



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

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The value of our home community—Mount Vernon

In my last white paper, I wrote about the predicted very sharp and alarming decrease of 15% in the “traditional” population of students who will attend four-year colleges and universities—a dramatic drop that will occur beginning in 2025. And, increasingly, these students will come not from the Midwest and Northeast but from the West and the South. In a higher education environment that is already highly competitive and challenging, the reality that there will be even fewer students beginning in six years, and they will increasingly come from outside the Midwest, only makes our strategic planning and implementation that much more critical and time-sensitive.

As I have spoken to Cornell alumni and friends at various events over this past spring, I have focused largely on these demographic shifts and how they will influence higher education, including residential liberal arts colleges like Cornell.

Ultimately, I have stated widely my belief that those schools that will survive and thrive when we hit “the 2025 Cliff”¹ will have three primary characteristics: 1) they will have strong financial foundations, as evidenced by significant endowments, low debt and deferred maintenance, and broad revenue sources (e.g., tuition, philanthropy, and endowment support); 2) they will have an alumni/friends base that is inspired and motivated to make a difference in the life of “their” institution over many years, including through their philanthropy; 3) they will be in a vibrant setting—a location in which both the college (or university) and the wider community celebrate and advance the shared benefits that they bring to the larger enterprise.² These locations will help to extend the academic setting beyond the traditional

¹ This term was affectionately coined by our Board Chair, Gilda Vinzulis Boyer '84.

² See <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/rural-economies-colleges-development/525114/>.

borders of a campus and classrooms. In fact, at Cornell, as we launch our new academic program—*Ingenuity*—we will require our students to have no fewer than two “experiences” outside the classroom (e.g., off-campus travel, civic engagement, and research experiences). I am hopeful that this requirement will necessarily translate into even greater involvement in Mount Vernon.

This third attribute—being in a great location and maintaining a strong community-college relationship—is the focus of this white paper. And, here, I’ll cut right to the chase. On this important characteristic, we at Cornell College are extremely fortunate to be located in Mount Vernon, Iowa, and, yes, it cannot be gainsaid that Mount Vernon is fortunate that Cornell College is located here as well. We strengthen each other. Ultimately, our setting, location, and community collectively provide one reason why I am bullish about Cornell’s future. As one friend noted to me as I accepted my current position at Cornell: “Mount Vernon and Cornell ... it’s a really lovely mix.” And, this statement has stuck with me. I am confident that other schools would love to have our location as their own—in historic, quaint, and treed Mount Vernon; proximate to Cedar Rapids and Iowa City; and within driving distance of Chicago.

It is also the case that there is more that we all can and should be doing to ensure that the Cornell-Mount Vernon partnership grows—that we continue to expand the opportunities for our students in the local community.

Important Shared Moments in our History

I am not sure how many realize that Cornell and Mount Vernon have been interwoven from the very beginning—with Mount Vernon incorporating in 1847 and Cornell College just six years later in 1853. This relationship has never been artificially forced or even viewed as a necessary evil. It did not just happen by serendipity either. From the beginning, the Mount Vernon-Cornell partnership has been genuine and quite intentional—with a focus on shared interests that, frankly, one might expect of a smaller community such as ours.

Reverend Dr. Richard Thomas, Cornell professor and chaplain beginning in 1967, could not have characterized the history of this relationship any better when he wrote:

“The history of Cornell is a community history, set in a particular place. Somehow Cornell would not be the Cornell we know if it were in Cleveland, Ohio, nor would Mount Vernon be the same without Cornell. The interrelationship with Mount Vernon ... is an inseparable part of the college’s history. George Bowman’s vision was made possible by the support of local merchants and real-estate brokers. They not only believed in the notions that the church and the growing nation needed educated leadership taught in a religious environment, but they may also have seen the economic advantages that came with a vital college ... [t]he lack of a clear central entrance to campus and the absence of walls kept both the town and campus accessible to each other as both town and campus grew together in area and wealth. Historically, each generation has had the opportunity to decide how to be good neighbors. The historic preservation of the campus seems to confirm the apparent intention of the founders to blend both town and college into one community.³”

Cornell’s 166-year history is marked by moments when the vitality and vibrancy of our partnership were obvious. For example, we love to celebrate the construction of College Hall, a classical, federal-style building dedicated in 1857, because it reveals the historic devotion of Cornell’s faculty, staff, students, and local laypeople. College Hall was a project undertaken by the college community, from start to finish. As the late Charles Milhauser wrote in his book, *Cornell College: 150 Years from A to Z*, “Trustees, professors, students, and local craftsmen joined forces: ‘We measured the dimensions, dug the foundations, put them in, and then planned and built a story at a time ’” Cornell never even retained an architect or a contractor for the project.

³ Heywood, Charles William, and Thomas, Richard Harlan. *Cornell College: A Sesquicentennial History*. Cedar Rapids: WDG Communications Inc., 2004, Volume Two, 232-233.

In 1858, just one year after College Hall was completed, our college catalog listed “194 students who lived in 69 homes in Mount Vernon, which certainly must have been a significant percentage of the total number of dwellings in the town. ... [i]f a population of 700 is assumed for 1857 and it is further assumed that there was an average of four or five residents per household, then there must have been between 140 and 175 homes in town. In other words, 40 to 50 percent of the homes in the town boarded students. Most homes boarded only 1 or 2 students, but 10 had more than 5 and 3 had 10 or more students.”⁴

As a perfect symbol of the Cornell-Mount Vernon relationship, in the early 1900s Cornell and Mount Vernon began negotiating with Andrew Carnegie to build a new library that could be used jointly. As an initial condition, Mr. Carnegie required that Cornell and Mount Vernon first establish an endowment for the library’s annual operations. When we collectively met his expectation, construction on our library started and was completed in 1905.⁵ The fact that we built a Carnegie library is noteworthy because, today, our Cole Library remains the only private college-public library partnership in the United States from Carnegie’s original foundation. To this day Mount Vernon residents still make up 45% of the library’s active users and check out over 50% of the materials.

Today’s Collaborations between Cornell and Mount Vernon

It will probably come as no surprise that when we welcome guests, we lead not only with our points of distinction, such as our One Course calendar, but also our enviable location. And, saying this is not enough. It is for this reason that we schedule an evening event for our newly arrived first-year students during orientation when they visit the many businesses in uptown Mount Vernon. Similarly, for admission counselors visiting from around the country, we hold dinners in different uptown restaurants (rather than on campus) so that these counselors (who will recommend colleges/universities to prospective students) can see firsthand that Cornell has a strong relationship with local business and, counter to what they may have thought before arriving, that we are in a vibrant and appealing town.

We also place on our website a list of our major contributions to the wider Mount Vernon community.⁶ As an academic institution, we are always pleased to have open to the public so many events and performances, including visits by high-profile guests such as Gary Becker or Steven Chu—both Nobel Laureates—as well as U.S. presidential candidates. More specifically, in 2017-18, we offered 34 guest lectures and performances, five theatre productions, 20 art exhibits, and 48 different events through the Chaplain’s Office—all open to the public.

More than 700 Cornell students volunteered over 17,000 hours of their time for community service, most of it locally, at a total value that we estimate to be over \$400,000 in 2017-18 alone. This service includes, for example, multiple Cornell students who are members of our Mount Vernon-Lisbon Emergency Medical Services team. Each year we welcome almost 7,000 guests just for Homecoming, Commencement, and campus visits, as well as roughly 17,000 fans who attend our home Cornell athletic events. We know that these guests stay, dine, and shop in our local establishments—as we would hope. Though we have never measured the economic impact that Cornell has on our local community, it has to be in the tens of millions of dollars each year.⁷

Thanks to the invitations that we receive from schools like Washington Elementary in Mount Vernon, our students also get involved in our local public schools. Our students have the opportunity to serve as Lunch Buddies (53 of them in 2017-18), provide weekly tutoring (13 of them in 2017-18), and do their student teaching at the elementary and secondary levels (55 students since 2010 between the Mount Vernon and Lisbon schools). Further, we have very

⁴ Ibid., Volume One, 52.

⁵ Ibid., 133-134, and Volume Two, 233.

⁶ crnl.co/impact

⁷ Colleges that have undertaken economic impact studies have learned that their presence translates into millions of dollars each year. Nebraska Wesleyan University estimates its economic impact at about \$75 million each year to its local community. Berea College, albeit a school with a much larger endowment than ours, has a \$202 million impact annually on its local community. Bemidji State estimates its amount to be around \$166 million.

successfully shared athletic facilities with the Mount Vernon Community School, notably in baseball and softball. To be sure, we have also committed ourselves to ensuring, to the extent possible, that all of our athletics spaces, such as Van Metre Field at Ash Park and the indoor arena at the Small Multi-Sport Center are available for Mount Vernon, when they are needed. And, when this occurs, we are fortunate because the Mount Vernon Mustangs bring wider audiences of prospective students and their families to our athletic facilities when they use our facilities.

Finally, there is also the financial side of our contributions. We employ almost 300 individuals, many of whom choose to make Mount Vernon and Lisbon their home. Others may live elsewhere but still spend their dollars in town. Though we are a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, we annually pay about \$56,000 per year in property taxes and about another \$50,000 through the city sewer upgrade fees. We are one of the largest financial supporters of the Mount Vernon-Lisbon Community Development Group. And, Bon Appétit, our dining services provider, estimates that it spends approximately \$500,000 each year in local purchases, of which about \$250,000 is paid to local farmers for their goods.

Suffice it to say, it is extremely satisfying that we are able to contribute to Mount Vernon in such significant and meaningful ways. And, it is equally satisfying to be in a town that is such a great college town. The day that any one of us forgets this is the day that we will begin our decline.

Going forward, in a spirit of trust and goodwill, the relationship between Cornell and Mount Vernon is one that we must necessarily continue to nurture, especially as the college-going population begins to decline and moves further to the West and to the South. This will only make our job of recruiting and retaining students that much more challenging. To the extent that Cornell struggles, Mount Vernon will struggle. Similarly, to the extent that Mount Vernon does not achieve its strategic priorities, Cornell will face greater challenges. Fortunately, that is not, to date, our shared story. Let us continue to sustain this important relationship, and in the process, each other.



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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