



# Cornell College

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## WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

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### **The Strategic Focus on Athletics and Wellness Opportunities at Cornell College**

In 2012 I shared with you a white paper on *The Role of Athletics in Cornell College’s Educational Mission*. The primary focus of that paper was on the significant physical, psychological, and emotional benefits that regular exercise and competitive athletics offer students. After all, the evidence reveals why athletics is so important to our educational mission. Athletics teaches resiliency and the ability to confront adversity, and helps our students develop team building skills applicable in any setting. We can help our students to become effective and courageous lifelong learners and leaders, in part, by encouraging them to develop habits of the body and to engage in sport. It is no doubt also true that excellent athletic and fitness opportunities and facilities are important in attracting and retaining students, faculty, and staff to Cornell (and Mount Vernon)—the major focus for Cornell now and into the near future.

It stood to reason in 2012, just as it does now, that investing in our athletics programs—people and facilities—makes tremendous strategic sense. Consistent with that perspective, over the last 10 years, we have systematically improved every single outdoor athletics space on campus—the football/lacrosse field (now Van Metre Field at Ash Park), the baseball diamond, the outdoor track, our tennis courts, our spectacular new competitive soccer pitch, and now the softball field (in partnership with the Mount Vernon Community School District and thanks to Mount Vernon native and honorary alumnus Dave Van Metre). We have also undertaken some modest but important improvements inside the Richard and Norma Small Athletic and Wellness Center (fka the Small Multi-Sport Center), particularly in the gymnasium.

But, much has changed since 2012. We’ve thankfully emerged from the Great Recession of 2008, but now been plunged into a global pandemic that has forced us to reexamine everything we do. And, this moment is occurring

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all while higher education prepares for a precipitous decline in high school graduates beginning in 2025 in an already highly competitive national student recruitment environment. Recognizing the imposing future ahead for ill-prepared, stagnant colleges and universities, I can see that the success and resulting growth of our athletics program are critical to our future, perhaps even more so now than 10 years ago.

My goal in this white paper is to discuss why athletics is of particular strategic importance to Cornell at this time and, as a result, how we are investing further in Cornell College's athletics and wellness opportunities for our students.

At the end of the day, we need to invest above all else in those programs and initiatives that will make us so desirable to prospective students that our recruitment can focus on the most promising academic and diverse student body. Similarly, we must also meet student expectations so that students persist to graduation. When we accomplish these goals, we will become so financially strong that we have the resources to invest in our highest strategic priorities—e.g., people, programs, facilities. These must be our primary areas of focus at this time.

This is where athletics comes into the equation because we know, particularly in comparison to our peer schools (as well as in comparison to our own past results), that we have additional recruitment and retention opportunities through our athletics programs. At the highest level with recruitment and retention in mind, as one alumnus noted, what is needed for athletics is a combination of: 1) great coaches (who have the resources to do what they do best—teach, mentor, and recruit), 2) excellent facilities, 3) a college culture that fully appreciates the central importance of athletics to our students and the college, and 4) success of our teams on the field/court. And, of course, the first three are essential to the last.

And recruitment and retention occur within a competitive higher education landscape, one which is about to become even more competitive in light of the impending major demographic shift.

Regarding the environment, particularly the declining demographics in which we recruit students, I wrote in my 2019 white paper *Demographic Shifts and Cornell College, February 2019* that, due to a 12% drop in fertility rates beginning in 2007 (following the economic recession), we will experience a 15% decrease in the number of “traditional” students who will go to college in the 2025-2029 period alone. In that time, the cohort size of 18-year-olds will shrink by more than 650,000 from 4.5 million to 3.85 million students, and college-going students will shrink by almost 450,000 from 2.87 million to 2.43 million. As a result, at a high-level, the acute competition for “traditional” college students (Cornell's proverbial bread-and-butter) will only get more acute. Sadly, the latest data suggest that the drop in fertility rates begun in 2008, giving rise to a drop in college-going students, will continue at least into the late 2030s.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, an overall trend associated with individuals at a college-going age does not tell the entire story. There are also necessarily shifts within that population as a result of factors such as interstate migration, immigration, and birth rates along racial/ethnic lines—and they affect student recruitment at a tactical level. For example, the growth and diminution of high school graduates will not be in the same regions of the United States. During the increase period (between 2012-2025), the West and South will grow; during the decrease period (between 2025-2029), New England and the Midwest will experience 15% to 20% drops.

In addition to the demographics, we also have to respond aggressively to other significant external pressures, such as the increasing price sensitivity of families who are looking for institutions with strong value propositions where students graduate having had great educational experiences, access to strong post-graduate opportunities, and low to no debt. Without that strong value proposition, students will simply choose another college to attend.

As you would hope, to respond proactively to this challenging environment, we are currently engaged in a strategic planning process that will chart a three-year path (from 2021-2024) in advance of this precipitous demographic decline. The overarching question that guides this entire planning process: what does Cornell need to become and to do in order to be a school that students want to attend? As painful a question as that might be (because it could

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-navigate-the-demographic-cliff>

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suggest that we aren't currently that school), we must ask it with candor and humility if we expect the planning process to be meaningful.

There is no doubt in my mind that we have a terrific team of coaches and staff in athletics. We know this from our students. We know this from prospective students. And, we know this from our alumni. And, unlike many other institutions, it is also noteworthy how many of our head coaches have remained at Cornell for years—an indication of how seasoned they are as teachers, mentors, and recruiters.

By the same token, many casual observers of Cornell have noted that, in athletics, we punch above our weight class. After all with limited budgets and historic sub-optimal facilities, in just the last 10 years, we have won 19 conference championships, celebrated three national champions, and recognized 48 All-Americans and seven CoSIDA Academic All-Americans. In the past three years alone, we've had 14 student-athletes elected to Phi Beta Kappa. In addition, our coaches have claimed 14 Conference Coach of the Year awards in eight different sports. Results such as these don't just occur by happenstance. It speaks to the commitment of our coaches and student-athletes. It reveals that we are hardworking and industrious, and that, as a community, we value excellence, including in athletics.

However, it is not entirely complimentary to say that we punch above our weight class because it makes explicit that we operate with inadequate and limited resources. It begs the larger question: how great could we be with additional resources? As a result, one important strategic priority for Cornell is not just having great coaches but supporting them with the resources that they need to build successful programs and to recruit future Cornellians. Here is one area where we have a real opportunity.

Football is a perfect case study of what is possible. As our new head coach, Dan Pifer, took the helm last winter, we asked him what he needed in order to be successful. Thanks to college resources and philanthropic support, we hired every position that Coach Pifer sought. It was an obvious step because it is what Coach Pifer stated that he needed in order to rebuild our football program and to achieve the recruitment and retention results we know are possible in that program. To do otherwise would not only harm our football program at a micro-level but also Cornell at a macro-level because we would not be able to achieve our recruitment goals (which benefits everyone at Cornell) or set Cornell football up for competitive success.

In fact, running with courage toward opportunities such as the one in football rather than away from them is precisely the mindset that we need at Cornell in every aspect of the college. At times, we can be so fearful of tight budgets or overspending that we shrink from an opportunity to recruit more students. And, it also goes without saying that, with those resources in hand, we have to, thus, expect great results—maintaining programs that regularly compete for conference championships AND achieving our recruitment and retention goals.

Over the course of the last month, I have had a chance to speak with alumni about Cornell athletics. The comments have been insightful and extremely helpful. Many noted, for example, that employers greatly value hiring those who were student-athletes in college because these graduates know how to work in teams; know how to communicate; know how to make adjustments as a situation might dictate; and know how to work hard toward a goal. And, in a competitive hiring environment, these attributes offer an enormous advantage.

It is also true as I noted in my 2012 white paper that improved athletic facilities are essential to the recruitment and retention of our non-intercollegiate athletes who currently use a relatively small fitness center space in the Thomas Commons. It's a nice space with well maintained equipment, but at 1,700 square feet, it falls far short of our students' fitness needs.

Having top-notch athletic facilities is important, not so much because they offer a strategic advantage BUT because they negate a strategic disadvantage. After all, many of our students come to Cornell from high schools with better indoor athletic facilities than we have at Cornell, and these students are also recruited by other schools with superior athletic spaces—neither of which puts us in a favorable recruiting position. At the moment, our athletic

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facility holds us back. It is for this reason that renovating and expanding the Richard and Norma Small Athletic and Wellness Center has been the primary facility project on our radar following the completion of the Russell Science Center and the renovation of West Science Hall.

Separately, improved and enlarged recreation and athletic facilities are vital to enhancing Mount Vernon. Cornell's long-term success is wrapped up with Mount Vernon's long-term ability to attract and retain families and businesses—and that requires the strongest college possible as well as better recreational and athletic spaces and opportunities. Further, Cornell would be better able to accommodate Iowa-wide public school events, such as high school basketball or volleyball tournaments, which is another important way to bring prospective students from throughout Iowa and the region to campus and recruit them.

I am delighted to report that the Board of Trustees will be considering the renovation of, and expansion to, the Richard and Norma Small Athletic and Wellness Center at its winter Board meeting in mid-February with the goal that construction can begin this spring. On this timeline, the project would be completed by December 2022—in under 22 months from now! This renovation will be the first substantive expansion of the Small Athletic and Wellness Center (aka the SAW) since the addition of the arena in 1986 and will provide the following exciting and necessary improvements:

- new wellness and fitness center for the entire college community
- new team locker room facilities for all student-athletes
- teaching, learning, and exercise space for dance, yoga, spin classes, and other small group exercise and training
- new centralized office spaces for coaches, staff, and administration including new meeting spaces and a conference room
- an expanded and welcoming lobby

These much-needed improvements and upgrades will provide a new look and feel to the existing building (contemplating how it fits in with our historic campus) and will create a central hub of wellness for our entire Cornell community to enjoy.

Thanks to leadership gifts and pledges from **Richard Small '50 & Norma Thomas Small, honorary alumna; Jean Russell '65; C. Scott Ririe '79 & Shelley Ririe;** and **The Hall-Perrine Foundation**, we have already raised \$15 million toward this \$19 million project. We are excited to have reached this milestone, but there is still much work to be done before we can successfully conclude the campaign. Given the strategic importance of this project, there is no time to lose.

One of our institutional goals is to be excellent in everything we do—not just in the classroom but also in areas such as athletics, other co-curricular activities, and residential life. We have further progress we wish to make in encouraging more of our students to appreciate the human value of regular physical activity and the enduring and powerful lessons to be learned through athletics. And, of course, athletics is critical to our new student recruitment goals. In this respect, we don't just want our fair share of new students either. Let's do what it takes—let's increase our value proposition—so that we get our unfair share.



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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