



# Cornell College

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## WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

January 2018

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### **The Cornell Spirit**

The Cornell Spirit is one of our greatest institutional assets, and yet it can be so hard to articulate. For me, the Cornell experience is defined by this very genuine focus on each and every student and *their* education. *Each* and *every* student, individually, matters. Our commitment to our students—the joy that we collectively share in serving them—is one of our special points of distinction.

Those with a connection to Cornell—including those who are not students—come to campus with vastly different backgrounds and different contexts. They experience Cornell from different angles. And yet, in the aggregate, their stories line up perfectly to tell a similar story.

This white paper addresses the Cornell Spirit—largely as defined by extraordinary acts of generosity toward, and in support of, Cornellians. Our spirit is best revealed by Cornellians themselves. They experience it and, in so doing, they define it. It is an enormous pleasure to share these stories with you.

### **The general, generous, overarching warmth and spirit of campus**

Sometimes it is hard to identify the specific person who is generous. For example, whom do we thank for the fact that so many faculty, students, and staff regularly say hello to each other when passing on the Ped Mall—something which undergirds the warmth and spirit of Cornell? Or, how do we account for the overarching friendliness that pervades campus? There is no one to thank, and yet everyone is to thank.

Honorary alumna **Dyan Smith**, experienced firsthand that generosity:

“In 1969, I was a student at the University of Iowa, putting myself through college. I had become engaged to **John Smith ’71**, a student at Cornell and

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my high school boyfriend. I was on a very strict budget—just \$100 per month for food. I often ate Campbell’s tomato soup for dinner (it was only 12 cents a can back then). When I visited John in Mount Vernon on the weekends, we would often go to The Commons for dinner—what a feast! There was so much food and it was so good. The students and staff knew that I was not a student but allowed me to dine there occasionally. We usually ate with John’s social group, the Milts, and all of their friends. We still maintain those friendships. As for conversations, I remember so much talk about the Vietnam War—but not everyone was against it—and their voices were heard.

“I will always remember the warmth and generosity of all these people and the incredible sense of community. What a school! The lesson of blessed giving—the kindness that Cornell showed me which cost very little but meant so much—is what I carry with me to this day. I wish I had been offered the privilege of being a student at Cornell College.”

### **Faculty generosity toward students**

In the winter of 2017 at an alumni event, I had the opportunity to meet **Freya R. Brier ’80**, who told one of the most moving Cornell stories that I have ever heard. And, it should come as no surprise that our faculty are central to the Cornell Spirit.

“I was born into a lower middle-class family in Chicago. My father’s family had emigrated from Austria in the 1920s, and my mother had come to Chicago from Canada after World War II. While both my parents were intelligent and valued education, I was the first in my family to have the opportunity to attend a four-year college when I left for my freshman year at Cornell in 1976. But in 1978, when I was at the end of my sophomore year at Cornell, my father lost his job. He was 56 at the time and wouldn’t find a new job for several years.

“I assumed I wouldn’t return to Cornell until my father found a job, since we couldn’t cover the tuition (\$4,000 a year in those days!) from the family’s savings. I called the college to tell them I didn’t think I would return in the fall, fully expecting that they wouldn’t do anything more than wish me luck. But Charles Milhauser, the Cornell registrar at the time, sprang into action, identifying scholarships for which I could qualify, helping me apply for them, and arranging for a work-study job in exchange for partial tuition coverage. Between the financial aid Charles had helped me assemble and an Illinois State student loan, I was able to piece together enough funds to cover my tuition for my junior and senior years. I had planned to finish my Spanish degree by doing my spring blocks in 1979 in Spain, but the funds I had assembled for tuition didn’t stretch far enough to cover the incidental living costs of the study-abroad program. And in those days, cleaning professors’ houses on the weekends only netted me an additional \$5 a house—not enough. Then someone told me about an available job waiting tables at a popular Greek restaurant in Cedar Rapids, but I didn’t have a car to get to the job—until Sally Clute, my Spanish professor, offered me the loan of her car nights and weekends so that I could get to and from my job! And over winter break, Sally and her husband offered me the use of their house and car in exchange for cat-sitting, so instead of going home, I worked two shifts a day at the restaurant every day during the break, and earned enough tips to fund my spring blocks in Spain to finish my Spanish degree.

“If all that wasn’t enough, in the fall of my senior year in 1979, after I had taken two blocks of intro Russian, the United States announced it would not be attending the 1980 Summer Olympics held in the Soviet Union in retaliation for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Soviet-American relations were at an all-time low, and in response, a group from the U.S. called the “Citizens’ Exchange Corps” put together a one-of-a-kind program where a mixed group of U.S. citizens would spend March of 1980 as goodwill ambassadors traveling throughout

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the Soviet Union and meeting Soviet citizens. Nancy Ickler, my Russian professor, submitted my name as a candidate for the group, and I desperately wanted to participate. But the cost of the program—an extra \$400 above the cost of tuition—was beyond the savings I had left to cover my senior year living costs, and my dad was still unemployed. So, I had to turn down the invitation to be a part of the group. A few days later, when I picked up my mail from the mailroom at Pauley Hall, there was a plain envelope with my name written on it in my mailbox. I was shocked to find that the envelope contained a cashier's check in my name for \$400 and nothing else—no note, no names. No one ever took credit for the check, but I have my suspicions as to whom it came from. With that check, I was able to go to the Soviet Union with Citizens' Exchange Corps, and the experiences of that month will remain with me the rest of my life. And even today, almost 40 years later, sitting in my kitchen in Bellevue, Washington, writing this story, I cry when I remember that anonymous and generous act to support one student's desire to learn.

“I never expected, nor really fully understood for years afterward, the magnitude of the generosity and caring of the Cornell community, without which I would never have been able to graduate from college, let alone graduate with the incredible life experiences that formed me as an individual and enabled me to graduate from law school, have a fulfilling and successful career, and retain a lifelong joy of learning, languages, and travel. Where else would the faculty and administrators care about the success of the individual student? I know, had I gone anywhere other than Cornell, I most likely would not have been able to finish college. The annual contributions I make to Cornell can never fully repay the value of the opportunities Cornell made available to me.”

### **Staff generosity toward students**

It is also self-evident that, right alongside our faculty, our staff take a great personal interest in the success of our students. For example, **Jessica Johnson '07** spoke eloquently in the Summer 2015 Cornell Report about the impact that recently retired Kay Lamphier had on her. And, there is the powerful story of **Jeff Zupancic '91**, which further reveals staff's (and faculty's) commitment to our students:

“My journey to Cornell was not expected. As a high school student, I didn't know anything about Cornell, and it wasn't on my list of schools. Fate, however, had another plan. I serendipitously met the admission counselor from Cornell College, agreed to visit the campus, and as they say, the rest is history.

“I had many professors and staff who helped me: Rev. Thomas, Bob Majors, and Dave Loeb sack, for example. But, nothing—not even knowing these great faculty and staff—would have been possible without the “intervention” of Dr. Charles Milhauser. In the late fall-winter of 1987, I decided to take a semester off to go “find myself.” When I went to the Registrar's Office to inform them of my decision, Charles invited me into his office to talk. He asked me what I planned on doing (which, of course, I had no idea), and he asked if I was planning on coming back. I assured him that I just wanted a break and promised I would be returning in the fall. By late summer of 1988 (roughly nine months after I had left Cornell), I was living in an apartment with **Dave Hanses '88** in Schaumburg, Illinois, and socializing with my many Cornell friends. We all decided to head back to the Hilltop together to have one last blast before school started.

“As I was walking to Merner one morning during that visit, Charles happened to be outside, saw me, and asked me to come inside to talk. I agreed and we went into his office. Charles got directly to the point and asked me if I was a man of my word, to which I responded: “Yes, of course!” That led him to his next question: “You said you were taking last semester off and starting again in the fall. It's now the fall, and you aren't registered for any

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classes.” Of course, I began to make some weak excuse (because I did not intend to return to Cornell), which he immediately saw through and he asked me what I was going to do about it. I said that it was too late to enroll now, so I would probably have to wait. Of course, these were just more excuses, and he wasn’t buying any of it. He told me that he had a schedule for me and that I’d have the first block off. He also told me that if I needed to change any classes, I needed to come see him. At that point, I think I had a few more excuses that he quickly brushed off, reminded me of my promise to him, stood up, and walked me out of his office.

“By the time that I got back to Merner, I had gone from upset for being held accountable, to confused, and finally to excited and happy that I was a member of the Hilltop again. As I walked into my friend’s dorm room, I announced that I was coming back to school and had enrolled in classes starting in October. I might have even taken the credit for being “responsible” at the time, but the reality is that I probably never would’ve gone back to Cornell or even to college, had it not been for the “intervention” of Dr. Charles Milhauser.

“I regret that I never truly conveyed to him how important that and the many interactions he and I had in the years that followed led to where I am today. He taught me that promises and words matter, and I know that without his guidance and support, I would’ve never had the chance of receiving the support and guidance I had from Rev. Thomas, Bob Majors, Dave Loeb sack, and many more. I also know that, had I selected a larger school, none of this would have happened as I would’ve been just one of the thousands of students passing through. While Cornell wasn’t on my list of schools, I’m glad fate intervened. It was the best decision I made as a young man.”

### **Alumni helping alumni**

And, of course, when you become a Cornellian, you benefit from the support of the entire Cornell alumni base behind you—often across many generations. As one example, after medical school, Dr. **Clark Thompson ’78** applied for a position in the otolaryngology office of Dr. **Robert Cooper ’50**. According to Dr. Cooper, he and Dr. Thompson were scheduled to attend a professional conference together. Dr. Cooper’s wife, **Charlotte Farnham Cooper ’51**, recognized Clark’s name because she had been close friends with Clark’s mother. They scheduled a lunch together and, according to Dr. Cooper, he and Dr. Thompson “just hit it off immediately.” Dr. Cooper encouraged Dr. Thompson to come join the practice in Salem, Oregon, which he did. Dr. Cooper noted that it was just fantastic to have Dr. Thompson there with him. “We could help each other—share and discuss different patients’ conditions we were addressing and appropriate treatments. You learn a lot this way.”

And, wonderfully, generosity begets generosity. For his part, Dr. Thompson was later in a position to help a more recent Cornell graduate. In 2016 Dr. **Brandon Crawford ’12** sought out Dr. Thompson because of their Cornell connection. Dr. Crawford wrote:

“I had actually met Dr. Thompson long before I had heard of Cornell College. He specializes in otorhinolaryngology (also known as ear, nose, and throat or ENT) with an emphasis in pediatrics. He was my surgeon who had performed a tonsil and adenoidectomy on me when I was much younger, as well as a sinus surgery when I was 17. I had just been accepted to Cornell College when I visited him for a follow-up appointment for the sinus surgery. And, when he found out where I was going, he said: “you mean in Iowa right?” I was shocked to find out that not only did he know which Cornell I was talking about, but that he was also an alumnus. He told me all about how it was a great little town with wonderful student-focused education that really prepares you for life. I then traveled from Oregon to Iowa to start at Cornell.

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“I returned to Oregon during my final year of medical school to complete my final months of clinical rotations, and I knew that I wanted to close the loop by rotating with Dr. Thompson and having him as my attending. He helped me be a better family physician by teaching me about ENT, guiding me through the office appointments as well as in the operating room, showing me what I can do in my role within medicine.

“I remember one day in the operating room when we got onto the topic of Cornell College and how it had changed in the years between when we had both attended. We connected over downtown Mount Vernon, all of the shops, food, and activities. How the small town really feels like home as opposed to a place to just go for school. Then the subject of the block system came up. Dr. Thompson graduated before the One Course calendar schedule had been instituted. However, his younger brother was a senior during the first year that the schedule started. He was curious as to how I felt about the system and if it had lived up to all of my expectations. I told him that it was the best way that I have ever learned, and that I recommend it to anyone who wants to go to college, especially if they want to seek higher education afterwards. I could not imagine myself being better prepared anywhere else for work, medical school, and life.

“I would characterize our relationship as friendly colleagues. I hope to end up practicing family medicine in Oregon near Dr. Thompson’s practice. He is a fantastic surgeon and physician who is one of the best that I have ever had the pleasure to meet and work with. I anticipate that when I finish residency and make it back to Oregon, we will reconnect and have the opportunity to work to support our community’s health.”

### **Extending financial aid for those with the greatest need—to ensure that Cornell remains in reach for our students**

It is also absolutely true that the power of the Cornell experience is lost if our students cannot afford to attend. Here is one emblematic story, from Cornell graduate and current Board Chair, **Gilda Vinzulis Boyer ’84**, that says it all:

“The summer of 1982, between my sophomore and junior years, was tumultuous for my family. During that time, first my mother, then my father, lost their jobs. I was already at Cornell through the generosity of others via scholarships, plus federal and state grants and loans. I worked at Old Sem for my work study job, and cleaned a few houses in Mount Vernon to make some fun money. This was not untypical of many Cornell students back then, as it is today. I was devastated when my parents made it clear that they had no means by which to make my upcoming tuition payments. Distraught, I called **Barry Boyer ’84**, then boyfriend, Cornell student, and now 33-plus years my husband, to break the news. He was undeterred. He said: “I know Barron Bremner will help us.” Barron had recruited Barry to Cornell to play football. He was a legendary figure at Cornell, a most gregarious and generous spirit. He assured Barry that he would find a way to help me bridge my funding gap. True to his word, I was awarded some additional money which made it possible for me to return to the Hilltop that fall. I couldn’t believe that Barron, who had this big job and more pressing things to worry about, had made getting me back to Cornell a priority.

“It was one of those momentous moments in my life. It solidified for me that Cornell was indeed a special place, a place where I mattered and I belonged, a school that went beyond to help its students succeed. Barron’s actions allowed me to complete my degree at Cornell, graduate magna cum laude, later attend law school at Iowa, and enjoy a 20-year career in private practice. As a result, it’s been part of my personal creed to give back and pay it forward. Over the years I have volunteered in my community and supported a variety of organizations. And of course, I have always given back to Cornell, starting as a freshly minted grad diligently

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making my small Annual Fund gift, and most recently serving as a member of the Board of Trustees and supporting the Russell Science Center as part of Greater > Than, The Campaign for Cornell College. I do so knowing that perhaps my time and my gifts will make that life-changing difference for a few students here and now. And lucky us, we have been able to experience that amazing sense of community and place that is Cornell.”

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I don't pretend to believe that we have the corner market on such spirit. I am sure that alumni and friends at other colleges and universities have powerful life-changing stories that resonate for them. And, that is good for them. No matter.

What matters for us is what we do for *our* students. This white paper has been a joy to write because, at the end of the day, these stories affirm precisely why we exist—to change lives. These stories reveal that Cornell supports those who are on a good path but just need more assistance. We also help those who, for whatever reason, have gotten off-track and need guidance getting back on-track. We serve those who may not be Cornell students, as well as those who have already graduated. They are all Cornellians.

If you believe that an “education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school<sup>1</sup>,” you could conclude that we often learn best when that learning is conjoined with emotions—how someone made us *feel*. The Cornell Spirit is what ensures that Cornellians not only gain the knowledge and skills “necessary for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship” but that they carry those abilities forward with passion and commitment.

Have you had an experience that reveals the Cornell Spirit? I'd love to know about it so that I may compile and share them with others. Please feel free to contact me with your story.



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](mailto:jbrand@cornellcollege.edu)*

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<sup>1</sup> 1956 copyright (1984 edition), “Out of My Later Years” by Albert Einstein, Essay: On Education, (Year specified in table of contents: 1936), Start Page 31, Quote Page 36, Citadel Press: Kensington Publishing Corporation, New York.





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