Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

President Jonathan Brand

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This White Paper is the first in a series on the importance and relevancy of higher education and the unique value of a Cornell education.

Helping Students to Think for Themselves

Periodically, Cornell alumni express concern to me that higher education is overly focused on inculcating particular viewpoints in our students rather than helping them to develop their own viewpoints, a perspective that is consistent with a larger public concern. They worry that Cornell has "fallen into this trap" and believe that such an approach is fundamentally antithetical to our larger educational goals and purpose.

Our students become purpose-driven leaders who are guided by their own views, supported by evidence.

As two examples of this particular concern, The Pew Research Center 2019 Report and Gallup's 2017 survey revealed that increasingly Americans have less confidence in higher education, in part, upon the belief that we advance a partisan viewpoint. "Ideological conformity," "politically liberal," and "cancel culture" in which students do not feel free to express their own perspectives are terms often used in this context. While there are other factors for this diminished confidence in colleges and universities (e.g., the perceived high cost to attend), the fact remains that Americans have growing concern about the ways that colleges and universities live their educational missions, namely what and how they teach students.

As it relates to Cornell, this is a vitally important topic because it goes to the very heart of our existence and purpose. While I could "simply" share my own personal observations with you, I ultimately concluded that nothing could be more powerful or true than sharing with you evidence and perspectives offered by our faculty and staff on this topic. After all, we are rooted in the academic experience, as led by the faculty.

How we teach students to think for themselves at Cornell College is the topic of this White Paper. I seek to address the perception—hopefully a MISperception for us—that, at Cornell, we tell our students WHAT to think rather than HOW to think. How do we help students to think for themselves—to develop and understand their own perspectives that they can explain, question, modify, etc.? How do we prepare our students for the future and how do we help them to make decisions on their own—to think critically?

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It is axiomatic that everything we do for our students must flow from our mission. We exist to offer "an innovative and rigorous learning community where faculty and staff collaborate with students to develop the intellectual curiosity, creativity, and moral courage necessary for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship." And, in so doing, we respect our core institutional values, which include a focus on our students' intellectual, moral, and personal growth as they discover and embrace the integration and application of knowledge. Necessarily, living out our mission and values requires that our students think critically and creatively for themselves.

So, I'll give you a little reveal several pages in advance—I can categorically say that our philosophy, approach, and methodologies are geared to help students think critically and independently, even beginning right away with New Student Orientation before classes have started.

ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is not static. And, it's really about the process of coming to know—of learning. As a result, at Cornell, we focus on habits and methods of learning—the HOW—which is really about helping our students to learn through the questions they ask, through their communication skills such as writing and digital work, and through their collaborative group experiences, including class projects and off-campus study.

Asking Questions

Teaching our students how to strengthen their knowledge—generally referred to as information literacy—is anchored in inquiry and curiosity. As Jen Rouse, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and Consulting Librarian, Arts & Humanities, noted, "When [we] work with students, we model critical thinking, and we work with students on what it means to ask deep and abiding questions. Questions that guide their choices in reading, writing, choosing technologies that showcase their work in meaningful ways, and evaluating resources to best support their thoughts, their creation of new knowledge. *We don't hand out answers, we explore processes.*"

To that end, Leon Tabak, Professor of Computer Science, shared with me a compilation of very intentional and detailed lessons that undergird his classes and that are intended, expressly, to help our students formulate an argument—defined not as a quarrel but as a disciplined process for answering questions, developing reasons behind those answers, and learning from someone else's answers. As a major focus of his teaching, Professor Tabak helps our students, for example, to identify arguments, recognize differences in values, and to find excellent models and practices on which to build their own arguments—all essential ingredients in forming an evidence-based conclusion.

Jen Rouse further emphasized the value of questions as a foundation of independent thinking. Students are naturally curious, so when courses tap into that energy and lead them to design research that intrigues them, independent thinking thrives. For example, Professor of English Leslie Kathleen Hankins, in her Introduction to Literary Studies course, stimulates the students to engage interrogatively with the texts through response journals that they fill with specific focused questions about each text, ones that they would be eager to explore more fully in future research. Such questions range from macro to micro. They may explore reflective and metacognitive practices through which they engage with literary texts, ranging from current graphic novels to Harlem Renaissance poetry, or the complex trade-offs of translating an oral tale into a written form.

With each new text, students consider their unique questions about the readings and reflect upon them. How are they responding to these texts? Why might the author have chosen this way (e.g., a fable, novel, poetry) of composing the text? How do these texts encourage them to understand and engage with cultural traditions perhaps unfamiliar to them, for example in "Two Old Women," a novel derived from an oral tale from indigenous people? How does a particular work reflect the historical, cultural, social perspective of its moment, as with Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" when read as an expose of the horrors of early industrial London? By the end of the course, the students share three potential avenues for more exploration in conferences and brainstorming sessions, in library sessions, and one-on-one work to construct research questions and find and vet potential sources that will challenge and engage them even more in their lines of exploration. Because from day one the students have been developing their questions, and have become fully

invested in them, they bring a creative and innovative spark to research projects that makes them go deeper, get excited, and do work based on delight, not drudgery.

Debating Ideas
It is often said that the greatest technological innovation of the last 100 years is the seminar table. It is where students engage in robust, rigorous, and respectful debates, going courageously wherever their conversation takes them. *This* is the antidote to any "cancel culture."

As one example, Lewis Kanyiba, Associate Professor of Kinesiology, models all of his classes on a debate-based pedagogy. He writes: "[my teaching] relies on students being able to understand and practice freedom of expression by freely communicating their experiences either in writing, or orally to their professor, peers, and classmates. The first step is ensuring that my classroom is a safe space, where students know and are assured that they are free to express their views, rebut an opinion, provide an alternative to suggested methods, and practice civil discourse.

"Students in groups of four take turns in argumentations. Each argumentation topic is aligned with the course curriculum and encourages each student to select a claim, research the claim for evidence/warrants, verbally present the claim, provide an opportunity for their peer to respond, and lastly have the final word with a chance to either reinforce the original claim as is, reinforce the original claim with reservations, or revise the original claim (based on the "opponent's" argument). Argumentations provide an opportunity for students to scrutinize their beliefs on a certain topic, learn from their peers, understand the limitations of unchallenged opinions, and overall, become citizens who are not afraid to engage in a dialogue and argumentations based on facts, while at Cornell and beyond."

Exploring Through Writing
We also learn how to think by writing. Counter to what some believe, writing is not a process that only begins when one has fully formed ideas to communicate. To the contrary. Writing and thinking go hand-in-hand; as we write and rewrite, we also develop and improve the ideas we are expressing. When I asked Katie Sagal, Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing, how she teaches students to write and to develop their own perspective, she spoke about her approach through genre studies. She explained that, "When we spend time in first-year writing learning how to identify genres, including what makes something part of a given genre, I'm giving them the tools to identify future writing and research genres independently. Ideally, writing-research opportunities are … about learning to adapt an existing toolkit of writing-research skills in new situations … Learning how to begin to think about a writing situation before they worry about the final product can be a good way of giving students authority and confidence in their writing skills."

Through writing, students can also explore their own lived experiences and hear directly about the lived experiences of their peers. Jennifer Ferrell, Writing Program Director, noted that "from the time that our students start at Cornell … [we] help them begin to reflect on what their own lived experience has been as well as hear from others who have a variety of different experiences. This helps our students to make connections between their own lives, the ideas and concepts they're learning about in classes, and how those connections can be viewed and interpreted in a variety of ways.

"In those courses … students begin to see the various ways in which perspectives different than their own might develop. Being able to see those perspectives and how our own lived experiences help shape those perspectives is a key part—to me—of helping our students develop the ability to think critically."

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Our fundamental mission relates to the world into which our graduates go as we prepare students "**for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship** [emphasis added]." I have written previously about one of the most powerful ways that we live this mission—through experiential learning, which allows our students to apply what they are studying in the classroom to real-life settings.[1] Such experiences only help our students to understand themselves as they better understand the world around them.

1 crnl.co/experientiallearning

For example, in Statistics 200, led by Tyler George, Assistant Professor of Statistics, students develop their facility with statistics as they work with local community partner, Waypoint (a Cedar Rapids organization that focuses on homelessness, housing, and domestic violence and coordinates that support in 96 of Iowa's 99 counties). More specifically, according to Professor George, "the class helped Waypoint, and other Iowa nonprofits, with data collection and analysis to answer key questions important to the organizations and how they can best serve Iowa communities." As a result, in this class, our students learned that their own thinking matters; it is consequential and can make a real difference in the lives of others—an important and enduring life lesson. They also appreciated that group projects, especially when done in real-life settings, enhance learning how to learn and how to reach conclusions.

Similarly, off-campus study connects our students to the world around us, solidifying their ability to develop their own worldview and communicate it.[2] And, our distinctive One Course At A Time methodology only strengthens those experiences because entire classes can travel together for up to 3½ weeks to all parts of the world—from Europe to Africa to Asia to right here in the United States—something not possible at other institutions.

Finally, we also help students to focus on their own professional futures and their role in the world after they graduate, which is predicated upon them knowing themselves—their wishes, their dreams, and their interests. And, that takes work and time. For example, Laura Farmer, Director of the Dungy Writing Studio and Director of Fellowships and Scholarships, noted: "Honestly, that's the main thing I get to do here in the Dungy Writing Studio—help students think for themselves and have the confidence to try new things—and fail from time to time! I see this growth in my academic sessions, and also with my fellowship work. And sometimes I see the most growth when students decide NOT to apply for an award because they've come to realize something new about their life, their goals, or their ambitions."

When Laura helps students with goal setting, fellowship applications, and essay revision, we see a process that encourages students not only to prepare for the future but to see themselves AS the future. What a powerfully important point! Laura and Jennifer communicated that Cornell students often hesitate to sing their own praises. Thus, Laura and Jennifer encourage our students to tell their Cornell stories and confidently share their reflections as learners and global citizens in an effort to make a difference once they embark on these new adventures. That's what it's all about.

At a global level, as Jen Rouse notes, "We [at Cornell] are here to facilitate the act of opening up new ways of thinking and being in the world for our students that they might never have imagined for themselves."

I hope that this White Paper has given you a sense of how committed our faculty are to our academic mission and their central role in achieving it. They are both passionate about, and devoted to, teaching our students the foundations of critical thinking and communication—with a focus on the world around us—so that our students become purpose-driven leaders who are guided by their own views, supported by evidence. This is what we do best, and reveals why we are widely recognized for the quality of our teaching. May it always be so.

Jonathan Brand
President

2 crnl.co/offcampusstudy

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