



# Cornell College

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## WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand and Provost, Vice President  
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October 2022

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Advising may be the essential undertaking that helps a student to develop the introspection and growth mindset “life skills” that we expect them to have upon graduation.

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### The Integral Role of Advising at Cornell

Academic advisors in all of my majors are the people that I look up to the most and admire, both as humans and as scholars. [They] especially have all encouraged me to push myself to be the best I can be and to shoot for the stars ... I know that I can reach out to them comfortably, and ask for help or guidance through whatever academic or even personal struggles that I am going through. Even when I experienced ruts in finding motivation and happiness, I always knew that these professors were there for me, and will be there for me after my experience at Cornell.

—William Alvey '22

As William attests, essential and enduring growth happens when we serve as advisors to our students.

We solicited input from multiple faculty and staff on the role advising plays at Cornell College—and how it has changed to meet the evolving needs of Cornell students—and are thrilled to share their insights with you in their own words.

Had we attempted to define advising 20 years ago, we likely would have focused on *academic* advising—the process through which students select majors and then the sequence of courses they take to satisfy their general education, major, and graduation requirements. Advising in this era was more prescriptive, focusing students on the specific academic steps that they needed to take in order to graduate.

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Today, advising is the process of guiding and supporting students on their journey of academic, professional, and personal growth. We recently asked Brooke Paulsen, Director of Student Success, to define our advising model today. She describes Cornell's current approach to advising as "*developmental advising*, in contrast to prescriptive advising, a more traditional advising approach characterized by information distribution from advisor to student." Brooke characterizes our developmental approach as "more holistic because advisors carry the teaching role beyond the classroom to support students' overall growth. Advisors focus on having a dialogue with students for the purpose of helping students make their own educational choices in the larger context of our *Ingenuity* core curriculum and the student's academic and future goals."

When defined more expansively than just the selection of a major or classes, advising supports perhaps the most critical relationships students form at Cornell with faculty and staff—the ones that help students to chart their own paths.

Students also desire greater guidance throughout college than they have in the past. As we now welcome a new generation of students, we see that current students are very career-focused and wish to take classes that they can affirmatively connect to a profession. Some wish to accelerate their path to graduation, even in under four years. They are perhaps more focused on the short-term, which is important, but we also wish to help them think about the longer-term, specifically the compounding value of their applied liberal arts training as critical thinkers, communicators, and problem solvers.

Ultimately, our developmental advising model reflects the goals of Cornell's 2021-2024 strategic plan **Bold Approaches that Enrich Lives**. The strategic plan grew out of our recognition that we must anticipate and adapt to students' evolving wants and needs as we plan for the future. Those wants and needs include 1) a personalized educational experience; 2) intentional, integrated curricular, co-curricular, and social opportunities; and 3) help making the connection between their Cornell education and their post-Cornell education and careers.

In the simplest of terms, we cannot respond to our students' evolving wants and needs without a developmental approach to advising.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further affirmed our commitment to developmental advising. Certainly no other force in our lifetimes has so dramatically altered student needs and expectations. In the words of one advisor, we see that the pandemic "took away a lot of what students expected or deserved. Students missed out on pivotal moments for growth and self-discovery"—moments, we argue, students still need to experience in order to achieve their full potential.

However, it is well documented that college-going students across the country were experiencing greater mental health challenges, such as anxiety, before the pandemic. COVID-19 has only exacerbated this problem. It is no different at Cornell, and strong advising relationships are increasingly one of several avenues of necessary support for our students. Chelsea Plunkett, Coordinator of Academic Support in our Student Success Center, shares one example of how she provides this kind of support as an advisor:

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Last year, I worked with a student with severe performance anxiety. They were unable to start written assignments, find their place on campus, or see their own potential. We started small with a focus on daily written responses, time management, and self-confidence. I also connected the student to first-generation staff members on campus to help them feel more comfortable. Each block, the student was able to turn in more assignments, and we reflected on the changes. By Block 6, they shared a complex writing topic that stemmed from their passion. This was the moment I got to step back and listen to the student explain their ideas with enthusiasm. When they received a high score on the paper, we reflected on the changes since Block 1 and how they were able to accomplish it. For this student, like so many others, it was about recognizing their ability, connecting coursework to personal interests, and finding a voice.

Thus, our shift to a developmental advising model is a response to student wants and needs that were evolving even before the COVID-19 outbreak, but that have taken on a new urgency during the pandemic and during our strategic planning process, which has prioritized student recruitment, retention, and the well-being and sustainability of our institution as a whole.

We have emphasized during this most recent strategic planning and implementation cycle that every employee of the college has a role to play in recruiting and retaining students. Consequently, the advising relationship starts early—new students now have the opportunity to meet virtually with a faculty advisor months before they arrive on campus for new student orientation, creating an on ramp to their Cornell experience. We see in our retention data that these early opportunities to form a relationship with a faculty member correlate with higher retention. With these actions, our faculty and staff have embraced the developmental advising role.

When we spoke to faculty and staff about their current views on advising we were amazed at the consistency of goals and approaches to advising across the college. Suffice it to say, what our faculty and staff do as advisors is nothing short of spectacular. Some even noted that they value advising above everything else that they do. This is precisely because of the opportunity the developmental advising relationship affords them to “build trust and community” with their students by focusing on the “why” versus the “what” of their educational choices, as one faculty member put it. **In other words, advising may be the essential undertaking that helps a student to develop the introspection and growth mindset “life skills” that we expect them to have upon graduation.**

The faculty and staff we approached about sharing their experiences as advisors were more than generous with their time and collectively helped us see a powerful culture of developmental advising taking hold.

We would like to share two of the most compelling advising stories faculty and staff shared with us as well as our takeaways from those stories. The following story from Lynne Ikach, Professor of Russian, about Kimberly Gordon '19, illustrates, among other things, how much of a team effort developmental advising is:

Kimberly Gordon came in as a transfer student to study Russian and International Relations with the intention of working in the government sector. As a junior, she came to me with information about a

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grass-roots Russian-American organization that worked to help orphans in Russia, and wanted to take part in their summer volunteer program as an internship. I mentioned Kimberly's internship idea to Prof. Catherine Stewart, faculty advisor for Cornell Fellows, and she immediately told me Kimberly should apply for Fellows funding, so we got the ball rolling. I helped Kimberly develop her internship goals and prepare for her Fellows interview, and Jodi Schafer's Berry Career Center team provided excellent advice and support. Kimberly received funding and had an amazing experience in Russia<sup>1</sup>. As a result of this experience, she changed her career goal from working in the government to working in the NGO or social services sector. The internship also served as preparation for Kimberly's Russian Studies capstone, which involved additional research on orphanages in the Soviet Union and Russia. Her 2019 Student Symposium presentation on the capstone project was attended, among others, by two students who were adopted from Russia, and who were excited to learn about Kimberly's experiences and to share their own stories with Kimberly after the session. It was wonderful to see how the internship, subsequent research, and presentation helped to shape Kimberly as a person—these experiences gave her confidence and helped her to reformulate her career goals. It was my absolute privilege to advise Kimberly throughout her time at Cornell, and it would not have turned out the way it did without the excellent support and coordination of efforts from my colleagues and the programs we have in place.

This story also illustrates the value of the advisor-advisee relationship as it evolves over time. Advising is not a one-and-done activity. It is a process. It is a journey. As another advisor explained, "I ask questions that get students to articulate their goals, and as time passes, we revisit and refine their goals as necessary. Some students come to Cornell with very clear goals, while others are unsure of their path, and I help them to choose courses and programs of study that suit them best. I make recommendations, but emphasize that it's their education and their choice."

We can also see in this example that developmental advising is fundamentally student-led and the advisor is much more of a listener. This recognition is essential because our students "want to be heard and are comfortable sharing their needs and expectations." Ultimately, the goal is to guide students to figure out what they want. One advisor wrote: "I feel that my main role in advising is to enable a student to understand why they are here at Cornell and to help each student understand the role they play in developing their own educational plan ... direct guidance as an advisor is certainly important, but so is active listening and reflection on a student's need to take control of their future." Another faculty member added: "I make sure that students know they are in control of their own collegiate journey."

To put it another way, we want students to become great self-advisors. "I want them to find independence, confidence, and trust in themselves and their choices. My hope for students is to use reflection, problem-solving, and flexibility to adapt to new challenges in and out of the classroom," one advisor said. Another faculty member spoke in terms of "asset framing,"<sup>2</sup> helping students to create narratives that define them by

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1 See Kimberly Gordon's blog at [crnl.co/gordonblog](http://crnl.co/gordonblog).

2 Defined by Trabian Shorters.

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their gifts or “assets” instead of the challenges they may face. This approach involves an emphasis on what a student brings to the college or “the table” when they arrive. “How do we find a way to enhance those skills and engage them in a much larger dialogue of who they want to become and who and how we might help them in that process?”

This advisor’s approach also shows how advising has taken on a broader life focus rather than on the selection of courses or a major. “Holistic” may be the word that appeared the most from advisors as they take a wider focus in mentoring students. As one faculty member noted: “This alone has shifted the major focus of many of my advising conversations and allows students an open forum to discuss and understand the importance of their coursework, and frees time to support students in understanding how their classes and educational experiences are connected.” Another advisor noted that that broader focus means that every time they meet a student, they ask about “their life and the non-academic aspects of living on campus.”

Advising is a major responsibility for faculty. And, we hope that you can see how seriously they take this responsibility and how meaningful it is to help students consider these broader questions.

Our survey of faculty and staff also affirmed for us that non-faculty play a central role in advising students.

The second story we want to share is from Nicole Casal '18, who credits a staff member who served as her advisor—Angie Bauman Power, formerly Director of Student Life and currently Director of Institutional Effectiveness—with retaining her at the college:

Cornell was not an easy journey for me. I was never a strong academic student and was truly ready to drop out of college sophomore year. Once I got more involved on campus, my academics still struggled. I would rather give all my time to PAAC, orchestra, KRNL, or my five work study positions. I did not have close relationships with academic advisors because I knew they were aware I was struggling and barely staying awake in classes. It was hard to stop by and ask for help because to simply put it, I was embarrassed. So, I didn’t really have an advisor I felt truly connected to until I met Angie Bauman Power.

Angie was not [a faculty member] and she created a rapport with me that made it easier for me to open up. I was able to talk about my struggles without fearing this would affect how I was viewed in class. I did not feel the embarrassment of having to explain my situation to a professor. Angie was honest in her responses and brought reality into our conversation without diminishing my experiences as a student.

Her approach felt so natural that I would often update her on my class success more than any faculty/staff on campus.

Angie’s mentoring style was so impactful that I joked she was more of my college best friend than anything. And to this day, whenever we greet each other it’s always with a loving and welcoming “HI BESTFRIEND!”

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Nicole has recently returned to the college as an Assistant Director of Residence Life with responsibilities that include serving as a successful advisor and mentor to a cohort of largely first-generation students in one of our leadership programs. She goes on to say:

As I entered this role, I often think of how Angie would approach this conversation. Did Angie ever make me uncomfortable when she asked me the hard questions of why I wasn't doing well in class or why I was not in class? How are personal things going in life? I strive to be like my college mentor. Someone who pushed all the right buttons to make sure I graduated on time and helped me find my sense of belonging on this campus.

We love this story because Nicole's successful return to the college helps to make visible the long-term impacts of developmental advising that we do not always get to witness once students graduate.

In addition, it reminds us that advising is one of the ways that we can "challenge students to explore opportunities outside of their comfort zone" in a supportive manner. This may be one of the most delicate aspects of working with advisees who are experiencing discomfort—helping them understand that some kinds of discomfort are an important part of growth and development.

And, in trying and testing in areas that might not seem obvious to them, students can also explore paths that might not be right for them. One advisor noted: "I believe not all stories are about getting what we want. I had some of my most difficult conversations with students who had to come to terms that the path they had chosen might not be the best. It's a point of acceptance that might be hard to reach, but after that, there are many life-changing possibilities to explore and enjoy."

This story also reminds us how far beyond the classroom the advising relationship can go, and the possible limitations of an advising relationship centered on the classroom experience. No doubt, with the freedom that we offer to students to speak their minds, advisors help students navigate aspects of their lives that go beyond academics. We all know that college brings a whole range of new challenges and opportunities, which collectively provide immense growth opportunities. As another advisor described themselves, "I see myself as a source of support and someone who can help students develop study skills and positive habits ... since academic struggles are rarely isolated to the classroom, students may discuss personal, relational, or social struggles, difficulty with motivation and procrastination, and mental health challenges."

Both Kimberly's and Nicole's stories illustrate several final important insights. First, many advisors feel strongly that effective advising also means celebrating success. "The conclusion of a large in-class project, acceptance to an internship, or successful completion of a campus event deserves celebration. Any victory, large or small, needs to be celebrated. Sometimes I will even wear a party hat to celebrate with the student. Or do a victory dance."

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Second—and this won't surprise anyone—advising at Cornell also doesn't end at graduation. Advisors regularly hear from former advisees, now alumni, not only because they seek letters of recommendation but also because they seek additional guidance and want to remain connected.

Through our current strategic plan, we have launched or enhanced multiple programs and offices that are fundamentally rooted in a development approach to advising. Here, we are thinking about the Student Success Center, the Cornell Well-being Network, and the Office of Intercultural Life, in particular. It is all thanks to you, as supporters of Cornell College, that we have been able to broaden the critical role that advising plays at Cornell—by all faculty and staff—through all of our programs. We recognize you, and we thank you.

Advising connects directly to our mission—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.

Cornell's mission is not possible unless students take ownership of their learning. And, advising is foundational to that goal.

As one faculty member told us: “ ... I am truly here to *advise* them, but not make their decisions for them. Ultimately, they need to be able to tell their own story.”



Jonathan Brand  
President

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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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