



# Cornell College

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## WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

*November 2021*

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“Our vision articulates a Cornell in which we are collectively motivated to determine what students of today and tomorrow will need and want, and then meet those very needs.”

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### **Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives: Cornell College’s 2021-2024 Strategic Plan**

In my last white paper,<sup>1</sup> I was delighted to write to you about student wants and needs as the guiding information for our now-completed 2021-2024 strategic plan: Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives. More specifically, I noted that we must anticipate and adapt to the needs and wants of current and future students as we plan for the future.

Pursuit of answers to these questions revealed the necessity for us—Cornell faculty and staff members—to research and better understand the general characteristics of Generation Z students, develop methods to anticipate their needs and wants, and be able to adapt elements of Cornell’s curricular and co-curricular environment to attract students and support their success.

Why? We must focus on student enrollment through both recruitment and retention.

Our 2021-2024 strategic plan is intended to support programs we need in order to be a desirable destination for students. And, as a result of improving the value proposition for students, the college can generate the revenue to accomplish other strategic priorities, such as paying employees competitive salaries, investing in our campus, balancing the budget, and strengthening Cornell’s endowment.

The purpose of our three-year plan is to create innovative and differentiating curricular and co-curricular opportunities and operational excellence approaches necessary for Cornell to be financially and operationally sustainable for the long-term. Areas of immediate emphasis are:

- Balanced annual operating budgets
- Annual recruitment goals
- Annual retention goals
- An organizational structure and employee roles/responsibilities that are aligned with our strategic priorities

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<sup>1</sup> June 2021 Presidential White Paper: “Student Wants and Needs,” [crnl.co/wants&needs](http://crnl.co/wants&needs)

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On-campus working groups conducted extensive research, including obtaining data and information from departments, external consultants, and peer and aspirant colleges. They conducted analyses of our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges.

Today, as a result of that comprehensive and data-driven strategic planning process, we now have our next strategic plan—focused on recruitment and retention—to guide our decisions across Cornell College for the next three years.

It is a pleasure to present to you the salient elements of that plan, which include starting assumptions at the outset of the planning process, intended outcomes of the three-year plan, and areas of immediate emphasis that we have incorporated into this year's operating budget.

### **Starting Assumptions**

It is always helpful to begin a planning process with givens—those assumptions that you make that guide the planning process. The five starting assumptions of our plan were:

1. We cherish who we are—our liberal arts mission, our student-centeredness, our array of academic and co-curricular programs, and our One Course At A Time model.
2. Our current financial profile is unsustainable over the long-term. We must achieve the financial flexibility needed for strategic investments and enduring sustainability.
3. Our undergraduate full-time student body size at census day is projected to be approximately 1,000 students over the next three years.
4. A predicted demographic cliff and other external challenges demand responsiveness.
5. Planning will include additions, reductions, and revisions to practices, programs, and positions and the development of current and/or new recurring revenue streams.

### **Our Vision**

As a result of our research and ensuing discussions, a vision for the 2021-2024 strategic plan began to take shape: **Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives.**

**More specifically, as our vision, Cornell College faculty and staff will 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.**

I am particularly proud of this vision because it does not just focus on students. It focuses on Cornell employees, alumni, and even those communities that we all serve. This vision also emphasizes *how* we do our work. It articulates a Cornell in which we are collectively motivated to determine what students of today and tomorrow will need and want, and then meet those very needs.

The vision is exciting and directive, and the plan comes with bold elements: a cutting-edge student debt management plan; Cornell's Ingenuity curriculum, including the Ingenuity in Action component; a commitment to maximizing our One Course At A Time methodology; a recognition that we must innovate around the nature of work, culture, and community; and, finally, a willingness to rethink what it means to teach, mentor, and advise, especially under One Course At A Time.

### **Our High-level Strategies**

In the penultimate stage of our planning process, we took a *de novo* review of all possible strategies through the lens of recruitment and retention and focused on those initiatives that will have the biggest return on their investment. We did not lose sight of our educational mission or vision in this process. Rather, we conducted a fundamentally mission- and vision-driven analysis to influence recruitment and retention, knowing that we must be experts at understanding the educational experiences that our current and prospective students seek and need in order to recruit and retain them more successfully.

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From these discussions, our central on-campus group—the Strategic Planning Advisory Group—determined the highest priorities and recommended the following high-level strategies:

I. Responding to students' wants and needs

- Reducing student debt
- Personalizing a student's education—moving toward a curriculum of one—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 to 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—seamless high-quality, digitally-enabled experiences
- Enhancing facilities

II. Expanding and diversifying our markets

- Developing new markets/rendering Cornell more diverse
- Expanding athletic opportunities
- Developing focused marketing communications
- Developing alternative revenue streams to diversify beyond the traditional-age residential student population

III. Doing things differently

- Innovating around the nature of work and supporting our culture and community of students, faculty, and staff
- Rethinking what it means to teach, mentor, and advise, especially under One Course At A Time

### **Initiatives in Progress**

Some initiatives are already being implemented or are ready to be implemented, while other strategies commit to a process that will lead to further initiatives (such as our organizational cultural assessment that we are currently undertaking).

For example, this fall, we launched our Student Success Center ([crnl.co/studentsuccess](http://crnl.co/studentsuccess)), which provides coaches and additional support to all Cornell students to help them navigate all aspects of their college experience. Similarly, we recently launched a bold debt reduction plan ([crnl.co/debtreduction](http://crnl.co/debtreduction)), which is another initiative to ensure that Cornell remains accessible to all qualified students. Engineering, launched in 2017, is now one of our largest majors in terms of new student interest and thankfully is benefitting from the renovations made to West Science Hall.

To be sure, we also continue to improve those spaces that matter to students. We are under one year away from completing the renovations to and expansion of the Richard and Norma Small Athletic & Wellness Center. With just over \$2 million left to raise, we are still actively fundraising for a project that will transform the experiences of not just student-athletes but also of the general student body and employees. We are now developing a housing plan to further improve our residential spaces such as Olin and Bowman-Carter halls and also to increase the number of beds on campus.

Other initiatives will require further funding. In this vein, we are committing to expanding our programming related to diversity and inclusive equity. Over the last 20 years, we have made impressive diversity-related investments led by our Office of Intercultural Life, our Diversity Committee, and, more recently, our Senior Diversity Officer. We offer a wide range of courses that celebrate the value of diverse worldviews and lived experiences. We invite many speakers and regularly host programs that intentionally reflect the knowledge and experience of people from diverse backgrounds. We have a tradition of diversity education with faculty and staff, and we recently formed an Alumni of Color Association. In short, to continue our momentum and maintain a welcoming environment for all students, especially our students from underrepresented populations, our next critical step is to create a larger and more prominent space (than Stoner House) for our staff and programs.

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## Measurable Outcomes for Success

Because the focus of the three-year strategic plan includes the achievement of recruitment (number of new students), retention (first-to-second-year return rate), and overall student body goals, the following specific strategic plan outcomes were developed in May 2021, with care being taken to balance aspirational goals with realistic ones. Given that we just enrolled the largest class in the last 18 years (404 new students—a 28% increase from last fall) and experienced an improvement in first-to-second-year retention—all in this challenging COVID-19 period—we are optimistic that we can achieve these goals, especially with all of the strategic plan initiatives in place or underway.

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Fall 2024	Fall 2025
New students	366	394	405	408
First-to-second-year retention rate	80.9	82.1	83.3	84
Full-time enrollment	1062	1132	1212	1278

Additionally, the focus of the three-year plan will include the achievement of an organizational culture and employee roles/responsibilities/well-being that are aligned with strategic priorities. Benchmarks and strategies to enhance Cornell's workplace culture will be identified through periodic assessments beginning in Fall 2021.

And finally, these outcomes must lead to balanced operating budgets—a strong financial condition that enables Cornell to provide a highly desired environment and commensurate compensation for faculty and staff.

At its May 2021 meeting, Cornell's Board of Trustees signified its support for the Strategic Plan overview and encouraged further development of our metrics and reporting techniques. The executive team designed a high-level set of measurable outcomes that will be monitored and shared with the Board of Trustees and campus community on a regular basis. A plan captures a moment in time. Throughout the three-year period of this strategic plan, ongoing results will be used to adjust projections and initiative implementation plans.

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I would like to extend a special note of gratitude to John Harp, Special Assistant to the President; Erin Davis, Professor of Sociology; and Lew Sanborne, Vice President for strategic enrollment planning at Ruffalo Noel Levitz, for their strong leadership and guidance throughout our planning process.

I am pleased to share with you this summary of our three-year strategic plan: *Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives*. Our plan is the result of incredible work by many people across Cornell, and it was produced on a highly compressed schedule while simultaneously meeting the enormous daily demands necessitated by COVID-19. It's nothing short of miraculous what faculty and staff have done to get us to this point. This has been an invaluable campus undertaking, and I am delighted that we are now into the first year of implementing it. And, frankly, this plan wouldn't even be possible without all of those initiatives and steps that we have taken over many years that YOU made possible. Thank you. I look forward to updating you regularly as we implement this plan. Thank you again.



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.  
You can always reach me at 319.895.4324 or [jbrand@cornellcollege.edu](mailto:jbrand@cornellcollege.edu)*