



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

President Jonathan Brand

May 2024

The key is to be ready—with a strong financial foundation and a motivated culture where people experience the satisfaction that comes from successes made possible only through shared effort.

This White Paper is the second in a three-part series on the importance and relevancy of higher education and the unique value of a Cornell education.

What does a successful liberal arts college look like?

As you surely know from the media and past white papers I've shared, higher education is confronting multiple significant existential challenges that will persist for the foreseeable future. For example, we know that the United States will experience smaller pools of prospective students¹ for, at least, 15 years beginning in 2026. In addition, students are increasingly focused on those colleges that have a high perceived value and where they can graduate with little to no debt. A student's attention on high value and low debt, which is completely rational, in turn, puts greater pressure on colleges to increase their financial aid awards, especially as competition intensifies among colleges and universities to recruit a decreasing number of students. Otherwise, these schools won't achieve their enrollment headcount goals.

At a high level, in terms of the external environment, at least over the next 10-20 years, we should expect:

1. More and more disruption in the future—at every level and every scale. The pace of change will only accelerate.
2. A smaller pool of prospective students, especially as more students consider additional options beyond higher education.
3. Stronger student and family focus on the “return on the experience” conjoined with their continued focus on the “return on the investment” of college.
4. Increased student and family sensitivity to student loan debt.
5. Greater focus on internships and off-campus study as a part of establishing the value of college—preparing students for life beyond college while they are still in college.

-
6. Enhanced technology, including artificial intelligence, that influences, both positively and negatively, the in-class and overall student experience (academic, advising, progress tracking, student life, digital social experiences).
 7. Students who need greater support as they develop their academic and social skills, particularly following COVID-19.

Ultimately, as a result of these many trends, weaker schools will continue to struggle. In addition, these days, one of the greatest risks to these colleges is not that a student will choose a different college, but that they will not choose any college, deciding instead to forgo that experience altogether, only exacerbating their problems. Everyone loses in that instance because the world needs educated citizens.

Along with many others, I have predicted, and it is now playing out—the divide between the haves and the have-nots in higher education is growing, and this gap strongly presages additional college closures and mergers in the future. Thus, we can expect to see an acceleration of schools that cease to exist, join with other institutions, or morph into something entirely different, if that is even possible.

I recognize how sobering this introduction might sound. But, there is no reason to be deflated. Rather, as you will see by the end of this white paper, Cornell can win. Of course! The key is that we recognize the pressures around us and respond accordingly and courageously. And, in so doing, we must concentrate on the attributes of the most successful liberal arts colleges. *That* is where we are focused, and *that* is where we remain headed.

The elements of successful liberal arts colleges

Cornell's outgoing Board Chair **Jeff Jensen '81** often notes that too many organizations focus on the urgent to the exclusion of the important. That means putting short-term band-aids on problems without addressing the underlying long-term issues that are creating those problems in the first place. Instead of *solving* a problem, people just *cope* with it, year after year.

Like other sectors, higher education has this challenge too. Thankfully, over many years, at Cornell, we have eliminated many negatives that were holding us back. (Let's call them the urgent.) Today, we have the privilege of being able to focus on the important.

Within this context, Jeff asked me last fall what it will take to ensure that Cornell is thriving in another 170 years. For him, the answer to that question *is* the important—and it is what we *all* need to focus on today to the exclusion of everything else.

At the highest level, achieving our mission as effectively as possible and in perpetuity requires that we have the financial strength to weather any disruption at any time. In this context, financial strength means an exceptionally strong endowment and assets that continue to grow. It means always having the resources to direct to our highest strategic priorities. We are able to move away from a focus on the immediate budget cycle timeline (the urgent) so that we can invest in long-term strategic opportunities (the important). As I have often heard, it is hard to be creative when you're being chased by lions. A lack of financial strength hinders an organization's ability to dream and then take good, calculated risks.

With greater financial strength, I envision a Cornell where every strategy and initiative brings us closer to the following broader realities which I consider the primary attributes of a highly successful liberal arts college:

1. Our students and alumni report the highest levels of satisfaction in their Cornell experiences. They value what we offer—while they are at Cornell and afterward—and are fiercely proud of Cornell and their identity as Cornellians.
2. Employers and graduate schools universally want to recruit our students.
3. Faculty and staff express significant satisfaction in their jobs and in their compensation, which strengthens student success and satisfaction. People across the country wish to work at Cornell College.
4. We, as faculty and staff, naturally respect the whole—how we collectively contribute our expertise to educating and supporting the entire student—rather than think only about our discrete areas of the college.
5. Cornell's true strength lies in its impressively spirited, diverse, and inclusive community that provides an equitable environment for all.
6. Other schools look to us as *the* example of how a bold and innovative higher education institution should function in educating and supporting its students.
7. Mount Vernon is a booming college town that factors centrally into the decision of students and employees to come to Cornell.

As a result of the foregoing attributes, prospective students representing the full diversity of the country and the world long to attend Cornell College above other institutions.

And, we are able to fully achieve our institutional vision—a vision that captures the future dream state of Cornell College. Not only do we predict evolving student needs and wants in advance of students expressing them so that they can thrive personally and professionally in a diverse and rapidly changing world, we also have the confidence and nimbleness to innovate in ways that meet those needs and wants (as well as those of employers and graduate schools) regardless of what other schools offer. Like our One Course At A Time calendar or Ingenuity (our new academic core curriculum) we develop new programs and pedagogies because they are right for our students, not because they are the flavor du jour or what everyone else does. In so doing, we have the energy and resources to take calculated risks. And, we are prepared to reallocate our current resources, and invest some new resources, into strategically expanding and diversifying our markets.

How we will get from where we are to where we want to go

For us to achieve our vision, we must focus on how we make decisions. In fact, in “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable,” author Patrick Lencioni writes: “If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.” That statement speaks to the importance of process and to the value in the effort it takes to achieve widespread alignment across an institution. And, that takes a lot of hard work.

Ultimately, at a procedural level, successful liberal arts colleges will have healthy (and even satisfying) and strategic decision-making cultures that are eminently student-focused, confident, and nimble. They will

be able to direct an institution's resources to its highest priorities. Everyone will naturally value open and courageous debate that leads to strategic decisions that people trust and are committed to implementing, even if they don't agree with the actual decision.

The future is going to be very different than we might have anticipated. We cannot simply assume that the world, particularly higher education, is going to return to the way that we might have known it and loved it in the past. It won't. The higher education landscape has changed and is going to continue to change dramatically.

The key is to be ready—with a strong financial foundation and a motivated culture where people experience the satisfaction that comes from successes made possible only through shared effort.



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.
You can always reach me at 319.895.4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu