



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

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Advancing Greater Well-being at Cornell

These presidential white papers are intended to offer you greater insights into those pressing topics at Cornell College that are on my mind and demand our attention. In this white paper, I address one such timely topic—student success and well-being, particularly as students nationwide have struggled more as a result of COVID-19. In fact, we can see that our students are experiencing challenges that have impacted their ability to fully enjoy and benefit from Cornell. And, we need to respond because we will *always* have a strategic imperative to help our students achieve even better wellness and balance in their lives—more so today than ever in light of the significant instability they have experienced the last few years.

Understanding the Problem

Consistent with national trends, Cornell students have been reporting increased levels of stress and fatigue associated with workload and busyness. More specifically, stress, depression, and anxiety are having a greater negative impact on Cornell students' academic performance as reflected by their responses on the National College Health Assessment from Spring 2022 and Spring 2018. (Anxiety-46% (2022) vs. 35% (2018); Depression-35% (2022) vs. 29% (2018); and Stress-45% (2022) vs. 34% (2018).) While these outcomes are, no doubt, predictable given the uncertainty and social isolation that high school and college students have faced over the last few years, it is also, of course, quite concerning.

In fact, as a part of our 2021-2024 strategic plan, Bold Approaches that Enrich Lives¹, we learned about our students' struggles and responded with a strategy that recognized their increased challenges, some of which are exacerbated by our daily schedule on the block system. More specifically,

our strategic plan provides that we will “consider how we utilize, and the implications of, our One Course At A Time schedule to meet student needs and wants” and also “address student concerns related to workload and busyness, encourage a balance of curricular and co-curricular opportunities, and increase enjoyment, well-being, and a sense of community on campus.”

Through the strategic planning process, we recognized that addressing student stress is critical to student success and satisfaction. Nobody wins if a student doesn’t stay in college and benefit from all of the opportunities available to them. And, we are societally better off when students graduate and become productive citizens post-Cornell.

To date, at Cornell, I had been viewing our students’ discernible struggles as OUR challenges—unique to us, especially because our One Course At A Time methodology is a relatively demanding schedule. Classes move quickly. Reading assignments can be substantial. Papers may need to be completed in a matter of days. However, in fact, now having spoken to several of my peers at other Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) institutions, I can see that our students’ challenges are part of a much larger crisis, and even go beyond the effects of COVID-19. Student stress and burnout have emerged as a larger national concern for all of us, and, like us, our peer institutions are working diligently to implement solutions to help their students.

Finding an appropriate and well-tailored answer is not easy. While other schools are considering a range of options (such as adding in non-class wellness days throughout their semesters), no one has really figured out the optimal set of solutions, even as we try to understand the full scope of the challenges. Creating effective institutional responses to the reported decline in well-being is such a complicated matter. Through my conversations with peers, I also had an epiphany. Though our calendar may currently appear to exacerbate our students’ challenges, our distinctive One Course At A Time methodology and our exceptionally cooperative culture also offer us the flexibility and freedom to consider solutions to student stress in particularly creative and effective ways. We are in a position once again to do what basically no other school can or will do thanks to our educational philosophy and schedule.

Our students have been very forthcoming with us. Some have told us, for example, that their stress is due, in part, to a daily schedule that can be unpredictable and even inconsistent. Other students have highlighted the fact that, for them, there is not enough reliable open time for them to do what they need or wish to do in a normal business day, and this minimizes their ability to enjoy the full college experience. Some have reported that it is hard for them to retain regular appointments or part-time jobs because their schedules are so full and unpredictable.

College students are also now coming with greater needs. For example, more than 60% of students nationwide meet the criteria for having a mental health issue, and three-quarters report at least moderate psychological distress, according to an American Psychological Association article². And, as it relates to Cornell students, these results give greater context for what we have heard from some students—that an unpredictable and inconsistent daily schedule in all of their activities exacerbates their challenges, thus compromising their well-being. Our students would benefit from a more harmonized institutional approach to their daily schedules, which would allow them to stay on top of their work and also apply the most effective methods of time management.

Achieving greater predictability and consistency at Cornell is more complicated than it might first appear. For example, the level of classroom autonomy at Cornell has been one of our distinctive characteristics as a

² crrl.co/APAarticle

result of our One Course At A Time methodology. Under our block system, our class schedules bend to the subject matter and not the other way. If a particular class needs a bit more time on a given topic, it is much easier to find that time at Cornell than at other institutions because we don't have to worry about infringing on students' other classes. Our block system provides a level of flexibility and student-focus that is unparalleled in higher education—and our students and faculty can—and do—maximize learning because of that. As a result, we need to be mindful not to negate such a powerful point of distinction—the flexibility that each class has in its schedule—as we seek greater consistency and predictability to support student success.

Our students' struggles involve the full spectrum of campus opportunities that, while fulfilling, are also demanding. Other activities such as preparation for performances, athletic practices, and student organization involvement also place heavy demands on students. They need more predictability and consistency in all of their commitments, not just in their classes. As a result, we necessarily need to understand not only our students' class commitments but also their commitments outside of their classes (e.g., athletics, music, theatre, student organizations) in order to develop a comprehensive and holistic approach to the daily schedule. Understanding student time commitments is a first step to increasing student satisfaction, learning, and engagement—where students also have greater agency/control over their days.

Ultimately, finding creative solutions to help our students will require that everyone on our campus is coordinated together in this effort to help our students.

During the spring, we had some initial and important conversations on campus regarding our students' perceptible challenges and their daily schedules. These conversations have revealed how complicated the matter really is. At the same time, I heard widespread agreement that many of our students are struggling—that they are experiencing troublingly high levels of stress, burnout, and fatigue. *Our collective recognition of these challenges is already an enormous step forward because we can all begin from the starting point that there is a pressing problem that we need to address.*

Faculty and staff shared other important observations. For example, some believe that we need to help students reconsider their expectations around busyness and their workload, and we also need to help our students to more fully develop their focus, coping, and productivity skills (read: less time on social media). In fact, our students may have more free time than they perceive. We need to study this further.

So, I hope that you can see how vexed and important this topic really is, and how we have a real challenge before us, though not insurmountable—increasing the predictability, consistency, and moderation of our daily schedule with the parallel goal of reducing student stress and increasing student satisfaction and agency all while maximizing student engagement and learning—and in a manner that can be realistically implemented. We wish to help our students, and also to help them to help themselves.

Moving Forward

The worst step we could take would be to do too much before we fully understand the issues we are seeking to resolve. We need to reconsider our daily schedule thoughtfully and comprehensively—specifically focused on resolving the challenges our students are facing. So, we are going to approach our students' daily schedule in two phases.

Because this topic is so important for Cornell, we have committed to pursuing a series of initiatives that could be implemented as early as the spring semester of the next academic year (which begins this upcoming

January) to offer our students even greater consistency in their daily schedule. We will approach this topic comprehensively and creatively based on what we learn from our students.

In the meantime, thanks to a compressed but very thoughtful faculty deliberation, we are also piloting one important initiative this fall that we believe will help our students immediately. More specifically, faculty will post their daily schedules for their courses in advance of each semester. In posting schedules in advance, we will give our students predictability that will allow them a semester at a time to select the additional activities that balance with their course load as well as schedule other commitments (such as healthcare appointments, campus employment, or well-being activities) that don't conflict with their classes.

I am confident that one vital attribute of schools that will do well in the future relates to their organizational culture—that they will have healthy cultures with strong community alignment around student success. Thankfully, Cornell is already defined by this exceptional student-focus. We know our students. We support our students. We love our students. Everyone, including you as alumni and friends of our spectacular college, shares this attachment to our students. And, students know it. Thus, from a cultural perspective, we are well positioned going forward. Now, we will rely on that community spirit to fully understand what our students are experiencing, developing creative solutions under our One Course At A Time methodology, and ultimately encouraging greater student well-being.

I will plan to update you on this pressing and timely topic as our process unfolds.

As always, thank you for your devotion to Cornell. We are thankful, and we definitely would not be the same without you. Onward and upward!



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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