



# Cornell College

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## WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

June 2021

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“If we continue to do what we have been doing, we’ll only muddle along—we won’t fully realize our mission or secure our future. Instead, we need to be bold by innovating and by maximizing our distinctiveness.”

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### Student Wants and Needs

“If we are useful, we will endure.”<sup>1</sup>

The future is going to be very different than we might have anticipated. We cannot simply assume that the world, particularly higher education, is going to return to the way that it was pre-pandemic. It won’t. The landscape for higher education has changed and is going to continue to change dramatically. Whether the result of new technologies, the possibility of a future pandemic, different student needs, or some other unforeseen event or trend, disruption is here to stay. At Cornell, we must prepare for change, particularly as the pool of prospective students shrinks and also becomes more diverse, beginning in 2026. If we continue to do what we have been doing, we’ll only muddle along—we won’t fully realize our mission or secure our future. Instead, we need to be bold by innovating and by maximizing our distinctiveness.

Recognizing that we must embrace boldness, groups of faculty and staff—with input from the Board of Trustees—recently engaged in a strategic planning process, led by Special Assistant to the President John Harp and Sociology Professor Erin Davis with the guidance of Lew Sanborne of Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL). We began our strategic planning process by identifying the external trends that will shape our future.

In our external environment, we should expect:

- More and more disruption in the future—at every level and every scale. The pace of change will accelerate.
- A smaller and more diverse pool of prospective students, beginning in 2026.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Chief Superintendent Reginald Bright, “Endeavour,” Masterpiece, 2018.

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- An acceleration of schools that close, merge, or morph
  - Continued high demand for residential in-person seminar-style collegiate experiences enhanced by *quality* virtual learning
  - Greater focus on internships and off-campus study—more partnerships between higher education and corporations
  - Enhanced technology to support the in-class and overall student experience (academic, advising, progress tracking, student life, digital social experiences)
  - Students who wish to have an education on their schedule and not the college’s
  - Continued student and family emphasis on value and price as competition gets even more fierce
  - Stronger student and family focus on the “return on the experience” **conjoined with** their continued focus on the “return on the investment” of college
  - Increased student and family sensitivity to student loan debt
  - Growth in academic offerings to students older than 22 years of age

The vision we created in anticipation of this future—a vision that captures the future dream state of Cornell College—may not be what you might expect. It’s relatively radical. And, it speaks to a culture and a way of operating as we educate our students:

*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. Our bold approach enriches lives.*

More specifically, we must condition ourselves to anticipate, and then readily and continually adapt to, the emerging interests, needs, and wants of current and future students in a world of continued disruption. In so doing, we must reallocate our current resources, and invest some new resources, into strategically expanding and diversifying our markets.

As we developed the strategies and tactics that flow from this vision, we were guided by three primary questions throughout the process:

- What will students need?
- What will students want? (We studied, in particular, Gen Z students.)
- What is distinctive about Cornell?

The most promising strategies responded to all three questions.

No doubt, in answering these three questions, we needed to collect data and information to guide us. And, so we did. We evaluated surveys that our students regularly take such as the Student Satisfaction Inventory from RNL, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and student withdrawal surveys. We reviewed student enrollment data at Cornell, including course enrollments and majors. We examined similar data from peer and overlap schools. We audited aspirant schools to consider their curricular and co-curricular characteristics. We reviewed data from prospective students who had considered Cornell but ultimately chose to attend other colleges. We commissioned a pricing analysis to understand how prospective students and their parents view our strengths and weaknesses in relation to other schools within the context of our price.

We conducted focus group sessions with students, faculty, and staff to understand their experiences at Cornell College through their eyes.

We collected national data about the interests, needs, and wants of Gen Z. And, we received guidance and support from leading higher education consulting firms such as EAB and RNL.

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Finally, those of us engaged in the strategic planning process read many articles, attended multiple seminars, and participated in working sessions about the future of higher education and the demographic and enrollment forecasts for the U.S.

As a result of this thorough research, we developed a short list of student wants and needs, now and into the near future.

Students seek, and will seek, in a college:

- A safe and stable campus (physically and emotionally)
- A flexible, year-round, and personalized educational experience—education on their schedule
- Life and work skills, including the traditional “liberal arts” lifelong learning skills
- Strong (and well recognized) employment placement and graduate school placement results
- An educational experience that blends the best of residential with the best of online
- Technology that wraps around the in-class experience that is as good as the tech platforms students already use in their personal lives
- Many experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships and off-campus study)
- A premier academic reputation and strong value proposition
- A campus that has a diversity of students, faculty, and staff
- A fun/spirited campus climate
- An attractive campus with updated academic, residential, social, athletic, and recreational spaces
- An ability to graduate with little-to-no debt

Thus, our strategic plan needed to focus on these student wants and needs. And, we ultimately settled on the following high-level strategies:

- Reducing student debt
- Personalizing a student’s education—moving toward a curriculum of one (where a student’s educational experiences are tailored to that student)—and maximizing One Course At A Time
- Supporting and mentoring students across the college—through intentional curricular, co-curricular, and social opportunities
- Focusing on helping students make the connection between a Cornell education and their lives post-Cornell (e.g., work and graduate school), which will require new partnerships with employers
- Investing in technology to provide seamless high-quality, digitally-enabled experiences across the campus
- Undertaking additional essential facilities enhancements that students are telling us they need

I am extremely thankful for all that we have accomplished—collectively—over the last 20+ years that positions us to plan for the future in a bold and courageous way. Let’s keep going; as always, it is going to take all of us to achieve the vision before us.

You can expect that I’ll return with more details about the strategic plan as we flesh it out, finalize it, and begin to implement it. It’s an exciting time to be a Cornellian.



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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