

# Cornell College

W H I T E P A P E R S E R I E S

## **THE CENTRAL ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES**

A Presidential White Paper  
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## THE CENTRAL ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

*Periodically, I will produce papers on matters of importance to Cornellians. This white paper explains the evolution of our student learning outcomes. I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper. You can always reach me at 319-895-4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu.*

Students and their parents nationwide are increasingly focused on the “value-added” aspect of a college education. How will attending X institution prepare me for life, especially for a career or profession, and is it worth the cost? The partnership of liberal learning outcomes, knowledge in at least one discipline, and experiential learning opportunities will provide that added value parents and employers desire. It should come as no surprise that Cornellians are already thinking about this very issue.

In fact, in my first year as President of Cornell College, Peter McCormick ’65 invited me to talk about ways in which Cornell can truly distinguish itself in the higher education sector. Over a bowl of goulash and dumplings in Cedar Rapids’ Czech Village, Professor McCormick reflected on the current crisis in higher education and passionately explained how students, in his opinion, do not retain substance as well as capabilities and appreciations. For him, this reality has created a challenge for colleges and universities that might exclusively focus on the instruction of content (which students forget over time) as well as an opportunity for Cornell to further set itself apart. More specifically, Professor McCormick explained how Cornell’s distinctive One Course At A Time educational model permits students and faculty to delve more deeply into materials, thus creating an optimal environment for students not only to learn content but also to master specific capacities and values—capacities and values that will benefit them throughout their entire lives.

To be sure, Professor McCormick had raised something that has been increasingly in the public eye over the last decade—the “value-added” nature of an education. Not only do accrediting bodies wish to ensure that students are learning what schools and faculty say that those students should be learning, but a tightening economy (and greater pressure on student recruitment) has pushed all institutions to establish for prospective students and their parents, alumni and friends, and the general market that they are delivering on their educational promise to enhance the lives of their students.

Professor McCormick's timing was perfect. After all, here at Cornell, we had initiated an institution-wide strategic planning process and had (and still have) the goal of charting an ambitious path that plays to Cornell's unique strengths and also responds to the pressures and opportunities external to Cornell. As I played with this idea in my mind, I increasingly realized a number of truths about Cornell College, liberal arts colleges as a sector, and higher education in general.

1. Our educational model and the particular warmth and generosity of our students, faculty, and staff do provide us a unique opportunity to make good on our commitment to our students—through their hard work (and our attention and mentorship), they will develop “the intellectual curiosity, creativity, and moral courage necessary for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship.” Content knowledge AND essential capacities/values are both important at Cornell.
2. In fact, teaching content and essential capacities as well as assessing students' abilities requires a level of creativity in teaching. It is much harder to accomplish than it sounds. Fortunately, Cornell's One-Course calendar already requires that level of creativity in teaching (because it would be impossible to simply lecture to students for four hours per day and expect them to stay engaged, which is an essential condition to effective learning).
3. If an institution settles on the most important learning outcomes and its students excel toward those ends, then it should follow that these students, as graduates, will lead particularly successful and meaningful lives. This should, in turn, mean that those graduates are the most sought after individuals by employers and others.
4. It is easy to concentrate on learning that occurs in the classroom when, at an institution like Cornell, our great strength (and recognition of it) is that learning occurs everywhere—in class, in the dining hall, in co-curricular activities, through community service, in our residence halls, on stages or athletic venues, off-campus, just to name a few. So, at Cornell, we should be working hard to integrate all of these experiences such that we are all collectively focused on our students' learning and the same outcomes.
5. Increasingly, graduate programs—even specialized ones such as medicine and engineering—are focusing on essential capacities in addition to content knowledge.

Thus, to the extent that Cornell prepares students for graduate studies, our increased focus on these capacities will only help our students in the future.

6. It is a complicated endeavor to settle on central learning outcomes and ensure that they are woven into all programs and then measured.
7. Colleges and universities, perhaps inappropriately, are often attacked for being undisciplined or operating largely in silos. Educational outcomes that are endorsed by all faculty and staff as central to student learning provide the basis for bringing everyone together around a common mission.
8. Learning outcomes, if endorsed by everyone, can also ensure that an institution makes the most of its resources.
9. The pursuit of liberal learning outcomes is widely recognized as a best practice, including through “Liberal Education through America’s Promise” (LEAP) advanced by the American Association of College and Universities beginning in 2005. Cornell College joined with this effort as a member of the LEAP Action Network of colleges and universities across the country committed to advancing liberal education.

At the beginning of the last academic year, consistent with the foregoing, Dean Joe Dieker advocated for an idea that, at the time, he called “Liberal Learning Across the Curriculum.” The basic idea was that our students should encounter the overall educational objectives of the college throughout the various classes they take during their course of study. Course content would always be paired intentionally with liberal learning skills and objectives. Thus, the college would ensure that its core mission of liberal education would be strong and effective. This concept was not completely new to Cornell as it built upon good work by the faculty in developing the college’s educational objectives, curriculum, and assessment over the past several years.

In fact, Dean Dieker argued that Cornell College, already one of America’s finest national liberal arts colleges, could be a leader in teaching and learning of the important liberal learning skills and outcomes being advocated on a national level by educational, business, and political leaders. Simply put, Cornell with its outstanding professors, supportive and caring staff, distinctive One Course calendar, and bright and curious students should “DO” liberal arts education better than any other institution. The ideas he presented at this opening meeting of the

faculty and in subsequent Deans' fora were well-received by members of the faculty. During the last academic year, in collaboration with the faculty, he created a Curriculum Advisory Committee to begin work on a new statement of educational objectives for Cornell College. The group worked with the following ideals in mind:

- The college cannot articulate all the possible learning goals of a high quality liberal arts education. Rather, we must intentionally choose those goals that are the most important for achievement by all students at Cornell. Thus, the committee chose intentionally to use the term “Educational Priorities.”
- The Educational Priorities and Outcomes are not focused on any particular discipline or body of knowledge. Learning objectives based on knowledge are best articulated in course syllabi and individual program outcomes.
- The Educational Priorities and Outcomes are not only the domain of the curriculum; rather they must be integrated in curricular, co-curricular, independent, and collaborative contexts across the campus.
- The outcomes must be able to be assessed through a variety of direct or indirect methods so that the college can determine the degree to which students are achieving these outcomes as a part of their successful completion of their studies at the college.
- The Educational Priorities and Outcomes must be articulated in very concise terms.
- The Educational Priorities and Outcomes must reflect the distinctive mission and culture of the college to insure “buy-in” from the faculty, staff, and students of the college.

As a result of these conversations, the faculty has settled on the following essential learning outcomes for all Cornell students:

### **Educational Priorities and Outcomes**

The Mission and Core Values guide learning at Cornell College. Students are engaged in a broad education in which they gain knowledge and learn to think through disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. The completion of a major provides students the opportunity to gain a depth of knowledge in at least one area of study. Faculty and staff provide opportunities for learning in a supportive environment where students ultimately take responsibility for their own education.

Cornell College recognizes that meaningful education occurs in multiple formats and venues and encompasses a wide variety of disciplines and learning objectives. As an intentional learning community, the college has chosen to emphasize the following Educational Priorities and Outcomes for all students. In order to achieve these Outcomes, the Educational Priorities are embedded in curricular, co-curricular, independent, and collaborative contexts across the campus.

Educational Priorities	Students will...
<b>Communication</b>	speak and write clearly, listen and read actively, use information technology effectively, and engage with others in productive dialogue.
<b>Quantitative Reasoning</b>	interpret and draw inferences from quantitative data; use mathematical, logical, and statistical problem-solving tools.
<b>Creative and Critical Inquiry</b>	respond to the complexities of contemporary and enduring problems using information literacy tools, creative thinking, and analysis.
<b>Intercultural Literacy</b>	connect with diverse ideas and with people whose experiences differ from their own and that may be separated from them by time, space, or culture.
<b>Ethical Behavior</b>	recognize personal, academic, and professional standards and act with integrity.
<b>Citizenship</b>	collaborate with others and contribute in their communities and the larger world.
<b>Vocation</b>	discover and prepare for the range of opportunities and challenges that await them beyond their college experience.
<b>Well-Being</b>	respect the ways physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual well-being may contribute to a balanced life.

### Implications

There is little value in creating a new set of Educational Priorities and Outcomes if these statements are simply going to be printed in the Academic Catalogue without any further implementation (akin to creating a strategic plan that just goes onto a bookshelf, gathering dust). In endorsing these new priorities and outcomes, our faculty, staff, and students are now working to insure that our students achieve the stated outcomes. A key ingredient in this process is revising our faculty review and reward systems to reflect their commitment to helping our

students achieve these new educational outcomes. In addition, we are figuring out how we should assess student achievement of these outcomes and how we will make the changes necessary for improvement if the outcomes are not at the level we think appropriate. This will require a lot of work and outside-the-box thinking—both attributes that come very naturally to Cornell faculty, students, staff, and alumni.

Specifically, here are some of the direct benefits of moving forward with a new set of Educational Priorities and Outcomes. Measuring learning:

1. Recognizes that skills and capacities are important in partnership with substantive knowledge. “Education is what remains after you have forgotten what you have learned.”
2. Advances liberal learning in that an education is not only what happens in each class but also what happens across and between classes and co-curricular experiences.
3. Ties an organization to those outcomes that the faculty, in particular, considers the most important.
4. Focuses an entire college on that which is most important—permits more strategic discussions about what truly matters at that institution.
5. Has the ability to bring a college community together—allowing everyone to act on the reality that they play a role in educating each and every student.
6. Sets Cornell up to measure through true assessment and as well through our students’ own assessment of their learning whether they are achieving what we institutionally say is important as well as what we hear from graduate programs and employers about what matters—thus, central learning outcomes are a vital step to institutional assessment.

Ideally, the Educational Priorities and Outcomes will become an intentional and essential part of the student learning experience at the college. Through a focused effort on student achievement of the Educational Priorities and Outcomes of the college, paired with the rich learning experiences of our curriculum, our students will graduate from Cornell College with a superior education in the liberal arts. We believe that this is truly what it means to reimagine the liberal art experience, assuming an even greater leadership role among all colleges and universities, including among national residential liberal arts colleges.

This ambitious plan will also require your support, as alumni and friends of Cornell. We will not be able to accomplish this alone. This greater focus on our educational priorities and outcomes is closely linked to our longer-term plans for comprehensive growth, the attainment of which will require a stronger financial profile, both in our endowment and fundraising, than we have ever had in the past.