

Five Commitments to Renew the American University

A Vision Statement from Cornell University's Committee on the Future of the American University

The American university has periodically found itself at a crossroads, faced with existential challenges arising from profound social transformations, difficult economic circumstances, and powerful new technologies. Repeatedly contending with internal and external pressures, the American university has proven remarkably resilient. But it now faces an unprecedented crisis and must confront an uncertain future driven by a number of disruptors, notably including rapid technological change epitomized in the current moment by the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), fissures in the relationship between universities and the federal government, and the erosion of public trust in higher education.

Since the autumn of 2025, Cornell University's Committee on the Future of the American University has sought to diagnose the causes and consequences of disruption to higher education and chart a path forward for Cornell. We were not asked to defend the university as it is, but to imagine what it could become. The committee's year-long process, including engagement with thousands of internal and external stakeholders across hundreds of meetings, activities, and events, surfaced numerous factors disrupting higher education today, each meriting careful consideration. Our expansive charge called on us to simultaneously look backward — to better understand the evolution of the purpose of American universities — and forward — to commit to a clear, renewed purpose that will help shape a vibrant future. Both tasks were undertaken in a moment when uncertainty is the only certainty in higher education. The committee sought to model careful deliberation and evidence-based discourse to address a wide range of complex issues and work collaboratively through areas of disagreement. On topics where consensus could not be reached, committee members attempted to faithfully represent the productive tension in the full report. Our focus throughout was on what is needed to sustain a thriving university for decades into the future rather than only considering the short-term pressures of the moment. **Although the diagnoses offered in this vision statement and in our full report speak to national issues, we do not presume that any of the proposed recommendations necessarily apply to institutions other than Cornell.**

The committee's central premise is that the wave of disruption challenging higher education today is not a passing threat driven by transient forces. Tensions between universities and the federal government are symptoms of larger, longer-term systemic issues that have arisen over decades. The future of the American university lies in leadership that recommits to a clear purpose, which the committee defines as promoting a **human-centered, integrated learning ecosystem to cultivate sound judgment**. Delivering on this purpose calls on Cornell to make five guiding commitments — to rigorous deliberation and discourse, robust public impact, research innovation and resiliency, strongly connected community, and integration and coordination. These commitments are rooted in academic freedom and, when taken together,

will provide Cornell with a clear sense of direction to weather the current storms, navigate those that are on the horizon, and prepare for those that we cannot yet predict.

The American university has been shaped over time into an institution of learning that has itself repeatedly learned how to respond to disruption. This process of adaptation has resulted in an institution of remarkable complexity and consequential achievement — one that generates new knowledge and creative output, teaches students, stewards traditions, and positively impacts society, all at once in a single human community held together by a shared commitment to learning. The American university was slowly assembled, piece by piece, through argument and experiment, and the pressure of unmet needs. It is a product of the same open and self-correcting inquiry that it exists to cultivate. And that history, from its seventeenth-century roots to today, should serve as a lesson for the present. **What must the university learn today to prepare for tomorrow?**

The test that the American university faces today is in some ways familiar. Universities have been regularly remade by transformative technologies, political upheavals, and dramatic shifts in access to knowledge. And yet the current crisis is quite different because the forces bearing down on higher education are operating simultaneously, disrupting virtually every dimension of what universities do: how and what we teach and research, who we serve, how we are funded, and whether the public believes we are worthy of support.

A Structural Diagnosis

America's first institutions of higher education were few, small, and mostly sectarian. They comprised a handful of faculty members and confined themselves to a narrow slate of subjects. They were restricted to the social elite, and their objectives were limited, primarily focused on instruction. The slender sense of purpose made these institutions relatively straightforward to lead, as the enterprise could be readily pointed in a single direction.

Two and a half centuries later, the original purpose of American higher education is difficult to discern in many of today's universities. They have diversified their functions and greatly expanded the scope of who and what they teach, as well as how and what they discover and share with the world. Universities have become, in a word, "multiversities" (a term coined by Clark Kerr, then President of the University of California, in 1963). The advent of the multiversity allowed American universities to accomplish things no other institution in the world could match. It established a learning ecosystem that held together research, teaching, and public impact in an integrated circuit, with each enriching the other. Few institutions anywhere have been built to conduct such a diverse array of activities at scale, and fewer still have done it as well, or for as long, as the American university.

But the same expansion that created the multiversity also planted the seeds of its potential unraveling. As the university's functions multiplied, they began to pull attention, resources,

and aspirations in different directions. Faculty, staff, and administrative expertise grew more specialized by necessity, and that specialization widened the distance between colleagues who were working on the same campus but to different ends. Incentive structures — for tenure, promotion, funding, and prestige — increasingly valued individual and unit-level achievements over university-wide goals and engagement with communities near and far. Each unit came to pursue its own mission partially at the expense of the shared purpose of the institution.

For decades, this arrangement seemed to work well. Funding flowed freely from the federal government, foundations, donors, and tuition-paying families confident that a degree was the surest instrument of American social mobility. But higher education's economic and social capital is now under extraordinary scrutiny and pressure. Under the current confluence of disruptors, the seams that fragmentation left exposed can no longer hold.

What makes the future of the American university so uncertain is that the multiversity is itself unstable, an institution pulled in myriad directions and thus challenged to articulate its value to America and its singularity on the global stage. The future of the American university rests on renewing its defining purpose.

A Purpose Renewed

Learning happens not only by acquiring established knowledge from classrooms, libraries, and museums, but also by generating new knowledge through discovery, creativity, and innovation in research labs, field investigations, and studios; by deliberation and dialogue throughout campus life; and by genuine engagement with the community beyond the university's walls. **At its best, the university is an integrated ecosystem for learning whose goal, in its broadest sense, is the cultivation of sound judgment.** The university's learning ecosystem is human-centered, but not self-centered. It is a place where judgment arises from opportunities to reflect deeply, weigh evidence carefully, test ideas rigorously, and navigate complexity and disagreement productively. The cultivation of judgment is advanced by engaging in transparent and authentic discourse across the full range of human interest and difference and by putting knowledge to work for a truly global community. It cannot be rushed. It requires thoughtful and hard work, intellectual humility, and the openness to be challenged and to change one's mind. This quintessentially human learning ecosystem is more important than ever as AI transforms how information is aggregated, processed, and shared.

For Cornell, the learning ecosystem carries a valued inheritance. As the only land-grant institution in the Ivy League, Cornell is at once a leading private research university and an institution with a responsibility to serve the people of New York state and beyond. **This dual identity is not a contradiction — it is one of Cornell's greatest strengths.** Through our major medical center and tech entrepreneurship hub in New York City, extension offices in every county of New York state, veterinary hospital and diagnostic center, and law and policy clinics,

Cornell has sustained generational relationships with New Yorkers. Their questions, needs, and lived experiences have shaped what scholars at Cornell study, just as Cornell's research and discoveries have directly benefited local families, communities, and economies. That reciprocity is central to the university's mission and extends beyond state and national borders, strengthening Cornell's partnerships around the world. The American university is by tradition and by design a global university, and it must continue to cultivate the relationships needed to solve worldwide problems.

No other type of American institution is positioned to weave such a wide range of functions into a unified environment that operates, albeit imperfectly, in service of democratic values and local, national, and global stakeholders. To some, a narrowing of the scope of universities might be an obvious response to the current pressures. Simply reducing functions, however, does not address the factors that allow missions to pull apart from one another; it only shrinks the university without reinforcing the seams. Rather, this committee proposes that what the American university needs to do is align its diverse functions toward a clear sense of purpose.

Challenges Facing the Multiversity

While entropy is an unavoidable consequence of the multiversity's ambition, it has given rise to troubling forces that undermine the university's credibility and threaten the pursuit of its core purpose to foster a human-centered and integrated learning ecosystem that cultivates sound judgment.

Erosion of a Culture of Deliberation and Engaged Discourse

The virtue of deliberation — fostered through rigorous scholarship, deep engagement with different perspectives, careful discovery and consideration of evidence, questioning of one's assumptions, open and in-depth dialogue, and intellectual humility — is central to learning and cultivating sound judgment. Myriad external and internal contemporary forces work against discourse, curiosity, and rigor. These forces include a concerning spike in uncritical dependence on AI; increased tribalism and political polarization; growing anxiety, isolation, and mental distress; surging economic uncertainty and high tuition costs that encourage students to focus on financial returns and to avoid risk; the desire of universities to produce a welcoming climate by avoiding potential offense; and the possibility of reprisal by colleagues, supervisors, faculty, university administration, or the government. The shallowing of deliberation and discourse on campuses, even if not in every area of the university, has weakened universities' public standing and challenged their ability to contribute positively to a highly fractured and polarized American society. This undermines one of the most potent arguments for the importance of universities.

Loosened Ties with the American Public

Despite the university's wide-ranging contributions to communities, its relationship with the public is straining. From questions about access and affordability to concerns about the value

universities provide to the world, public trust is declining. While university brands have become ubiquitous, many Americans have lost a clear sense of what universities do and how they contribute to everyday challenges. Universities are seen by some as isolated islands with limited significance for the lived realities of those who do not have a direct connection to campus, which can contribute to questions as to why universities should receive public support. University endowments have grown to record totals while the incomes of many Americans stagnate, spurring broad concerns about why tuition continues to increase. These concerns with cost have been joined by increasing frustration with other issues, ranging from questions about who is and is not admitted to highly selective universities to the prospects of a shrinking labor market in an AI-saturated world. Taken together, universities now confront a true crisis in public trust.

Growing Pressures on the Scholarship Ecosystem

The scale and breadth of federal funding for academic research since World War II has been significant, strengthening many of the most innovative universities in the country. To remain global leaders in research and creative output, American universities still require robust government investment. However, recent federal funding freezes, cancellations, and related uncertainties have left the scholarship ecosystem vulnerable. Threats to federal funding have been used to pressure universities across a wide variety of fronts, exposing a level of reliance that could leave institutions less empowered to pursue the research priorities that best serve society. Beyond funding issues, the scholarship ecosystem faces other notable pressures including but not limited to public trust in research integrity, siloing of the research enterprise from other university missions including teaching and public impact, declining numbers of graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, a crisis in academic publishing, increasing regulatory burden, the rise of AI slop in research publications, and institutional preoccupation with funding growth that can sometimes shift the focus away from quality and impact toward quantity and size.

Weakening of Bonds within the Institution

One of the most potent arguments for universities is their ability to bring together members from different functional units to advance collaborative learning. University constituents, however, are increasingly disconnected from a shared mission beyond their own scholarly or academic agendas. Expansion, increased specialization, technological disruption, and demands on time have weakened bonds across the university. This has reduced real and perceived transparency and, as a consequence, our knowledge of and trust in one another. This force, more than almost any other, has left universities less prepared to confront today's challenges, which will require both solidarity and shared expertise. The weakened sense of a shared responsibility to the institution, its values, and its different constituents undermines the ability to effectively confront complex issues in higher education. The challenge is not to reclaim the past but rather to renew the American university for a stronger future.

Fragmentation of Learning Experiences

The weakening of relationships across the university is accompanied by a related force shaping higher education: fragmentation. Fragmentation is not new to American universities. While there are many ways in which the learning experiences of today are richer and more varied than ever, they are also more siloed. An increasing student dependence on technology and social media can have a further splintering effect that may lead to isolation and lack of robust connection. University fragmentation has deepened the divide between academics and residential life, separating faculty and students. The result is a diminishing of the transformative power of university education for individuals and for society. Members of the university have the fullest experience when they can integrate learning across the classroom, residential life, extracurriculars, research labs, field programs, studios, and faculty dialogues. The world's problems do not confine themselves to particular institutional functions or academic disciplines. They require knowledge and insights that are accumulated across the entire university. The fragmentation of universities' activities means that these institutions are less capable of leveraging their entire community to solve real-world problems, thereby exacerbating the weakened connection with the public. This may be a long-simmering force, but the gaps that separate different forms of learning in the university are widening, weakening higher education's value proposition.

The committee's assessment above is not based on nostalgia for a bygone era, but an acknowledgement that the current pressures shaping higher education cannot be ignored and require significant action.

The Vision: Five Commitments and Steps to Renewal

Confronted by disruption in the present and uncertainty in the future, American universities have several potential paths they could take. Rather than retreat in defense, lie down in conciliation, or battle in implacable opposition, this committee sees another path for Cornell: **an opportunity to renew the full positive force of the university amid the current turmoil.** We believe that the solution lies in reorienting the university to our core purpose. Doing so will demand leadership, coordination, and a renewed commitment from everyone who calls the university home. It will require that Cornell University speak with courage and clarity about our commitments and contributions, listen with humility to public concerns from all parts of America, and work in sincere partnership with skeptics and supporters alike toward an institution that serves the local community, nation, and world.

The committee's vision for the future of Cornell University, which we hope other universities may find useful, rests on five commitments that seek to reorient the institution to the purpose of integrated learning:

- A commitment to rigorous deliberation and engaged discourse, to cultivate sound judgment and a human-centered approach to AI.

- A commitment to robust impact through strong and sustained two-way bonds with the public.
- A commitment to innovation and resiliency in research, advancing global leadership in discovery and scholarship.
- A commitment to a strongly connected community through renewed attention to academic civics.
- A commitment to purposeful integration and coordination, aligning across the learning ecosystem of the university.

Renewing and deepening these commitments will require real changes in how Cornell organizes itself, funds its activities, and evaluates outcomes. Breathing life into these commitments will require concrete action. Below we describe each of the commitments and include examples of the steps that Cornell will need to take to reposition itself in this time of turbulence.

Cultivating Sound Judgment: A Commitment to Rigorous Deliberation and Engaged Discourse

At their best, universities are hubs for learning through careful study, discovery, dialogue, and debate. They are places for intellectual growth through the acquisition and creation of new knowledge and the ongoing refinement of ideas and arguments. Two overarching pressures particularly inform the need for rigorous deliberation within the university — the narrowing of discourse in academia and the diffusion of AI within the learning ecosystem. These separate pressures are operating simultaneously and must be confronted by rededicating universities to the cultivation of sound judgment.

Cornell must ensure that it is a place in which differences of opinion, perspectives, and ideology are not only tolerated but embraced as the key ingredients of genuine learning and growth. Fostering truly open and rigorous deliberation means that universities must push students and colleagues to consider and reconsider arguments, anchoring their thinking in evidence-based inquiry. A culture of deliberation calls for grappling with complex and competing ideas for the sake of advancing knowledge. Moreover, discourse must be generous: it should extend to others the respect that they are worth engaging, and worth being engaged by, rather than simply worth defeating.

In a world in which AI can generate content and analyze information at scale, the value of sound judgment is more important than ever. What is truly human is the intellectual capacity to explore complex information and conflicting perspectives to reach nuanced conclusions, and to make decisions that are founded on the quality and merit of presented material. In an increasingly divided society inundated with unverified and often inaccurate information, universities must reclaim their role as a place for rigorous learning and discernment based on the best scholarship available and not on pre-existing worldviews or untested assumptions.

Open and rigorous deliberation should permeate all academic activities from classrooms to research labs to studios. Doing so will entail a shift in how many faculty and students think about these various learning spaces, as well as their roles in fostering real dialogue enhanced by different viewpoints. Open inquiry and academic freedom must be protected to elevate the quality of engaged disagreement. For some, this will require new teaching tools and research practices that model more in-depth deliberation and discourse. Cornell should also normalize engagement with competing ideas and approaches in seminars, staff and faculty meetings, and student campus life, to name a few settings.

Recommendation: Promote whole-person education.

The goal of education is not merely the transfer of knowledge, but the development of socially connected, emotionally resilient, and civically minded graduates who are comfortable navigating uncertainty, and are able to leverage knowledge and sound judgment to produce constructive solutions to complex problems. These capacities are not produced through knowledge alone; they require personal growth and transformation. Therefore, universities must make educating the whole person an explicit goal. This means, among other imperatives, that faculty should strive to develop not only intellectual, but also social and personal capacities in their courses wherever possible. Deepening the university's commitment to whole-person education should emphasize not only academic achievement, but also students' ethical development, ability to work with others, civic engagement, and personal growth.

Recommendation: Reclaim technology use and non-use to promote human-centered learning.

Decisions around the choice of whether and how to use technology, and AI in particular, in classes, research labs, and studios must not be left to chance or to lobbying by stakeholders. It must be an intentional choice by the faculty member who is teaching or mentoring in these spaces, driven by principled understanding of effective and non-effective uses for enhancing cognitive capabilities, promoting human connections, and cultivating sound judgment.

Recommendation: Educate through intentional development of human relationships.

A transformative education that promotes deliberation and discourse toward the goal of sound judgment is intrinsically based in relationships, rather than just transactional exchanges. Cornell must identify and foster opportunities to help students develop meaningful personal relationships throughout their educational experience. One idea is expanding programs through which alumni share their workplace experiences, building relationships between students and potential employers, and strengthening connections between alumni and the university. Another example is to make space in both academic and residential life to navigate relational dynamics. Rather than operating out of the fear of offending, students must develop the courage and wisdom necessary to confront their and others' mistakes with humility in a relational context and thereby become more thoughtful, socially connected adults.

Recommendation: Lean into a broad domestic and global vision consistent with Cornell’s “any person” ethos.

Rigorous debate and deliberation benefit from the presence of broad domestic and global perspectives. Universities are enriched by members who represent differing ideas, views, and traditions. One way to promote this is to invest in partnerships that deepen existing ties while also looking to a wider range of regions and intellectual traditions. These efforts can build on models like Cornell’s Global Hubs initiative to expand connections to new domestic regions and countries.

Our committee proposes numerous additional recommendations to enrich Cornell’s culture of deliberation. Beyond the examples above, our full report calls for pedagogical models that show and not only tell students, staff, and faculty how deliberation can be promoted. It also includes proposals for hands-on learning opportunities such as a gap semester or year for public service that can, in turn, promote engaged discourse on campus about students’ experiences. Finally, many of the recommendations made by the committee seek to improve connections across disciplines and units that are often siloed. These bridges have the power to strengthen the deliberation muscles needed when engaging with colleagues who have different perspectives, assumptions, and approaches to learning.

Strengthening Two-Way Bonds with the Public: A Commitment to Robust Impact

The loosening of the American university’s relationship with the public must be reversed. To do so, higher education has to address access and affordability, and strengthen a truly two-way relationship with local, state, national, and global communities. This reciprocity will promote accountability and a genuine exchange of information, values, and expertise, which can shape and inform the questions researchers ask and how discoveries are translated to the public. Cornell must reinvigorate the connection between what happens on campus and the lived realities of the world it helps shape. Activities in this domain should be guided by an ongoing commitment to demonstrating the university’s public value in tangible and concrete ways. At Cornell, public engagement and impact are woven into our DNA. In challenging times such as these, it could be tempting to lean away from this commitment. It is exactly the opposite that Cornell must do, not only to regain public trust, but also to fulfill our purpose of putting knowledge to work in communities.

Recommendation: Establish a task force to develop a new tuition model at Cornell.

The high sticker price of a university education has reached a crisis point that requires deep rethinking. The task force must address complex questions, including: Should overall tuition be lowered? If so, how do we ensure our financial viability *and* maintain robust financial aid for students in lower income brackets? Should Cornell provide merit-based aid to recruit students who are considering more competitively priced institutions? In addressing these questions, the task force should be guided by Cornell’s institutional values, recognizing our founding commitment to educational access across the socioeconomic spectrum. Regardless of the details

of a future pricing model, universities must improve how they communicate costs to applicants and their families. The American public needs a clearer explanation of both how price is set and how it relates to institutional costs.

Recommendation: Support, incentivize, and integrate public engagement in university life.

Cornell needs to reassess how it values and recognizes outreach, public impact, and community engagement work, including entrepreneurial activities, for both tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. For example, a central fund for prestigious public engagement fellowships might name an annual cohort of fellows who have demonstrated scholarly excellence in their discipline as well as keen interest in public engagement.

Recommendation: Leverage public impact infrastructure to support communities affected by technological disruption.

Land-grant institutions and universities driven by a public-impact mission like Cornell should build on cooperative extension and other outreach units to partner with communities in preparing for and responding to workforce shifts, environmental effects, and other AI-related developments. Universities have an important role to play in making sure that the benefits from AI, and technology and innovation more broadly, accrue widely and that the risks are mitigated consistently.

Strengthening Cornell's connection to the public goes beyond the examples above. The full report from the committee also makes several recommendations related to greater transparency and clarity around admissions, establishing a public impact advisory council, and expanding opportunities for meaningful connection between the university and local community members.

Advancing Global Leadership in Discovery and Scholarship: A Commitment to Innovation and Resiliency in Research

There is currently no substitute for the American research university in simultaneously producing fundamental discoveries, creative output, and economic and translational impact while training the next generation of scholars. As described in our full report, some analyses show a 150 to 300 percent return on federal investment in research. Cornell must also remain committed to deep, fundamental scholarship alongside applied, translational, and entrepreneurial work.

Over the last century and a half, what has allowed discovery and creative practice to thrive so uniquely and exquisitely in the American research university is a deep commitment to academic freedom and an extraordinary partnership with the federal government on behalf of society. To remain global leaders in research and creative output, Cornell must strongly advocate for both freedom of inquiry and robust federal and state investment. To promote nimbleness and resiliency against unpredictable shocks to the funding landscape, Cornell must

also continue to diversify internal and external funding commitments and reimagine the structure of research to nurture external partnerships. In addition, units across Cornell must sharpen their focus where needed on research quality, moving away from an emphasis on quantity. This will require a reassessment of university incentive structures, including the tenure and promotion review process. It also will necessitate new approaches to rigor and accountability, especially with regard to the creative and responsible use of AI and other emerging technologies. As part of this effort, Cornell must also make proactive decisions about the future size of our research enterprise.

The university should be an environment that is open to a wide variety of scholarly topics, research questions, perspectives, and methods, which must be rigorous and evidence based. In turn, rigorous research depends upon long-term security that allows open inquiry. While technology such as AI should be embraced for its benefits to research, in-person human interactions that spur collaboration, creativity, constructive thinking, and lifelong learning must be considered essential components of discovery. Finally, the committee advocates for a university-wide embrace of the ethos that research excellence and public engagement and impact are not mutually exclusive but robustly inform and reinforce one another.

Recommendation: Broaden doctoral and postdoctoral training for a more uncertain job market.

Cornell should broaden doctoral curricula and postdoctoral programs to include the transferable skills needed in any career (e.g., communications and conflict resolution), build structured pathways into industry and applied practice directly into training programs, and expand funding partnerships that share training costs with the employers who benefit. Dissertation and capstone requirements should be reconsidered by embracing disciplinary variation in the forms that advanced scholarship can take — while holding all forms to the same standards of depth and rigor — and engaging faculty governance from the outset, given the implications for hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions.

Recommendation: Promote productive disagreement in the scholarly process.

Incentivize scholars with contradictory views to collaborate with each other, sometimes referred to as “adversarial collaboration.” This works best when scholars with opposing viewpoints exhibit intellectual humility and work together to rigorously test their conflicting hypotheses. Even if this approach is not equally practical across all disciplines and projects, the spirit of the approach (formalizing the process of constructive critique and working in tandem with those who have opposing perspectives and hypotheses) could be more systematically adopted by departments and units across campus. In theory, this is what some internal seminars, external conferences, and peer review aim to accomplish. In practice, many studies are not subject to the same scrutiny and, especially amid pressure to publish, irreproducible work or biased scholarship can slip through the cracks. The committee recommends continued robust, discipline-specific deliberation on this important topic.

Recommendation: Develop or expand external partnerships, such as with research institutes like focused research organizations (FROs), to address complex questions.

FROs (e.g., the nonprofit biomedical Arc Institute) tackle highly ambitious, thematic, and team-based research. This model is likely most appropriate for certain disciplines or interdisciplinary areas and would require reimagining the tenure process and promotion criteria, as well as mechanisms for how faculty may transition in and out of association with the FRO. These organizations are related to but different from typical university centers and institutes in several ways, including that they tend to have a finite lifespan and represent an all-hands-on-deck integrated approach to a shared, focused question (as opposed to modestly thematically connected independent labs working on related but different agendas).

Recommendation: Empower units to incentivize and enable public engagement in the scholarly processes and outputs of faculty and staff.

The university could provide central support for relevant offices in each college to instantiate their vision of public engagement in a manner that makes the most sense locally. The goal is to facilitate direct connections between faculty research and public interests, needs, and concerns. Doing so will promote research transparency and accountability. Cornell could also expand investment in professors of public impact across all colleges. Units should develop public engagement strategies that include clear criteria for how public engagement activities are formally recognized and valued, including for tenure and promotion.

Maintaining excellence in research and scholarship amid disruption and prolonged uncertainty requires institutional innovation and intervention. The committee's full report outlines areas for change across the research and scholarship enterprise, including recommendations that impact undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral associates, faculty and staff, and the public. Suggestions include enhancing curricular integration of research, establishing structures that empower coordination across colleges to achieve shared goals (including cooperative hiring and resource allocation), incentivizing entrepreneurship and public impact innovation, and implementing new models of internal funding for grand and ambitious projects that seek to advance inquiry and creative practices across disciplines at the scale required for today's challenges. Any changes to the research enterprise must pay close attention to how the entire scholarship ecosystem — including applied and fundamental, team-based and individual — is affected. The committee also recommends new positions, programs, and opportunities across the university to promote, recognize, and sustain long-term and robust research-related two-way engagement with the public.

Promoting Academic Civics: A Commitment to a Strongly Connected Community

Academic freedom, open inquiry, scholarly rigor, intellectual pluralism, and the pursuit of knowledge are not merely abstract ideals. They are the foundations upon which university communities are built. A thriving university requires a renewed investment in academic civics to strengthen the bonds within the university and bolster collaborative governance. Academic

civics begins with the recognition that the American university is more than a loose collection of specialized functions and autonomous members. They are communities sustained by a shared purpose that no individual office, discipline, constituency, or generation can achieve alone. Academic civics seeks to cultivate the habits, relationships, understandings, and commitments that help all constituents of the university community to see themselves not only as occupants of particular roles but as participants in a common enterprise, contributing from their distinct expertise, perspectives, and viewpoints.

Establishing an institutional space for the cultivation of academic civics will encourage reflection on what it means to belong to a university and on the responsibilities that accompany that membership. Today, civic commitment to higher education needs revitalization to reestablish trust and promote the collaboration that higher education will require to navigate an uncertain future.

Recommendation: Establish the Future of the American University Forum.

The questions raised by this committee cannot be resolved by a single report. They require an institutional home that can sustain discussion, turn inquiry into action, and then transform the results of actions back into inquiry. A proposed Future of the American University Forum, described in detail in the full report, could provide a place for Cornell and higher education more generally to ask big questions and tackle looming disruptions before they turn into crises. The forum could help lead an institution-wide effort to reassert the value of academic civics, making it a core consideration in how we train students, convene shared governance bodies, and assess tenure and promotion cases. The forum would not be a think tank, producing reports at a distance from university life. It would be embedded in the work of the university, drawing faculty, staff, graduate students, and undergraduates into genuine inquiry, building bridges to peer institutions and external scholars, and creating the conditions for the type of deliberation and experimentation envisioned in the committee's report.

Academic civics represents a critical pillar in the committee's proposed path forward for Cornell University. As such, the committee recommends integrating academic civic principles across the core missions of the university, including the development of curricula for graduate students interested in pursuing careers in academia, faculty and staff engaged in collaborative governance, and any new members of the Cornell community. In addition, the committee makes several recommendations for reassessment of existing governance structures and processes, suggesting a critical need to amplify community expectations for collective and individual civic responsibility.

Aligning Across the University: A Commitment to Purposeful Integration and Coordination

The fragmentation of higher education's learning ecosystem is one of the most consequential forces that universities must push against. The multiversity's purpose centers on the advantages that arise from combining disciplines and its core missions (research, teaching, and public

impact) under one roof. The siloing of academic endeavors undermines the argument for the integrated American research university. Fragmentation also limits universities' ability to be flexible and agile during times of great change. Cornell must, therefore, reassert the integrity of our unified purpose by integrating across different university units and functions, from the classroom to the field site, from studios to residential life, from the research lab to local communities.

Doing so requires increased coordination, which is the product of horizontal bridges and mechanisms that ensure information sharing, cross-unit learning, and partnerships without undermining local autonomy. Especially with the rapid rise of AI, which presents both unprecedented opportunities and risks for a human-centered education, it is critical to explore curricular innovation through integrative approaches. Greater coordination across units will also allow the university to make good on the promise of providing lifelong learning beyond traditional undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Recommendation: Provide lifelong learning and access to the university.

Universities' approach to education has been built mostly around fixed entry and exit points for both undergraduate and graduate degrees. This linear approach has been consistent with the arc of students' careers and their pursuit of new skills and knowledge over the course of their lives. Many of the forces described above require a significant reimagining of the shape, place, and cadence for the learning that universities provide students, staff, and faculty. The importance of sound judgment and deliberation, the accelerated pace of technological change with implications for access to data and information, and the remaking of jobs and careers, require new educational models that expand the lifelong connection to universities. Effective coordination will be critical to reconfigure access to learning, skills, and insights, so that the university's members are able to enter and exit in ways that address new needs and challenges over the course of their lives and careers. For example, all alumni, staff, and faculty could have access to distance learning content and classes as part of their affiliation with the university.

Recommendation: Design spaces and artifacts for transformative education.

A transformative education needs spaces in and out of the classroom that enable human-centered education. This includes classrooms, studios, maker spaces, and auditoriums that inspire learning and collaboration through dynamic and interactive environments, including tech-free educational spaces. It also includes the design of residential and public spaces to scaffold social interaction. Such environments should align with best practices for campus design from social science, architecture, and urban design. Attention must also be paid to the design of technologies widely deployed on campus. For example, the university should invest in institution-hosted technologies, such as AI models or social networks, that better align with the human-centered university's mission than those currently commercially available.

The full report from the committee points to myriad ways in which Cornell could be more coordinated across our core functions. For example, many universities have defaulted to supporting intellectual development in the classroom and social and personal development outside of it. Critical to a learning-focused purpose is the alignment of curricular and co-curricular activities. At the graduate and professional level, there is both a pressing need and a real opportunity to transform the growth in the sector over the last two decades into a well-organized, highly coordinated approach to advanced study. At the undergraduate level, the committee's full report calls for better integration between student and campus life efforts and those based primarily in the classroom. Currently, these important educational domains operate in parallel. The committee suggests ways for these to be connected to enhance students' learning and transformation.

Thriving in an Age of Uncertainty

Higher education finds itself at a crossroads that calls for more than just surviving a crisis. It calls for making difficult choices. The landscape of disruption surveyed by the committee is neither temporary nor an aberration that will dissolve with a new political administration, the next market cycle, or a short-term shift in public mood. Indeed, many of the critiques of America's universities are strikingly bipartisan, drawing left and right into alignment like few other issues. The committee's assessment is unambiguous and unanimous: the pressures threatening universities will not resolve themselves and must be proactively addressed.

The history of the American university is a story of adaptation amid disruption, but adaptation of a particular kind. The universities that have navigated moments of crisis most successfully are the ones that reimagined how their purpose might meet the future and built new capacities and capabilities to fulfill that vision. The land-grant movement did not abandon the liberal arts; it deepened their meaning and broadened their impact. The post-war research partnership did not distort the university's educational mission; it extended learning into labs, field sites, and research stations around the globe. The movement for more accessible and inclusive campuses did not undermine excellence; it drove an explosion of new creativity and innovation.

The challenge before American higher education today is to find that same combination of principled roots and openness to change. It is harder than it sounds. The pressures facing higher education must not be underestimated. Institutions face very real financial constraints, genuine threats to their independence, powerful and disruptive AI technology that has capabilities central to much of the work that universities do, and a deficit of public goodwill that will not be replenished by a retreat into the ivory tower. Some things that universities have done for decades will need to change, not because external critics demand it, but because sustained examination reveals that current structures, incentives, and practices are not adequate to the university's own purpose. While the work ahead will not be easy, it is critical that the urgency of this moment and the importance of higher education guide the actions taken to ensure that the future of the American university is bright.

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