



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand and
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“There are many uncertainties ahead, yet we feel prepared to meet them—we know we are a community of Cornellians who will rise to the challenge of changing conditions and keep our Cornell spirit, and quality of education, alive.”

One Course At A Time as a pandemic response

It probably comes as no surprise that as colleges respond to the pandemic they have had to reconsider their academic calendars with the goal of making them more flexible in the face of the unknown. And, it would be an understatement to say that it has been a challenge for many schools to make these alterations in a manner that is both capable of being implemented and also supported by faculty, staff, and students. For us, like most other liberal arts colleges, while Cornell wasn't particularly prepared to offer online courses in the spring of 2020, our schedule gave us incredible flexibility. We were prepared to deal with an emergency evacuation of campus, and our professors were flexible enough to adapt to online teaching with extremely short notice and with the utmost empathy for our students whose world had been upturned in the matter of a week.

From March 11–March 20 our COVID-19 crisis management team took on the task of determining the safest and most responsible course of action to protect our campus while the information and recommendations about the novel coronavirus changed day to day, sometimes hour to hour.

We first extended spring break to give us time to learn more, build an infrastructure to support online learning, and help our professors adapt their next course to a new delivery format. In that short time staff at Cole Library's Center for Teaching and Learning prepared and offered 12 hours of training for faculty, plus numerous individual sessions to help faculty prep for their courses. Once Block 7 started there were two hours a week of faculty drop-in sessions to problem solve, in addition to ongoing individual consultations.

Our Office of Information Technology (IT) was charged with enabling access to classroom content to students around the country and the world. All in about 18 days. The dramatically different daily requirements of remote Cornell students, faculty, and staff had to be identified, and solved. Every skill set in IT

was engaged to provide solutions to hundreds of unique situational challenges. Cornell's Desktop staff developed emergency processes, identified training needs, answered a flood of urgent questions, as well as designed home user solutions, and quickly shipped equipment wherever it was needed. As nearly 100% of Cornell users became remote users overnight, Cornell's single point of contact Help Desk saw a nearly 60% increase in daily calls from students, parents, faculty, and staff, all of whom were doing things they'd never done before.

While we addressed the logistics of distance learning from campus, we had to review how the change to online learning would impact our student body. Eighty-eight percent of our students were off-campus elsewhere for spring break, 103 were on campus and would need to find a way home, and our international students were in a challenging situation with borders closing and airplanes grounded. How many of them were prepared to learn successfully from home? Would they have problems with internet access? Did they have the technology they needed? Did they have that technology with them, wherever they were? What if their next class was a lab or required other hands-on learning?

Our departments of facilities services, residence life, food services, and health services had to determine how we could safely support students on campus to prevent the spread of the virus were it to appear in our community. As we analyzed our ability to isolate students who had possible contact, or quarantine anyone who tested positive for the virus, it became obvious that we—like other colleges—were not in a position to maintain a significant population of students or staff on campus and adequately minimize risk.

By the end of spring break we had 75 students living on campus who could not leave for one reason or another, and by Block 8 that number was down to 25. We asked all faculty and staff to work from the safety of their homes if they were able to, we launched our first block of distance learning, and we continued to try to plan for what came next amidst ongoing confusion about how this pandemic would play out.

Block 7

Now that immediate necessities were handled, we needed a better picture of how finances were affected. Could we hold hope for all being back on campus next fall? Would our students return or would the pandemic still be raging? What were the financial ramifications of offering refunds for room and board? What would happen to the personal finances of our students and their families? How would their situations change? Would we be able to recruit a fall class with high schools and ACT and SAT tests disrupted? Would students be willing to go to college in the fall?

We focused on how to keep a virtual campus active and engaged even when the physical one couldn't be. The admission office created a new approach so that prospective students and their families could visit Cornell virtually, and participation immediately met or exceeded what we had seen with physical visits. We increased transparency and communications with students and their parents, sending more emails than we had in years—being honest about what we didn't know but were still working on—all with the emphasis on supporting the college community and minimizing risk.

Our families were honest right back.

First, thank you for all that you are doing to help students transition to the new normal (not normal). I imagine you've been working tirelessly to answer every question, address every situation, and consider every need. We feel that. We appreciate that, more than you can know. And, it must be heartbreaking for all of you. I know it is for us. And yet, here we all are in this uncertain, uncharted territory.

My question, which is more of a concern, I decided not to ask on the group call. Are you all going to be okay from a fiscal perspective? I know that times are hard for small, liberal arts colleges. This seems like a massive blow. You don't have to

share anything that you don't care to share with a parent. I mostly want to say that I hope you will be okay. I hope that you all can weather this storm. We need you. We want you to thrive.

Thank you again for everything you are doing and the grace with which you are doing it. We deeply, deeply appreciate you.

The Berry Career Institute immediately went online, recording sessions and adapting content on ways to find an internship or job in the current environment. Student Affairs staff tested a variety of methods to keep current students engaged with their campus community to various levels of success. We learned that screen time burnout was real, and social media engagement wasn't a high priority, even though our students missed campus and appreciated postcards from our secondary mascots, the campus squirrels.

Engagement was where we saw our faculty and staff shine, as we expected.

After Professor of Physics Kara Beauchamp gave her students a mental health day during that first online block, one of her students wrote that it reminded him why he likes Cornell College so much.

"Sometimes schools are so worried about academics that they forget about the students and teachers. It means a lot to me that all my professors really care about how I am doing as a human (not just in their class). Honestly, it means everything," wrote Charlie De Poortere.

The disruption to campus services meant an anticipated \$1.06 million in requested refunds to students for room and board and \$121,000 in initial technology upgrades to support distance learning. We were able to secure just under \$4.5 million by way of a loan from the federal Small Business Administration program to assist with operations, which is forgivable. We also received about \$422,500 in CARES emergency funding for students and immediately distributed about \$180,000 of it to students who needed it for their distance learning. The remaining balance—another \$240,000—will be available to students this fall as we reconvene. Another approximately \$422,500 of CARES funding was also awarded to Cornell for operations costs.

And we created a new fund, Cornell Cares, to help mitigate the financial burdens to our students and families as they studied remotely. Many of you generously supported this fund to help pay for unexpected student expenses such as travel, shipping costs for their belongings, technology needed for distance learning, and other unanticipated expenses incurred as a result of our response to the pandemic. Thank you so much for making a difference in the lives of our students.

Block 8

As we stepped into Block 8 our next action item for students was how to celebrate our graduating seniors whose college careers were not ending where they expected at all. Professor of Theatre Scott Olinger created an outdoor show that featured the faces of every member of our graduating class projected on College Hall or Norton Geology Center. "I just hope that they understand that we really do miss them," Olinger told KCRG, the local ABC-TV affiliate. "That the faculty and the staff and the administrators miss them terribly, we care about them, we want to celebrate their achievement."

The college's first-ever Virtual Commencement was planned for the weekend after classes ended. Response exceeded expectations, as we reached over 16,000 people through the Facebook stream and over 2,000 comments were logged during the event.

While we were planning celebrations on one side, the faculty was eagerly rethinking the very calendar that has given us so much flexibility for the past 42 years. We needed to extend the flexibility we inherently had with the block plan even further for the next two years during which we anticipate the pandemic will disrupt our normal

operations. Our new Academic Dean, Ilene Crawford '92, who wasn't slated to start work until July 1, actively participated in our academic planning for the future, and Joe Dieker, Dean of the College, ultimately presented a bold action plan to our faculty.

Goals of the new flex plan include the creation of a nimble calendar that can pivot from on-campus courses to online courses as needed and provide more opportunities for essential on-campus courses that require hands-on learning experiences. It keeps the personalized Cornell experience alive, and maximizes enrollment by offering a flexible and attractive calendar. By adopting this plan we have been proactive rather than reactive, and have begun to reimagine Cornell in a future that would forever be changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to our 42 years on the block plan, we've been able to do what virtually no other school can do. And, as other schools explore models like the block plan, we are able to benefit from our 42-year head start.

The new calendar maintains our eight-block academic year, on campus or online as necessary, and courses during this time that can't be held due to COVID-19 can be rescheduled later in the year or into summer flex blocks as situations dictate. Two summer flex blocks have been added that can be on campus or online, including essential hands-on courses that may ultimately be displaced by COVID-19 as well as general courses in high demand.

The flex plan means that we can offer even more flexibility on the block plan to our students, and we are now prepared to adapt our campus population to whatever the virus response needs to be every 3 ½ weeks. This bold action plan even has the added benefit of making it possible for a student to complete their education in 3 ½ or even three years. It also sets us up to start planning offerings for non-traditional and part-time students, which was a challenge to imagine previously.

As schools across the country began to roll out their tentative plans for fall we started to see familiar block-like solutions. Beloit and Luther colleges, just two examples from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, announced modified plans with flavors from the block system for fall. We also heard from more institutions wanting to explore the block plan approach. We embraced the idea that the advantages of the block plan were becoming more obvious to the education community. We also knew that we had the advantage of infrastructure and training to support the model that other schools wouldn't.

Returning to campus

Summer hasn't been a time to slow down. Approximately 15 task forces and subcommittees were created to develop plans and contingencies for how we welcome our students this fall.

We recommitted to our core values by creating a set of guiding principles for how we would respond to the pandemic conditions:

- We value the Cornell community and the life, safety, and dignity of each of its members.
- Our goal remains to facilitate learning in an immersive environment, with a preference for in-person classes and interactions.
- We strive to work with individual needs, when feasible.
- We take into consideration our impact on the wider Mount Vernon-Lisbon, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City community.
- We base decisions on scientific and medical data and public health recommendations.

Like the block plan, our solutions may be distinctive, creative, and informed by the unique needs of Cornell.

For the summer of 2020 we offered 14 pilot summer online courses, ranging from Beginning Spanish II to Cognitive Neuroscience, and had 82 students register. These courses were meant to be a testing ground for our faculty and also to practice offering online courses that could be delivered through the Acadeum College Consortium for

revenue generation.

Faculty training for best practices in online classrooms is continuing at an unprecedented rate through the summer, both from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest and Cole Library's Center for Teaching and Learning. And a small group has been meeting with other block plan institutions to share ideas about online teaching and possibly create opportunities for faculty to remotely visit with classes and for students to partner on projects.

Recruitment messaging for fall term has shifted to explaining how the block plan will minimize disruption and how it can reliably keep students on pace to graduate in no more than four years. We're preparing to promote spring semester starts and transfers in a way we have not done before. The common First-Year Seminar implemented last fall offers us the flexibility to add introductory courses to welcome a spring class that wasn't possible in the past.

The investments we made in 90 days in response to a pandemic, from curriculum to facilities that support One Course At A Time, ultimately strengthened Cornell.

Why we are confident in this volatile time

Cornell has a strong position in the marketplace—no school in the top 100 national liberal arts colleges has moved up in the rankings in the last five years more than Cornell. And we are nationally (and even internationally) recognized for our innovative and deeply personalized One Course At A Time calendar.

We have a decision-making culture that permits Cornell to turn on a dime. Our faculty approved a bold new plan in under a week. That is unheard of in higher education.

We have a deeply devoted Board and alumni base that continues to financially invest in Cornell at impressive levels.

We have a very dedicated faculty and staff who are focused on student learning and well-being. They will go the extra mile to help students succeed.

Cornell has been educating students since 1853 and has weathered many difficult times throughout our history. We will also weather the current pandemic.

It has been exhilarating, joyful, and, yes, a bit exhausting for the entire campus. There are many uncertainties ahead, yet we feel prepared to meet them—we know we are a community of Cornellians who will rise to the challenge of changing conditions and keep our Cornell spirit, and quality of education, alive.



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.

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