enrollment out of financial challenges.

The endowment is the foundation of our financial strength *over the long-term* because endowment dollars “provide a much-needed and perpetual stream of income to the institution”<sup>1</sup> and protect that school from the ups and downs of the market. Nothing will ensure our future more powerfully and with more certainty than a healthy and growing endowment. As a result, building our endowment needs to be our primary long-term focus....”

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<sup>1</sup> The Investment Committee pamphlet, AGB, Jay A. Yoder.

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Thankfully, we have a positive story to tell here. Thanks to you, we have made substantial progress toward our ambitious \$200-million-plus endowment goal. Since 2011, the endowment has increased from \$64 million to \$115.2 million as of December 31, 2025; together with \$18 million in external funds that function like the endowment, the college now has \$133 million in endowment and endowment-like assets.

Our fundraising efforts must remain tightly focused on building our endowment—with a motivated sense of urgency. Let's keep going!

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This moment calls for bold action to complete this work.

As I write this white paper, I recognize that my time as president is limited. Thus, my primary focus is on doing all that I can—with you—to ensure that Cornell's next chapter under a new president is its best chapter ever. We are positioning Cornell for a bright future, and it is. To that end, these strategic plans, including improved culture and decision-making, as well as building the endowment, are my central priorities for the remainder of my presidency. I remain excited by and fully committed to this crucial work.

I hope that you, as alumni and friends of Cornell, will rise up to this moment for Cornell. Your active support and engagement with the college matters now more than ever. Let me personally extend my gratitude for all the ways you strengthen Cornell. I hope you will be part of our transformational journey. And, I really look forward to our remaining 16 months together.

Onward!



Jonathan Brand  
President

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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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