



# Cornell College

---

## WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

October 2020

---

“We will, no doubt, one day look back at this period in our history and recognize that our community saved our college. It’s been as hard as anything we have had to do at Cornell, and yet it hasn’t been hard because we’ve done it together.”

---

### Cornell College’s Legacy of Resilience

“Enthusiasm is common. Endurance is rare.”  
— Angela Duckworth

In 2018, in a chapter in “Making College Better” edited by Joseph DeVitis, I delineated the foundational learning outcomes essential to any student’s education. Central among them was persistence or “grit” as it is commonly referred to these days. More specifically, I wrote:

“The significance of grit has been in the public eye under several names: resilience, perseverance, resolve, follow-through, and stick-to-it-iveness. At one level, it might seem obvious that persisting through challenges is critical to success, particularly because things rarely go as one expects. Such claims square nicely with past experiences that many of us have had in overcoming obstacles. One countervailing body of evidence suggests that grit is overrated relative to intelligence; however, it must have value if a student is to make the most of his or her intelligence. The response falls to higher education to encourage situations in which students are required to persevere—and to learn how to persevere wisely.”

The reality is that our students don’t just learn in the classroom. Cornell students also learn out of the classroom. In this respect, an entire college serves as a living laboratory for them. For example, our students gain critical lifelong skills when they live together—at all hours of the day during the expected ups and downs that come with any college experience. They grow through the training and development received to compete on athletic fields and in mock trial courtrooms, to perform on artistic stages and in campus jobs, and to lead student organizations and community service.

---

Our students also gain essential insights when they watch and participate in our institutional decision-making processes. This is why the methods we use to make decisions—the steps we take in framing questions, in collecting evidence, and in explaining our conclusions—are so important.

And, of course, our students learn from us when, as an institution, we must also persist. In these ways and many others, our community helps to develop each and every student.

The notion that a community precedes and forms the person is not a new concept. In “Politics,” Aristotle noted that: “[a]s there could be no foot or hand without the body, so there could be no family or [person], in the proper sense of the words, without the state.” For Aristotle, individuals develop their sense of self largely through their interactions with others. Put another way, an entire institution’s behaviors influence and even, in part, define the person. It is through an institution that we create expectations around communication. We solidify the habits that we consider essential. We promote our most important values. And, in the context of this white paper, institutional resilience—both a value and a habit—teaches our students the importance of persistence and even helps to develop it within them.

And, Cornell is nothing if not persistent. Over our almost 170-year history, we have had to dig deeper—to lift ourselves back up and keep going with energy and momentum—in ways that define us. This story of our very beginning, based on the research of Bill Heywood in “Cornell College: A Sesquicentennial History,” Vol. 1, seemed most auspicious. And it is little known.

In the fall of 1853, neither our new building nor our faculty was ready when the Iowa Conference Seminary (soon to become Cornell College) was scheduled to open. Construction of what we now know as Old Sem was delayed by problems obtaining materials and workers. Two full-time professors—David Wheeler and Sarah Fortner—were to open the school with three other part-time faculty members, and be joined at the start of winter term by their principal, Samuel Fellows. Wheeler fell ill, and Fortner opened the school herself in Mount Vernon’s Methodist Church. When Wheeler’s illness persisted, founder George Bowman appealed to Fellows’ employers at Rock River Seminary in Illinois to release him early. On three days’ notice, he and his family packed their belongings and traveled to Mount Vernon by horse and wagon.

On Nov. 14, the students and faculty processed with banners through Mount Vernon to Old Sem, which still lacked interior paint. A decision was made to shorten the fall term and start the winter term early. When Fortner became ill as that term began, Heywood wrote, “The ability and willingness of the faculty and their families to assume extra responsibility in times of need were demonstrated again.” Fellows’ wife Olive filled in, and Bowman himself moved into the building to run the boarding hall.

After a chaotic beginning, the year concluded with a hugely successful public exhibition in which 12 “ladies” and 15 “gentlemen” delivered orations interspersed with musical performances. The students were carefully coached and prepared by their faculty, and Olive Fellows sewed matching dresses for the women.

Olive Fellows described the scene that day:

“We shall never know ... how many earnest prayers arose from thankful hearts that they had lived to see the day when they could sit in the shade on an Iowa prairie and look up to a building, just behind them erected for Christian education, and call it ours! For our sons! For our daughters also! ... The results of it began to appear in the increased number of students the next fall term and, afterwards, at each term, til we were obliged to ask for a college charter and have another building.”

---

We have continued to educate promising students through wars, including the Civil War and two world wars. We survived the Depression and the Great Recession of 2008. And, we have already made it through earlier global pandemics, including the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920 (rendered even more challenging because it coincided with the last six months of World War I and a fuel shortage). The resilience that engendered our willingness to come together and persist in times of real challenge is woven into who we are. It anchors our sense of permanence from our very beginning in 1853. And, it teaches our students, as a result, that resilience yields success.

Now we have arrived at 2020, a year that has, to date, required more persistence and grit than anyone could have imagined at the beginning of the year. For context, we have long known that rural, private, residential liberal arts colleges with relatively small endowments continue to be at risk. We are located where our students largely are not. The pressures that schools like Cornell face will be that much more challenging as we approach a precipitous decline of about 15% in high school graduates beginning in 2025. And, this reality existed before COVID-19.

But, we persisted.

There is a saying in higher education that if you give us a decade, we can do wonderful things. We are not known for our speed but rather for highly engaged and involved planning and decision-making that takes time. Yes, in these COVID days, with new challenges surfacing on a regular basis, no institution realistically has a decade to make decisions. Schools need to move quickly and to be able to seize opportunities as they emerge.

As alumni and friends of Cornell, you would marvel at the ways that our faculty and staff have come together to respond to COVID-19 and to the derecho. As I noted in my last white paper, at Cornell, we had to rethink everything if we hoped to be able to welcome our students back to campus this fall—from the number of blocks we offer; the array of course offerings; the location of the courses (e.g., in person, remote, or both by way of a hybrid fashion); the daily schedule; the configuration of classrooms; the technological needs of remote learning—both for faculty and staff; residential life; dining; music; athletics; our testing plan (and access to testing equipment which has been in short supply nationwide); the appropriate supply of PPE; COVID-related policies related to employees; the college's overall operating budget; and the communications plan so that we could regularly update students and their families, prospective students and their families (YES—we had to keep recruiting during COVID), faculty and staff, alumni, and the general public AND answer their questions. Suffice it to say—it was a lot, and it never let up.

We were on a steady and successful path to welcome students back in mid-August when an inland hurricane—a derecho—blew through campus a few days before our first students were supposed to arrive. We are fortunate in that nobody was hurt. Twenty buildings sustained roof damage. But, our natural campus took a direct hit. We lost about 150 trees, and another 160 trees were damaged. We lost power for over four days, and the campus looked like a war zone. Suddenly, a Crisis Management Team that had been meeting remotely on a weekly basis for over five months needed to meet in person and handle a crisis other than COVID (all while managing COVID still). Here, as an institution, we could have just raised the flag and given up.

But, we persisted. We delayed the start of our school year by two weeks and kept moving forward.

Alas, classes started on Sept. 7, and 85% of our students decided that they wanted to start the year on campus. And, our academic year has been a success to date—with extremely low COVID rates (as of the writing of this White Paper, only five students have tested positive through our on-campus testing!) and a community that has overwhelmingly embraced the importance of following our COVID-related policies.

I could go on in chronicling the aspects of our work. Nothing is routine these days! We will, no doubt, one day look back at this period in our history and recognize that our community saved our college. It's been as hard as anything

---

we have had to do at Cornell, and yet it hasn't been hard because we've done it together. And, I include you—our alumni and friends—because your energy, time, and financial help has also supported us and motivated us. Thank you. As the higher education environment gets even more challenging over the next few years, a college's culture will be more important for the long-term success of a school. Those schools not rooted in trust conjoined with an indefatigable will to keep going—to persist—will have even more challenging futures. This is where we are well positioned and where our students stand to learn the most from us. With our resilience, we will confidently and successfully weather future storms. And, our students will be that much better for it.



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)*