Report of the

Committee on the Future of the American University

Cornell University

September 22, 2026

"… controversy should be regarded as an invitation to move in, not a warning to keep out."
— Edmund Ezra Day, fifth president of Cornell University (1937–1949)

Cornell University

Table of Contents

1. Preface 4
   1.1. Revolution and Reason 4
   1.2. "… Any Person … Any Study" 5
   1.3. This Report 7
2. Introduction 9
   2.1. The American University 9
   2.2. Disruption 10
   2.3. The Challenge 15
   2.4. The Charge, the Committee's Process, and Stakeholder Feedback 17
   2.5. The Challenge of the Multiversity 20
   2.6. Meeting Crisis with Commitment 23
3. Undergraduate Education 26
   3.1. Background 26
   3.2. What We Heard 28
   3.3. Diagnosis 36
   3.4. Transformative Education 40
   3.5. Recommendations 43
   3.6. Roads That Should Not Be Taken 54
   3.7. Admissions 59
   3.8. Price and Cost 67
4. Research and Scholarship 73
   4.1. Background 73
   4.2. Core Principles 75
   4.3. Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for Specific Constituencies 76
   4.4. Challenges and Opportunities with Research Funding 91
   4.5. Challenges and Opportunities with Artificial Intelligence 96
   4.6. Other Special Topics 98
5. Public Impact and Community Engagement 102
   5.1. Background: Reimagining Cornell's Public-Impact Mission 102
   5.2. The Role of Public Impact in Today's Higher Education Landscape 103

5.3. Barriers to Stronger Public Impact 106
5.4. Core Principle and Imperatives for Enhanced University Public Impact 110
5.5. Recommendations 115
5.6. Conclusions 117
6. Graduate and Professional Education 119
6.1. Background 119
6.2. Core Principles 119
6.3. Disruption 125
6.4. Prior Studies 128
6.5. Feedback 129
6.6. Recommendations 134
6.7. Conclusion 143
7. Academic Civics, Collaborative Governance, and Institutional Structures 145
7.1. Background 145
7.2. Stakeholder Perspectives on Solidarity, Civics, and Governance 146
7.3. Academic Freedom and Tenure 151
7.4. An Introduction to Academic Civics 154
7.5. Shared Governance as Institutional Judgment 157
7.6. Cultivating Academic Civics 161
7.7. Securing the Future 163
7.8. The Challenge of University Structures 165
7.9. Recommendations 167
7.10. Conclusion 169
8. Deliberation 170
8.1. Contentious Questions 170
8.2. The Conditions of Deliberation 171
8.3. A Community — and a Committee — That Do Not Always Agree 173
8.4. Renewing the Commitment 175
8.5. Keeping the Promise 176
9. Reflections on Deliberation 178
9.1. Reflection by Anthony Burrow 178

9.2. Reflection by Milton S. F. Curry 179
9.3. Reflection by Eve De Rosa 182
9.4. Reflection by Rick Geddes 184
9.5. Reflection by Durba Ghosh 186
9.6. Reflection by Drew Margolin 188
9.7. Reflection by Jocelyn Rose 190
9.8. Reflection by Phoebe Sengers 192
9.9. Reflection by Praveen Sethupathy 194
9.10. Reflection by Adam T. Smith 197
Appendix A. Committee on the Future of the American University 200
Appendix B. Events Featuring, Hosted by, or Co-Hosted by the Committee 202
Appendix C. Publications by Committee Members 205
Appendix D. Stakeholder Engagement 207
Appendix E. Methodology 215
Appendix F. Disruptors Identified by Stakeholders 217
Appendix G. The Impact Agenda: Compiled Recommendations 219
Appendix H. The Future of the American University Forum: A Proposal 223
Appendix I. Selected Bibliography 234

1. Preface

1.1. Revolution and Reason

The United States was made possible by the havoc of war, but its promise was kept through learning: slow, reasoned, and in its own way revolutionary. From the opening gavel in Philadelphia in 1787 to the last state's ratification three years later, the U.S. Constitution was argued over, defended, and revised in the open, and it became one of the most carefully reasoned documents ever written. The people who built the American experiment were not only soldiers and statesmen. They were scholars and scientists, writers and debaters, who understood that what the sword had won, only patient reasoning could keep, a conviction realized in the civic mission of the American university.

American universities take many forms today, from community colleges to liberal arts colleges to public and private research universities. What they share is a single purpose: to provide the structural, financial, technological, and human conditions that make learning possible. A university is a kind of vessel. It establishes a community apart from the constant pressures of immediate need, private interest, and short attention.

But the university community does not advance learning in isolation. Seminars and laboratories, committees and clinics, lecture halls, libraries, maker spaces, and design studios provide settings for working out ideas, understanding other perspectives, confronting disagreement, and thinking collaboratively toward solutions. Relationships that can weather disagreement, nurture pluralism, and sustain mutual respect are built on open and robust discussion, intellectual humility, empathy, and a rigor that refuses easy answers.

Within the space of the university, students, faculty, staff, and administrators collaborate on the fundamental work of learning: creation of new understanding, stewardship of traditions, transmission of knowledge, and application of discoveries and creative output to shared problems. Other institutions do some of these things: national laboratories generate knowledge, museums steward it, online courses impart it, companies and foundations apply it. Only the American university links them together into a single learning ecosystem unified by a critical practice — deliberation — toward the goal of cultivating a vital capacity: sound judgment.

Judgment is the skill that learning produces. It is the slow, consequential, evidence-based discernment that resists the hot take and the hasty verdict. It is the common catalyst of research, teaching, and engagement alike, and it is the university's most important contribution to a modern democracy.

Learning, and the institutions that protect it, are under extraordinary pressure today. Artificial intelligence (AI) threatens to hollow out learning's core practices — reading, writing, and reasoning — producing the appearance of judgment without the human capacities beneath it.

Universities have also become political lightning rods, further jeopardizing their standing. And confidence in slow, reasoned judgment itself is wearing thin, both within and beyond American campuses. Each of these forces, in its own way, pushes the university toward the very haste it was built to resist. But each also opens new opportunities for the future.

This report asks how the university must adapt to honor its quietly revolutionary purpose in American life. The answer cannot leave the university exactly as it is today. Today's pressures are too intense and the opportunities too promising to prioritize nostalgia over envisioning the future. To plan for that future is to renew a conviction forged two and a half centuries ago, in a far more turbulent era: that learning provides an indispensable foundation for modern life in a democratic nation.

1.2. "… Any Person … Any Study"

The American university's commitment to deliberation was born in revolution, but its distinctive form took shape amid the ruins of civil strife. Cornell University was founded eighteen days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, in a violently divided country, with a profoundly iconoclastic mission: a university where "any person" — of any race, gender, nationality, religion, or class — could "find instruction in any study."[1] As New York's land-grant institution, it was a unique private university with a public mandate, committed to learning in both the practical and liberal arts, and following new and contested ideas wherever they led. Nothing about that moment in time in America instilled confidence in this fledgling institution of higher education. The nation was polarized by raw political divisions, its economy was being remade by the new technologies of industrialization, and its future was deeply uncertain.

Cornell's namesake, Ezra Cornell, wanted to open higher learning to the people that the colleges of his day overlooked: the working class, the families of "the professions, the farms, the mines, the manufactories."[2] His co-founder and Cornell's first president, the historian Andrew Dickson White, imagined an "asylum for science," a place from which ideas would "go forth to bless the nation."[3] Out of those ambitions came a single, radical vision: a nonsectarian institution of both discovery and learning that joined liberal and practical arts, research and creativity, scholarship and public service. Cornell was founded as an institution that could lead the country and also be responsive to America's current needs.

---

[1] Cornell University's full motto is "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." Ezra Cornell to Andrew Dickson White, February 23, 1868, Ezra Cornell papers, #1-1-1. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

[2] Ezra Cornell, "Address at the Opening of Cornell University," in Carl Becker, *Cornell University: Founders and the Founding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1943), 136.

[3] Andrew Dickson White to Gerrit Smith, September 1, 1862, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

What makes Cornell's invocation of "… any person … any study" particularly powerful is the claim it makes on who is welcome in the deliberative space of the university. To admit any person was to insist that the university, and the nation, are richer for the range of people gathered on American campuses. That founding commitment was an assertion that deliberative communities learn better when everyone is present, when their members bring different histories, traditions, and questions to the table for open, reflective, and rigorous inquiry. A century after its founding, the historian Frederick Rudolph would refer to Cornell as "the first American university,"[4] and, indeed, most of the nation's institutions of higher education now bear a greater resemblance to Ezra Cornell's and Andrew White's vision than they do to the antebellum colleges.

The American university's structural commitment to pluralism requires engagement with the world both at home and abroad. The American university draws on its European inheritance but also much more. It has been shaped by the enduring Indigenous communities of this continent, by formerly enslaved people and their descendants, by immigrants from every part of the world, and by the traditions that all of them have carried, transformed, and woven together. It is in that generative, unfinished confluence — revolutionary and tragic, hopeful and incomplete — that the American university finds its calling.

Cornell, among other institutions founded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, built that calling into its organizational DNA. As a land-grant institution, it carried the Morrill Act's promise of practical education for all, and it extended its work beyond campus through extension offices in every New York county, "putting knowledge to work" in the lives of families and communities, as described in the motto of Cornell Cooperative Extension. Research in the public interest is not a departure from the founding vision of the American university but a vital expression of its promise.

The result is an institution defined by its dualities: an Ivy League research university advancing innovation with a land-grant commitment to local communities; a champion of broad liberal education and a leader in technology and the sciences; a private institution that houses contract colleges serving the state; a presence in both rural and urban New York; and an American university with partners around the world. In each of these aspects, Cornell provides a laboratory for understanding the landscape of higher education in America more broadly and an appropriate site for imagining our collective future.

What Cornell's founders understood, and what this report affirms, is that the work of the university is a human-scale enterprise: it happens between people, in communities small enough to sustain genuine relationships and large enough to hold genuine differences. That

[4] Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 116.

understanding was forged in one of the most uncertain moments in American history, and it is the perspective we bring to this uncertain moment of our own. The disruptive pressures that Cornell faces today are different from those of 1865; yet, as in previous eras, Cornell is configured to meet the challenge of historical crises and turning points. Then, as now, the university's answer to uncertainty was to gather people together — concerned skeptics and ardent supporters, campus constituents and public communities — and begin the slow, deliberative work of learning toward sound judgment.

1.3. This Report

Given the broad scope of our committee's charge and the whirlwind of forces buffeting American higher education, it should not be surprising that this report is, among other qualities, long. While we have provided a vision statement as a succinct account of the primary diagnoses and most promising remedies, that document is backed by the discussion and deliberation reflected in this full report. Where the vision statement asserts, this report argues by supplying the intellectual case, the informational record, and the ethnographic evidence that stand behind the vision statement's more general claims. Readers who want the committee's case in brief should start there; readers who want to see that case made in full, and tested against evidence, will find it here.

But the report need not be read cover to cover. It opens, in this preface and the introduction, with an argument for why the American university matters and how its sense of purpose has been put at risk. The report then moves from inspiration to information and analysis, providing a mission-by-mission examination of what American universities like Cornell actually do. Each mission chapter is designed to be largely freestanding, connected to one another by the fundamental commitments outlined in the vision statement. The report's conclusion then returns to the aspirational register with which it began, mustering the diagnoses and the recommendations of the middle chapters in service of a larger claim about the unfinished work of the American university.

Three things about how the report builds its case are worth knowing up front.

The report offers consensus, not unanimity. Eighteen faculty members, informed by over 6,000 stakeholders across hundreds of meetings, could not possibly agree on everything. Where the committee reached consensus, the report says so. Where it did not, the report says that too. A reader looking for a single, seamless argument will occasionally find instead an account of where reasonable people, working from the same evidence across the same twelve months of deliberation, still see things differently.

The report is general in its diagnoses but specific in its remedies. The pressures described in the pages ahead — the erosion of public trust, the fragmentation of the multiversity, the strain on the conditions that make deliberation possible — are not unique to Cornell; they are

reshaping American higher education broadly, and much of what this report diagnoses will be recognizable to any institution. Its recommendations, in contrast, are not so general. They are addressed to one institution, built from what this committee heard from this community, and sized to what Cornell specifically can do. And, yet, Cornell is a hybrid in its founding DNA, at once a research university, a land-grant institution with a vocational and professional mission, and a liberal arts institution. As a result, the experiments, innovations, and remedies described here may carry beyond this campus, but we make no presumption that they do.

The report is expansive but stays within its charge. The committee's charge asked it to examine nearly everything a university does, and the report ranges accordingly. But ranging widely is not the same as claiming authority to resolve every concern. In a number of places, the report identifies a tension, raises a question, or describes a risk without prescribing a solution either because the committee did not find one or because answering it fell outside what the committee was asked, or qualified, to do. Readers should thus expect open, unresolved questions alongside the report's recommendations.

The goal of this report, as captured in the vision statement, is renewal. Its tenor, accordingly, is neither apology nor apologia but anticipation. The report's vision is firmly set on preparing the American university for our nation's uncertain future. Despite the inscrutability of the future, we are certain that lively debates and innovative ideas will follow. That has always been the life, and the hope, of the university.

2. Introduction

2.1. The American University

The American university is an improbable institution. The earliest colleges in the American colonies were founded by communities that were, by any measure, too small and too preoccupied with survival to sustain institutions of higher learning. Harvard was established in 1636, just sixteen years after the Mayflower landed, in a colony of fewer than 20,000 people. The colleges that would follow over the next 390 years were founded by similar acts of extraordinary ambition that were at once brazen deeds of speculation and devout expressions of faith in America and in learning as central to human endeavor.[5] Throughout its history, faced with profound social, economic, and technological transformations, the American university has repeatedly found itself at a crossroads.

Contending with internal and external challenges, the American university has proven singularly resilient. Established as sites for the transmission of classical wisdom and the formation of character, during the nineteenth century they confronted a new economy defined by industrialization, a new political order riven by civil strife, and a shifting society needing access to knowledge and skills. In the face of these forces, higher education reinvented itself. Supported by the Morrill Act of 1862, a new kind of university was forged with a revolutionary mandate: to serve the practical needs of an industrializing nation, in part by opening higher education to people who had never previously been its intended beneficiaries and in part by promoting discovery and creativity to expand the boundaries of human understanding.[6] Agriculture, engineering, and science moved to the center of many universities' missions, alongside an enduring commitment to the liberal arts. This was not merely a curricular expansion. It was a recognition that the university needed to ask new questions, allowing it to not only transmit established knowledge but also discover new knowledge. Moreover, the land-grant university made American society's first demands upon higher education. Its founding compact required that knowledge be put in service to the wider public, a call for engagement that resulted in impactful extension networks that brought universities into communities far from their campuses. Universities learned during this period that knowledge created within their walls belongs to the world beyond them. The land-grant university was, in this sense, the American university's first serious attempt at significant institutional adaptation. But it would not be the last.

The research university joined the classroom, laboratory, libraries, and community into an intricately entwined ecosystem, establishing a powerful new model for integrated learning. But

---

[5] David F. Labaree, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[6] Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

it was not in itself scalable to the needs of twentieth century mass democracy. That required help. The combination of the GI Bill and the post-World War II research enterprise drew the federal government into the university ecosystem in a new way that brought higher education within reach of millions, transforming it from a privilege of the few into a genuine public good and producing the artistic, scientific, and technical capacity that drove American prosperity and global leadership for decades.[7]

Even as America's universities adapted themselves to this new model, reshaping what was taught and how and for whom, they struggled to understand who truly belonged in the community of learning. The opening of higher education to women, to Black Americans, to immigrants, and eventually to students of every background was not a smooth or inevitable progression.[8] It was a series of hard-won battles, each one requiring the university to confront the gap between its professed commitment to learning and the exclusions it had naturalized. And each opening carried an epistemological lesson as well as a moral one: that the range of people included in inquiry shapes the quality of the inquiry itself. A university that excludes women does not merely fail those women; it impoverishes its own understanding. A university that segregates scholars of color does not merely perpetuate injustice; it cuts itself off from knowledge and perspectives that would make it wiser. The American university was not founded as a welcoming community, but it has learned, and continues to learn, how to become one. A gradual, incomplete, still-unfinished opening to the full range of human experience has made the university an educational environment that is itself always in the process of learning.

The American university's continuous process of learning and adaptation has resulted in an institution of remarkable complexity and genuine achievement — one that stewards traditions, teaches students, generates new knowledge and creative output, and engages communities, all at once and within a single human community held together by a shared commitment to learning in its most comprehensive sense. This American university was slowly assembled, piece by piece, through argument and experiment and the pressure of unmet need. It is a product of the very practices — open, adaptive, self-correcting inquiry — that it exists to cultivate. And that history cannot be a source of complacency. It is a warning that when conditions change, higher education's response must not be to simply defend what exists but to ask what the university must learn next to prepare for the future.

2.2. Disruption

The test the American university faces today is in some ways familiar. Universities have been regularly remade by transformative technologies, political upheavals, and radical shifts in

---

[7] Paula E. Stephan, "The Endless Frontier: Reaping What Bush Sowed?" NBER Working Paper 19687 (National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2013), https://doi.org/10.3386/w19687.

[8] For a view from Cornell, see Donald Alexander Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), https://hdl.handle.net/1813/112315.

access to knowledge. And yet the current crisis is unprecedented because the forces bearing down on higher education are pressing simultaneously on every dimension of universities: how they teach, what they research, who they serve, how they are funded, and whether the public believes they are worthy of significant support. The question is not whether the current model of the university will change. It will. The question is whether it can once again turn disruption into an occasion for deeper understanding about how to evolve to continue to serve the needs of students, the institution, the nation, and humanity.

Cornell University's Committee on the Future of the American University was formed to examine the impact of three major forces that threaten to upend the American university: rapid technological change epitomized in the current moment by the rise of AI, the fissures in the relationship between universities and the federal government, and the erosion of public trust in higher education.

Of the three forces the committee was charged with examining, none is more philosophically and practically consequential than the rapid advance of artificial intelligence and technological change, because it strikes at the core practices through which learning happens. AI has arrived in higher education with extraordinary speed and with consequences that are still unfolding. Its promise is genuine: AI tools can accelerate discovery, democratize access to knowledge, assist students and scholars across language barriers, and open new possibilities for research and creative practice that were unimaginable a decade ago. The committee does not dismiss these possibilities, and this report asks the university to engage them with intellectual curiosity.

But the risks posed by AI are equally real. The concern that AI will displace human workers is serious and deserves careful examination both as an economic reality and a dispiriting ethic reshaping the very idea of labor. AI also raises notable questions about access equality, environmental consequences, and accountability. For the university, the threat that AI poses to both learning and scholarly integrity is also deeply concerning as the technology has already proven adept at mimicking the form of knowledge without the supporting substance of inquiry. These are problems any learning community must confront. But beneath them lies a more fundamental challenge: AI can produce the appearance of learning without the intellectual formation that makes learning meaningful and durable.

Learning, as our committee understands it, is not merely the internalization of correct inputs and/or production of correct outputs. It is the slow cultivation of a person through the discipline of reading carefully, studying deeply, communicating effectively, debating rigorously, creating constructively, and sitting with uncertainty long enough to both respect it and tackle it. These practices are constitutive of the formation of judgment. A student who uses AI to produce an essay has not learned to write. A researcher who uses AI to synthesize existing literature has not learned to deeply engage it. The shortcut bypasses the process through which understanding is formed and judgment is developed. In a world where machines can

synthesize, generate, and analyze at scale, the university's most important response is neither to restrict AI nor to embrace it uncritically, but to become far more intentional about what remains indispensably human in the learning process. The challenge is to build curricula, pedagogy, and assessments around the cultivation of those capacities.

The second disruptor is less philosophically novel than AI but no less consequential practically: the deteriorating relationship between American universities and the federal government. To understand what is at stake, it helps to understand what was built. The partnership between universities and the federal government that took shape after World War II was one of the most productive arrangements in American history. It was built on a powerful idea that the federal government would invest in the patient, open-ended, fundamental inquiry that universities were uniquely positioned to conduct, and that universities would direct that capacity toward the advancement of knowledge and creative output, national priorities, and the public good. The results were extraordinary. Federal investment drove the research enterprise that made American universities the global leaders in science, medicine, and technology. It produced the breakthroughs in computing, in genomics, in materials science, and in public health that have shaped the modern world. And through the GI Bill and the student loan system, it extended the benefits of higher education to millions of Americans who would otherwise have been excluded from it (although it continued to exclude many).[9] For eighty years, this compact underwrote both the excellence and the accessibility of American higher education, as well as creative output, scientific breakthroughs, economic growth, and resulting public good.

That partnership is now under severe strain. Federal support for university research is contracting, and there is no clarity on whether it will reach its former peak either in terms of real dollars allocated or the breadth of investment that benefited the arts, humanities, and social sciences as profoundly as the physical and biological sciences. Legislative pressure on what universities may teach and research is intensifying. The independence that has always been the precondition for the university's public value — the academic freedom to follow evidence wherever it leads, to pursue questions that have no immediate payoff, to reach conclusions that are inconvenient for those in power — is being challenged in ways that have not been seen in generations. A university that can only ask the questions its funders approve is no longer a university in any meaningful sense. It is simply another contractor.

Our committee does not believe that the remedy to precarious federal support is to minimize legitimate public concerns about higher education. Questions about the cost of a college degree, the economic return for families carrying significant debt, and the role of wealthy institutions in a democratic society are all fair questions, amongst a much longer list, that universities have too often deflected rather than engaged. The post-war compact was never unconditional, and the

[9] Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

public support it rested on was never guaranteed. It had to be earned, and it has to be earned again. The university's response to the current strain on its relationship with the government should not be defensive but it need not be capitulatory. Ultimately, the American university and the American government need one another in ways that are both pragmatic and profound.

Both our purpose and our future call on universities to articulate what institutions of higher education owe the American public that sustains them. And this requires a principled, confident articulation of why academic freedom is so vital to the American future that it must be protected.

The third disruptor roiling the American university is the erosion of public trust. Over the last two years, universities have come to regard the crisis of trust as the most pressing, with initiatives at several institutions, as well as a recent report from the American Association of Colleges and Universities centered specifically on developing a response.[10] Declining trust in universities is not a crisis of the moment. Public confidence in higher education has been declining for years. When Gallup first measured confidence in higher education in 2015, 57 percent of Americans expressed a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the institution; by 2026 that figure had fallen to 38 percent.[11] The declining trend line cuts across the political spectrum, stoked by a range of grievances that cannot all be attributed to bad faith, political demagoguery, or a general decline in faith in institutions.

Some of those grievances are economic, reflecting declining certainty in the value of university degrees. The price of a college degree has outpaced inflation for decades, saddling families with debt and raising reasonable questions about whether higher education still delivers on its historic promise of economic and social mobility. The high sticker price, high aid pricing model that selective institutions have adopted is opaque by design, which erodes trust even when the motivation for the underlying arrangement is defensible. Well-meant efforts to ease the process of applying for admissions across colleges have compounded the problem, leading individual applicants to apply to an ever-increasing number of colleges. The resulting plummeting of admission rates creates a sense of scarcity, driving an escalating competition to acquire the credentials to be admitted and a sense of suspicion about who is selected and why.

---

[10] *Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education* (Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education, April 10, 2026), https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2026-04/Report-of-the-Committee-on-Trust-in-Higher-Education.pdf; Colleen Flaherty, "Presidents Puzzled on Rebuilding Public Trust in Higher Ed," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 9, 2026, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2026/04/09/presidents-puzzled-rebuilding-public-trust-higher; Jeremy C. Young et al., *The Trust Agenda: A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education* (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2026).

[11] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Higher Education Slips Back Slightly," *Gallup*, July 13, 2026, https://news.gallup.com/poll/712322/confidence-higher-education-slips-back-slightly.aspx.

Other grievances are about culture. Critics from across the ideological spectrum have raised concerns about intellectual conformity on American campuses. Cancel culture from both the left and right wing inflames the sense that certain questions cannot be asked, certain conclusions cannot be challenged, and certain perspectives are not welcome. Research by think tanks across the political spectrum, including the American Enterprise Institute[12] and Progressive Policy Institute,[13] have called attention to an increasing misalignment between the orientation of academic scholarship and the core premises of the liberal democracy that makes that research possible. This is not an evaluative assessment of the party affiliations of the professoriate (which is, itself, an uninformative metric in an era of both polarization and realignment) but the political vision constraining the research. The committee takes these concerns seriously without endorsing every version of them. A university that cannot model genuine pluralism of thought, that cannot hold and argue across deep disagreements without dissolving into either enforced consensus or performative conflict, is not promoting learning.

At the same time, the polling data that demonstrate falling confidence in the university as an institution also reveal something else: public trust in what universities actually do in communities (e.g., extension work, public health contributions, local economic contributions, direct engagement with families and neighborhoods) remains substantially higher than confidence in the institution in the abstract. An American Higher Education Barometer report from 2025 found that 83 percent of respondents recognized the importance of universities for economic growth, and 76–79 percent viewed universities as having positive local community and healthcare impact.[14] That reservoir of goodwill provides a map to the future. It points toward what the university can do to rebuild the broader trust it has lost: not just better messaging or more strategic communications, but deeper two-way engagement with the communities it serves.

Trust is not simply a communication problem, it is a relationship problem. And relationships are rebuilt the same way they should be established in the first place: through being present, listening actively, communicating transparently, acknowledging mistakes, and following through to meet needs.

---

[12] Jenna Silber Storey and Benjamin Storey, "Five Reasons Viewpoint Diversity Makes Academic Sense," American Enterprise Institute, January 26, 2026, https://cfau.aei.org/five-reasons-viewpoint-diversity-makes-academic-sense.

[13] Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin, "The Distortion of American Studies: How the Field's Leading Journal Has Embraced a Worldview as Slanted as Donald Trump's," Progressive Policy Institute, January 22, 2026, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/the-distortion-of-american-studies.

[14] David Lazer et al., *Higher Education Public Opinion Analysis: Strong Support Amid Specific Vulnerabilities* (American Higher Education Barometer, October 2025), https://raw.githubusercontent.com/kateto/AHEB/main/REPORTS/AHEB%20Report%2001%20Higher%20Education%20Attitudes.pdf.

The three forces outlined above defined our committee's charge, but our work quickly revealed that they were only the most visible part of a larger landscape of disruption. Engaging over 6,000 stakeholders surfaced pressures that cut deeper and in some cases predate the current moment by decades. A demographic cliff is approaching that will sharply reduce the traditional college-age population over the coming decade, straining enrollment models predicated primarily on the training of 18–22 year olds.[15] The economics of higher education are under stress from multiple directions at once: wage stagnation has reshaped the calculus around the economic return of some degrees, and the financial models that sustain everything from doctoral programs, to university research and scholarship, to campus infrastructure were built for a world of reliable federal support that is now much less stable.[16] The academic publishing industry, consolidated into the hands of a few commercial publishers extracting extraordinary costs from universities producing the scholarship, is failing in its core public function of making knowledge accessible.[17] The faculty workforce has been quietly restructured over decades, with tenure-track positions giving way to contingent appointments that undermine the stability and civic engagement that shared governance requires.[18] And campuses are navigating intense debates about academic freedom, expressive culture, and the conditions under which genuine learning across deep differences is possible.[19]

The committee studied, discussed, and deliberated on all of these disruptors, challenges which go well beyond the three that were specified in the committee's original charge. Taken together, these pressures do not describe a university system in temporary difficulty. They describe an institution at a crossroads. Choices need to be made.

2.3. The Challenge

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 shift in public mood. Indeed, many of the critiques of America's universities are strikingly bipartisan, drawing

---

[15] Bryan C. Harvey, "Teetering on the Demographic Cliff, Part 1: Prepare Now for the Challenging Times Ahead," *Planning for Higher Education*, July–September 2021, https://plan.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/49/2022/01/Harvey-2021-Demographics-SCUP.pdf; Nathan D. Grawe, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018); Nathan D. Grawe, *The Agile College: How Institutions Successfully Navigate Demographic Changes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

[16] Robert Kelchen, Dubravka Ritter, and Douglas Webber, "Predicting College Closures and Financial Distress" (Working Paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, December 2024), https://doi.org/10.21799/frbp.wp.2024.20.

[17] Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit, "The Dysfunctional Academic Publishing Ecosystem: The Need for Reform," *International Higher Education*, October 2024, https://ihe.bc.edu/pub/ro4sc1tg.

[18] Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[19] Len Gutkin, "Academic Freedom's Fierce Internal Fracas," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 21, 2025, https://www.chronicle.com/article/academic-freedoms-civil-war.

left and right into alignment like few other issues.[20] It is the visible surface of deeper, longer-running transformations in the relationship between the American university and the society it serves, which have been developing for decades and that the events of recent years have brought suddenly and sharply into view. The committee's assessment is unambiguous: these pressures will not resolve themselves.

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 not the ones that retreated to primordial minimal functions or undertook wholesale reinventions to meet the passing demands of the moment. They are the ones that reimagined how their purpose might meet the future and built new capacity 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 across the academy.

The challenge before us is to find that same combination of principled rootedness and openness to change. It is harder than it sounds. The pressures facing higher education must not be underestimated. Institutions face major financial constraints, genuine threats to their independence, 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.

But self-examination of the kind undertaken by the committee also reveals something else: that the university's commitment to learning, in all its forms, is how higher education will meet current challenges and reshape itself for the future. A world in which AI produces the simulacrum of knowledge without the formation of judgment, in which political pressure threatens the independence of inquiry, and in which public trust in institutions is at a historic low is precisely the world that needs universities committed to the deliberative, difficult, and irreplaceable work of genuine learning that cultivates judgment. But that work cannot be done well by a community that has lost fluency in its own institution: how it is governed, how it is

[20] Compare, for example, the Progressive Policy Institute's report on The Distortion of American Studies with a similar study of American political science from the Goldwater Institute: Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin, "The Distortion of American Studies: How the Field's Leading Journal Has Embraced a Worldview as Slanted as Donald Trump's," Progressive Policy Institute, January 22, 2026, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/the-distortion-of-american-studies; Timothy K. Minella, "Peer Review Gone Wild: Flagship Political Science Journal Shows How Academic Gatekeepers Promote Ideology Over Scholarship," Goldwater Institute, December 2, 2025, https://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/policy-report/peer-review-gone-wild/.

financed, and what its members owe one another. Rebuilding that shared civic knowledge is not a peripheral concern; it is the precondition for imagining the university's future.

American universities have been in challenging positions before. They have never been in one that looked like the moment we are in now. The difference between those two facts is where the work of this report begins.

2.4. The Charge, the Committee's Process, and Stakeholder Feedback

In September 2025, Cornell University Provost Kavita Bala convened the Committee on the Future of the American University to consider the current course and future direction of higher education over the next half-century. The committee, composed of eighteen faculty drawn from across disciplines, was charged with examining the disruptive forces confronting higher education. We were asked to envision how Cornell should adapt its core missions of undergraduate education, research and scholarship, public impact and community engagement, and graduate and professional education to meet the disruptions of the current moment by looking decades into the future. Our charge was deliberately ambitious. We were not asked to defend the university as it is, but to imagine what it could become.

There is a productive ambiguity built into our charge between contemplating the future of Cornell and contemplating the future of American universities as seen from Cornell. The committee has sought to honor both senses of our instructions. Cornell's hybrid structure — public and private, Ivy and land-grant, rural and urban, local and global — makes it an unusually complete version of the American research university and an appropriate site for experimentation and inquiry that may speak to a broader set of institutions. Frederick Rudolph's characterization of Cornell as "the first American university" captures a perspective on the institution that remains both true and generative: that Cornell's founding values of "… any person … any study" cannily anticipated the direction American higher education would travel, and that Cornell is likewise well positioned to help chart where it must go next.[21] Our mandate was to build on those founding values to envision what Cornell and the American university can become for the coming decades.

The committee understood its charge as itself a call to deliberation. Between September 2025 and September 2026, we engaged more than 6,000 stakeholders in over 250 meetings and events, including students, faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, and alumni, as well as federal, state, and local officials, journalists, leaders of peer institutions, and outside experts. Our aim was not to simply gather opinions but to engage the collective experience, wisdom, and expertise of the community in a deliberative process of inquiry. We sought out conversations with critics of the university as well as supporters to locate points of friction and also identify

[21] Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 116.

the often-surprising points of agreement. While we had begun with three disruptors, these conversations revealed many more, such as a national student mental health crisis, erosion of shared governance, competition with alternative credentialing systems, and dwindling numbers of college-age students.[22] Numerous stakeholder conversations surfaced a concern the committee came to take seriously: that American universities have become sprawling organizations with proliferating mandates and activities, and that without a coherent account of their core purpose they are rudderless in the face of these many disruptors, buffeted by internal and external forces rather than guided by clear principles.

Across three separate phases, the committee organized itself into three sets of subcommittees (Figure 1). The committee's first challenge was to better understand the pressures being brought to bear on universities by the three disruptors cited in our charge, with three subcommittees focused on rapid technological change (e.g., AI), the unraveling relationship with the federal government, and diminishing public trust in higher education. The reports of these subcommittees, completed in November 2025, were informed by equal parts discussion, review of scholarly study, and community conversation.

Phase 1 Subcommittees: Disruptors	**Phase 2 Subcommittees:** University Missions	**Phase 3 Subcommittees:** Cross-Cutting Issues
● Rapid technological change (e.g., AI) ● Evolving federal relationship ● Declining public trust	● Undergraduate education ● Research and scholarship ● Public impact and community engagement ● Graduate and professional education	● Academic civics ● University structures ● Pluralism and diversity

Figure 1. Subcommittees of the Committee on the Future of the American University

We then undertook an extended analysis of the four core missions of the American university, breaking into new subcommittees focused on undergraduate education, research and scholarship, public impact and community engagement, and graduate and professional education. These conversations were fueled primarily by extensive input from stakeholders within and beyond the university, including several advisory panels composed of experts from across Cornell, as well as an external advisory board composed of national thought leaders.[23]

Several subcommittees hosted events to engage specific constituencies. And throughout spring 2026, committee members also authored a regular column in *The Cornell Daily Sun* — Cornell's independent, student-run newspaper — as a way to bring ideas to the Cornell community and solicit feedback.

[22] For a comprehensive list of stakeholder-identified disruptors, see Appendix F.

[23] For a list of advisors and external stakeholders, see Appendix D.

The results of these intensive and extensive conversations were a set of preliminary frameworks, released in April 2026, that described the values, principles, purposes, and practices vital to the future university. To receive feedback on the frameworks, the committee hosted nineteen town halls for faculty and staff across all Cornell's academic and administrative units, as well as for alumni and trustees.

We then turned to a final set of questions that cut across all four missions and could not be adequately addressed within any of our prior deliberative groups: the state of governance and academic civics, abiding tensions of structure and organization, and the role of pluralism and diversity in shaping campus, community, and curriculum. These cross-cutting subcommittees brought the deliberative process full circle, connecting the work of the missions back to the foundational question of how a university governs, shapes, and sustains itself.

This report combines the work of the three phases of the committee, whose reports and outputs have been drafted, redrafted, and rethought in light of the feedback received throughout our stakeholder engagement process.

Use and non-use of AI in this report

This report was drafted by humans. Its text was iterated extensively through many rounds of careful human review and revision. AI was sometimes used to support background research related to the report; it was *not* used to automatically write the report or pieces of it.

AI *was* used to assist in the analysis of stakeholder data. The committee's discussions and deliberations produced over four hundred documents across all phases of engagement, including meeting notes, emails from stakeholders, and survey responses. While human-produced summaries of these documents were reported to the committee on a weekly basis, the volume of input quickly outpaced committee members' abilities to keep track of everything that was being shared. In order to make sure all stakeholder voices would be heard as the committee developed its work, we used AI-assisted analysis to systematically synthesize stakeholder feedback from these documents in a structured and auditable way, with a specific focus on identifying and organizing arguments stakeholders were making, problems they were identifying, and solutions they were proposing. The details of how the analysis was structured, how AI was leveraged, how the results were human-audited and reviewed, and how the results were referenced during our writing process can be found in Appendix E.

We will describe these stakeholder arguments at many places in this report. We emphasize that, when we do so, we are relating the shape of a conversation, *not* the results of a structured social-scientific inquiry. While we attempted to speak with a wide variety of groups, these discussions did not reflect a representative sample of stakeholders, nor did all stakeholders comment on all topics. Our description of themes that stakeholders' arguments commonly share therefore does not indicate how widely held these views are, nor should it be taken to capture the full range of

views in our community or in the world beyond Cornell. Moreover, we do not assume that what stakeholders believe is necessarily true, nor does the committee collectively endorse any position held by stakeholders, even in areas where they largely agree amongst each other. Instead, it is our intention to relate what stakeholders discussed with us, and what we are therefore reacting to, as transparently as possible.

As part of the AI-assisted analysis, we used a structured methodology for determining commonly shared themes and tensions between arguments in these unstructured discussions, helping ensure that our summaries reflect the content of the corpus rather than individual judgments about which views to emphasize. The full methodology used for determining the common themes and tensions between arguments reported here is detailed in Appendix E. We note in particular that a "common theme" is defined as an argument that is supported by at least four of our collected stakeholder documents from at least three distinct stakeholder groups, and which has no opposition position held by at least four documents.[24] This does not mean that all stakeholders we spoke with necessarily agree with arguments described as common themes, nor does it imply that the committee takes such arguments as factually correct.

As a result of the committee's methodology, our hope is that stakeholders will hear their voices, ideas, concerns, and solutions in the recommendations forwarded here. While we include a reading list in the appendix to this report, our focus has been on surfacing the wisdom discovered in deliberation with the community. Because Cornell has within it so many versions of the American university, there are recommendations contained here that we believe could apply across the landscape of higher education. That said, Cornell is also unique. It is the only institution of higher education that is both a land-grant institution and an Ivy League research university. So some of what we provide here as a way forward will necessarily be specific to our institution. We do not presume to speak for all of American higher education, or its future, but we hope what we have learned is of broad utility.

2.5. The Challenge of the Multiversity

America's first institutions of higher education were few, small, and narrow. They were composed of a handful of faculty and confined themselves to a narrow slate of subjects. Their uses were limited and their purpose was focused on instruction. That slender sense of purpose made these institutions straightforward to lead as the enterprise could be readily pointed in a single direction.

Two and a half centuries later, the purpose of American higher education is difficult to discern in many universities. They have radically diversified their functions and drastically expanded

[24] Where common themes were opposed by less numerous arguments, the exceptions were noted as a dissent. When there was only a small number of documents on a particular topic, lower thresholds were used. Details can be found in Appendix E.

the scope of both who and what they teach, 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).[25] 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, 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 made the multiversity imaginable 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 working on the same campus but to increasingly different ends. Incentive structures — for tenure, promotion, funding, and prestige — increasingly valued individual and unit-level achievements over the university's civic order or its engagements with communities near and far. Each unit came to pursue its own sense of mission partially at the expense of the higher, collective purpose of the institution.

For decades, this arrangement seemed to work well. Funding flowed freely: from the federal government, from foundations, from 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.

Five Forces of Crisis

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 to the cultivation of sound judgment. Myriad external and internal contemporary forces work against discourse, curiosity, and rigor, including: 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

[25] Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

on financial returns and to avoid risk; the desire 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 taken a toll on the public standing of universities and on 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 in American society.

Loosened ties with the American public

Even as the multiversity has grown to pervade much of American society over the past several decades, and its wide-ranging impacts on communities are significant, its relationship with the public has been strained. 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, in many respects, the American public has lost a clear sense of what it is that universities do and how they contribute to everyday challenges. Universities are seen by many 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. As private endowments have grown, there are broad concerns about why tuition has also increased, especially as the income of many Americans has failed to keep up with inflation. 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-enabled 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 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, other notable pressures include but are not limited to declining public trust in research integrity, siloing of the research enterprise from other university missions including teaching and public impact, decreasing numbers of graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, a crisis in academic publishing, increasing regulatory burden, the rise of AI slop in research publications, and a 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 the university as a singular institution is its ability to

bring together members from different functional units to advance learning as a collaborative and fundamentally collective endeavor. 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 second and 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 increasingly 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. On a practical level, the fragmentation of the university has led to a growing divergence between academics and residential life, with faculty and students increasingly separated. 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 are able to integrate learning across the classroom, residential life, extracurriculars, research labs, field programs, studios, faculty dialogues, and academic disciplines. 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, thus weakening higher education's value proposition.

2.6. Meeting Crisis with Commitment

The multiversity has come at a steep price for American higher education, one that the current moment of disruption makes impossible to afford. What is needed now is leadership willing to name the costs of institutional fragmentation and lead universities back toward the purpose they were built to serve.

The future of the American university today rests on reasserting its unified purpose. Simply reducing functions does not address the factors that allow missions to pull apart from one another; it only shrinks the university without reinforcing the seams. We believe that

committing to do less with the extraordinary intellectual and financial resources of the modern university is precisely the wrong course. It would undermine public trust rather than rebuild it, and it would insulate universities further from the public they exist to serve. What is needed is a clear sense of our shared commitments and the will to orient diverse functions in the same direction.

The conviction of Cornell University's Committee on the Future of the American University is that the core purpose uniting all areas of the American university is human-centered and integrated learning. 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 end, in its broadest sense, is the cultivation of sound judgment. This judgment arises out of varied opportunities in the university to reflect deeply, weigh evidence objectively, 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 putting knowledge to work for a truly global community. It cannot be rushed. It requires thoughtful and hard work, intellectual humility, and the willingness to be challenged and to change one's mind. This collective, quintessentially human learning ecosystem is more important than ever as AI transforms the ways in which information is aggregated, processed, and shared. But while the university's learning ecosystem is human-centered, it is not self-centered.

What makes the university extraordinary is not any one of these modes of learning on its own but their integration into a single community built around human relationships. Other institutions contribute to learning in important ways. Museums steward knowledge, online platforms transmit it, national laboratories generate it, nonprofits apply it. But only the university bundles all five modes of learning into one institution, held together by shared membership in a community of inquiry. That integration is not merely convenient. It is generative. Students and faculty who move from seminar to laboratory to community engagement project to museum collection and back again are not doing five separate things. They are participating in a single process in which each mode of learning enriches and deepens the others.

For Cornell, the learning ecosystem carries a valued inheritance. As New York state's land-grant institution, Cornell was built on the promise that knowledge generated on campus carried an obligation to reach the people beyond it. Through our major medical center and tech entrepreneurship campus in New York City, extension offices in every county of New York, veterinary hospital and diagnostic center, and law and policy clinics, Cornell has sustained generational relationships with New Yorkers whose questions have shaped what our scholars

study, just as Cornell's research and discovery have directly benefited local families, communities, and economies. That reciprocity is central to the university's mission — where proposed solutions move to dissemination, and dissemination brings light to the next problems worth investigating. Today, that same commitment catalyzes Cornell's partnerships around the world. The American university is, by both tradition and design, a global university, and it must continue to cultivate the partnerships needed to solve global problems.

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. The pages that follow describe that work one mission at a time, examining undergraduate education, research and scholarship, public impact and community engagement, and graduate and professional education in an effort to dedicate every part of the university to the purpose of learning. It ends by contemplating the practices that hold the American university together: the civic bonds that foster solidarity and collective governance and the conditions that support real deliberation on the most difficult questions.

3. Undergraduate Education

3.1. Background

Universities across the country are grappling with how to adapt to the rapid rollout of artificial intelligence (AI). The power of new AI models is undeniable, even given their equally undeniable limitations — an uneven intelligence that generally requires human supervision in order to create reliable results. The most immediately obvious disruption lies in the ways that AI's ability to generate work at the level of a college graduate or beyond has undermined traditional modes of assessment that rely on work done outside the classroom.[26] The rapid advance of AI has also raised questions about whether universities are adequately preparing students for an AI-infused workplace. Universities face a real challenge: navigating the opportunities and harms of AI in education is a tightrope walk that must be executed while the technology continues to change rapidly, and many of its eventual effects are as yet unclear.

But advances in AI do not just introduce practical challenges for universities. Because AI can engage in forms of knowledge work, it raises existential questions about the purpose and value of universities: can and should professors be replaced by automated teachers? What should students learn at a time when AI agents can produce knowledge outputs that compete with college graduates? What jobs should universities be preparing graduates for, given possible changes to white-collar work as many workplaces adopt AI tools? What is the value of a university credential if the outputs on which students are assessed may have been produced by AI tools? What is the point of having a university education at all, if a person can, in principle, educate themselves at home using AI as a tutor?

While AI has made these questions newly urgent, answering them requires grappling with deeper, longer-standing ones: What is a university actually for? What should students learn there? What is the value of an education? These questions predate AI and demand a broader answer. Universities cannot simply react to AI — or whatever technology disrupts them next — by scrambling to defend their value each time. They must instead articulate what their undergraduate education is worth in the first place and shape their offerings to deliver on that answer.

The committee's approach to grappling with this question starts with the recognition that learning is at the heart of the university. For undergraduates, this learning plays a

[26] Edward C. Watson and Lee Rainie, *The AI Challenge: How College Faculty Assess the Present and Future of Higher Education in the Age of AI* (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2026), https://www.aacu.org/research/the-ai-challenge; Edward C. Watson and Lee Rainie, *Leading Through Disruption: Higher Education Executives Assess AI's Impacts on Teaching and Learning* (American Association of Colleges & Universities and Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center, 2025), https://www.aacu.org/research/leading-through-disruption.

transformative role in their lives. For most of them, it is not only a time of intellectual advancement; it is the time in which they make their transition to adulthood.

Cornell and many other American colleges and universities have, over the past century and a half, evolved toward a distinctive format for undergraduate education: students commit to (roughly) four years of study living on or near the campus of the university. This model, which we call the residential campus model of higher education, does not describe all American universities, and it is not the path pursued by all undergraduates in the U.S.[27] It is, however, the model that is most familiar to Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University and many of its stakeholders. More importantly, it is the model which may be most vulnerable to AI, as well as the other disruptors that initiated this report. Thus, while we hope that our diagnoses and recommendations may be more broadly useful, it is four-year residential colleges and universities that are the primary subject of this analysis of undergraduate education.

It is worth recognizing that the residential campus model is expensive, in contrast to the more commuter-oriented model of many European universities, among others. Even if the costs of living on or near campus can be controlled and minimized, students who enroll in college full-time for four years pay an opportunity cost by foregoing the option to work full-time during that period. They are paying up front for an education, with the expectation that this commitment will pay back for them over their careers.

Although costly, for many decades this model has been both successful and appreciated. The American residential undergraduate model has thrived as a rite of passage, a foundation of lifelong connections, a profound educational accomplishment, and a boon to American industry, civil society, and prosperity. A college education was a key factor in rising social mobility for many Americans since World War II and the GI Bill. As recently as 2020, there were bipartisan efforts to expand financial aid in order to put a residential college education within reach of more families.[28] Higher education enjoyed broad trust from the public until only recently, as discussed in section 2.2.

This past success does not guarantee that the residential model will continue to be widely valued. Indeed, there has been a national conversation emerging as to whether a college education is worth the cost. It is clear that the time is ripe for undergraduate education to receive a critical reexamination. When it is working correctly, the residential model provides an

---

[27] Melanie Hanson, "College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics," Education Data Initiative, March 27, 2025, https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics.

[28] Hugh T. Ferguson, "Congress Releases Bipartisan Year-End Spending Deal, FAFSA Simplification, COVID Relief, and Other Student Aid Provisions," National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, December 21, 2020, https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/24271/Congress_Releases_Bipartisan_Year-End_Spending_Deal_FAFSA_Simplification_COVID_Relief_and_Other_Student_Aid_Provisions.

education that is uniquely transformative for the student,[29] in line with the views of John Dewey and many others in the American education tradition.[30] It challenges the student intellectually, socially, and personally, while encouraging them to grow into an individual who is simultaneously more worldly and more grounded. It inspires their curiosity to simultaneously ask: "How does the world work?" "What is good and bad about it?" "Who am I?" and "What is my place?" This transformative growth, when achieved, is beneficial to the student and those in the student's life. It helps them perform well at professional and personal duties, and it helps them serve their families, communities, and nation.

This transformation does not, however, happen naturally. The student must choose to undergo it, and the university must identify the conditions that, for each generation, give students the best chance of true and lasting metamorphosis. It follows that when universities fail in assisting student transformative growth, students, parents, employers, and the general public will notice, and the value of the college experience will come under question. Next, we examine what stakeholders are noticing.

3.2. What We Heard

In this section, we describe key themes from our discussions with stakeholders. Our work here draws on the broad range of stakeholder discussions held by the full committee. We supplemented these through targeted outreach to specific groups relevant to undergraduate education. This included soliciting direct feedback from Cornell's Undergraduate Education Associate Deans Council, University Student Services Leads group, and an advisory panel focused on undergraduate teaching. Student voices came from a range of sources, including two committee-hosted events: a debate on AI in education and a panel discussion that included time for students to share what they wished their professors understood. The Cornell Political Union also provided student feedback by inviting committee members to attend a debate on the future of higher education. A first-year student perspective came from participants in the Meinig Family Cornell National Scholars Freshman Forum, where students researched and presented on several key questions from the committee throughout spring 2026. To solicit perspectives from students in their senior year, written feedback on the committee's preliminary framework on undergraduate education was submitted by over one hundred seniors enrolled in AMST 2001: The First American University, a course about Cornell's history. Students in the class also participated in a speculative futuring exercise to inform the committee's work. Committee

[29] See: Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Josef Sorett and Jonathon Kahn, "A Certain Amount of Bravery: What It Takes to Restore Student Trust," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 16, 2026, https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2026/07/16/formation-and-restoration-student-trust-opinion.

[30] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). We are grateful to several stakeholders who pointed out the link between our recommendations and Dewey's philosophy of education.

members also met twice with a group of student leaders in a senior honor society. The committee further benefited from university admissions professionals reaching out to provide insights about their work. See Appendix D for more information on stakeholder engagement.

Skepticism about the value of an education

The area in which we received the most frequent and consistent feedback, with the same response from diverse stakeholders, was the cost of residential higher education. A general theme of our conversations across students, parents, government leaders, and policy analysts was that college is too expensive.

Stakeholders raised related concerns that the economic benefit provided by the undergraduate degree no longer justified the cost. Many stakeholders worried about the impact of AI, noting that AI was able, or would soon be able, to replicate many of the core skills college graduates were taught, such as reading texts and writing about them, responding to questions that demand complex technical knowledge, and writing computer code. Thus, they quite logically feared that the jobs that the university was training students for would simply not exist by the time they were ready to graduate, and the funds they spent on their education would have been squandered.

Fears about AI were not the only force driving concern over what many stakeholders termed return on investment, or ROI — i.e., the economic value that could be expected given the investment of money and time into a degree. Skepticism around the value of college took two broad forms. One focused on upward mobility in the American economy in general. For generations, college was seen as the ticket to the middle class. A broad sense that the American economy has stagnated and that mobility is less possible today than in previous generations has made many skeptical of this "American Dream" narrative. For example, according to a recent Pew Research poll, home ownership is today much more difficult for young people to achieve than in the past, leading to a sense that the deferred gratification of the investment in a college degree was leading only to deferred frustration.[31]

The other form of skepticism was more jarring. Employers and those who represent their perspectives consistently reported that American graduates, whatever their specialized knowledge, arrive in the workplace without some of the professional capacities the workplace demands. This feedback, corroborated by a National Association of Colleges and Employers survey on employer perceptions of proficiency gaps among recent graduates,[32] centers not on

[31] Richard Fry and Blen Wondimu, "Buying a Home Has Gotten Harder for Young Adults in Most U.S. Metro Areas," Pew Research Center, June 24, 2026, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/06/24/buying-a-home-has-gotten-harder-for-young-adults-in-most-us-metro-areas/.

[32] Kevin Gray, "The Gap in Perceptions of New Grads' Competency Proficiency and Resources to Shrink It," National Association of Colleges and Employers, January 13, 2025, https://www.naceweb.org/career-

disciplinary knowledge, but on the interpersonal and dispositional skills that allow that disciplinary knowledge to be deployed effectively. These include the ability to handle uncertainty and solve problems that do not have clear answers, a readiness to absorb critical feedback and recover from setbacks, and working in teams that require compromise with others who do not share their perspective or assumptions. While these capacities needed to thrive in complex organizations may seem mundane, employers report encountering them less reliably in new graduates.

The idea that students are graduating without essential capacities needed to thrive in the professional, adult world was also a theme of the feedback we received on non-economic topics. There was concern from some stakeholders that students were not receiving sufficient instruction in traditional American principles, among them the value of free speech. Contrary to our expectation, we did not hear many suggest that students were being "indoctrinated" into particular political ideologies. Rather, the concern seemed to be more the inverse: that university education was not providing enough of a foundation in civic principles that undergird a free, democratic society. Which principles these stakeholders thought were essential often depended on their political leanings, with some focused on freedom or classic ideals, others focused on remediating structural inequities, and yet others on collective duties to the environment. What struck the committee was less the predictable variation in which principles different stakeholders emphasized than the unexpected agreement beneath it: that preparing students for high-paying jobs, however well a university does so, is not sufficient. Societal and civic commitments also matter.

A disconnect between learning and felt economic pressures

The pressures associated with navigating an increasingly uncertain educational and economic landscape were also evident in students' own experiences. Consistent with national survey data,[33] students described experiencing an enormous amount of stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges. However, contrary to some public narratives that characterize students as entitled or "soft," the students we spoke with regularly connected their stress, anxiety, and related struggles to a rational economic calculation. Students frequently described being acutely aware of the cost of attending Cornell, regardless of their economic background or their access to financial aid. They also reported that the financial sacrifices they and their families were making were shaping how they felt they should use their time at the university. Many students spoke of intense pressure to choose the "right" major, earn excellent grades, secure prestigious internships, gain admission to selective student organizations, and eventually secure the well-paying job that would justify the financial investment that had been made for them. It seemed

---

readiness/competencies/the-gap-in-perceptions-of-new-grads-competency-proficiency-and-resources-to-shrink-it.

[33] Daniel Eisenberg et al., *The Healthy Minds Study: 2024–2025 Data Report* (The Healthy Minds Network, 2025), https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2024-2025_HMS-National-Data-Report_Student.pdf.

they felt it was not only risky, but almost a dereliction of duty to themselves and those who had invested in them to deviate from this path.

This orientation was manifest in their approach to academics. It would be unfair and untrue to suggest that Cornell students are not curious or interested in learning. However, they told the committee that they and their peers often feel that indulging this interest is a luxury they cannot afford. It was hard to justify taking classes on topics that do not provide useful signals on their résumé and thus maximize their chance at a good job. Students are often so busy with the many activities they see as necessary for building a strong résumé that spending more time on classwork than necessary to achieve their target grade feels, to many, irrational. Not every student succumbs to this pressure. Some actively resist it, pursuing intellectual and personal interests in ways that do not optimize their résumé. But they described this resistance as requiring them to override an internalized pressure that makes exploratory courses feel irresponsible and non-strategic interests embarrassing.

Students also remarked on this pressure with respect to their use of AI. Almost every student we heard from expressed a sincere aversion to using AI to do their classwork for them. Nevertheless, the temptation to use it was great, particularly because they suspected other students were using it. To forgo its use would therefore cost them more time and result in a lower grade and thus reduce their competitiveness for scarce employment opportunities.

The culture and practices of student-run clubs provide the starkest illustration of this ethos. Cornell students, from a diverse set of backgrounds, described a ruthless club culture. These clubs have become extremely selective, with extended interview processes to discern new members. Students described these processes as extremely stressful, and yet also essential, since selectivity is a feature, not a bug, of the system. Membership in selective clubs is a way students differentiate themselves from their classmates in the competition for future employment. We note this issue is not exclusive to Cornell.[34]

Faculty responses reflect students' pragmatic attitude to the educational experience. They indicate that students often seem checked out of their classes, doing what is required to get the best possible grade, but not engaging with the material for the sake of learning. In this landscape, the undermining of traditional modes of assessment by the arrival of AI technologies that can do students' work for them is particularly disruptive.[35] Faculty report a sense that they

[34] Rose Horowitch, "The Perverse Consequences of the Easy A," *The Atlantic*, August 28, 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/08/harvard-college-grade-inflation/684021/.

[35] Edward C. Watson and Lee Rainie, *The AI Challenge: How College Faculty Assess the Present and Future of Higher Education in the Age of AI* (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2026), https://www.aacu.org/research/the-ai-challenge; Edward C. Watson and Lee Rainie, *Leading Through Disruption: Higher Education Executives Assess AI's Impacts on Teaching and Learning* (American Association

have been left to deal with this situation individually but need broader institutional support in the form of clear policies and enforcement backing. Faculty have also noticed that they are in an arms race among courses for student attention. If they do not reward students for basic elements of course engagement — such as attendance or preparatory reading — students allocate their effort and attention to the courses that do. Faculty report intense pressure in their interactions with students about grades, with students often seeing grades below an A as an existential threat to their life path — and not without justification, given the importance of GPA for professional school applications. They report this pressure is compounded by the role of student evaluations in faculty review and promotion that disincentivize rigorous grading, as well as a customer-service dynamic driven by the cost of an education that leads to an expectation of good grades in return for the high price charged.

Ironically, the flattening of distinction between students in assessment that results from this dynamic has exacerbated the highly competitive club culture. Because students are keen to distinguish themselves from their peers, as grades become less distinctive, competitive assessment moves to the clubs.

These examples highlight a tension that external observers rarely see. From the outside, some observers see student mental health struggles and higher grades as signs that students have become less resilient and universities overly accommodating. But students and faculty describe a different dynamic, in which student behavior and stress levels are driven by real-world pressures that produce an intense focus on achieving what students understand to be the prerequisites for future success: exceptional grades and strong credentials. To do otherwise would be to squander their financial investment.

At the same time, our conversations suggest that there is a gap between what many students believe is required for future success and the broader set of capacities sought by employers. Many students perceive extraordinarily high academic performance as essential to securing future opportunities and justifying the cost of their education. Employers emphasize a broader portfolio of capabilities, including adaptability, resilience, communication, collaboration, and effective project management. Viewed in this light, student behaviors that are understandable responses to academic and career pressures may not align with what employers want. For example, faculty report that some students experience negative feedback as existentially threatening, making it difficult to use criticism as an opportunity for learning and improvement. They also describe challenges around deadlines due to students' competing commitments, including frequent requests for extensions and difficulties communicating proactively when work cannot be completed on time. Yet the ability to manage commitments, communicate clearly about constraints, and navigate setbacks constructively is essential to their

---

of Colleges & Universities and Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center, 2025), https://www.aacu.org/research/leading-through-disruption.

future workplace success.

Drivers of disconnection

University experts on student development and campus life offered useful perspectives to explain this apparent disconnection. They pointed to a variety of changes in society that have altered the manner in which young people, particularly those who matriculate directly out of high school, enter a university. They describe students as academically more advanced than in prior generations, but developmentally younger.[36] Today's students, they argue, have grown up immersed in digital technologies and spent formative years during the pandemic in a significantly online social world.[37] As a result, they excel at quickly finding information but have difficulty engaging with sustained reading and complex arguments.[38] Stakeholders also describe technology as having rewired students' social lives, reducing capacities for face-to-face interaction and creating a need to curate an ongoing online persona, while simultaneously enabling stronger connections to their parents and life outside the university.[39] These trends, stakeholders argue, make it harder for students to develop close friendships, reinvent themselves, and make independent decisions — developmental opportunities that residential college life traditionally offered. These trends are now exacerbated by the AI technologies that can replace human relationships with a less-demanding artificial substitute. Some faculty, staff, and students argued that human relationships in education, such as between students and faculty or between peers, must be actively protected as AI becomes more accessible.

University experts and other stakeholders pointed out that students from marginalized and first-generation backgrounds face unique stressors in this regard. They are entering a new world, often very different from the one they came from, without ready access to grown-ups who can provide a road map. Moreover, they often face additional hurdles that make their path more tenuous, such as the anxiety and demands on student time produced by the bureaucracy of financial aid. Insensitive comments from faculty or peers remind these students that, from

---

[36] Kaylin Ratner, Erin F. Budesheim, Chelsea S. Alexander, et al., "Hurry up and Wait: Developmental Anxiety during the Transition to Adulthood," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 17, no. 3 (2025): 483–505. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12621.

[37] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017)

[38] Susanne E. Baumgartner, Douglas A. Parry, Ine Beyens, et al., "The Short- and Long-Term Effects of Digital Media Use on Attention," in *Handbook of Children and Screens: Digital Media, Development, and Well-Being from Birth Through Adolescence*, ed. Dimitri A. Christakis and Lauren Hale (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69362-5_5.

[39] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017); Colleen B. Doyle and Grainne M. O'Donnell, "The Theory of Emerging Adulthood: Parents' Experience of Their Child's Transition to College," *Higher Education Research and Development* 41, no. 2 (2022): 330–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1857342.

their perspective, they are not welcome on campus as others are.[40] Beyond these well-documented challenges, the committee also heard students speak about the pressure they feel, the sense that everyone at home is counting on them to succeed. The constant connectivity to parents and friends at home may exacerbate their sense of obligation.

Stakeholders told us that the culture of competitive university admissions has also played a role in their focus on doing things "the right way."[41] Campus experts explained that entering students are less likely to have had "real world" experiences in high school, such as a part-time job, since they have used their summers and extra time to obtain more academic expertise in preparation for college applications. Moreover, both students and campus experts described students, particularly at highly selective schools, as having been ruthlessly seeking visible signals of their talent since middle school. Thus, their ability to optimize performance with respect to a rubric, which faculty describe as detrimental to learning, is what has enabled them to gain admissions to the university.

Educating for an AI-inflected workforce

Students' interest in AI was consistent with this broader pattern of concern with future employability. Students (correctly) view facility with AI tools as an important skill that employers will expect. They were skeptical that faculty fully understood how AI would be used in future workplaces or were sufficiently open to incorporating AI in assignments to allow them to develop needed skills. Our conversations with faculty, however, suggested greater openness to experimenting with AI in teaching and learning than students often assumed. Faculty, students, and other stakeholders generally agreed that students need formal AI literacy education that teaches both productive use and critical engagement with AI. There was also general agreement that the goal should be thoughtful, discipline-sensitive integration of AI, rather than either blanket bans or uncritical adoption.

On this topic, there were significant tensions between stakeholders that reflect the complex balance of opportunities and risks to learning provided by AI. Some stakeholders emphasized how AI can enhance learning by providing personalized support, enabling deeper engagement, and freeing time for higher-order thinking, while others emphasized its capacity to undermine learning by providing shortcuts that prevent the development of foundational thinking skills and judgment.[42] A related tension concerned educational priorities: while some stakeholders

---

[40] Anthony Abraham Jack, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[41] Emily Sohn, "Perfectionism and the High-Stakes Culture of Success: The Hidden Toll on Kids and Parents," *Monitor on Psychology*, October 2024.

[42] Nataliya Kosmyna et al., "Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt When Using an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task," arXiv preprint, arXiv:2506.08872 (2025), https://arxiv.org/abs/2506.08872; Lixiang Yan et al., "Beyond Efficiency: Empirical Insights on Generative

emphasized the importance of preparing students to effectively leverage AI tools as a core professional competency, others stressed the need to ensure that the development of judgment, meaning-making, and other distinctly human capacities remain central. Finally, there were tensions about whether AI governance should be standardized university-wide or left to individual disciplines and faculty to decide.

But many stakeholders, including those with the most experience with AI in the contemporary workforce, emphasized that the skills needed to work well with AI and to thrive in an AI-inflected workforce are not limited to skills in *using* AI. Certainly, students need some AI-specific knowledge. But, these stakeholders argued, equally important is the development of sound judgment: coming up with the right questions, discerning what's valuable and reliable, turning critical analysis into action, all building on a solid, well-rounded basis of knowledge. For these reasons, several stakeholders, notably some employers whose workforces leverage AI, argued that the best education for AI is a liberal arts education that helps to develop such judgment.[43] Liberal arts help develop the broad knowledge, flexibility, and resiliency needed to adapt in an uncertain, rapidly changing work landscape. Traditionally, graduates might develop some of that judgment in the workforce, but when AI can cheaply replace an intern, some stakeholders warned, those graduates must attain a higher level of experience than before to even get in the door.[44] Moreover, in an AI-inflected workforce, stakeholders argued, human capacities like collaboration, imagination, creativity, and courage are more important than ever.

A paradoxical picture emerges from all these conversations. Many students are desperately trying to do what they believe is needed to get the high-paying job that would justify the enormous financial investment made in their education. This is driving unsustainable activity

---

AI's Impact on Cognition, Metacognition and Epistemic Agency in Learning," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 56 (2025): 1675–85, https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.70000.

[43] This contention is reflected in some recent public commentary, such as Greg Weiner, "The Best Education for Future Success Might Surprise You," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2026, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2026/03/02/ais-best-use-is-enhancing-human-judgment-so-study-liberal-arts/; Maureen Dowd, "What A.I. Kant Do," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/16/opinion/ai-liberal-arts.html; Blair Effron, "Why A.I. Can't Make Thoughtful Decisions," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/25/opinion/ai-human-judgment.html; Elwood Watson, "The Value of Critical Thinking: Humanities in a Technological Era," *Washington Monthly*, February 24, 2026, https://washingtonmonthly.com/2026/02/24/the-humanities-in-a-technological-era/.

[44] Indeed, there is some initial evidence that AI adoption is leading to the displacement of entry-level knowledge workers. Erik Brynjolfsson, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen, "Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence," Stanford Digital Economy Lab, November 13, 2025, https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publication/canaries-in-the-coal-mine-six-facts-about-the-recent-employment-effects-of-artificial-intelligence/; "Is AI Putting Graduates Out of Work Already?," The Economist, May 13, 2026, https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2026/05/13/is-ai-putting-graduates-out-of-work-already.

loads and high levels of stress. And yet, these sincere efforts may not work, because the strategies many students are using undermine the development of the broader capacities that employers expect, and that are becoming ever more crucial with the widespread adoption of AI. This insight leads to the committee's diagnosis and prescription for moving forward.

3.3. Diagnosis

As we listened to the challenges faced by students and faculty alike, we noticed a common thread holding together these seemingly disparate concerns. Undergraduate education at the multiversity has increasingly come to be regarded as a commodity, a basis for a set of transactions between parents, students, universities, and employers. The transaction is straightforward and intuitive: the student pays tuition to the university, the university gives them knowledge and a credential certifying it, and the student presents that credential to an employer in exchange for a job. We might call this a *transactional* approach to higher education. Its logic is straightforward and intuitive — and, we will argue, ultimately self-defeating.

The alternative is not to reject return on investment, but to understand the nature of its return differently. A *transformative* approach locates the value of education not in the credential — an external marker a student can display — but in the graduate's transformation: the capacities gained that enable contribution in the workplace, community, home, and world. Both approaches offer a return, but in different ways: the transactional approach provides a signal of learning, while the transformative approach provides the results of learning.

The transactional approach leads students to acquire legible credentials, such as grades, résumé lines, and membership in selective organizations, that signal their value to employers. But when every choice is weighed by whether it leads to a credential, students rationally avoid the very experiences that would develop their capability: intellectual risk-taking, unfamiliar challenges, open-ended exploration, and the productive failure that helps to develop sound judgment. A course outside one's major does not lead to a job in one's chosen field; taking a challenging course risks a lower grade. In a transactional model, curiosity is a liability. In a transformative model, intellectual adventures are not only possible, they are vital, since the new ideas encountered and the failures that follow bold choices lead to the cultivation of sound judgment and build the resilience employers are seeking.

Maximizing transactional return also leads to minimizing time on campus, and thus tuition costs. Indeed, we heard from students who were eager to get through college faster, in three and a half or even three years. But time on campus is critical to the transformative promise of the residential model. Time at the university gives students a chance to unlock their curiosity, to tackle problems of increasing uncertainty, to be put into challenging situations that lead to the mistakes and missteps from which they can grow. And, ironically, these are exactly the needed workplace skills that the transactional approach undercuts. It optimizes for signals of competence at the direct expense of competence itself. This is why employers report that

American graduates are increasingly arriving credentialed, but underprepared.

The transactional approach is further limited by its fixation on the moment of graduation. For transactional calculations, the first job and the salary it offers takes on substantial importance as the measure of an education. This is how students and some parents described the goal of education: to get a job at graduation. Students who have a job secured before graduation then feel they have succeeded in their undergraduate endeavor, whereas students who are still looking feel they are failing. This only makes sense if the leveraging of a credential for a first job is the measure of learning.

Yet most graduates will change jobs, and likely careers, numerous times.[45] More importantly, at each stage of their career, employers will be less concerned with the piece of paper they earned before their career started and more concerned with how well they actually perform in their roles. Promotions go to the most productive employees. Workers get poached to new firms because someone admires their *work*, not their degree. This is where a transformative education delivers its full return: the value of the learning it delivers continues to compound across a career and a life, long after the value of a signaling credential has stopped.

The return from a transformative education is not merely financial. Although public discussion about the value of an education often focuses on preparation for the workforce and eventual earnings,[46] that is not all the public expects of higher education. Across the ideological spectrum, there is substantial agreement that colleges and universities should help students to become better informed citizens, critical thinkers, and people who constructively contribute to their communities.[47] A transformative education produces graduates who can not only succeed economically but also have developed the wisdom to understand how their actions affect others and can contribute responsibly to the broader community.

The transactional model positions the student as a customer: they come to college to purchase

---

[45] Dan Doonan, Tyler Bond, and William H. Kenneally, "Debunking the Job-Hopping Myth: A Data-Driven Look at Tenure and Turnover Among Younger Workers," National Institute on Retirement Security, September 2, 2025, https://www.nirsonline.org/research/debunkingjobhopping/.
We note that, according to this research, this trend is not as new as is often assumed. New graduates have always changed jobs.

[46] Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[47] Kathryn Palmer, "Americans Recognize Nuances of Higher Ed's Value," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 17, 2025, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2025/07/17/americans-recognize-nuances-higher-eds-value; Noah D. Drezner, Oren Pizmony-Levy, and Aaron Pallas, "Americans' Views of Higher Education as a Public and Private Good" (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2018), https://www.tc.columbia.edu/pre-launch-archive/old-public-matters/reports/Research-Brief-2-v10102018.pdf; Gallup and Lumina Foundation, *Education for What?* (August 30, 2023), https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Education.for_.What_.pdf.

the specialized knowledge that they believe employers demand. They receive something external to exchange. A transformative model, in contrast, is learning-centered. It is based on the premise that the full value of higher education is beyond a student's initial expectations. Students come to the university seeking a better future, but they cannot yet know which capabilities, perspectives, and habits of mind will ultimately matter most. Helping students discover and develop those capacities is one of a university's unique responsibilities. A transformative approach centers rigorous instruction, challenge, and growth as the fundamental duty of the university in a way that a transactional approach cannot.

The transactional model is also uniquely vulnerable to competition from artificial intelligence, particularly amid great uncertainty about how AI will affect the workforce.[48] Why should students pay professors to acquire knowledge that employers can obtain directly from AI? The premise of higher education in the age of AI must be that humans are responsible for something more than the ability to write a memo or produce code. People must be good at deciding what to do and why. They will need to figure out how to negotiate those whats and whys with other people. And they will need to be able to ask questions of the world and themselves that go beyond the ken of the training data on which AI has been built. Hence, one of the most pressing transformations an undergraduate can undertake at a time when AI is being rapidly adopted is the cultivation of sound judgment. This capacity is what will justify a human's seat at the table, and this is what a transformative education builds.

Our analysis to date might be taken to suggest that the transactional orientation to education has been imposed on universities from the outside. But universities have themselves contributed to its development. An admissions landscape across highly selective universities that rewards competitive signaling trains students to think transactionally for years before they arrive (see section 3.7). The high price of tuition naturally produces an expectation of proportional, measurable return (see section 3.8). And the structural conditions of the modern research university make transformative education difficult to provide, even for faculty deeply committed to it.

---

[48] David Autor, "The Labor Market Impacts of Technological Change: From Unbridled Enthusiasm to Qualified Optimism to Vast Uncertainty," NBER Working Paper No. 30074 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2022); Peter Dizikes, "Daron Acemoglu: What Do We Know about the Economics of AI?," MIT News, December 6, 2024, https://economics.mit.edu/news/daron-acemoglu-what-do-we-know-about-economics-ai; Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne, "Generative AI and the Future of Work: A Reappraisal," Oxford Martin Working Paper Series on the Future of Work, Working Paper No. 2023, preprint, October 9, 2023, https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/publications/generative-ai-and-the-future-of-work-a-reappraisal; Leslie Willcocks, "Robo-Apocalypse Cancelled? Reframing the Automation and Future of Work Debate," *Journal of Information Technology* 35, no. 4 (2020): 286–302, https://doi.org/10.1177/0268396220925830; Valerio Capraro, Austin Lentsch, Daron Acemoglu, et al., "The Impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence on Socioeconomic Inequalities and Policy Making," *PNAS Nexus* 3, no. 6 (2024): pgae191, https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae191.

At their best, research universities integrate learning across the classroom, lab, and studio. This model provides students access to cutting-edge knowledge and experiences creating scholarship, fosters understanding not only of what we know but how we know, and develops awareness of the forms of judgment needed for principled truth-seeking. But at their worst, heavy faculty workloads and the fragmentation of attention between many competing responsibilities challenge even the most dedicated faculty to maintain a focus on transformative education.

When teaching and research come into conflict at a research university, tenure-track faculty members may squeeze undergraduate education between research activities that are more highly rewarded in promotion and in disciplinary circuits of prestige. Tenure-track faculty have generally not been systematically trained as educators; an issue also addressed by our subcommittee on graduate and professional education in chapter six. There is little structural incentive, post-tenure, to excel at teaching other than the pressures and rewards offered by interaction with students themselves. Many faculty reported that the use of student reviews for contract renewal and promotion created perverse incentives to cater to what students want rather than give them what they need. At many research universities, a substantial share of undergraduate teaching is done by non-tenure-track teaching faculty, including adjunct faculty. During the fall semester of 2025, 49 percent of Cornell's undergraduate courses and 38 percent of graduate courses were taught by non-tenure-track faculty.[49] These faculty are deeply committed to teaching, but they have less job security than tenured faculty, and their promotions and contract renewals are more reliant on student reviews. Cornell, in particular, provides strong teaching support services and a growing community of practice, but these are generally used by those who already care about teaching. Across higher education, there are few mechanisms to hold post-tenure faculty institutionally accountable for poor teaching. These structural factors mean that faculty do not always prioritize undergraduate education, and those who do may struggle to implement the educational practices they believe to be best for students. What is remarkable is that even under these incentive structures, many faculty remain deeply committed to classroom instruction as a vocational value, and the quality of instruction across the university remains genuinely high.

The transactional approach to undergraduate education is not the fault of any single actor. It is the product of converging forces, including economic pressures that make investing in education feel like a gamble, cultural shifts that frame education as a private commodity, and institutional structures that make transformative teaching difficult even for those committed to it. The remainder of this chapter will examine what universities can do in response to these pressures to make undergraduate education genuinely transformative for all its students.

[49] We note Cornell has resisted the broader trend to "adjunctification" by giving teaching faculty multi-year contracts and possibilities for promotion.

3.4. Transformative Education

A transformative approach to higher education must center on the integration of knowledge and experience, helping students to grow wise and become more capable. It is an education that develops the capacities needed to work effectively with AI by being resolutely human-centered. It develops 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 in the face of this uncertainty. These graduates will have the capacities and dispositions needed to lead responsibly, and the social and emotional skills to engage with others across significant differences in identity, experience, worldview, and values, and to navigate the conflict that will inevitably result. This is what employers will pay them for, this is what society needs from them, and this is what they need for themselves.

Some students already arrive at this destination, through their own initiative and through mentorship by staff and faculty invested in transformative outcomes. The task of a transformative education is to deliver universally on what these students demonstrate is possible, by designing an educational environment in which these transformative capacities are cultivated in every student.

A transformative education requires clear focus on developing four critical student capacities: sound judgment, constructive work across differences, civic-mindedness, and meaning-making.

Sound judgment

In an age of profound uncertainty, students must be able to confidently navigate unpredictable situations. By their nature, these situations do not come pre-packaged as problems of subject matter (e.g., chemistry, finance, or ethics), nor do they come with pre-defined rubrics for evaluating potential responses. When graduates face these situations, whether in professional, personal, or civic life, they need sound judgment: the intellectual capacity and emotional fortitude to make informed, ethical decisions in situations where rules do not neatly apply and any decision will necessarily have downsides. Sound judgment thus necessarily integrates intellectual, social, and personal concerns.

Sound judgment is grounded in a solid foundation of domain knowledge and critical thinking. But it requires more: *constructive* thinking that pushes beyond critique toward creation.[50] This includes defining the problem and choosing between imperfect alternatives, each of which has downsides. The best technical solution may be the most expensive; the easiest solution to implement may be the riskiest. It is impossible to weigh trade-offs if one does not have the underlying knowledge to identify them, but naming them is not the only task. Learning to weigh them, to make complex evaluations that integrate questions of what, who, and why

[50] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938); Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961).

across domains, is equally essential. A transformative education does not simply help students see what is wrong with the world; it trains them to make it better. This requires courage, tolerance of failure, and the willingness to be wrong.

Graduates who have cultivated sound judgment will not only be hired to do jobs; they will excel at them. They will, in particular, excel at deploying AI as a tool. One key to working well with AI is similar to the key to working well with others: being clear about exactly what you want and communicating it clearly.[51] Graduates with this capacity will define tasks for AI, evaluate its responses against the needs of the situation, and learn to decide when and where one should not send a machine to do a human's job.

Even at a moment when universities are scrambling to adapt to this immediate disruptor, we should recognize that this is unlikely to be the last technology in the coming decades that will have significant consequences for universities' functioning. It is thus valuable to not only consider AI specifically, but to think more generally and more intentionally about technology use, its effects on learning in and beyond university communities, and how to learn from this moment to make the cultivation of sound judgment more resilient in the face of future rapid technological change.

No one can learn sound judgment overnight, or without making mistakes. To learn sound judgment, students must be put into situations that stretch their existing capacity: problems that feel hard to solve, trade-offs that are painful to face. Then, through repeated practice that develops their creativity, curiosity, resilience, and fortitude for making hard choices, they find and enhance their capacity for doing so.

Constructive work across differences

Graduates will enter a vast, interconnected and multipolar world in which they must work with people who differ fundamentally from themselves. Such differences can lie in identity, experience, background, worldview, and values, as well as in personal working styles and communication preferences. To succeed and thrive in that world, graduates must have the capacity to engage productively with such differences: to recognize, accept, and even value these differences.

The reality of difference also requires students to learn how to navigate conflict. Disagreement is an inevitable feature of human society, so graduates need skills to engage with it constructively. These skills are not only valuable for society but also named by employers as crucial to professional success.

---

[51] Keith Ferrazzi, "We Interviewed A.I. Agents. They Nailed Your Co-Workers' Worst Habits.," *New York Times*, July 24, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/24/opinion/ai-workplace-manager-teamwork.html.

This capacity must be learned. A common misconception is that the ability to work across differences is a generic call to "be nice." In practice, the challenge is more demanding. As we describe in chapter eight, sustained engagement with others whose point of view challenges one's values is difficult and does not call for a uniform response. Navigating these challenges calls for a delicate balance of empathy, emotional regulation, rigorous evaluation, and deliberative self-reflection. Sometimes the answer will be to tolerate, sometimes to negotiate, sometimes to change one's own mind, and sometimes to confront. The skill lies in seeing these as possibilities, weighing the consequences of different responses, and exercising sound judgment about what the situation needs.

Graduates who have wrestled with these challenges, and learned to do so productively, will be able to keep their heads and proceed wisely when they inevitably face these challenges beyond the university. But transformation is, by definition, an uneven process. Students should be expected to struggle with these challenges and sometimes fall short as they develop the habits of mind needed to navigate engagement across differences with judgment and maturity. The role of education is not to eliminate such failures, but to help students learn from them and grow beyond them.

Civic-mindedness

A transactional approach to education frames it as a private good realized in the personal, financial advancement of the student. But education should not be only a private good. Graduates who have learned only how to succeed individually, but not how to sustain the communities around them — familial, local, professional, civic — will find those communities withering. And it is not only financial opportunity that disappears with them, but much of what makes a life worth living: relationships of trust, shared purpose, and the civic foundations on which even individual prosperity depends.

Fostering this civic orientation does not mean teaching students the "right" way to think or act according to a preferred political or moral perspective. A transformative education is premised on developing sound judgment, not on delivering correct conclusions. Students must ultimately decide for themselves how to act in the world. What the university owes them is the capacity to reason well about what their choices mean — for themselves, for others, and for the communities on which they depend.

This is an area where universities have a particular obligation to the public's trust. It is a responsibility of universities to ensure that each generation of graduates is civically engaged. Any university that boasts or claims to prepare students to move into positions of influence owes it to the public to educate them, so that they can best contribute to society, not simply seek a high income. If universities in the U.S. fail in this educational mission, they weaken civic life by producing a generation unprepared for the responsibilities they will later take on.

Meaning-making

Meaning-making involves knowing one's values and how to put them into action, as well as developing a sense of purpose that provides an internal compass to guide one through life after college. This capacity is crucial because it enables the consideration and integration of academic content, including both specialized knowledge and ethical considerations — into personal moral systems.

The ability to make meaning in a messy, rapidly changing world also gives students the capacity to support their own resilience through difficult times. Graduates who know what is fundamentally important to them, and why, will have a stronger ability to respond to life's challenges, be they personal, social, or professional.

The path to building this capacity is the most formidable for students. It requires that they be *deeply challenged*. A person cannot know what is most important to them if these core ideas have not been questioned. If a student is never asked to defend an idea or value they have taken for granted, how do they know if they really believe it? How will they know how to defend it? How will they learn to manage their intellectual and emotional responses to such challenges?

What all these capacities share is a need for transformative growth, produced through the regular exposure to productive but regulated stress — the kind that enables them to grow rather than to avoid in the face of challenges.

3.5. Recommendations

Many educators will welcome, but be unsurprised by, the preceding analysis. A transformative approach to education is not a new idea; it recalls John Dewey's growth-oriented philosophy of education, developed during an earlier period of deep social, economic, and technological change, which has had a lasting influence.[52] At one of our committee's town halls, an attendee described the committee's suggestions for undergraduate education as "mother's milk."

But the current moment requires an intentional and purposeful commitment to a transformative education, in the face of the many societal pressures that push towards transactionalism, including economic uncertainty, the rising cost of education, legitimate anxiety about AI and the labor market, and structural conditions of the university itself. These forces are real, and they are not going away. A transformative education requires a deliberate, intentional pedagogical structure to foster transformative capacities, even in the face of pressures that work against them.

In this section, we set out the foundational commitments required to re-center transformation in

[52] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004); John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

the undergraduate experience. These operate at the level of principle rather than specific policy or structure, but they are not optional. Without them, efforts at reform will address symptoms while leaving the underlying transactional dynamic intact.

Promote sound judgment through whole-person education. Sound judgment — the ultimate aim of learning in a human-centered university — cannot be cultivated through intellectual training only. Sound judgment demands not only rigorous thinking, but the social and personal capacities that allow that thinking to be applied constructively, in situations of uncertainty, and with accountability to others. These social and personal capacities include:

- **Connection**: the capacity to develop deep, multidimensional relationships built on humility, empathy, effective communication, and the development of shared values and goals.
- **Pluralism**: the ability to navigate consequential differences constructively. Pluralism is the capacity to engage those differences thoughtfully, seeking understanding, cooperation, and progress where possible, while recognizing that some disagreements will remain unresolved.
- **Leadership:** the responsible exercise of influence, grounded in integrity, service-mindedness, ethics, and accountability rather than the accumulation of power or resources.
- **Resilience:** self-discipline, self-care, and effective management of setbacks, uncertainty, and change, which set the stage for healthy success in and beyond the university.
- **Flexibility**: the ability to fluidly respond to changing circumstances, roles, and workplace demand over the course of one's career; it involves curiosity, knowing how to learn, and creativity.
- **Courage**: the mental and emotional habits needed to accept and work through the challenges that produce growth, fostered by repeated exposure to tolerable levels of discomfort.
- **Self-knowledge:** the capacity for honest self-reflection, enabling individuals to recognize their strengths, address their limitations, and act in accordance with their values.

These skills are not separate from intellectual development; they are the conditions under which intellectual development becomes sound judgment. Their integrated cultivation is not a new goal for higher education, especially in the residential model. But it is now challenged by many pressures, including the economic uncertainty that drives students toward narrow credentialism, institutional fragmentation, and the temptation to outsource the challenges of learning to AI. Integration must therefore become a deliberate, institution-wide pedagogical commitment instantiated within the curriculum.

Example 1: Rethink lateness policies.
Undergraduate students regularly request extensions or alternative testing arrangements,

including outside formal accommodation processes. In a traditional model of higher education, instructors may see these requests as primarily administrative burdens that require extra time and are not germane to the instructor's domain expertise. A plant scientist wants to talk about plants, not make-up exams.

In an integrated, whole-person approach to education, however, instructors see the problem instead as an opportunity for learning and development. Problems in meeting deadlines often arise from challenges in navigating competing priorities, assessing workload, anticipating expectations, and adapting to personal and academic circumstances. These capacities are not separate from academic success; they are part of the judgment and self-management that students are developing through the course of their education.

Developing this judgment requires integrating intellectual, social, and personal understanding: What does the work actually require, and what will it take to complete it? What does the instructor expect, and by when? What are the student's own capacities, commitments, and constraints? Seen this way, course policies can and should be designed to not only manage logistical issues, but to target these learning goals. For example, students may be required with a late submission to also submit meta-cognitive reflections on the difficulties encountered in getting the work done. Policies that permit a limited number of late submissions could require students to declare in advance when they will use that flexibility and how many additional days they expect to need. Such a requirement shifts the focus from merely excusing lateness to developing the ability to recognize emerging problems, revise plans, and communicate expectations to others. Lateness then becomes an opportunity to develop intellectual, social, and personal capacities, rather than just a rule to comply with, or to fail to do so.

Example 2: Create shared developmental models for classroom expectations.
In an education that fosters integrated capacities, students are not approached simply in terms of their current habits and abilities, but as developing individuals with significant potential for growth. Faculty take responsibility for using the full range of challenges that emerge routinely in the classroom as opportunities to spur that growth. Such growth is not limited to a single classroom but occurs across them. For example, an institution can identify a set of developmental expectations over the four years that a student is expected to attend, and build the skills needed to meet those expectations systematically into the curriculum. In a first-year course, students may have more flexibility over their deadlines and spend more time on developing basic abilities to work in teams. In a fourth year course, they may have less flexibility over deadlines and have assignments that develop more advanced teamwork competency.[53]

[53] At Cornell, developmental models for the classroom could build on the groundwork laid by the First Year and Sophomore Experience framework: https://undergrad.cornell.edu/who-we-are/collaborative-initiatives/first-year-sophomore-experience/.

Integrate the learning environment across classroom and campus life. The integration called for in our first recommendation faces a significant structural obstacle. As universities have grown in scale and complexity, they developed a division of labor for these skills. Faculty are in charge of intellectual development in the classroom, while student affairs professionals are in charge of social, personal, and professional growth outside of it. One consequence of this arrangement is that many faculty have little contact with staff or understanding of student life. This means, for example, that their sense of what students of a particular age, or in particular situations, can handle is underinformed. At the same time, the role of staff, particularly those who interact with students regularly, is seen as outside the educational mission. It can sometimes feel like there are two separate institutions stitched together, one organized around classroom instruction and one organized around the rest of students' lives.

To teach the whole person, faculty and staff must become instructional partners in a single, coherent learning environment. Students then learn everywhere, experiencing the challenges of transformative growth all the time. Faculty partner with career services to bring the fostering of needed professional skills into the classroom; dorm life becomes a site for learning more broadly than the major.[54] Even recreation supports transformative education, since such an education is deliberately demanding, and recreation restores the capacity to be challenged again.

Universities must see faculty and staff, in the words of one of our stakeholders, as "co-educators." This involves finding creative ways for them to work together and pool their expertise. This could include faculty working with staff to craft not only effective but instructive policies for late work or academic integrity — policies that staff can, in their student-facing roles, advocate for and reinforce. It could also include empowering staff to take on more explicitly instruction-oriented roles, and working to consistently align instruction across both environments. The capacity for pluralism, for example, could be fostered through shifting from self-selection of roommates to intentionally assigning heterogeneous groups to live together while supporting them in navigating the challenges that may result.

Example: Prepare for student self-doubt.
Consider a not uncommon occurrence: a student receives a poor grade in a highly competitive subject they had intended to pursue as a career. This grade causes a significant threat to their sense of self, a feeling that they have let down family members, leading to anxious or depressive feelings. In a transactional model, this creates a pressure for grade inflation which undermines student's return in the long run.

How might a partnership between faculty and staff as co-educators address this problem? First, the realization that students are going to receive poor grades and experience self-doubt could be

[54] Cornell's Learning Where You Live program is one model: https://lwyl.cornell.edu/.

explicitly built into the co-curricular life cycle. A program could be developed that connects students to more senior peers who can provide mentoring in response to negative feedback. While an individual student does not know whether they will receive a poor grade, the university, at the level of the population, does. It happens every year.

Indeed, some programs already do this — minority-serving student organizations at Cornell, for example, have long connected students to senior peers precisely to prevent attrition, and the evidence shows that such programs work.[55] But these programs are typically understood as safety nets to catch students who struggle. In an integrated model, they would not be thought of as safety nets beneath the learning obstacle course, but part of the course itself. They would be deliberately designed to teach the learning goals of resilience and connection and leveraged by faculty as a tool to support student growth.

When the university intentionally teaches how to respond to negative feedback, treating it as a predictable stage of development rather than an anomaly, it signals to students that struggle is a normal part of intellectual growth, not evidence that they cannot succeed. This normalizes the risk-taking that is required for a transformative education, since students who know that setbacks are anticipated and supported are more willing to attempt difficult things. Setting the expectation that setbacks are a normal part of learning is particularly important for students from underrepresented backgrounds, who may already question whether they belong at the institution. In turn, faculty can feel more comfortable giving the unvarnished assessments that students need. When students are prepared for setbacks as part of their education, honest feedback no longer derails them. It becomes an opportunity for growth that builds resilience.

Prepare students to exercise judgment about and beyond AI across the curriculum. AI is a challenge that reverberates across the curriculum because of its contradictory pressures on judgment. Using AI well demands sound judgment — knowing what questions to ask, framing them in terms an AI can effectively answer, discerning the shortcomings and limits of AI's answers, weighing whether AI should be used at all — but overreliance on AI can stunt the very development of that judgment. Education with and about AI must therefore focus squarely on fostering sound judgment about its use — not only in the abstract, but in the majors, recognizing that norms for and applications of AI will vary depending on discipline. One way Cornell is already addressing this is by developing three minors in AI that allow all students to add AI to their major, which integrate AI understanding with considerations of implications in

[55] Juan I. Venegas-Muggli, Carolina Barrientos, and Fernando Álvarez, "The Impact of Peer-Mentoring on the Academic Success of Underrepresented College Students," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 25, no. 3 (2023): 554–571, https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025121995988; Mariana Guerreiro and Saúl Neves de Jesus, "The Role of Peer Mentoring Program Elements in Promoting Academic Success and Preventing Student Dropout in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 49, no. 5 (2025): 671–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2025.2484768.

practice.[56] Cornell has also developed an AI literacy module for all its students that is built into existing courses, which provides resources and structure for students to grapple with what AI means for their own learning trajectory.[57] Efforts like these provide structured opportunities to reflect deeply on the hard questions that applying AI practically surface.

But the need to grapple with hard questions and come up with principled responses extends beyond AI. A transformative education integrates ethics, purpose, and self-understanding throughout the curriculum. Ethics courses, seminars which encourage students to consider multiple perspectives on life questions, and great books curricula all provide opportunities to help students to weigh their values and come to their own conclusions. But a transformative education does not confine ethics and meaning-making to a parallel stream, siloed from questions students will grapple with in their future work and life. This means restructuring majors to incorporate coursework in societal implications and ethics, whether as components within existing courses or through focused additions. Programs like Cornell's Biology & Society major, Bovay Program in the History and Ethics of Professional Engineering, and AI & Society minor demonstrate how disciplinary scholarship can be integrated with reflection on societal implications and policy and ethical issues.

Meaning-making is an area where integration across academics and campus life is particularly crucial, since it is where students' academic understanding meets their personal value system. Faculty bring their disciplinary expertise and history of judgment in their domain; student and campus life professionals bring developmental knowledge and a familiarity with the personal circumstances and the cultural, spiritual, and religious communities that strongly inform how students navigate meaning. For example, when a student chooses a major, they must reflect on how to weigh their personal values, their intellectual interests, family expectations, and market realities — considerations which are currently fractured across academic advising, personal advising, career services, and personal support communities. Major selection in a transformative education would be supported as a site where all these considerations come together.

Provide a hands-on, project-based education at a human scale. Sound judgment develops through practice, not transmission. If the goal of a transformative education is to cultivate integrated intellectual, social, and personal capacities, then the primary pedagogic model must put students in the position to practice these capacities together, by applying knowledge

[56] Cornell's minor in AI develops technical proficiency in AI, incorporating computational methods, ethics and policy, and the design of human-AI systems; the minor in AI in Society equips students to develop sound judgment about the ethical and societal dimensions and impacts of AI; and the minor in AI in Practice (currently under development) will support students in developing proficiency in using AI as a practical tool in their disciplines (for example, as businesspeople, doctors, or scientists)

[57] Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation, "AI Critical Literacy Program," accessed August 31, 2026, https://teaching.cornell.edu/generative-artificial-intelligence/ai-critical-literacy-program.

constructively, learning from and with others, and taking personal responsibility for what they do. This demands three things:

Dynamic, applied pedagogy

The majority of education should require students to put knowledge to use — demonstrating, building, arguing, and problem-solving, rather than passively receiving information. Such pedagogy can draw on many models, including the humanities seminar, engineering capstone projects, the studio model in the arts, lab courses, section-based teaching, flipped classrooms, active learning, peer tutoring and peer-led learning, learning through dialogue, and field-based courses. What they share is that students practice constructive engagement with uncertainty in every class session by applying knowledge to hands-on projects and cases. Assessment in such classes is more robust against the widespread availability of AI because students are demonstrating their capacities in action every time the class meets, rather than producing content that a machine can generate. These classes produce students who are prepared for dynamic interaction with co-workers and AI.

Education at a human scale

Sound judgment is interpersonal: it requires the willingness to risk being wrong in front of others, to hold and be held accountable, and to build the kind of trust that sustains honest intellectual exchange. Students cannot develop judgment, accountability, or the courage to think constructively in settings where they are consistently anonymous. Even though many instructors have invested significantly in active pedagogy at scale, attendance patterns suggest that many students do not experience large courses as sites of personal accountability.[58] The format can transmit knowledge effectively, but it is not enough to cultivate the interpersonal capacities that transformative education also requires. No student should go through their education without regular access to classes small enough to be personally known, especially in the first two years. Such settings create organic opportunities for personal accountability and for relationships with faculty, peers, and visitors to the university. They replicate, in structured form and across the university, the skills and connections students currently seek in competitive clubs.

Experiential learning

Flexibility, resilience, and the ability to exercise judgment in unfamiliar contexts develop through encountering the world beyond the classroom. A human-centered university leverages thoughtfully constructed and well-integrated mechanisms for experiential learning, such as engaged learning, co-ops, internships, gap years, study abroad, and periods of civic or national service. It treats these not as résumé items, but as structured opportunities to practice

[58] Rose Horowitch, "Even College Students Have Stopped Hanging Out," *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2026, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/08/college-loneliness-socializing/688307/.

constructive thinking under real conditions and to develop civic-mindedness.

Encounters across cultures are a particularly powerful form of experiential learning. Interaction with international classmates, cross-cultural collaborations, and study abroad experiences place students in situations where their familiar assumptions will be challenged, where students come to recognize the limits of their own thinking and must find ways to navigate them constructively. Such experiences cultivate flexibility, courage, and the capacity for constructive work across differences. Such encounters can also be constructed domestically, developing opportunities for students to learn in and from the diverse tapestry of communities across the U.S.

Educate through intentional development of human relationships**.** A transformative education that promotes deliberation and discourse toward the end of sound judgment is intrinsically based in relationships, rather than just transactional exchanges. By this, we mean that students, faculty, and staff do not relate to each other as parties to an exchange, with each seeking to extract value with minimum effort, but as members of a shared community who are mutually invested in a common goal. A student who sees a professor only as a source of grades, or a professor who sees students only as a source of evaluations, is reducing a relationship to a transaction. But meaningful relationships are crucial to a transformative education for a range of reasons. They provide the sense of belonging that enables students to take on the risks, challenges and missteps required for transformative growth. The capacity to build and sustain deep relationships is itself one of the core capacities of a transformative education. Additionally, the relationships formed during a student's time at the university become the social networks that sustain them across their lives and careers.

A university must intentionally identify and foster opportunities to develop meaningful personal relationships throughout the educational experience. This is done affirmatively, by identifying opportunities for relationships and building practices into curricular and co-curricular activities that emphasize relationships. It is also done negatively, by intentionally limiting practices, such as excessive reliance on technologies that substitute for in-person interaction, or group cultures, such as in student clubs, governance bodies, or collaborative projects, in which membership functions primarily as a credential rather than a site of genuine mutual commitment.

Example 1: Connect to the world of work by integrating alumni into the classroom.
Students need opportunities to connect their classroom life to the world of work and to better understand what that world requires of them. Faculty are not always best suited to provide this connection, since their own working experience is heavily academic. As the committee discovered repeatedly in stakeholder discussions, alumni are the natural connector between these two worlds, with a wealth of experience in the contemporary working world and an understanding of what the transition from academics to work requires. Programs to

systematically bring alumni into the classroom to share their experiences educate students while building relationships between them and potential employers and enriching relationships between alumni and the university.

Example 2: Make space to navigate and repair relational missteps.
Our committee heard concerns from stakeholders about both the silencing of unpopular views and the use of speech to intimidate or demean. These concerns were often framed as a question of regulation: what kinds of expression should be permitted, and what kinds should be sanctioned?

A relational focus to a transformative education, in contrast, emphasizes that students are going to make mistakes in how they communicate with each other. It is inevitable and in fact useful. The question, then, is how we ensure that students learn from these inevitable mistakes, and how they can grow from understanding the impact of their words on others, whether they have said something another person finds hurtful or whether they feel hurt by something said by another person.

If we focus on precisely naming what is and is not allowed, for the sake of reducing mistakes and justifying appropriate punishment for any offenders, these learning opportunities are lost. Students have learned to be quiet in order to reduce friction. Faced with the possibility of causing offense, they often approach interaction as though success depends on correctly identifying and following a set of social rules: a shifting informal, and largely invisible, rubric. The answer is not to make the rubric visible, but to replace it with growing judgment, and to enable the development of that judgment by creating room for mistakes. This allows students to develop the wisdom necessary to orient themselves to one another and become more thoughtful, socially connected adults. One example of how to do this is Haverford College's Peer Confrontation process, which requires students to work out conflicts and harms among themselves before enlisting aid from administrators.[59]

Show, not (only) tell — model the capacities that students need. Humans learn through a combination of instruction and imitation. Imitation and modeling are particularly important for the learning outcomes described above, since they involve knowing *how* to do things more than knowing *what* is true about them.

Modeling what we aim to teach requires everyone, including faculty, staff, and leadership, to think of themselves as role models for the capacities we aim to teach our students. For example, a faculty member who teaches a range of perspectives in their classroom models pluralism; a

[59] Haverford College Office of the Dean of the College, "Resolution Processes," accessed September 6, 2026, https://www.haverford.edu/deans-office/community-guidelines/student-conduct-resolution-guidelines-and-procedures/resolution-processes.

staff member who responds to student concerns by reconsidering policy models leadership; an administrator who acknowledges a mistake publicly models courage and self-knowledge. When a university community engages with each through constructive disagreement and evidence-based argumentation, it models the flexibility to be changed by a better argument. The more visibly and intentionally the adults around them practice what they ask students to develop, the more students are likely to learn.

This lens changes how we understand the role of faculty as experts at the university. If the goal of education is, as the transactional approach implies, domain knowledge transfer, then it is not clear why it must happen at a university at all. After all, domain knowledge can be conveyed by a variety of skilled instructors and, increasingly, by AI systems. But the distinctive value of the university lies in the integration of teaching with active research and with professional practice within a single learning ecosystem. This integration means that students regularly encounter professional judgment in many forms, both in and outside the classroom: a researcher modeling how to navigate genuine uncertainty to construct original knowledge; a practitioner modeling how to exercise judgment under real-world constraints and consequences; or a teaching specialist modeling how leadership entails mutual accountability. In a transformative education, each professor not only applies this judgment in their own practice but also intentionally models it for students.

Example: Share the messy path to expertise.
Faculty and staff are professionals who have developed judgment by navigating years of transformation through setbacks: intellectual wrong turns, professional setbacks, and hard-won changes in perspective. These experiences are usually invisible to students, who encounter only the polished result. But sharing how one has navigated failed hypotheses, misjudged collaborations, and mistakes made in overconfidence provides students with a vivid understanding of how sound judgment is developed over time. A faculty member who shares the story of a research project that failed because their initial framing was not rigorous enough, or because they miscalculated its constraints, is modeling the very self-knowledge, resilience, and intellectual humility they ask students to develop.

Rethink teaching supports and incentives. This report argues that teaching must be integrated, relational, hands-on, and at a human scale. Such teaching requires specific forms of institutional support, especially in the face of the many pressures we have previously detailed that work against a transformative education. Addressing the challenge of making transformative education truly central is a question of academic civics, described in chapter seven: What kind of an institution does a university aspire to be? How do faculty conceive of their roles and responsibilities in the institution?

Making a deep and consistent institutional commitment to excellence in teaching will require aligning practices of hiring, evaluation, promotion, compensation, and teaching assignments

with the commitment to transformative education. To develop a transformative approach to education, faculty must commit to a rigorous standard of excellence in undergraduate education, including investing in evidence-based approaches. Current incentives will need to be adjusted, and structured support made available to make it both possible and rewarding for faculty to engage in this work. Universities must consider the impact of the precarity of non-tenure track teaching on their faculty's ability to deliver a transformative education, and consider shifting teaching faculty after their first review to long-term rolling contracts that recognize their crucial role in the institution, provide enough security to build a life based on the institution, provide more academic freedom, and shift them from dependence on a customer-service model in teaching.

Universities will need to develop mechanisms to engage faculty to build modeling, teaching, and practice of the capacities required for sound judgment into the curriculum. Learning to teach in this way may involve substantial work on the part of faculty. Making this possible will therefore require creating the space and time for faculty, who are often already overloaded, to do this work. This could include better differentiation of what tasks are truly mission-critical, addressing bureaucratic burdens, producing default policies faculty can adopt as appropriate, and easing the transition through focused training. Making the shift to such a transformative education university-wide will likely require increasing the capacity of centers for teaching support.

Reclaim technology use and non-use as an institutional decision. Some uses of technology in education have been a boon, for example, by making accessible a range of learning resources that earlier generations could only imagine. Other uses, such as the ubiquitous use of phones and laptops in classes, are often more of a distraction from learning than a support.[60] The use of AI is the latest example of this tension between help and hindrance. Cornell is addressing this institutionally by supporting faculty to both "lean in" to AI (i.e., finding new ways to leverage it for teaching) and "lean out" of it (i.e., creating methods of teaching that circumvent challenges in learning and assessment produced by reliance on AI). This example illustrates a broader strategy for addressing the role of technology in a human-centered education. The choice of whether and how to use technology in classes must not be left to chance or to lobbying by students. It must be an intentional choice by the faculty teaching the class, driven by principled understanding of effective and non-effective uses, and supported institutionally. This support should include a university-wide policy that technology can only be used in a class when explicitly invited by the instructor.

[60] Reynol Junco, "In-Class Multitasking and Academic Performance," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 6 (2012): 2236–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.06.031; Faria Sana, Tina Weston, and Nicholas J. Cepeda, "Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers," *Computers & Education* 62 (2013): 24–31, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.003.

Example: Structure technological conditions to foster relationship building, not relationship avoiding. Long before they arrive on campus, many students have been immersed in communication technologies that displace face-to-face interaction. This creates challenges for the relational forms of learning that transformative education requires. But it is neither realistic nor desirable to eliminate it entirely, since the capacity for judicious use of technology is a core skill students must develop. We suggest that institutional approaches to technology use be guided by a principle of relationship enhancement. For example, a class that uses technology to help students meet new people or work in a team promotes the development of relationships. By contrast, when technology takes students' attention away from meaningful interaction with peers, faculty, or staff, it undermines the relational dimensions of learning that a transformative education must cultivate. The university can also provide opt-in social environments where students who value face-to-face interaction can rely on shared tech-free norms,[61] such as a "tech detox" pre-enrollment summer program that allows new students to build relationships outside of tech, eating clubs where tech is checked at the door, and optional tech-free dorms that students can choose to live in if they want to try a lifestyle based on a mutual commitment to in-person interaction.

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 a commitment to 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.

3.6. Roads That Should Not Be Taken

The committee's analysis of undergraduate education also encountered a number of pathways that, based on our diagnosis, do not offer a promising future for the American university.

Implement online-only education

Some stakeholders suggested that the American university move toward an asynchronous, online-only model of education. The appeal of this is straightforward: it can be offered at a much lower cost, and at a much larger scale, than the residential experience.

---

[61] Molly Worthen, "Why Universities Should Be More Like Monasteries," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/25/opinion/college-students-monks-mental-health-smart-phones.html.

The committee's view is that online education can be highly effective for certain educational purposes, particularly the acquisition of specific knowledge and technical skills. It serves learners well when the goal is targeted professional development: for example, some master's students, or working professionals seeking additional certification (see discussion of lifelong learning in section 6.2). But online education takes for granted that students have already established a foundation of the intellectual, social, and personal capacities transformative education aims to develop.

It is difficult to achieve the goals of a transformative education through online education. Sound judgment, the capacity to work constructively across differences, and personal resilience grow when we are known, make mistakes in front of others, and navigate the consequences of our actions as they unfold. It is hard to see how students can develop capacities like these if their only connection to a university is asynchronous and task-focused. Asynchronous learning also presumes skills like time management, meeting deadlines, and directing one's own development that transformative education directly cultivates. The deep relationships with faculty, staff, and peers that we have argued are essential to transformation require shared presence that online formats cannot easily replicate.

Shorten the path to degree

Another suggestion the committee heard was that the undergraduate experience should be shortened in order to reduce its overall cost. Clearly, there is no magic formula that suggests a transformative education requires four years; some residential universities require only three (e.g., Oxford and Cambridge). More fundamentally, the goal of transformative education is not to give students a certain number of credits that indicate a certain quantity of knowledge is transferred. The goal is to challenge them to expand their horizons and capacities and then give them tools and time to grow.

Thinking this way, we suggest that a transformative education should distinguish between time at the university and time to degree. Broadly, we think that time between initial matriculation and graduation should remain extended. This is a crucial time of life, perhaps the only time in most students' lives when they are old enough to face adult-level stress but typically uncommitted enough (e.g., to families or mortgages) to be able to take risks and allow themselves to grow. In this context, it may make sense to break up the time on campus, or to integrate internships and externships into the model, as is done on some campuses already.

However, we contend that the fundamental premise which often underlies education acceleration — that education is simply knowledge transfer whose time scale can be compressed without cost — is flawed. It presumes that the student enters the university with most of what they need to thrive in the world and that the vital capacities developed by higher education just grow naturally. Some students may have already received education in many of these capacities, such as those who have served in the military or received an associate's degree

prior to matriculation. Others can develop those capacities in alternative ways through instructional design, for example when three years of bachelor's work is sequenced with a one-year master's degree. It could possibly become true that all students enter college with many of these capacities, if a national service program were to require transformative experiences of *all* young people. As things currently stand, however, most 18-year-olds should not be expected to have the crucial capacities we have named, nor to be able to grow into them without an education that nurtures them directly.

Develop a unified core curriculum

Cornell is a famously decentralized university. The only requirements all students share are writing seminars and physical education courses. All other requirements are set by individual colleges. Questions about whether we should have a core curriculum, and what should be in it, arise perennially, and this acute moment of disruption is no exception.

Some stakeholders argued that the rapidly transforming workforce and the arrival of disruption through AI necessitates a shift from a narrow vocational focus to a more general, liberal arts education, which the university should support through uniform general requirements such as big idea or "great books" courses. Another argument was that college distribution requirements are incoherent across the university, creating unequal access to opportunity, leaving some graduates without key skills, and failing to provide a coherent intellectual foundation. Topics and skills stakeholders mentioned as needed in a core curriculum included critical thinking; writing and communication; AI literacy; ethics and moral reasoning; reading and engagement with texts; civic engagement and citizenship; research methods; race and equity; cultural, historical, and literary analysis; community engagement; foreign languages; and interpersonal skills. A few stakeholders called specifically for education in Western civilization, American history, and American democratic principles.

There are certainly compelling arguments for a core curriculum that all undergraduates share, as other universities' experiences with core curricula can attest. There are also key issues. A core curriculum emphasizes a specific process for students to reach key, university-wide learning outcomes. It then becomes the role of those courses to teach that specific aspect of the curriculum, with students required to enroll in those courses precisely because it is not expected they will develop this capacity in other courses. This encourages faculty to see the inculcation of these key capacities as something "outsourced" to the core curriculum, which is inconsistent with our emphasis on educating the whole person and integrating learning across curricular and co-curricular activities. Moreover, while stakeholders often hope that core curricula lead to deep engagement with particular topics or skills, the framing of core requirements encourages students to treat these courses transactionally, as a checklist that has to completed before they can study what actually matters to them. This suggests a "bold but optional" approach that offers, but does not require, a rigorous and credentialed path through particular competencies

that may be more likely to lead to actual learning.[62] Finally, we must recognize that the perennial call for required courses tends to chase shifting circumstances or political winds that demand now one, then another topic be added to what students are required to know.

The committee's overall sense is that Cornell's decentralized college structure should be seen as a feature, not a bug to be patched, as discussed further in section 7.8. It allows colleges to produce unique educational experiences that are tailored to their offerings and enables a degree of curricular innovation and experimentation that a fixed core curriculum can hinder. While some stakeholders argued that Cornell students share no experience but the swim test, the committee sees the experience of being part of a particular, focused college community as, in fact, the unique thing that all Cornell undergraduates share.

Nevertheless, the core concern stands: we must assure all Cornell undergraduates can acquire the skills the times demand. An elegant solution to this conundrum was proposed by the Meinig Scholars, a group of first-year students who worked with the committee to develop their own vision for Cornell's future. They proposed that rather than develop a shared curriculum, the university develop a shared competency framework that each college could implement as it sees fit. Sometimes a competency might be instantiated in a course, sometimes as modules within disciplinary coursework, sometimes through co-curricular offerings — but whatever the case, it would be tailored within the college's overall curriculum, rather than being grafted on externally.

Become more vocational

Some stakeholders suggested that American universities should reorient themselves toward vocational training, particularly at a time when AI is expected to take over many roles, particularly in the white-collar workforce. The committee believes that extending opportunities for vocational education could be a sensible policy for shaping the larger American educational ecosystem. However, this does not mean that shifting to vocational education is a sensible choice for American residential universities. The two educations are complementary, not interchangeable.

Vocational training — whether of surgeons, plumbers, or Ph.D. students — is a means to prepare people to perform well within a defined professional domain: to master its specific practices, to meet that field's established standards, and to develop expertise within that field. This is all important and necessary. Transformative education develops a broader set of capacities: sound judgment across domains, the ability to integrate divergent perspectives, civic-mindedness, and personal meaning-making.

These broader capacities become increasingly important as professionals rise up the ranks of

[62] This suggestion was made by Jenna and Benjamin Storey of the American Enterprise Institute..

organization. As they do, they will find themselves increasingly in contact with people from other professions and trades, people who were trained to think differently than they do — for good reasons. Leading and collaborating effectively across these boundaries requires the broader, integrated skills that a transformative education develops. This is not a shortcoming of vocational training; it develops other skills. In addition, vocational training prepares students for a profession as it currently exists. In a time of rapid AI-driven transformation, graduates prepared for current practices become vulnerable to obsolescence as those practices shift. Undergraduate education should not replace or compete with vocational training, but it must retain its own purpose, which complements vocational training rather than duplicating it.

Become less vocational (i.e., "return" to the liberal arts)

A contrasting line of feedback, particularly from stakeholders inside the university, urged us to reject the skill-based approaches that have grown on American campuses in recent years and return to an emphasis on the liberal arts. Indeed, in our draft preliminary frameworks, we stated that, in order to cultivate constructive engagement with uncertainty and educate the whole student, universities should lean into the liberal arts. We argued that the liberal arts cultivates well-rounded human beings by enabling students to develop flexibility and resiliency through exposure to different ways of knowing, to grapple with big questions, to explore meaning-making, and to foster wonder, creativity, and curiosity.

Some stakeholders pushed back, saying this amounted to selling old wine in new bottles. Universities never stopped teaching the liberal arts, they said, and yet still lost sight of transformative education. If the liberal arts are to be part of the solution, something about *how* they are taught — not merely *that* they are taught — must change. Here, we argue that the emphasis on the liberal arts must be *reinvigorated*, not merely restated.

In recent decades, under pressure to demonstrate economic relevance, the liberal arts have increasingly justified themselves through their role in developing analytical skills, broadly described as "critical thinking." The argument is that in reading and analyzing sophisticated literature or philosophy, students learn to build arguments, use logic, sort credible from non-credible claims, and identify what is relevant. This is a reasonable claim, but it undervalues the liberal arts in two important ways. First, this is not a distinctive advantage of the liberal arts — for example, business school case studies can teach analytical thinking too. Second, and more fundamentally, it ignores what the liberal arts were originally designed for: character development. They were intended to not only teach students to provide well-reasoned answers, but to force them to confront unsettling questions. Is what is right based on instinct or on principle? Does this text mean what it appears to mean, or is there another layer? Does it matter that a great writer was a deeply flawed person?

These are questions that do not have answers that can be deduced from first principles. They require students to consider, weigh, and choose; i.e., to practice sound judgment. The goal of

liberal arts education, understood this way, is not to permanently saddle students with doubt by being critical, but to help them develop, through repeated practice, their own robust capacity to understand, weigh, and defend judgments under genuine uncertainty.

A student in one of our feedback sessions illustrated this vividly. She described reading essential works of political philosophy and finding herself persuaded by each text in turn — only to be persuaded by the next, which contradicted the first. This feeling that the ground is always shifting, and yet has so many solid elements, is exactly what builds sound judgment. There is no formula. You have to consider, weigh, and choose.

We argue that this is the basis on which to reinvigorate the liberal arts: not as a return to a former curriculum, but as coursework that forces students to ask unsettling questions, develop cogent alternative answers, and practice choosing and defending them. This is the liberal arts understood as training in judgment, and at the core of the transformative education we have described.

This framing also, perhaps unexpectedly, addresses concerns we heard from multiple directions about what should be taught. For example, some stakeholders were concerned that we do not do enough to teach the value of American democracy and related classic principles and urged us to recommend more. Others were concerned that we would make recommendations that would stifle appreciation for diversity in the curriculum, particularly on subjects regarding marginalized identities or global cultures. Despite their apparent opposition, both groups seemed to share an underlying assumption: that a curriculum's purpose is to bring students to a particular set of beliefs. The committee argues the opposite. The purpose is to expose students to competing ideas and not let them settle on anything comfortable until they have good reasons — and the courage — to do so.

3.7. Admissions

Every fall, several million American high school students organize a substantial part of their adolescence around college admissions. When Americans talk of college admissions, they are often thinking of highly selective colleges. But only a tiny minority of American four-year colleges are highly selective: only 4 percent of four-year college students attend highly selective colleges with admission rates below 20 percent.[63] The average acceptance rate across four-year colleges, by contrast, is over 70 percent.[64] But the norms that these institutions establish radiate far beyond their own applicant pools, shaping the advice provided by teachers, guidance counselors, and the growing admissions-consulting industry, not to mention parents and

[63] Stig Leschly, "The Irrelevance of Highly Selective Colleges," Postsecondary Commission, September 18, 2021, https://postsecondarycommission.org/the-irrelevance-of-highly-selective-colleges/.

[64] National Association for College Admission Counseling, "Selectivity: Acceptance Rates at 4-Year Colleges," December 14, 2023, https://www.nacacnet.org/selectivity-acceptance-rates-at-4-year-colleges/.

caregivers. Ambitious high school students across the country choose classes, sit for elective examinations, and select extracurriculars with at least one eye on college admissions. As a result, admissions at American universities is not only a sorting mechanism for a small, consequential class, it is also a powerful force that itself shapes how millions of American teenagers spend formative years and influences who they are when they arrive on campus.[65]

American universities have therefore always had two investments in undergraduate admissions. The first investment is in the outcome: which students end up in the entering class and which do not. It is this investment, and the competition it sparks, that has largely preoccupied universities, shaped external rankings, and brought both joy and disappointment to families worldwide.

But universities are also secondarily invested in the admissions process itself, including not just its impact on public trust,[66] but how it shapes the American high school student. This investment has received far less national attention than the first. As detailed in section 3.2, the committee heard from faculty in particular that fewer young people are exhibiting traits like curiosity, the capacity to deliberate across differences, and the readiness to encounter new ideas and people that prepare them well for college — concerns that echo those that employers expressed about new college graduates. While we have described myriad factors contributing to this problem, it is difficult to avoid imagining that one of them is students responding to the incentives created through the system that selects them. For example, when faculty say that students seem more focused on grades than on developing their curiosity, it is hard not to see the competition for perfect grades that they went through to arrive on campus as part of the problem. Given the thoughtful, engaged students that the committee encountered in stakeholder conversations, it is unclear whether these traits are truly missing in today's students or instead opportunistically suppressed as unhelpful to getting them into college or ensuring their success once enrolled.[67]

It is important to note that the current system is not the result of a specific choice made by any individual institution, but rather an emergence of consistent practices across numerous institutions. Moreover, it is not without merit. The American model of university admissions, as

---

[65] Kaylin Ratner, Erin F. Budesheim, Chelsea S. Alexander, et al., "Hurry Up and Wait: Developmental Anxiety during the Transition to Adulthood," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 17, no. 3 (2025): 483–505, https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12621; Mitchell L. Stevens, *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[66] Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, *Perceptions of College Admissions Practices* (2019), https://apnorc.org/projects/perceptions-of-college-admissions-practices/.

[67] Kaylin Ratner, Erin F. Budesheim, Chelsea S. Alexander, et al., "Hurry Up and Wait: Developmental Anxiety during the Transition to Adulthood," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 17, no. 3 (2025): 483–505, https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12621.

it is practiced today, came together for good reasons. Holistic review in particular — weighing grades, essays, activities, and context together rather than ranking applicants by a single number — developed in part as a thoughtful response to the profound unevenness of American K-12 education. A test score or transcript alone cannot fairly compare an applicant from a well-resourced suburban school with one from an under-resourced rural or urban district. Admissions professionals the committee spoke with maintained, with real justification, that only an individualized, holistic process can account for that disparity while still identifying students prepared to succeed at a rigorous institution.[68] Because of uneven access to K-12 education, a process that focuses on ranked merit defined only in terms of attributes such as test scores, class rank, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses taken would likely lead to a class composed almost entirely of students from the top income quintile, raising issues of basic societal fairness while reducing the range of differences needed to foster learning.

American university admissions can also point to real successes achieved by the current model. Sustained financial aid expansion (as discussed in section 3.8), outreach to less resourced high schools, and holistic review itself have made many selective universities substantially more heterogeneous, across many different dimensions, than they were a generation ago. These efforts have been aided by the massive growth of applicant pools.[69] In particular, applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face many hurdles to achieving qualification for admissions to highly selective institutions (e.g., less resourced high schools, less access to college counseling). They are therefore proportionally less numerous in the application pool than applicants from wealthier backgrounds. Larger applicant pools have created more opportunities to identify and recruit these students. The progress that has resulted should not be minimized or undone; it has made important contributions by expanding who can realistically compete for admissions and by providing enrolled students with opportunities to encounter and learn from their differences in backgrounds and experiences.

But the same process that has produced these genuine gains has also produced unintended consequences that contribute to the current disruption and push against the central commitments of the renewed American university. An important driving factor is the widespread adoption of the Common Application, a shared online platform that allows students to apply to different colleges through the same application, rather than submitting a separate application for each. The Common Application has made applying to college dramatically easier, democratizing access to the process itself. But it has also dramatically reduced the effort for individual applicants to apply to many colleges. Application volume has

---

[68] We note there are also policy approaches that use non-holistic review to increase socioeconomic diversity, such as in Adam Kapor, "Transparency and Percent Plans," NBER Working Paper No. 32372 (National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2024), https://doi.org/10.3386/w32372.

[69] Rodney Hughes, Sam Correa, Yi Gul, et al., *First-Year Application Trends* (Common App, 2026), https://www.commonapp.org/files/DAR/deadline-updates/2025-26/Common-App-End-of-Season-Report_25-26.pdf.

surged as each applicant now applies to many more institutions than applicants did a generation ago. As a consequence, while the overall pool of students applying to college has not grown dramatically, each selective institution now finds itself inundated with applications as never before. Universities have welcomed this growth because larger pools serve their access mission. But university leadership has also publicized plummeting admit rates as badges of prestige, reinforced by their importance in college rankings like those by *US News and World Report*,[70] which many families use to measure the education universities offer. The cycle reinforces itself every year. More applications produce lower admit rates; applicants then send applications to more schools to ensure admittance somewhere, which further lowers each school's admit rates. The result is an ever-decreasing probability of admissions, even though the number of available seats and the overall number of college applicants have not changed significantly. No single institution chose to start this process, and no single institution can reverse it. But each institution finds itself blamed for it. The result is two serious consequences with which universities must grapple.

The first consequence is a crisis of legitimacy. The modern admissions apparatus was built during the mid-twentieth century to serve two primary purposes: selecting university students by credentials and providing broad enough opportunity to legitimize that selection in the public's eyes.[71] For decades, that bargain seemed to hold. It no longer does. It was based on a premise that each university was using a mixture of objective standards and its own private criteria to identify the best candidates for its institution. However, the sheer quantity of applications, in many ways a mark of the success of these institutions in reaching broader applicant pools, undermines the logic of this arrangement. Highly ranked American universities grapple with an embarrassment of riches: they solicit, and then receive, far more applications from students who could thrive on their campus than they have seats to offer. Holistic admissions is thus not simply identifying the best applicants; it is also making decisions *between* the best applicants. By design, this process is bespoke and context-dependent. However, this makes it largely inscrutable to applicants and their families. That opacity becomes a blank canvas onto which every plausible grievance can be projected: that the process favors the wealthy, that it discriminates against one group or another, that it can be bought. Many of these suspicions are entirely unfounded; others, uncomfortably, are not, as crystallized in the public imagination by the Varsity Blues scandal.[72]

---

[70] U.S. News and World Report, "U.S. News Education," accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.usnews.com/education.

[71] Nicholas Lemann, "The Great Sorting," *The Atlantic*, September 1995, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1995/09/the-great-sorting/376451/.

[72] United States Attorney's Office, District of Massachusetts. "Arrests Made in Nationwide College Admissions Scam: Alleged Exam Cheating & Athletic Recruitment Scheme." March 12, 2019, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/arrests-made-nationwide-college-admissions-scam-alleged-exam-cheating-athletic.

The second consequence is arguably more corrosive. In a landscape where excellent, holistically evaluated applicants vastly outnumber available seats, high school students and their families have rationally adapted by trying to differentiate themselves however they can. What began as encouraging students to pursue their interests has curdled, for many, into an exercise in strategic self-presentation that encourages students and their families to accumulate activities (at least up to the ten slots allowed on the Common Application) that contribute to a personal brand. But the effects are not limited to individual applicants; it has also affected the institutional behavior of high schools. Stakeholders argued that high schools, especially well-resourced ones, responded by dramatically expanding the number of Advanced Placement courses offered.[73] This began a dynamic of curricular escalation that is now straining students, teachers, and their communities. Each application cycle raises the competitive baseline for what schools need to offer for their students to be admitted. The same observers reasoned that wealthier schools' current move to post-AP curricula[74] reflects a recognition that AP itself is no longer a sufficient marker of excellence. As a consequence, they contend, less-resourced schools that are unable to follow will find their students ever further disadvantaged. They describe an ever-accelerating treadmill for educational attainment driven not by what best educates students, but by the competition between high schools to get their graduates into the most prestigious colleges.

For applicants and their families, the ensuing race to incessantly accumulate courses, credentials, and activities comes at the cost of the time and attention that should be given in adolescence to exploration, intellectual risk-taking, and the process of self-discovery — core processes of character formation that do not fit an application rubric.[75] For many college-bound students and their families, getting into college becomes the dominant activity of high school itself, crowding out the open-ended curiosity, willingness to fail, and capacity for genuine deliberation that a human-centered university wants to cultivate once those same students arrive on campus.[76] A university that participates in an admissions system that trains adolescents to find their brand — a fixed and marketable identity — cannot be surprised when, on arrival, they are ill-equipped for the open inquiry and intellectual risk-taking that could

---

[73] Data documenting the expansion of the AP are consistent with this claim. College Board, "AP National and State Data," AP Central, Accessed September 1, 2026, https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/about-ap/ap-data-research/national-state-data.

[74] Chester E. Finn and Andrew E. Scanlan, "Elite Dropouts," in *Learning in the Fast Lane: The Past, Present, and Future of Advanced Placement*, ed. Chester E. Finn and Andrew E. Scanlan (Princeton University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691178721.003.0011.

[75] Sarah Bernstein, "Elite College Admissions Have Turned Students Into Brands," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/31/opinion/college-admissions-consultant-branding.html.

[76] Kaylin Ratner, Erin F. Budesheim, Chelsea S. Alexander, et al., "Hurry Up and Wait: Developmental Anxiety during the Transition to Adulthood," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 17, no. 3 (2025): 483–505, https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12621; William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2015).

undermine that brand.

Taking both investments seriously — the outcome of admissions and the process itself — means reform cannot start by patching the current model's most visible flaws. It should start with a clear understanding of the student that the university actually wants on their campus: someone sufficiently prepared to thrive amid academic rigor, primed for a transformative experience in the areas that matter to them, and ready to add something to, and actively care for, a community, rather than simply extract prestige from it. That is a different target than "maximally accomplished and credentialed." A selection process reverse-engineered from this student looks different in several ways. It rewards sufficiency — being well above the bar required to succeed — over being demonstrably "the best" by whatever metric can be gamed. It looks for the intellectual, interpersonal, and personal capacities a human-centered education is meant to build: curiosity and constructive, nuanced thinking; the capacity for connection and pluralism; resiliency, flexibility, and the willingness to be changed by ideas. And it treats the applicant not as a product to be evaluated once, but as a future member of a specific community whose readiness for that community, not just for achievement in the abstract, is what is actually being assessed.

This reframing articulates why transparency around university admissions is not simply a matter of publishing more and more criteria (or subtracting more and more criteria). Selective universities already publish general expectations; the public simply does not trust that they are the operative ones. More disclosure of inputs mostly helps well-resourced families game the system further. What would rebuild trust is evidence that stated criteria actually connect to the outcomes that the university cares about — who thrives, who struggles, and why — paired with a public explanation, grounded in that evidence, of what the university seeks and why.

Recommendations

We preface these recommendations with the recognition that the challenges we describe around admissions are an industry-wide problem for highly selective colleges, and not fundamentally within the capacity of any one institution to fix alone. After all, applicants typically apply to seven or more colleges at a time, and applicants targeting highly selective colleges commonly apply to substantially more.[77] For applicants, admissions is not experienced through an encounter with a single institution but with an entire admissions landscape. Nevertheless, there are actions a human-centered university can take to lead around this dynamic.

Recast the public description of what admission requires around preparedness, educational match, and responsibility, rather than maximal accomplishment. Universities should be explicit,

[77] Rodney Hughes, Sam Correa, Yi Gul, et al., *First-Year Application Trends* (Common App, 2026), https://www.commonapp.org/files/DAR/deadline-updates/2025-26/Common-App-End-of-Season-Report_25-26.pdf.

in public-facing materials, that they are not searching for the single "best" applicant by any composite metric, but for applicants who are well prepared to succeed, who will find a genuinely transformative experience in the distinctive opportunities the institution offers, and who will contribute to and take responsibility for the community they join.[78] Taken seriously, this changes the advice students and families receive. It does not make it easier to get in, but it does reduce the pressure to incessantly seek maximum accomplishment.

Report not only the factors considered in admissions, but their empirical effects. Selective universities communicate the general factors on which admissions is based. They can take accountability for their admissions processes by publishing regularly the empirical effects of specific factors on the composition of incoming classes. Prior empirical studies of these effects demonstrate how this can be done.[79]

Justify admissions criteria against evidence and publish the evidence. In a holistic admissions decision, a complex set of criteria are weighed to implicitly predict that applicant's future thriving at the university. Universities should articulate these criteria and rigorously study and publish their effects on thriving and contribution after matriculation, adjusting criteria accordingly. Any such analysis will necessarily be complex and partial, since characteristics have many contextual factors, and, in the end, each student's journey is unique to them and their emerging life circumstances. But the alternative is to ask the public, and the university itself, to assume the value of the criteria on faith alone. Transparency about method and evidence, even when findings are provisional and complex, can contribute to building not only the university's own understanding, but also public trust.

Address persistent concerns about special-case admissions. Three-fourths of the American public express concern about legacy admissions,[80] which is seen as creating an unearned advantage for those whose families have already benefited from a university education. A systematic study of income and admissions found that legacy preferences accounted for almost half of the advantage in admissions that families in the top 1 percent by income have at Ivy Plus

[78] We note this latter point resonates with the concepts of academic civics detailed in chapter seven.

[79] Raj Chetty, David J. Deming, and John N. Friedman, "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," NBER Working Paper No. 31492 (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2023), https://doi.org/10.3386/w31492; Peter Arcidiacono, Josh Kinsler, and Tyler Ransom, "Legacy and Athlete Preferences at Harvard," NBER Working Paper No. 26316 (National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2019), https://doi.org/10.3386/w26316.

[80] Vianney Gómez, "U.S. Public Continues to View Grades, Test Scores as Top Factors in College Admissions," Pew Research Center, April 26, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/26/u-s-public-continues-to-view-grades-test-scores-as-top-factors-in-college-admissions/.

schools.[81] Other forms of "special case" admissions, including children of donors, children of faculty and staff, and athletes in sports associated with wealthy families, provide at least the appearance of preferential inroads for some applicants, allowing them to leverage connections and wealth to access an education that is denied to others.[82] At the least, universities must communicate as clearly as possible with the public how such special cases are treated within their assessment processes. They must also consider whether and how their treatment of these special cases reflects their institutional values and the connection in their public communications about these matters.

Confront the competitive escalation of credentials directly, not just its symptoms. Limiting the number of extracurricular activities considered, reducing the premium placed on manufactured achievements that favor well-resourced families, and signaling clearly that exploration matters more than a curated résumé would help relieve the pressure reshaping American adolescence around strategic self-branding. This recommendation will also require selective institutions to exert collective influence over the Common Application's policies and practices to address the shared infrastructure that drives volume, not only the downstream behaviors that volume produces. At the same time, they must ensure that any such changes do not erect significant new barriers for the nontypical applicants whose access depends on low friction in the application process. They may also consider more radical solutions, for example, by agreeing on and securing legislative permission for joint admissions through a system like medical school matching.

Admissions reform based on the recommendations above asks more of universities than reconsidering what they look for in applicants. It asks them to recognize that the admissions process is not simply a selection process. It is a national rite of passage: an ordeal whose demands are continually reshaping the American teenager, whether or not they are admitted. The value of any rite of passage is its capacity to prepare initiates for what comes next. A university that truly seeks to cultivate sound judgment, inspire curiosity, and encourage civic engagement must ask whether the rite of passage in which it participates is teaching the lessons needed for human-centered learning, or whether its requirements encourage students to spend years training one set of qualities, only to require a different set the moment students arrive. The tension between the university's educational aspirations and the formative effects of the

[81] Raj Chetty, David J. Deming, and John N. Friedman, "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," NBER Working Paper No. 31492 (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2023), https://doi.org/10.3386/w31492.

[82] Peter Arcidiacono, Josh Kinsler, and Tyler Ransom, "Legacy and Athlete Preferences at Harvard," NBER Working Paper No. 26316 (National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2019), https://doi.org/10.3386/w26316. This work found that at Harvard, more than 43 percent of white admitted students were in a "special case" category, compared to 16 percent of Black, Asian-American, or Hispanic admits. The authors estimate that only one fourth of special-case admits would have been likely to be accepted as an ordinary applicant.

admissions system cannot be resolved by admissions offices alone, nor would it be fair to expect that: admissions offices have been asked to assemble excellent and heterogeneous classes, and they do. But the university as an institution must also consider whether the process through which those classes are assembled is shaping students in ways that work against what it hopes to do with them once they arrive. Posing that question seriously, and acting on the answer, requires a broader institutional commitment. This is not a question that our committee can answer. It requires deep deliberation among our university's relevant experts, including university admissions, student and campus life representatives, faculty, and experts in high-school-age youth. It may also require a broader conversation across institutions about how to address the shared, unintended impacts of the Common Application.

3.8. Price and Cost

One of the most widely recognized public concerns about American higher education is its high sticker price.[83] Two-thirds of US adults surveyed in 2026 did not think that four-year colleges are affordable. The same study showed three-quarters of parents still hope their children will pursue additional training after high school.[84] Published tuition at private, nonprofit four-year colleges has increased 27 percent in the last ten years in inflation-adjusted dollars, with tuition, room and board, and fees reaching an annual price of $60,920 in 2025–2026.[85] At Cornell, the total price of attending, including room and board, reached $92,844 in the 2025–2026 academic year ($69,588 for New York State students in contract colleges).[86] Compare these prices to the median household annual income, which is approximately $84,000.[87] The gulf between published prices at many colleges and the financial realities of American families has raised significant doubts about the perceived economic return of higher education and exacerbated the erosion of public trust. While we focus here on the price of an undergraduate degree, similar questions extend to some graduate programs as well, discussed in chapter six.[88]

---

[83] Here, "cost" is the price of attending (tuition, fees, and room and board) borne by the student. "Price" refers to the published price for attendance that is typically only paid by wealthier students. The average actual cost paid for attendance at Cornell and most other universities is substantially lower than the sticker price. We refer to the cost of operation borne by the institution as "institutional cost."

[84] Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, "Americans Say Four-Year Colleges Cost Too Much," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2026, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2026/07/22/americans-say-four-year-colleges-cost-too-much.

[85] Tuition at public four-year colleges also rose steadily from 2006 to 2020, but has since fallen significantly; average annual tuition, housing and fees total $30,990 for 2025–2026, as per Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025* (New York: College Board, 2025), https://research.collegeboard.org/trends.

[86] "Cost to Attend," Cornell University, accessed August 22, 2026, https://finaid.cornell.edu/cost-to-attend.

[87] Median U.S. household income was $83,730 in 2024, as per Melissa Kollar and Zach Scherer, "Income in the United States: 2024," Report No. P60-286, US Census Bureau, September 9, 2025, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/p60-286.html.

[88] Dick Startz, "Graduate Degrees Pay—but It's Complicated," Brookings Institution, March 27, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/graduate-degrees-pay-but-its-complicated/.

Beyond the implications for universities' public standing, many students report intense pressure to make their families' investment worth it, weighing the economic return for every activity. This stress can crowd out the curiosity-driven learning, exploration of meaning and purpose, risk-taking, and the formation of rich relationships necessary for an education that is truly transformative. High tuition thus fuels two challenges identified by the committee: the erosion of public trust and the pressure on transformative education. Compounding these pressures is the debt that students and families incur in financing the cost of a college degree, although we note the problem of debt is not equally distributed across institutions of higher education.[89]

One of the most poorly understood issues related to the cost of undergraduate education is the significant difference between the full price of tuition, room and board, and fees and the actual cost to most students as a result of financial aid (in particular, grants and scholarship aid that do not have to be repaid). The average tuition, room and board, and fees actually paid to attend a private nonprofit four-year college in 2025 was approximately $32,830, a number that has not changed significantly in inflation-adjusted dollars in the last twenty years.[90] At Cornell, the corresponding average net cost of tuition, room and board, and fees was $65,370 ($45,395 for New York state residents in contract colleges). The cost of a college education remains a significant investment for families and students and for many represents one of their largest household expenses.

Moreover, the widespread strategy of pairing high sticker price with high financial aid unintentionally produces an opaque pricing structure that erodes trust by pairing a high published price with an individualized offered price that is difficult for families to predict. This opaque pricing structure and the accompanying information asymmetry — the college knows how it calculates offered price but the families who will pay it do not — reinforces the idea that universities are not being transparent in their interactions and communications with the public. Exacerbating this perception is the common practice of sharing the final cost of attendance, after grant and scholarship aid, only after students have been accepted.[91] While this model has had remarkable success in making education more financially attainable for low-income families, it

[89] At Cornell University, 31 percent of students graduated with debt in 2024, averaging approximately $30,000. Both of these statistics are lower than the national average, although they can still generate real pressure for the students that incur them.

[90] For public four-year colleges, the average net tuition, housing, room and board, and fees has decreased in the last ten years from $18,450 to $16,200, as per Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025* (New York: College Board, 2025), https://research.collegeboard.org/trends.

[91] While colleges are required to provide an upfront cost estimator, the calculations involved are complex and require significant financial data.

often places significant burdens on middle class applicants.[92]

The committee's engagement with internal and external stakeholders revealed a number of common themes around cost and price. These included: (a) the finances of universities are incompletely understood, even internally, and this impedes effective management of costs, prices, and their communication with the public; (b) the gap between final cost of attendance and sticker price tends to unnecessarily deter applicants and undermine trust; (c) universities need to provide clearer information about prices and aid, regardless of which pricing model is used; (d) the growth trajectory of tuition and fees is unsustainable and should be addressed proactively; (e) the high cost of higher education can create a consumer mindset and undermine the student experience through stress and diminished intellectual freedom; (f) current pricing and financial aid models tend to exclude students from middle-class families and undermine institutions' ability to provide equitable access; and (g) the university should prioritize the management of their costs of operation to lower pressures on the costs to students and their families.

Tensions between stakeholder arguments were around competing understandings of causes and priorities: (a) whether the increasing cost of operations stems primarily from administrative mismanagement in the form of bloat and lack of accountability, from the necessary reliance of higher education on highly trained professionals to deliver services, or from external factors like compliance requirements and competition; (b) whether pricing models should favor a lower price with reduced aid or should continue as is but with much stronger communication with applicants and other stakeholders about aid options and costs; and (c) whether the institutional costs of operations should be principally controlled by cutting back and increasing efficiency or by developing new revenue streams through, e.g., enrollment growth, new programs, employer partnerships, fundraising, and online offerings.

Increasing the amount of financial aid given has allowed greater access to universities for those with modest means, and holding average cost steady over twenty years has been a truly impressive accomplishment. But universities cannot rest on these successes. They have kept cost stable by increasing sticker price and financial aid together, but the continued growth in sticker price is itself corrosive to public trust. Prices have risen to levels previously unimaginable. Moreover, even with financial aid, the actual cost of a university education weighs heavily on many students, reducing their engagement with the transformative possibilities of their education. It also limits the possibilities for middle-income students to enroll because the financial burden that remains for them after aid is still very heavy, particularly compared to that they would incur at a public institution. Finally, the lack of public understanding of the difference between price and cost is an enduring problem across the sector, one which better

[92] Raj Chetty et al., "Income Segregation and Intergenerational Mobility Across Colleges in the United States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 135, no. 3 (2020): 1567–1633, https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa005.

messaging alone is unlikely to resolve.

Recommendations

Some highly selective universities are addressing this suite of problems by offering free tuition to families whose income is under a fairly high threshold. This solution addresses the burden of cost and is easy to communicate to the public, but it is not a realistic solution for most colleges and universities. At Cornell, which has the largest undergraduate population in the Ivy League, 83 percent of the institutional grant aid awarded in 2025–2026 came from its operating budget and not from endowment. We instead recommend Cornell lead in this area in the following ways.

Establish a task force to develop a new tuition model at Cornell. It is clear that issues around the high sticker price of education and the costs that families bear after financial aid are at 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 maintain our financial viability and keep the door open to students from the lowest income brackets? Should Cornell provide merit-based aid in order to make itself more accessible to students we are otherwise losing to lower-priced institutions? How can we reduce cost without substantially reducing the quality of education we deliver?

We note this latter problem should not be underestimated. For a variety of reasons, the institutional costs of delivery of a quality education are intrinsically high.[93] We note as well that Cornell has already implemented changes that would come from simply increasing efficiency. Furthermore, many of the solutions that immediately reduce institutional cost — such as increasing the scale at which we deliver instruction, reducing teaching support staff, increasing automation, or cutting co-curricular programs that address personal and interpersonal matters — come at the expense of the human-centered, transformative education this report argues must be our future. The work must therefore consider not only the financial viability of the institution — no small matter — but also the effect of choices on Cornell's institutional values, recognizing our longstanding commitment to educational access across class, the burden that cost places on our students' capacities for curiosity, risk-taking, and career choice, and other non-monetary values of an education. One question to consider is whether the university can find additional sources of funding to support undergraduate education that do not come from families' pockets, particularly given the waning political support for government contributions to tuition — for example, by significantly expanding the endowment (again, no small task), or by partnership with philanthropy or industry.

The task force must draw significantly on the deep expertise of our financial aid and admissions

[93] Robert B. Archibald and David H. Feldman, *Why Does College Cost So Much?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

staff, who have a front row seat to the effects that cost and price have on the students we enroll — and fail to enroll — and their families. The conversation will benefit from the expanding policy literature in alternative pricing models.[94] Deliberation on these matters must also involve voices from across the Cornell community, including faculty, staff, students and their families, trustees, and alumni; and engage our existing structures of shared governance.

Prioritize transparency and predictability in pricing and financial aid models. Regardless of the details of future pricing and cost models, universities must improve the manner in which they communicate these to applicants and their families as well as the broader public. The public needs a clearer explanation of how price is set and its relationship to institutional costs. Beyond communication, future models should prioritize predictability, aiming to provide students and their families with accurate, multi-year estimates and, wherever possible, guarantees of their expenses.[95] Ideally, families will know their cost before or at the time of application, not at the time of acceptance. Delivering that information upfront would likely require changes in how financial aid is calculated to reduce its complexity. Solutions are not straightforward and will require tradeoffs.

Develop a clear internal understanding of financial models and factors driving price and cost. A starting point for any serious consideration of cost and price is a systematic analysis of university finances, which will allow decision-makers across the university to understand what different aspects of undergraduate education cost. We discovered in our own investigations that apparently straightforward questions like "does the university make or lose money if it enrolls more students?" are currently unanswerable. This is not because of incompetence or poor data collection; the complexity of higher education institutions and their integration of many

---

[94] For example, Zakiya Ellis, Emily Bond, and Edward Smith, *Not Just Financial Aid: Enabling Affordability Guarantees Through Tuition Policy* (EducationCounsel, 2025), https://educationcounsel.com/our_work/publications/higher-ed/not-just-financial-aid-enabling-affordability-guarantees-through-tuition-policy; Daniel Corral and James Dean Ward, *An Overview of Tuition Reset Policies in the United States* (Toronto: Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education, OISE–University of Toronto, 2023), https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/site/sites/default/files/2024-10/Daniel-Corral-An-Overview-of-Tuition-Reset-Policies-in-the-United-States-1.pdf; "Alternative Pricing Strategies for Colleges and Universities," EAB, accessed August 23, 2026, https://eab.com/resources/tool/alternative-pricing-strategies-colleges/; Strada Education Foundation, "Student-Centered Enrollment Management Principles," May 6, 2026, https://www.strada.org/news-insights/student-centered-enrollment-management-principles.

[95] For example, some colleges freeze or guarantee tuition, as per TuitionCreep, "Colleges with Frozen or Guaranteed Tuition," accessed September 3, 2026, https://tuitioncreep.org/guaranteed-tuition. Others provide income-based tuition guarantees, as described in Riyah Basha, "University Guarantees Tuition to Low-Income In-State Students," *The Michigan Daily*, June 22, 2017, https://www.michigandaily.com/news/campus-life/go-blue-guarantee-followup/. Some provide scholarship renewal guarantees or four-year financial aid guarantees, assuming no significant changes in financial circumstances.

missions has itself made this task increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, it must be tackled. We recommend using this information for a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the pricing decisions at Cornell.[96] Furthermore, we note that many faculty and staff have little understanding of how price and cost are set, or of the consequences of their own activities for the overall institutional cost of undergraduate education. This makes it difficult to engage in responsible decision-making across the university. The issue is not simply one of information (which is available but lost in the sea of information with which faculty and staff are inundated) but of insulation from the consequences of cost — an insulation which faculty in particular may need to give up for the good of the institution.

Work with policymakers to reduce regulatory costs. Regulatory costs are a significant driver of institutional cost, especially for research universities. The committee spoke with one university leader who told us that at his institution, the costs of regulatory compliance alone exceed total tuition revenue. This is an area where universities are likely to find bipartisan support. Collecting and sharing evidence showing which regulations are particularly costly would be an important first step for addressing this issue.

[96] A precedent for this is Ronald Ehrenberg's study of Cornell in *Tuition Rising: Why College Costs So Much* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

4. Research and Scholarship

4.1. Background

Research and scholarship as a core mission of the university

The foundation, size, and stated purposes of the American university have evolved over time. However, one common theme throughout has been intellectual development, or as John Henry Newman put it, the "enlargement of the mind."[97] The first president of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Gilman, stated that universities were responsible not only for disseminating existing knowledge but also "to extend… the realm of knowledge."[98] This sentiment, shared by Cornell University's first president, Andrew Dickson White, was instrumental in shaping the American university's core mission of research. From Humboldt University founder Wilhelm von Humboldt in the nineteenth century, whose ideas Gilman, White, and others leaned on heavily, to SUNY chancellor Ernest Boyer in the twenty-first century, there has been a strong ethos in the American university that research and teaching are two sides of the same intellectual coin. White also emphasized that scholarship is not solely for personal curiosity and fulfillment, but to "bless the nation," or, put another way, meet public needs and interests.[99] In the 1963 book, *The Uses of the University*, UC Berkeley chancellor Clark Kerr reiterated that the university is not only a hub for "knowledge production" but also a "prime instrument of national purpose," contributing to "economic and social growth" — a claim for which there is empirical evidence.[100] In other words, research and scholarship is a core mission of the university not only because it advances a long-standing goal of higher education — intellectual development through discovery and creativity — but also because it is a key part of an integrated learning ecosystem that promotes a culture of deliberation, advances the cultivation of sound judgment, and meets societal needs.

From fundamental discovery and creative arts to entrepreneurial spirit

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. For example, an analysis from the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas shows 150–300 percent return on federal investment in research.[101] Research universities are committed to deep, fundamental work in which discoveries and breakthroughs can be a long process, but the disciplinary knowledge gained lays a critical foundation upon which most

---

[97] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green, 1852).

[98] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 57.

[99] Andrew Dickson White to Gerrit Smith, September 1, 1862, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

[100] Anna Valero and John Van Reenen, "The Economic Impact of Universities: Evidence from Across the Globe," *Economics of Education Review* 68 (2019): 53–67, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.09.001.

[101] Andrew J. Fieldhouse and Karel Mertens, "The Returns to Government R&D: Evidence from US Appropriations Shocks" (Working Paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Research Department, 2023).

applied, translational, or entrepreneurial work depends. Many examples abound, from the research in atomic physics in the early 1900s that ultimately paved the way for the development of magnetic resonance imaging in the 1970s, to highly specialized, theoretical research in mathematics that served as the foundation for the internet developed several decades later. Research universities also encourage scholars-in-training at all levels to be exposed to and to participate in cutting-edge knowledge generation and creative endeavors, thereby developing valuable human capital for societal benefit. Finally, research universities are well-suited, at their best, to encourage the translation of their discoveries and innovations into products, technologies, and companies that benefit society.

Research and scholarship in the public interest

Not long after the meteoric rise of the research mission in the American university, particularly post-World War II, questions surfaced (even from within the academy) about whether universities should focus so much on the public interest. Harvard historian Howard Mumford Jones reflected that "goodwill is one of the obscuring forces in academic life."[102] In other words, Jones believed universities may be diluting their efforts by worrying too much about being useful to society, and that they should refocus their mission on rigorous fundamental research. This sentiment is shared by some commentators today. But the two goals — excelling in fundamental research and serving the public interest — are not as disconnected as they might at first seem. It is important to note that over the last century and a half, what has allowed intellectual inquiry, discovery, and creative practice to thrive so uniquely and exquisitely in the American research university is an extraordinary partnership with the federal government on behalf of society. Specifically, the government's support, from tax advantages, research dollars, and tuition aid, is predicated on universities serving the public interest. Therefore, university research (especially that which is government-funded) is undeniably and inextricably linked to public interest.

Cornell's founding as New York's land-grant institution underscores its pioneering commitment to integrating public impact and engagement with education and research, which is well stated in the motto of Cornell Cooperative Extension: "putting knowledge to work." It was partly for this reason that the Williams College historian Frederick Rudolph referred to Cornell as the "first American University."[103] Research in the public interest is a long-standing ethos of universities and is particularly woven into Cornell's DNA. Even Cornell's latest campus, Cornell Tech, reflects this priority in its commitment to build technologies with and for the public to meet societal needs and drive positive economic change. The clear focus on public impact throughout this chapter should not be read as a replacement for rigorous research, but

---

[102] Howard Mumford Jones, "The Meaning of a University," *The Atlantic*, November 1965, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1965/11/the-meaning-of-a-university/660058/.

[103] Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 116.

rather that research excellence and public engagement are mutually reinforcing principles.

4.2. Core Principles

This is a highly consequential moment of great uncertainty for the research and scholarship mission in American universities. The unprecedented pace of technological change — represented most notably by AI — is rapidly altering the research landscape and challenging how we pursue scholarly activities. The recent but notable shifts in university-government relations have upended decades of apparently stable partnership, which has highlighted anew the historical strength and value of university research in America, but also revealed vulnerabilities, gaps, and fissures in our scholarly enterprise that merit careful consideration. Public trust in higher education, which has been declining for decades, has eroded precipitously in the past decade. Although this is part of a decline in trust in public institutions more broadly,[104] university-specific concerns and issues pertaining to research and scholarship merit attention.

Hundreds of meetings with various stakeholders within and outside of the university about these disruptors surfaced numerous additional fissures in and challenges to the research and scholarship mission, including but not limited to funding models; undergraduate research and creative practice opportunities; declining numbers of graduate student and postdoctoral scholars; academic publishing; ideological and other biases in scholarship; tenure and promotion criteria; and community engagement. Research and scholarship are increasingly separated and siloed from teaching, public engagement, and entrepreneurial work, in part due to the enormous demands imposed by each professional activity. The culture created by university incentive structures and disciplinary and market pressures privilege some of these activities over others, but the real strength of the university is the collaboration and integration across them, which elevates the quality of each. With this in mind, we provide (below) the core principles that should anchor future decision-making around research and scholarship at the university. These principles, which emerged from extensive stakeholder discussions, advisory panel meetings, study, and deliberations by Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University, will be referenced throughout the subsequent sections of the chapter so that readers appreciate the grounding for the various recommendations and proposed action items.

Learning through discovery and creativity are at the heart of the university.

- **Human interactions and creativity must be prioritized:** While technology such as AI should be embraced for its benefits to research and education, in-person human interactions that spur collaboration, creativity, and lifelong learning must be considered essential components of discovery.
- **The university drives transformation through both disciplinary focus and trans-**

[104] Claudia Deane, "Americans' Deepening Mistrust of Institutions," The Pew Charitable Trusts, October 17, 2024, https://www.pew.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2024/americans-deepening-mistrust-of-institutions.

disciplinarity: It is critical to *both* maintain robust individual disciplines and invest in endeavors that transcend traditional academic boundaries (trans-disciplinarity) to cultivate judgment, advance knowledge generation, and put knowledge into action.

- **Fundamental research, creative practice, and applied innovation are mutually reinforcing and must be well-protected:** The university must develop nimble structures and mechanisms to buffer these different, but integrated aspects of the scholarship ecosystem against unpredictable shocks. Also, growth must be weighed against focus.

Scholarship must be anchored in rigor, accountability, and academic responsibility.

- **Scholarship must be both open and rigorous:** 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.
- **Scholarly integrity and academic civics are of paramount importance:** The ethical underpinning and trustworthiness of research and creative activities are critical for appropriate stewardship of resources, meaningful progress, and maximal educational and public impact. Also, with tenure (or long-time security of some sort) comes not only the rights of research freedom but also the responsibilities of university citizenship.
- **Mentorship and teaching are core values of university research:** Research in the university setting is distinguished in large part by the commitment to training and developing the next generation of scholars. Scholarship advances the teaching mission — the research enterprise must be integrated deeply into undergraduate, graduate, and professional education.

Public engagement is a pillar of the research and scholarship enterprise.

- **Public trust in scholarship matters:** Public engagement is evidenced by a serious commitment to bidirectional exchange of information, values, and expertise with the local and wider community. This reciprocal relationship can help shape the questions scholars ask and how discoveries are translated.
- **Public engagement and impact are deeply and broadly valued:** Public engagement must be promoted and recognized through prominent and regular opportunities for scholars and faculty members across all units. Tenure and promotion expectations may need to be reevaluated to appropriately value public engagement and impact.
- **Commitment to our local and global community is a crucial part of our identity:** The original land-grant mission, which was intended to advance educational and economic opportunities in New York state, animates our commitment today to broad societal engagement in New York as well as across the country and world, in part through our research, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

4.3. Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for Specific Constituencies

As delineated in section 2.2, our committee's work focused on the initial three disruptors that

were part of the provost's charge as well as the many others that emerged through extensive stakeholder discussions and committee deliberations. Many of these will arise throughout the sections below on the challenges and opportunities in research and scholarship for various university sectors and constituencies. Challenges pertaining to funding for research and creative practice, as well as other special topics including the impact of artificial intelligence on scholarship are considered separately in the subsequent sections of the chapter.

Faculty and staff

In this section, we briefly lay out five issues specific to how faculty and staff are affected that stakeholders raised across numerous meetings on research and scholarship. The most dominant topics of discussion in these meetings and among committee deliberations — including student training in research, public trust in research, research funding challenges, AI in research, academic publishing, and tenure — are treated separately, both later in this chapter and elsewhere in the report.

First, it came up repeatedly among stakeholders that the research and scholarship enterprise looks radically different for faculty and staff across different disciplines and units on campus. Personnel needs, funding and other resource requirements, staff support, size, and output (e.g., conference abstracts vs. papers vs. books) can vary wildly by discipline. Even within some disciplinary areas, especially those that span multiple colleges across campus (e.g., life sciences), there can be important differences in expected effort toward research for tenure-track faculty and level of involvement in undergraduate research mentoring. This means that faculty and staff experiences in research and scholarship across the university are highly varied and specialized. Many faculty- and staff-related challenges or issues in the research and scholarship enterprise are not broadly shared, and even among those that are, the solutions may not look the same for different disciplines or even different units within the same discipline.

Second, a common sentiment from numerous faculty across the humanities in particular (but this also applies in more theoretical fields like mathematics), is that the increasing emphasis on collaborative research can be alienating to faculty in disciplines whose scholarship depends on more individual and solitary work. While the importance of team-based efforts to some disciplines, and to emerging interdisciplinary areas, is broadly understood and appreciated, the perceived institutional over-emphasis on these approaches to research (through new university initiatives, seed funding programs, etc.) can have marginalizing effects.

Third, there is broad agreement among stakeholders that tenure and promotion criteria, as it pertains to evaluation of research excellence, must be reassessed. This important topic is addressed further in subsequent sections. We will, however, highlight here the challenges faced by faculty to engage in entrepreneurship. Some stakeholders raised the issues of having to overcome negative perceptions of the private sector and commercialization within certain elements of the academy and being dissuaded by cumbersome conflict-of-interest regulations.

Others highlighted the importance of calibrating expectations about success rates, time-to-success, and initial financial returns of entrepreneurial attempts when it comes to tenure and promotion criteria.

Fourth, stakeholders broadly agreed that the ever-increasing regulatory compliance requirements are placing massive administrative burdens on our research community, particularly our staff.

Fifth, there was open discussion on the topic of how research is structured at the university and how that might impact faculty and staff. Opinions varied widely on whether the current academic structure (i.e., departments) is ideal for the future of a thriving research enterprise. Ideas about alternative structures typically arose from faculty in STEM disciplines and new, emerging interdisciplinary fields, reflecting the changing needs in some areas of study and discovery relative to others and further highlighting the importance of resisting one-size-fits-all solutions where possible.

There were two main arguments *against* departments as the right structural unit in the academy. First, many of the most pressing and important questions of the day demand highly interdisciplinary expertise and approaches. Traditional departments may be too archaic and restrictive to meet the moment. The advent of cross-unit initiatives, like the Cornell Tech research campus or the Design Tech multi-college department, may suggest that traditional structures can have constraining effects. Second, departments are very rarely closed. This creates rigidity in terms of hiring when what we need in a fast-evolving research landscape is nimbleness. An alternative would be cluster-hiring in topical areas of focus that are reassessed regularly.

There were three main arguments *in favor* of departments as the right structural unit in the academy. First, departments exist to ensure that specific areas of learning and discovery have sustained representation in the university. Without departments, some disciplines may arbitrarily develop more vocal or influential advocates than others, leading to disparity and heavily skewed representation of research and scholarship areas. Second, departments are aligned with historical areas of scholarship and are responsible for providing the core curricula for students. Constantly changing topical areas of focus could create instability in the educational mission and may create misalignment with field standards that would affect Cornell's competitiveness. Finally, departments have a well-defined leadership structure to determine priorities in hiring, research focus, etc. Without departments, who would decide on the topical areas that the university will focus on? Research foci may become even more subject to top-down governance. Also, if someone is hired as part of a topical area, will they have the freedom to pivot or shift focus the way they currently can in a department setting?

Recommendations
Universities should perform a careful reassessment of university initiatives, incentives, and structures to enable robust support of both individual and collaborative forms of scholarship, reduce administrative burden that takes away from research effort, and increase participation in a wide array of valued activities that reinforce scholarship including entrepreneurship and public engagement.

Support all forms of scholarship – fundamental and translational, creative and technical, individual and team-based. While scholars should always be challenged to think outside of the box of their disciplinary traditions to expand knowledge, inventive expressions, and innovation, any changes to university and college structures and incentives should broadly recognize, value, and support all forms of scholarship that promote the mission of discovery and creativity.

Incentivize entrepreneurship and innovation. Entrepreneurship, including but not limited to patenting, licensing, commercialization, and job creation, is an important component of the "putting knowledge to work" ethos at Cornell. To make it possible for faculty to engage in innovation that maximizes the external impact of research, it is important for the university to provide *active support* (not waiting for faculty to come to them) that reduces time burden and activation energy for faculty; provide regular training for those faculty who do take the initiative to learn; facilitate connections with potential co-founders and executives; and value these efforts appropriately in tenure and promotion criteria. The opportunities and challenges posed by the latter aspiration are evident in the recent efforts at specific units in the university, including Cornell Tech. Our committee advises careful deliberation alongside these units to devise effective strategies.

Reduce regulatory burden. There is a critical need for universities to coordinate and communicate effectively with government, funding agencies, accrediting bodies, and others about creative efforts to reduce regulatory burden. This would save direct and opportunity costs and would allow faculty and staff to focus more of their efforts on research, scholarship, and entrepreneurship, if desired.

Assess department structure for research. For some disciplines, our committee recommends continued robust deliberation on the topic of faculty and staff participation in academic departments versus thematic centers and institutes. It will be important to carefully review current structures (organizational and financial) to determine what, if any, changes would aid the university in promoting research nimbleness without compromising some of the strengths of the traditional department structure. This topic is also discussed in section 7.8.

Public
As already discussed, public trust in higher education, which has been declining for decades,

has eroded precipitously in the past decade. Although this is part of a decline in trust in public institutions more broadly, there are university-specific concerns. Important questions about cost, transparency, workforce preparation, and other key areas have been well-documented and are covered in other chapters. Here we will consider public trust in research and scholarship specifically, which was the subject of many meetings with stakeholders.

Most surveys of public trust in research have focused on science, broadly defined. Unfortunately, this makes it more challenging to directly comment on public trust in research areas beyond STEM (such as in the arts and humanities) in a non-anecdotal, data-driven manner. Due to the many recent survey studies on trust in science, we focus next on public perception of STEM research.

A recent Pew survey on science[105] corroborates other reports (such as one in *Nature*[106]) that trust in academic scientists remains reasonably high, especially compared to other institutions and groups. However, a closer look at the data shows that nearly twice as many people distrust scientists compared to even a decade ago (about 23 percent in 2024 vs. about 12 percent in 2020). Political polarization has been cited as one part of the problem — for example, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a dominant acute factor. There is cause to worry that politicization of topics such as vaccine biology and climate change has fueled distrust. However, the Pew study also highlights some troubling data points that merit attention, including that the majority of Americans think that scientists are poor communicators, condescend to the general public, do not pay attention to society's values, and are close-minded. Other countries' surveys reveal similar results, including a 2026 study in Britain that finds nearly 30 percent of respondents believe "scientists think themselves better than other people."[107] International surveys (such as a recent study in *Nature Human Behavior*[108]) also broadly confirm these findings, both in terms of the reasonably high trust in scientific research overall but also evidence of public concern about scientists' openness and clarity. A notable recommendation from the authors of that same publication was that scientists "could work on being more receptive to feedback and more transparent about their funding and data sources, and invest more effort into communicating about science with the public — which we found to be desired by 83 percent of respondents. We recommend avoiding top-down communication but encouraging

---

[105] Alec Tyson and Brian Kennedy, "Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking," Pew Research Center, November 14, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trust-in-scientists-and-views-on-their-role-in-policymaking/.

[106] Helen Pearson, "Have People Stopped Trusting Science? The Data Tell a Surprising Story," *Nature*, July 1, 2026, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-01977-9.

[107] Archie Herrick, Luke Tryl, and Mark Henderson, *Britain Talks Trust in Science* (More in Common and Wellcome, April 2026), https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/final_bttis_1504.pdf.

[108] Viktoria Cologna et al., "Trust in Scientists and Their Role in Society across 68 Countries," *Nature Human Behaviour* 9 (2025): 713–730, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-02090-5.

public participation in genuine dialogue, in which scientists seek to consider the insights and needs of other societal actors."

Most surveys of trust in American university scholarship sample the U.S. as a whole. Sometimes the respondents are stratified by political affiliation, sex, or age (as in the surveys cited above), but these basic demographics can miss nuances in how different groups of the public view university research. For example, many rural farmers across New York state often view Cornell very favorably, in large part due to the dedicated work of Cornell Cooperative Extension to connect families and communities with university research and researchers. On the other hand, through broad and deep conversations with stakeholders who represent (or have access to) a wide variety of communities, we have learned of long-standing and widespread misgivings regarding university research and scholarship pertaining to perceptions of "ivory tower condescension," lack of transparency, dishonesty and fraud in the research enterprise, ideologically driven agendas, and other related issues that directly impinge on trust.

Our committee's internal and external advisors repeatedly highlighted that while some may not distrust university research per se, they may increasingly wonder whether universities really need all the money they get from the federal government for research due to large endowments or highly publicized corporate engagements. Finally, it has been noted by experts of higher education (such as Nicholas Lemann) that even prominent members of the public with significant influence on higher education policy often do not understand the centrality of research to the American university, in particular as it pertains to how it strengthens the educational mission.[109]

Across dozens of meetings on this topic, stakeholders broadly agreed that accessible research communication is not only important, it requires a cultural shift in the university to the extent that public engagement is not viewed as an add-on to university life but rather a core institutional responsibility. This will undoubtedly require structural support through incentives, training, and dedicated positions. Positive notions of scientists from stakeholders outside of the university were frequently related to perceptions of intelligence, teamwork, and tangible positive impacts on society such as medical discoveries. Also, some public groups in New York state view Cornell research very favorably, especially when they have experienced direct benefit of the research findings (such as farmers and ranchers across the state working in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension offices).

Negative perceptions generally stemmed from four concerns: (a) relevance — what is the benefit of this research, and why does it matter?; (b) accountability — are some questions or topics prioritized over others, and is this politically motivated?; (c) integrity — is there research

[109] Nicholas Lemann, "The Soul of the Research University," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 28, 2014, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-soul-of-the-research-university/.

bias or fraud, and what are the social and ethical implications of the work?; and (d) respect — do university scientists care about societal concerns, values, and priorities? Stakeholders agreed that true public engagement includes, but cannot be reduced to, better one-way messaging; it requires an interactive two-way relationship with communities — listening and partnering to engender trust and mutual benefit. This approach views the public as part of research and not merely a recipient of research outcomes.

Some stakeholders within the university emphasized that Cornell has a long-standing commitment to positive public impact through its research — it is the only Ivy League institution that is also a land-grant university. Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) is in every county of New York state. The university has four contract colleges that have direct partnerships with New York state and obligations to state residents. For all these reasons, Cornell is uniquely positioned to lead in "putting knowledge to work" (CCE's guiding principle). Others also noted, though, that Cornell's commitment to local public engagement and impact, derived originally from the land-grant mission, is intended to pervade across *all* colleges and cannot simply be relegated primarily to the contract colleges. Moreover, since the contributions that CCE makes at the intersection of research and public impact cannot be overstated, it is imperative that this unit be appropriately resourced, recognized, and valued at the university.

There was disagreement among stakeholders as to whether faculty, trainees (i.e., undergraduates, graduate students, postdoctoral researchers), or communicators — either within and external to the university – should serve as the primary public voices for research, and whether community engagement should be encouraged or required. Regarding the former, our committee recognizes merit in both approaches, though its recommendations are centered primarily around providing opportunities, training, and support for direct faculty and trainee engagement where possible. Regarding the latter, our committee focuses its recommendations on strongly incentivizing (not mandating) public engagement through resources, research support, recognition, and tenure and promotion criteria.

Recommendations

Our committee advocates a university-wide embrace of the ethos that research excellence and public impact and community engagement are not mutually exclusive but robustly inform and reinforce one another. We recommend new positions, programs, and incentives across the university to value, promote, recognize, and sustain long-term and robust research-related bidirectional engagement with the public. The recommendation is consistent with the recommendations in chapter five, which covers public impact more broadly.

Our proposed action items address ways to support, incentivize, and integrate research-related public engagement in university life and ways to better connect the public to research on campus.

Reassess tenure and promotion criteria for those involved in public engagement work. Public engagement work must be formally included and recognized as part of tenure review for faculty who do this work, and units should develop clear criteria for how this is formally recognized. Following tenure, faculty in good standing with a strong record of research productivity and teaching excellence should be able to apply for an increase in public engagement work as appropriate for the unit and discipline, with accompanying changes in effort distribution across research, teaching, and service. Tenured faculty who are interested in pursuing entrepreneurship and innovation related to their research for the purposes of public impact could potentially negotiate a change in their effort distribution depending on the specific circumstances so that their entrepreneurial activities are formally recognized and valued when faculty are being reviewed. Units should develop clear criteria for how entrepreneurial activities are formally recognized.

Create a central fund for named public engagement fellowships (e.g., "Sagan Fellow"). Every year, multiple named fellowships could be awarded across the university through a well-defined nomination or application process, achieving broad representation among colleges to create a diverse annual cohort. Successful applicants would demonstrate both sustained excellence in research and keen interest in public engagement. It would be an in-house sabbatical of sorts during which a fellow would dedicate a specific amount of time to developing and implementing public engagement projects related to their discipline (e.g., building educational programs with local school districts, partnerships with local media outlets, science and faith events in congregations around the country, research and culture op-ed series in popular venues, podcasts on various outlets on topics of public interest, developing research project ideas with local conservation groups, partnering with local Indigenous nations on projects of value to their communities, entrepreneurial endeavors with clear public impact, etc.). The fellowship would come with a base salary supplement and funds for the proposed public engagement activity. The cohort of fellows would meet together quarterly to share ideas about their work, cross-fertilizing their plans and activities. While individual colleges can also do this separately, a central program (even if it is simply coordinating across colleges), signals the importance of public engagement from the very top of university leadership.

Establish professorships of public impact in every college. We envision a certain number of slots in every college for highly accomplished tenured professors to transition (for a few years or even permanently) to this track, in which research effort would be reduced to accommodate significant effort toward public engagement projects. The positions would be prestigious, longer-term than the named fellowships described above, recognize both disciplinary research achievement *and* demonstrated interest and willingness to train if needed in public engagement, and signal the importance the university places on building two-way relationships with local, national, and international communities. Faculty in these positions would be able to pursue vetted activities of personal interest in the public-impact domain and would be available for projects driven by college and university leadership to advance reciprocity with the public. This

proposed program expands on a recent initiative in the College of Arts and Sciences to create professors of public understanding. The first of these is a professor of public understanding in science and mathematics.

Empower colleges to focus on fostering public engagement in the scholarly processes and outputs of its 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 interaction between faculty research and public interests, needs, and concerns. Making this connection will promote research transparency and accountability. Units should develop public engagement strategies, which should include clear criteria for how public engagement activities are formally recognized and valued, including for tenure and promotion. This work is complementary to efforts such as Cornell's Research Matters initiative, because the aim is to facilitate direct interaction between faculty and the public (either local community members, interest groups, or broader society) on the faculty member's latest research or community members' questions and interests. This will also enable universities to be better equipped for navigating the growing networks of philanthropists and public funders, such as the Impact Funders Forum, who are already shifting grant review processes to include evaluation of public partnership plans.[110]

Expand dedicated seed funds for research projects developed in collaboration with local community members. These projects could flow out of the work conducted during the named public engagement fellowships above or could be separate. Successful applicants would be required to demonstrate that the research questions are motivated at least in part by demonstrable local public needs and interests. This program strengthens and expands upon the success of existing infrastructure at Cornell, such as the Einhorn Center for Community Engagement and the Atkinson Center for Sustainability.

Create a "funding boost" program to incentivize faculty members to develop and sustain public engagement efforts. Any faculty member who receives an external grant for research will be eligible for additional funds if they propose specific public outreach activities centered around their research. If the external award already has a public engagement supplement (e.g., some National Science Foundation mechanisms), then the university would provide matching funds to support the public engagement activity further.

Create a course for postdoctoral researchers and graduate students across all disciplines to learn about public engagement through practicums. Our graduates will take these skills with them into their independent careers and may be future Cornell ambassadors beyond Ithaca. Cornell has significant expertise in this area in several units, which could be tapped for this effort.

---

[110] Angela T. Bednarek et al., "How and Why Funders Support Engaged Research," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 1 (2025): e2400931121, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2400931121.

Relevant content and approaches could also be drawn from the Scientist Network for Advancing Policy's (SNAP) course on science communication, the Aldo Leopold Foundation's Leopold Fellowship in Education & Communication, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science's (AAAS) Science & Technology Policy Fellowships program.

Create more opportunities to bring members of the local community to campus and engage with the research and creative activity of faculty and staff. One possibility could be a monthly "Cornell Day" — each college opens its doors to the public once a year for a broad tour and showcase. This would be coordinated by a collaboration between the provost's office and college deans in terms of cost, scheduling colleges to specific months, and providing bus pick-ups and drop-offs for surrounding community members throughout the county. As another example, the university could host a once-per-month, highly accessible public talk by a faculty or staff member engaged in high-interest research. The inspiration for this idea comes from examples like the "Hot Science, Cool Talks" series at the University of Texas at Austin (where the public talk, often drawing hundreds of attendees from young children to retirees, is preceded by a science fair in which students host tables with free interactive activities related to their research) or the Mindworks Lab at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. The public talks could have an online option (both live and recorded) to be more accessible, and invitations could be extended directly to specific classes at local county schools, scout troops, community organizations, and clubs. Undergraduate researchers, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers could be an important part of both types of showcases. Both ideas build on open houses and interactive experiences that some units currently run.

Create an "ask a researcher" platform. Set up an online platform for community members to submit questions about topics of interest that Cornell researchers help answer. This could be particularly valuable not only for reliable information transfer but also for two-way relationship building with the town and beyond.

Undergraduate students

Although the primary issues that surfaced around undergraduate education are covered in chapter three, we highlight here undergraduate research and creative practice for three main reasons.

First, as articulated in the introductory chapter, we defined the university as a learning ecosystem in which all the different learning modalities integrate to create a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. To actualize this philosophical understanding of the ideal university, our structures and incentives must promote *effective* integration across the different modes of learning, including research. Second, there was broad agreement among stakeholders across many meetings that the divide between academic and co-curricular experiences undermines holistic student growth and that greater faculty involvement in student development beyond the classroom is needed. There was also broad agreement that smaller

learning environments with faculty mentorship — particularly in the face of increasing atomization and insularity fueled by the rapid advancement of social media and technology such as generative AI — provides greater opportunity for cultivating sound judgment: thinking critically, dialoguing across perspectives, discussing and testing different ideas, and developing an investigative mindset for separating fact from fiction. Finally, a number of stakeholders mentioned the research experience as a distinctive educational asset but noted that the research landscape at universities is often opaque and there should be an effort to provide opportunities for undergraduate students more equitably across disciplinary areas and for students from different backgrounds.

Recommendations

In 2025, according to the Cornell Undergraduate Experience survey conducted biennially by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning, about 33 percent of Cornell undergraduates participated in research with a faculty member. The percentage varies considerably across colleges and departments. Anecdotally this appears to depend at least partly on unit-level resources, opportunities, and overall culture, though a more careful study of these differences is warranted. It is important to note that some colleges may provide alternative research-like experiences, such as student project teams, which could offer similar learning benefits to students but may not be included as "research with a faculty member" in the survey.

Those caveats notwithstanding, the percentage across Cornell (33 percent) has held over the past decade. According to the same survey in 2019, Cornell's undergraduate research participation (with faculty mentorship) is on par with many other peer research universities that offer a broad liberal arts education, although there are notable exceptions such as the University of Chicago (more than 70 percent) and Vanderbilt University (more than 60 percent). Other universities may provide interesting models for us to consider, but fundamentally whether and how to promote deeper undergraduate engagement in research is a philosophical question that Cornell must answer by considering its distinctive ethos and character.

Our committee's main recommendation is to strongly lean into research as a critical part of the undergraduate student experience that Cornell offers. The main motivation for this recommendation is that research projects and independent studies with faculty members represent a particularly compelling means of promoting integrated learning and cultivation of sound judgment.

Below are concrete next steps that should be considered to more deeply integrate research into the undergraduate experience, with the fundamental goal of student development through integrated learning.

Significantly expand and create new undergraduate research and creative practice fellowships. There is already robust infrastructure in place (including summer opportunities) for undergraduate research at Cornell, through centrally administered fellowships, and college- or unit-level competitive research funding programs. However, space is typically limited, and only a fraction of applicants are selected. Our committee recommends: (a) the expansion of existing successful fellowship programs where possible, and (b) the creation of a central program that offers as many interested first- and second-year students as possible a stipend and housing for summer research and/or creative practice at Cornell (or if needed at any other peer academic institution, foundation, or industry). Efforts should be made to ensure broad disciplinary representation. Students supported by the program would be expected to submit reflections and/or brief in-person presentations on their experience. The latter strategy is similar to the Metcalf Internship Program at the University of Chicago, which guarantees a stipend from the university for any early-stage student who secures a research opportunity in the summer. This approach would benefit from the creation of a dedicated office (e.g., Office for Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice Fellowships) that coordinates with individual colleges to help match students with faculty members, foundations, or industry partners, based on interest, and administer as many research and creative practice fellowships as possible. This office could also be responsible for coordinating with colleges on the process of faculty evaluation of the reflections/presentations throughout the following academic year.

Enhance curricular integration of research. One strategy that would require significant work across the university but generated enthusiasm among many stakeholders and our committee members is to develop at least one required course in every undergraduate major in which students are exposed to cutting-edge research and scholarship from on-campus experts, with the possibility of small group discussions and faculty demonstrations. The course would also include presentations and discussions of the ethical and societal implications of the research work. State-of-the-art resources and cutting-edge research programs set apart universities like Cornell from other types of educational institutions, but most undergraduates are not highly exposed to this strength. A Cornell education must include instruction in what research is (and what it is not), how discoveries are made, how to distinguish evidence from conjecture, and exposure to the state-of-the-art. We aim to cultivate an informed, inquisitive population that will make evidence-based, responsible, and ethical decisions.

There was also some discussion about *requiring* undergraduate thesis projects — such as what Princeton does — but there was less agreement among stakeholders and our committee members about this approach.

Graduate students

Many of the most pressing topics pertaining to graduate and professional education, including a deeper sense of belonging in the university, navigation of the rapidly changing technological landscape including AI, preparation for an uncertain work future, and opportunities for public

engagement are covered in chapter six. Here, we focus on specific issues in the graduate research and scholarship enterprise that were raised by stakeholders and our committee deliberations.

Particularly in the STEM disciplines, in which research is heavily dependent on personnel and mentees, graduate student researchers have become a mainstay of research programs. Faculty rely on graduate students to carry out research projects, and in turn graduate students depend on faculty for funding, training and mentorship, networking, and career development. The threats to federal funding, as well as the overall uncertain research grant landscape, have placed tremendous pressure on faculty and universities. Many research universities across the country have dramatically reduced the number of Ph.D. student slots since the capacity to fund trainees for multiple years is under notable strain. There are active conversations in programs across the country about the appropriate size of Ph.D. programs and, in some disciplines, how to balance hiring of graduate student training with other technical support staff and AI support. Across several meetings on this topic, stakeholders within the university consistently noted that the sudden decline in graduate student positions not only puts a generation of trainees and future workers in a precarious position, it also significantly slows down some types of research at universities. While some stakeholders concede that our research personnel needs may have grown too fast too quickly over the last couple decades, they also note that there is a critical need for enhanced institutional financial and structural support that advances graduate education more robustly and absorbs the shock of unpredictable external disruptors, such as the current federal funding situation.

As described in greater detail in chapter six, some stakeholders, most notably graduate students themselves, expressed a keen interest in improved connectivity across the university for cross-disciplinary education and vocational preparation. While collaborative opportunities within broad disciplinary areas are generally viewed as a strength at Cornell, in part due to the rich presence of university-wide centers and focus groups that regularly bring together research programs across campus and serve as intellectual hubs, connections between some colleges and schools are still lacking. Examples that came up include humanities Ph.D. students interested in medical anthropology being able to spend time with relevant researchers at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York City; programs linking science graduate students with Cornell Law School for exposure to careers in intellectual property or patent law; or expanded opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation. While there are notable instances across campus of cross-college partnerships that promote graduate student activities, stakeholders noted several obstacles, including mis-aligned incentives between graduate students and faculty. For example, faculty who are directly funding (often from time-bound grants) Ph.D. students to carry out research face financial and other contextual pressures that are not necessarily conducive to supporting graduate student activities that do not directly advance their research goals.

Recommendations

Graduate students are a critical part of the research ecosystem of the university. Our committee's main recommendation regarding graduate students as it pertains specifically to research is to expand opportunities and promote flexibility. Though there is already notable effort in this space at Cornell for some disciplines, the time is ripe to coordinate significantly across campus and provide streamlined assistance from central administration for these efforts. Chapter six expands further on this recommendation, including strengthening industry partnerships. At a time when graduate student numbers are in decline due to funding challenges and at future risk due to the increasing use of AI in some research fields for even graduate-level work, it is imperative that we recenter an integrated research ecosystem and redouble our commitment to mentorship in the research and scholarship enterprise.

Enhance institutional support for research training. There is a critical need for graduate students and their research to have strong financial support from the institution. This will alleviate pressure on faculty, support important research programs, and help buffer against unexpected shocks to external funding sources in the future. One area that the Cornell Graduate School is currently studying and reporting on is research training grants. Successful applications for training grants typically necessitate institutional support in the form of (a) matching slots and/or stipend support in some other manner, and (b) administrative positions and/or AI support to reduce the required data collection and management, program administration, and regulatory burdens on faculty and staff. These forms of institutional support for graduate student research merit critical attention.

Create named research fellowships and fellowship programs through external partnerships. Our committee recommends exploring the possibility of significantly expanding named graduate student fellowships, funded by donors who are interested in advancing discovery and creative output, as well as in investing in the next generation of scholars and innovators, in particular disciplinary or interdisciplinary areas. These fellowships would be prestigious and would give graduate students more flexibility in their training plan and career development goals, especially since their faculty mentors would not be directly responsible for their stipends. A related idea is to establish more named research fellowship programs (not just individual fellowships) that both match donor interests and create more flexible and cross-disciplinary research training.

Expand programs for research mentoring partnerships. Increasing opportunities for co-mentoring across faculty members within a university or between national and international partner institutions could distribute the financial load and strengthen the overall training experience and research output. For example, in the latter option, Ph.D. students could split their time between two different mentors across partner institutions, getting experience on the same collaborative project in different settings with distinct research styles. Such national and international partnerships could promote the global vision of the university and lean into pre-

existing similar strengths of Cornell such as the Global Hubs program. This would have a direct positive influence on the university's overall research enterprise as well, by enhancing cooperativity to tackle shared problems and pressing questions.

Postdoctoral researchers

Postdoctoral researchers (postdocs) are often the most transient and least well-connected members of the university research community. The postdoctoral community is an essential engine for discovery and creativity in the university, ambassadors of the university research enterprise after they leave, mentors to junior trainees (both graduate students and undergraduates) in research labs, and critical to advancing the educational mission by performing instructional duties in undergraduate classrooms and graduate level seminars. They represent a core component of our university and their research and professional needs merit careful attention.

The main challenges raised by stakeholders are the lack of connectivity across campus weakening university citizenship, restricted freedom to explore new research ideas and spaces due to constraints imposed by inflexible funding structures, and limited opportunities for mentorship and guidance.

Recommendations

In a survey conducted by the Cornell Postdoctoral Association during the 2024–2025 academic year (also highlighted in chapter six), in which more than 80 percent of the one hundred respondents were from STEM disciplines, 78 percent of postdocs reported having only one or two formal or informal mentors to discuss research ideas, skills and professional development, and career opportunities. Other findings from the survey corroborated the main message that typically postdocs experience limited cross-institutional integration. Notably, two-thirds of respondents do not feel a strong sense of belonging at Cornell.

Our committee's main recommendations are to expand opportunities for more flexible postdoctoral positions and bolster personnel and resource support for the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at Cornell, launched in 2025 prior to FAU's work, to provide valuable support, facilitate meaningful professional connections across campus, and implement career development programs. Many of the same proposed action items in the sub-section above for graduate students could be readily adapted for postdocs. The university-level fellowships, in particular, could afford postdocs the freedom to tailor their training experience. Current models rely heavily on faculty grants for postdoc funding, which constrains postdocs to devote all or most of their time to their supervisor's projects. Expanding funding and fellowship programs for postdocs would substantively increase flexibility and opportunities for cross-campus interaction. These recommendations are aligned with several of the core principles of research and scholarship in the university outlined above.

4.4. Challenges and Opportunities with Research Funding

University relations with the federal government developed significantly in the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1930s, the federal government recognized universities as powerful engines for addressing national security needs and priorities. In 1945, Vannevar Bush's landmark treatise on the importance of federal investment in scientific research even in times of peace was published.[111] Shortly thereafter, the National Science Foundation (1950), National Endowment for the Arts (1965), and National Endowment for the Humanities (1965) were created. During the same period, the U.S. Congress markedly increased funding for the National Institutes of Health. In 1965, the Higher Education Act was passed, creating the framework for federal student aid, accreditation, and related programs. This era marked a cataclysmic shift in the partnership between institutions of higher education and the government, including the amount of federal funding allocated for universities, while maintaining university self-governance and academic freedom.

The scale and breadth of federal funding for American research since World War II has been significant, strengthening many of the most innovative universities in the country. Stakeholders agreed that no other alternative source of support, or even combination of other existing sources, can be expected to match what the partnership with the federal government has offered over the past decades, especially in STEM disciplines. However, recent federal funding freezes, pauses, 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. Across numerous meetings on the topic of research funding, stakeholders broadly agreed that this issue must be addressed irrespective of whether current disruptions are temporary.

Funding constraints imposed by shifts in university-government relations may shrink the research enterprise at some universities, at least temporarily. Universities should strive to direct this shift proactively, so that the process more closely resembles pruning than it does indiscriminate cutting. Proper pruning removes plant parts (even healthy parts) to improve the long-term health of the central organism. Indiscriminate cutting driven by external forces is unlikely to have a salutary effect on research universities and has the potential to do significant long-term harm from both the smaller scale of the research enterprise and the limited directions in which it continues to prosper. Leading in this manner will require two changes. First, research universities must diversify funding streams for greater stability (though, importantly, not as a replacement for a fundamentally sound partnership with the government), and second, it may also require commitment of internal funds.

---

[111] Vannevar Bush, *Science, the Endless Frontier: A Report to the President on a Program for Postwar Scientific Research* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1945).

As universities diversify external funding sources by leaning into state, private foundation, corporate, and other philanthropic partnership opportunities where possible, universities still require robust federal investment, especially for fundamental research, which often does not have an immediate payoff. None of these alternative categories of funding are without limitations and challenges. For example, recent research shows that when federal funding for university research is reduced and private corporate funding partially replaces it, the resulting scientific innovations are less accessible to the public and have smaller positive spillovers.[112] That said, over-reliance on any one source (whether it be the federal government in the sciences or well-resourced foundations in the humanities) leaves us vulnerable and less empowered to define our own priorities. Many stakeholders agreed that corporate partnerships need to be expanded, but with appropriate safeguards to protect academic independence, research integrity, and intellectual property.

The second tool to move from indiscriminate cutting to a pruning model — committing internal funds — also comes with some risk. External funding creates accountability, and it generates competitive pressure that helps reduce insularity and pushes researchers to ask compelling questions. It may be difficult to replicate this pressure within internal competitive funding opportunities. However, to the extent that the university can raise unrestricted funds and maintain or increase endowment returns, the establishment of internal, competitive funding sources may sustain research programs in areas where external support wanes and the university identifies high institutional priorities, affording the capacity to foster the desired pace and directions of growth in the research and scholarship enterprise.

Stakeholders disagreed on how the university might prioritize the use of internal funds across proposed projects. The committee recommends that the university set aside funds in a manner proportional to resource and personnel needs for projects across the entire disciplinary spectrum that are deemed valuable but for which external funding may be particularly limited.

Related to this, the university must grapple with the sustainable scale of the research enterprise. Specifically, there is a worrisome preoccupation with funding growth in the university, and some stakeholders observed that this can shift focus away from quality and impact toward quantity and size. American universities must remain global leaders in research and creative output, but we must sharpen our focus on research quality, and less so on quantity, which will require a fresh assessment and reimagination of various incentives and structures in the university.

There was disagreement among stakeholders about the relative value of collaborative versus

---

[112] Tania Babina et al., "Cutting the Innovation Engine: How Federal Funding Shocks Affect University Patenting, Entrepreneurship, and Publications," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 138, no. 2 (2023): 895–954, https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=67952.

solitary scholarship. Researchers in the sciences were split on the importance of institutional support for team-based research, coupled with reform on hiring practices and tenure and promotion criteria. Faculty in the arts and humanities, as well as in disciplines such as mathematics, particularly emphasized that a lot of their scholarship can be inherently solitary, and incentivizing team-based research could marginalize those disciplines. Most agreed, though, that disciplines are often too siloed in the university today, and meaningful and sustained interactions across disciplines are needed to pursue some of the most interesting questions, challenging issues, or pressing problems of today.

Recommendations

Our committee strongly advocates for new paradigms and incentives to work toward more stable structures for research excellence, leadership in innovation, and funding resilience. This includes promoting greater coordination across some units and research areas that would benefit most from this while still explicitly valuing all forms of scholarship (individual and team-based), establishing substantive and dedicated fundamental research foundations and endowments (as we continue to strongly advocate for critical federal and state investment), expanding and partnering with thematic and time-bound focused research organizations (FROs), and redefining tenure and promotion guidelines to value a wider-array of research-related activities, including entrepreneurship.

Champion federal and state research investments. Government funding for universities is not a one-way gift — it is part of a bidirectional partnership, an investment on behalf of society with universities serving as "instruments of national purpose," as described by Clark Kerr.[113] Cornell must continue to devote significant attention to long-term relationship building with the government, strengthen shared appreciation of the historically-unmatched government-university partnership in America, demonstrate regularly and clearly to federal and state representatives the near- and long-term value for the nation of investment in university research, and deepen two-way engagements with the public and local, state, and federal representatives to build and sustain genuine relationships and trust.

Establish centralized internal funding for moonshot teams for especially bold ideas and initiatives that advance fundamental knowledge, encourage novel human expressions, and/or solve pressing and emerging societal challenges. Projects would ideally be cross-college and span a variety of different disciplines. Seed support should be substantial, in the form of direct funds and/or support staff lines. Additional institutional funds could be made available if external grants are procured. Professional development can be provided for those transitioning from more independent, solitary work. Tenure and promotion processes would explicitly recognize and value meaningful participation. Funded teams will present their work to all colleges to increase exposure to the program. This concept is related, but significantly more

[113] Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

expansive in disciplinary scope, to the discovery and commercialization engines idea proposed by Cornell faculty in 2021.[114] As projects conclude, secure external funding, or sunset for other reasons, ideas for new "moonshot teams" will be solicited on a rolling basis as funds allow.

Establish a large discovery and creativity university foundation operating on dedicated investment vehicles. A prominent example of this is the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF), which uses revenue from patenting and licensing to manage an investment portfolio for the specific purpose of funding fundamental research, discovery, creative practice, and public impact work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (it contributes over $100 million annually toward research at the university). This model would allow individual faculty and research labs in any discipline, performing solitary or collaborative work, to be supported by the foundation on the merit of individual or collaborative proposals and would not preclude grant applications to other agencies and sources (federal, state, independent foundation, industry, or otherwise). Even if the university is not positioned to establish such a foundation now, it could make necessary preparations for when the time is right.

Develop or expand external partnerships — for example, with research institutes such as focused research organizations (FROs) — to address complex questions. FROs such as Arc Institute or Arcadia Science accrued large sums of money from philanthropy to fund fundamental research: "These institutions do not pretend to operate like traditional academic departments. They present themselves not as collections of individual labs pursuing separate grants but as unified organizations with shared infrastructure, centralized operations, and coherent communication styles."[115] This model, which moves toward more time-bound thematic and team-based research, is likely most appropriate for STEM disciplines and would require reimagining the tenure process and promotion criteria, and also mechanisms for how faculty may transition in and out of association with the FRO. They are related to but different from usual 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). Multiple new FROs (or partnerships with existing FROs), focused on different questions, could get birthed and sunset in a staggered fashion, with new faculty participating across time. The questions to focus on will be determined by internal review of proposals together with pitches to interested philanthropists. To maintain robust philanthropic support, and to enable fundamental research through this mechanism, this model necessitates a

[114] Michael I. Kotlikoff, Emmanuel P. Giannelis, and Glenn C. Altschuler, "Research Universities and the Innovation Economy," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 27, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/04/27/new-model-american-research-required-today-opinion.

[115] Jolie Gan, "The Fight for Slow and Boring Research," *Asterisk*, January 2026, https://asteriskmag.com/issues/13/the-fight-for-slow-and-boring-research.

greater emphasis on research communication, which requires positions that are dedicated to helping faculty articulate their ideas, work, and findings in an accessible and appealing way to donors and the broader public (imagine a separate set of websites or other media intended primarily for the public including philanthropists and journalists, not necessarily other academics, which is the way current faculty pages are typically oriented).

Establish structures that empower coordination across colleges to achieve shared goals. This encompasses everything from normalizing cross-unit collaboration on hiring to enhancing centralized shared resource centers to drive discovery and innovation. The former includes cross-college hiring, cluster hiring, and cooperative resource allocation (e.g., start-up funds). The latter includes streamlining approaches for determining what technologies are most critical for the university to invest in, improving operational efficiency, and creating mechanisms for effective sharing and coordination across individual investigators, departments, and colleges. Additional ideas include centralized support for new technology development and training and education for students.

Set up a consortium of research universities that would create a cross-university review panel or study section that solicits proposals and makes awards. The idea behind the consortium, as opposed to keeping it completely internal, is that it would prevent insularity and ensure that stale research directions are not supported indefinitely. The Central New York Humanities Corridor, a consortium of eleven institutions, may provide a starting point or a helpful example.

Reassess research-related tenure and promotion guidelines. An action recommendation item in the *Public* subsection above already covered tenure and promotion criteria from the standpoint of formally valuing and recognizing public engagement as well as entrepreneurship and public impact work. Here the focus is on how research excellence itself is evaluated. One singular approach is not possible, as different disciplines, departments, and colleges are quite distinct in terms of the nature of the scholarly work (e.g., solitary vs. team-based), types of research output (e.g., conference abstracts vs. papers vs. books), or resource needs (e.g., tens of thousands of dollars in humanities vs. millions in STEM). Nevertheless, we recommend significant university-wide review of tenure criteria, both written guidelines and unwritten discipline-specific cultural expectations, with an eye toward how to evaluate true research excellence and impact.

Advance opportunities to pivot or adapt research goals. The intended purpose of a sabbatical is to add value to the university by enhancing professional ideas or capabilities, typically in research and scholarship. One of the goals of indefinite tenure is to enable risk-taking in research, including pivoting to new fields or research questions. Despite these opportunities, the practical reality in many disciplines due in part to the unprecedented pace at which some research fields and related technologies are advancing, is that there is a greater risk than in prior eras of losing productivity in your original field if you pivot away to another field and the

venture is not successful, diminishing credibility for future funding. Our committee recommends competitive mechanisms for short-term institutional funding or other related support for a highly successful researcher's lab, to enable ongoing work in the original research field while the faculty member attempts a pivot or particularly creative but risky undertaking.

4.5. Challenges and Opportunities with Artificial Intelligence

AI tools can be useful in research and scholarship because they draw on the vast store of new knowledge and creative output generated and recorded by human beings (much of which has been produced in universities). Such tools can only grow in value if research and creative enterprise continue. Moreover, the fact that AI tools increase access to what universities produce (e.g., research findings, creative output, teaching materials) only enhances the public value of those outputs. In these ways, the rapid changes brought about by AI have the potential for great synergy with the work of universities, though they also create notable challenges.

Discussions with stakeholders surfaced six main ways in which AI intersects with research and scholarship: (a) using AI for domain-specific research; (b) conducting research on how the rise of AI affects research and training; (c) developing and innovating with AI; (d) training in AI literacy, governance, ethics, and responsible use (this cuts across the education, research, and public-impact missions); (e) distinguishing between AI- and human-led research and publications; and (f) bidirectional engagement with the public about their concerns and needs. The Cornell AI Initiative is leading the charge in all these areas. It addresses both AI as a field of study and the responsible and effective use of AI as a tool for research, for which it is developing training modules for the campus community. The major questions with respect to these modules are when and how to encourage or require training, how to keep them up to date as AI advances rapidly, and how to extend it beyond students and faculty to staff, alumni, and the broader community. Though there is disagreement across stakeholders about whether AI has a net positive effect on research, there is widespread agreement on the critical need to promote human connections, interactions, and creativity in our scholarly activities. The Cornell AI Initiative has initiated the AI Innovation Lab and AI Office Hours to help connect AI experts with domain-specific experts to promote novel and responsible uses of AI for a wide-variety of research efforts spanning the humanities, social sciences, engineering, and medicine.

The main disagreement among stakeholders was around how actively the university should expand AI's role in research. On the one hand, there are promising and exciting developments in the use of AI across many disciplines, including but not limited to art and design, paleography, architecture, sustainability, business, agriculture, nutrition, sciences, and medicine. For example, AI is already fueling exciting progress in discovering drug combinations for animal and human clinical trials, modeling climate scenarios for effective energy policy, or restoring ancient art and manuscripts for cultural heritage preservation. On the other hand, there are notable ethical questions, including access disparity, privacy concerns, intellectual theft, undue influence of the private sector, and energy use and environmental

impact. There are also significant tension points. For example, generative AI has been a boon for non-native English speakers in terms of research communication, but it is also leading to a rapid proliferation of completely AI-generated research content (termed "AI slop"), which is causing a quality crisis in some disciplines. AI is also at the center of a tension between competitiveness and research security — American universities want to recruit the best minds from across the globe to remain leaders rather than followers in the AI space, but this pushes up against significant geopolitical concerns surrounding data security. Another pressure point is at the interface of research efficiency and student training.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing the point made above that there is a wide range of growing concerns from the public on whether proper guardrails are in place, how environmental and economic issues (pertaining to data centers in particular) are being considered, and whether we are developing and being held accountable to a governance pipeline that can enforce responsible use and help manage challenging trade-offs.

Recommendations

Develop a center for innovative and responsible use of AI, in coordination with a new unified computing infrastructure. A centralized unit on campus with robust expert and administrative support to help connect AI experts with domain-specific experts to promote novel, discipline-specific, curated, and responsible uses of AI for a wide variety of research efforts spanning the arts, humanities, social sciences, life and physical sciences, engineering, and veterinary and human medicine. This center would provide training in AI use as well as resources, workshops, and panel discussions on topics ranging from exciting and promising uses of AI on campus to important considerations regarding AI risks, governance, and ethics. This idea builds on the Cornell AI Initiative programs, including the AI Innovation Lab, AI Innovation Hub, and AI Office Hours.

The Cornell AI Initiative grounds its approach in cutting-edge research about AI across the disciplines, including developing AI technologies and applications, examining their social and ethical implications, and developing policy and law. It enables bottom-up experimentation across the university, by providing tools, support, guidance, and by enabling community building. For example, in collaboration with the Office of the Vice Provost for Research and other campus partners, the AI Initiative has provided funding to support a variety of faculty-led thought summits to identify novel interdisciplinary research areas related to AI, offered seed grants in areas such as AI and sustainability and AI and society, and sponsored the Assessing and Imagining the Impact of Generative AI in Science Symposium. The center could build on all this progress.

The proposed center could also be developed collaboratively among research universities in a consortium. Development of an integrated and broadly accessible AI center will require a unified computational ecosystem that is forward-looking to support the rapidly growing scale

of data-driven research. This infrastructure should include data processing, data storage, dissemination, analysis visualization tools, security, and AI tools. The current model of siloed systems, such as standalone domain-specific platforms, limits scalability, collaboration, and the ability to fully leverage emerging technologies such as AI and large-scale data integration. Universities would benefit from an integrated infrastructure developed in close partnership with campus-wide computing leaders. A coordinated approach that bridges multiple domains of expertise with shared high-performance computing, scalable storage, and next-gen AI capabilities will better position universities to support collaborative, data-intensive research and scholarship over the next decades.

Build a robust two-way AI communication pipeline with communities across the state. In such a fast-moving area as AI, the challenges and opportunities arise at a rapid clip. It is critical to build and sustain trusting relationships with the public, strengthened by regular joint deliberations with local communities and others across the state that may be particularly affected by Cornell's decisions around AI and research. Related to this, our committee recommends deepening connections with policymakers in the local, state, and federal government around this topic, including partnering to conduct research on critical questions such as the effects of AI on education, labor impacts, and the environmental impact of data centers in different parts of the state.

4.6. Other Special Topics

Research accountability

Some disciplines report a reproducibility crisis in research.[116] Potential factors include the "publish or perish" mentality around tenure and promotion, the rapid proliferation in the last fifteen years of predatory journals, and even data manipulation and ideologically-driven research design.[117] The reporting on a few prominent examples of these phenomena, even if they are rare, can substantially diminish research credibility in the eyes of the public, with long-lasting and devastating effects on public trust in universities. A pervasive culture within the academy in which corrections of published work and publication of null results are looked down upon adds to the problem. In addition to a culture change, we would benefit from mechanisms that reduce biased, flawed, and/or fraudulent research.

One solution is to promote productive disagreement in the scholarly process, potentially through the model of adversarial collaboration (AC).[118] In AC, opposing theories are rigorously

---

[116] Kelly D. Cobey et al., "Biomedical Researchers' Perspectives on the Reproducibility of Research," *PLOS Biology* 22, no. 11 (2024): e3002870, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3002870.

[117] George J. Borjas and Nate Breznau, "Ideological Bias in the Production of Research Findings," *Science Advances* 12, no. 1 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adz7173.

[118] Stephen J. Ceci, Cory J. Clark, Lee Jussim, and Wendy M. Williams, "Adversarial Collaboration: An Undervalued Approach in Behavioral Science," *American Psychologist* 81, no. 3 (2026): 374–90, https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2025-13496-001.

scientifically tested in a team composed of members with contradictory hypotheses. AC works best when scholars hold opposing viewpoints but exhibit shared intellectual humility. Even if AC is impractical in some disciplines and projects, the spirit of the approach (slowing down and subjecting your work to constructive critique) could be more systematically adopted by departments and units across campus. In theory, this is what internal seminars, external conferences, and peer review aim to accomplish. But not every study is subject to the same careful scrutiny, and especially amid pressure to publish, irreproducible work still slips through the cracks. Our committee recommends continued robust deliberation on this topic.

Libraries and academic publishing

If academic units are the organs of the university body, and the administration and assemblies the executive centers, then it is reasonable to imagine the university library serving, as one stakeholder memorably described it, as the university's "circulatory system." University libraries are not simply repositories of information. They are strategic partners in the creation of knowledge, curators of collections that enable discovery, stewards of institutional and cultural memory, and catalysts for innovation. Libraries connect people, ideas, and resources across disciplines and generations by combining deep expertise in information, collections, archives, digital scholarship, and student learning with a campus-wide perspective. In doing so, libraries help universities navigate change, preserve what matters, and advance their highest academic aspirations. And yet this vital system is now in crisis, in large part due to a serious dilemma in the academic publishing system.[119]

A major issue in academic publishing is that a few small, prominent publishers dominate the landscape and exercise market power in ways that raise the cost of publishing and access, limiting the positive public spillovers from university research. Another problem is the rapid rise of predatory journals over the last fifteen years, which has created a glut of papers of questionable quality. In 2025, Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, and MDPI were responsible for nearly 70 percent of all publications.[120] Publication costs, especially for open access, are exorbitant and even prohibitive. Due to the monopoly on prestige they have gained, these publishers are able to get university faculty to provide their best content and extensive services for free while requiring excessive fees for the privilege to publish with them. These publishers have high subscription costs, which creates significant stress for many university libraries. The *Library Journal's* 2025 Periodicals Price Survey found subject area increases in chemistry, physics, and history ranging from 36 to 50 percent just between 2019 and 2025,[121] even as the Consumer Price Index rose 26.1 percent over the same period, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. At the

[119] Lindsay Ellis, "After the Elsevier 'Tipping Point,' Research Libraries Consider Their Options," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 26, 2019, https://www.chronicle.com/article/after-the-elsevier-tipping-point-research-libraries-consider-their-options/.

[120] "Scilit Rankings," Scilit, accessed August 23, 2026, https://www.scilit.com/rankings.

[121] Siôn Romaine et al., "Learning from the Past | Periodicals Price Survey 2025," *Library Journal*, April 14, 2025, https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/learning-from-the-past-periodicals-price-survey-2025.

same time as costs have outpaced inflation, academic libraries nationally have grappled with a real decline in investment. According to a 2023 survey from the Association of College and Research Libraries, between 2015 and 2023, average expenditures fell from $4,677,043 to $3,950,693 — a decline of 15.5 percent.[122]

Alternatives such as arXiv (which Cornell supported and built up for decades), bioRxiv, and eLife have gained popularity in some fields but not all; part of the challenge is that in some disciplines these venues are flooded with papers and the capacity for careful vetting is limited. The irony of the current situation is that while digitizing publications was supposed to make scholarship more accessible, under the control of profit-making companies, the scholarship produced by universities is distributed only to those who can pay for digital subscriptions.

Current academic incentive structures compound the problem posed by rising costs and declining investment. Publishers profit from proliferation — more journals, more articles, more pages — while tenure and promotion practices that lean on publication counts and journal-impact metrics effectively outsource the university's own evaluation of scholarly quality to those same publishers. Stakeholders were clear that this is not simply a library problem but a faculty governance one. When a small number of publishers extract enormous profits from research funded by both public agencies and universities, transforming public investments into private goods, the crisis of trust is exacerbated.

The stakes reach beyond cost. As AI-generated and fraudulent scholarship proliferates, stakeholders shared that the university's capacity to curate and vouch for verified knowledge is becoming one of its most important public functions — one increasingly at odds with a publishing system built to maximize volume rather than protect trust. Restoring the university's control over how its own knowledge is produced, verified, and shared is, in this sense, not a peripheral concern but a direct extension of this report's central argument: that public trust in the American university depends on the institution honing and centering its own judgment, not outsourcing it to others.

Effectively addressing the current crisis in academic publishing requires coordination across researchers, publishers, funders, university libraries, university presses, and university administrators. Cornell University's Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Communications issued a report in 2023. The committee stated, "The careful consideration of sustainable, universal access to knowledge is an ethical and existential imperative for the

[122] *The State of U.S. Academic Libraries: Findings from the ACRL 2023 Annual Survey* (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2024), https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/2023%20State%20of%20Academic%20Libraries%20Report.pdf.

University, its Faculty, and its students."[123]

One option is for universities to invest directly in publishing capacity within the university's control, redirecting resources currently flowing to commercial publishers toward university press and open-access journal infrastructure. Cornell is well positioned to help lead on this front, having been the home for arXiv for decades, and operating both a research library and a university press. This option also must answer the question of how rigorous peer review of submissions would be conducted. Realizing this shift would require sustained institutional will: revising promotion and tenure practices to value the quality of scholarship over placement or impact factor and preparing for the legal friction — from copyright constraints to litigation risks — that any serious challenge to the current system is likely to invite.

Another option, not mutually exclusive with the option described above, is to lean heavily into society journals, which merits further discussion. All these models seek to reduce the market power of ever-growing publishing oligopolies, thereby gaining more autonomy among universities and likely saving on costs.

[123] *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Communications* (Cornell University Faculty Senate, March 2023), https://www.deanoffaculty.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/Senate_Ad_Hoc_Future_Academic_Comms.pdf.

5. Public Impact and Community Engagement

5.1. Background: Reimagining Cornell's Public-Impact Mission

Public impact is a broad umbrella term that includes a wide range of models, strategies, and activities. We define public impact as the set of ways that universities engage outside their campuses with the goal of advancing critical societal outcomes. Although extension and community engagement is a powerful engine, it is not the only vehicle to achieve public impact. Additional means include accessibility to the university, the development of new and revolutionary technologies, entrepreneurship and economic growth, translation of research with the goal of accessibility to the broader society, informing policy on behalf of public needs, and working with key outside partner organizations, among others.

Research universities like Cornell University already do many of these things to help disseminate new knowledge. As a land-grant university, Cornell has a more robust and explicit commitment to public impact, with direct and meaningful engagement with external stakeholders to advance a range of outcomes for communities, families, and individuals within the state and beyond. Cornell's dual status as a top-tier research university and land-grant institution implies a complex and demanding responsibility to the public, including the production of rigorous and high-quality scholarship alongside leveraging that research and creative practice to contribute to public needs. It also means that Cornell has a unique advantage in delivering on that core mission.

Of the three disruptors animating the work of Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University, the erosion of the public's trust in higher education stands out. It speaks to the visibility of higher education's contributions to society and to addressing challenges well beyond campus walls. Showcasing, valuing, expanding, and improving public impact and community engagement can help address the significant decline in public trust and the changing relationship with the local, state, and federal governments.

Our committee's analysis of the current state of higher education points to five areas in which universities, including Cornell, have shifted. Higher education's relationship with the public is one such area. Importantly for Cornell, there is considerable capacity to refocus activities and thus reclaim a generative, bidirectional relationship with the public, an area where we historically have had a considerable advantage. But universities must reclaim public impact in ways that promote the health of the overall learning ecosystem and serve stakeholder communities around the world.

Our approach to public impact is motivated by the overarching premise that universities have a responsibility to leverage new knowledge, insights, creative output, and scientific advances to make life better for communities, families, and individuals. The committee makes a distinction between external impact that leads to better health, education, community experience, and

economic outcomes versus efforts to impose ideologically influenced values and norms. In this chapter, we focus our attention on the former. The core principle that lies at the center of the committee's approach to the American university's public-impact mission, outlined below, is the product of extensive committee discussions, the rich input and insights from our public impact advisory panel, and our extensive engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. This included conversations with government and business leaders at the local, state, and federal levels.

One theme that emerged from stakeholder discussions relates to challenges in communicating public impact work. We agree that better communication strategies are critical. However, the core challenges in this area are not merely a matter of messaging. They are also a matter of prioritization, incentives, and coordination.

5.2. The Role of Public Impact in Today's Higher Education Landscape

Our committee's work has brought into sharp relief the erosion of trust in institutions of higher education, the weakened relationship with the public, and the vulnerabilities related to our partnership with the government (see section 2.2). Interestingly, despite the erosion of trust around some activities of the American university, there are relatively high levels of trust in its public mission. In an American Higher Education Barometer report from fall 2025, 83 percent of respondents recognized the importance of universities for economic growth and 76–79 percent viewed universities as having positive local community, economic, and healthcare impacts.[124] Viewed in this light, universities' public-impact mission is an antidote to the broader loss of confidence in our societal role. Compare this to the 42 percent of respondents in a 2025 Gallup-Lumina Foundation survey who had a "great-deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education.[125] This duality is supported by a recent Citizens & Scholars report on the state of higher education. According to their survey, 74 percent of respondents trust universities "to do what is right" even while their survey finds that only 25 percent have a great deal of trust in universities.[126]

These surveys point to the abiding trust that remains in higher education's capacity to advance public outcomes even amid a climate of skepticism. Research universities, we believe, should

---

[124] David Lazer et al., *Higher Education Public Opinion Analysis: Strong Support Amid Specific Vulnerabilities* (American Higher Education Barometer, October 2025), https://raw.githubusercontent.com/kateto/AHEB/main/REPORTS/AHEB%20Report%2001%20Higher%20Education%20Attitudes.pdf.

[125] *The State of Higher Education 2025* (Gallup and Lumina Foundation, May 2, 2025), https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The.State_.of_.Higher.Education.2025.pdf.

[126] "New Research Finds Americans Haven't Turned Against Higher Education—They're Ambivalent, and Waiting to Be Convinced," Citizens & Scholars, May 6, 2026, https://cands.org/higher-ed-trust-report-2026-findings/.

lean into public impact, not as an extractive and strategic means to gain support from the public, but to build genuine trust and more robustly fulfill the university's purpose. Put differently, to lean away from higher education's public impact work at a time of eroding trust in universities is a sure way to exacerbate the problem.

Cornell is well positioned to contribute to existing efforts across higher education through its integration of knowledge, teaching, and discovery with extensive public impact. As the only land-grant institution in the Ivy League, Cornell is at once a leading private research university and a land-grant 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**. It allows the university to be at the cutting edge of scientific discovery, creative output, and knowledge creation on the one hand and, on the other, to disseminate and translate these advances into tools, policy recommendations, and activities that will benefit the broader public (i.e., "putting knowledge to work," as described by Cornell Cooperative Extension). Our committee heard this message repeatedly in our stakeholder conversations. Effective public impact and engagement depend on high-quality research. At the same time, impactful research is advanced by a strong connection to the real-world challenges and realities exposed by public engagement work, while of course staying dedicated to fundamental research excellence that may not have immediate payoff but is the foundation on which all real-world applications are built. Drawing them together offers universities a clear path forward during a turbulent time. Cornell's public engagement tradition provides a blueprint for linking cutting-edge, rigorous research with applied tools, practices, and policies, alongside training and technical assistance to diverse stakeholders.

The combination of rigorous research, a commitment to education, and a public-facing mission through a long-standing and impressive existing infrastructure — a model exemplified by Cornell — has clear implications for the future of all American universities. Although our model provides us with a clear differentiator, it also can inform efforts across the entire higher education landscape. A reimagining of the land-grant mission for the twenty-first century should encourage American universities to be bolder and more ambitious, not less. Higher education in the U.S. should build on our tradition as the "land-grant university to the world"[127] by placing the public mission on equal footing with the commitment to rigorous research and a transformative education.

Achieving this future requires understanding the past. Ezra Cornell wrote of his goal to "do the greatest good to the greatest number of the industrial classes of my native state, and at the same

[127] David J. Skorton, "139th Commencement Address" (speech, Cornell University, May 27, 2007), https://president.cornell.edu/the-presidency/archives/skorton/20070527-one-hundred-thirty-ninth-commencement-address/.

time to do the greatest good to the state itself."[128] He joined with his fellow state senator, Andrew Dickson White, to convince the New York State Legislature to designate a new university as the state's recipient of the 1862 Morrill Act land-grant support. The result was Cornell University, an institution not intended for the wealthy and elite, but to serve the needs of New York state and humanity broadly: to "do the greatest good." It would combine practical and liberal education while being broadly accessible to students historically excluded from higher education.

The federal government continued to invest in land-grant institutions through the Hatch Act of 1887 to support agricultural research and its dissemination, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 to support community-based cooperative extension services. In both cases, this support bolstered work already underway at Cornell as part of its commitment to extending impact beyond the Ithaca campus. It is this foundation that formed Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), an impressive part of Cornell's unique presence in every county in New York state. CCE supports the needs of communities from agriculture and health to youth programs for leadership development. Despite this fact, many New York residents are unaware of the role that we play throughout the state and of our land-grant status and mission. Throughout our committee's discussions with internal and external stakeholders, it became clear that many in our own community are either unaware of this status or have only a vague sense of what it actually means.

Cornell's third president, Jacob Gould Schurman, expanded Cornell's public-impact efforts with his vision of "a People's University," a private university with a public mission.[129] He persuaded New York state to partner with Cornell to establish contract colleges that addressed specific state needs. That began with veterinary medicine in 1894 and was followed by agriculture in 1904, home economics (now human ecology) in 1925, and industrial and labor relations in 1945 (plus a short-lived college of forestry from 1898 to 1903).

But Cornell's commitment to public engagement is embedded in the DNA of the entire university, not just the units with state affiliations. The university's land-grant mission has complicated roots, which we have not always navigated well — the Morrill Act's troubling legacy of Indigenous dispossession is just one example of a complex legacy.[130] Answering the committee's call to enhance public impact work across the university requires that we recognize where we have historically fallen short and to aspire to do better. American universities have an

---

[128] Kaitlyn Danielle Ruhf, "To Do the Greatest Good: An Origin Story," Cornell University, June 26, 2023, https://giving.cornell.edu/story/to-do-the-greatest-good-an-origin-story/.
[129] Jacob Gould Schurman, "Inaugural Address" (speech, Cornell University, November 11, 1892), https://president.cornell.edu/_files/inaugurations/schurman-address.pdf.
[130] James Dean, "Faculty Research University's Ties to Indigenous Dispossession," *Cornell Chronicle*, October 12, 2020, https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2020/10/faculty-research-universitys-ties-indigenous-dispossession.

obligation to engage with real-world challenges and problems, directing university knowledge, art, literature, expertise, and resources to communities and individuals through accessible education and training, cultural experiences, applied research, and evidence-based policy recommendations.

The work of engaged research and scholarship has flourished across Cornell since its founding, through units, programs, and initiatives that place public impact and community engagement front and center. The range of stakeholders engaged through these efforts is impressive and wide-ranging. At this moment of great societal need, there is more that could be done across all academic units, state-affiliated or not. At the heart of our committee's core principles for public impact and community engagement, defined below, is the view that higher education has always had an abiding social responsibility and that this obligation has grown over time. The future of the American university will require reimagining how to build on existing academic infrastructure to more boldly integrate research and public impact, to expand the communities we work with, as well as the problems we seek to address. For Cornell University, this is inextricably linked to the founding ethos of doing the "greatest good," but this applies, we believe, to universities overall. At a time when our value as an institution is being questioned, embracing our potential for lasting public impact is more critical than ever.

In this time of immense uncertainty — with new technologies reshaping how we work and how we interact, longstanding social agreements evolving and being renegotiated, and institutions facing new pressures and expectations — the public-impact mission of American universities is more important than ever. At Cornell, we have been preparing for this moment for more than a century and a half. Our strengths as an institution position us to leverage our research capabilities to understand the features of this transformation and, no less important, to engage with society in a robust manner.

Our committee is strongly committed to the principle that academic and research excellence and public impact are not competing values — they are mutually reinforcing imperatives that represent the American university at its best. At Cornell, living up to our promise as the "People's University" will be critical to fostering trust and navigating an uncertain future.

5.3. Barriers to Stronger Public Impact

What prevents universities, like Cornell, from delivering more fully on their public-impact mission? Across the range of barriers to more robust public impact, our committee identified two overarching types of impediments: strategic and structural.

Strategic barriers

Public impact efforts at Cornell are negatively affected by a perceived separation between contract and endowed colleges regarding contributions to our land-grant mission. This is an artificial separation that obscures the many ways in which faculty and staff across the university

deliver on the institution's land-grant mission. It is also linked to some of the persistent structural barriers discussed below that have limited integration and coordination across public-impact efforts. What is needed is a university-wide, public-impact strategy that leverages the different strengths and ways of engaging in public impact across our colleges and units. Good examples of public engagement work are already plentiful. The challenge is to have them work in harmony for even more powerful effects.

A second underlying barrier arises out of the deeply ingrained perceptions of outreach work as secondary to research and classroom teaching. To deliver on a land-grant and public-impact mission requires that universities unseat this status hierarchy that is as persistent as it is anachronistic. Although public-impact-related work is conducted by faculty and staff across the university, it often remains undervalued relative to on-campus research and teaching. But there is clear evidence that this is changing in a wide array of disciplines from archaeology[131] to zoology[132] and everything in between. We must lean into this important direction across campus and disciplines.

Some of the reputational challenges that public impact work faces are the product of the conflation of this work with advocacy, an issue of particular sensitivity at a moment when universities are being investigated as partisan actors. We also heard this concern from community members, who worried that a call for greater public impact could be perceived as a call for faculty to advocate for political causes. To be clear, scholars should contribute their expertise to the democratic marketplace of ideas on any pressing matter. But public engagement draws a distinction between advocacy and the use of research-based expertise to solve real problems. As noted in the Research and Scholarship chapter of this report, some of the reputational challenges that public-impact research faces are also related to a false dichotomy between impact and excellence. These two defining qualities of scholarship are not necessarily contradictory. They can be mutually reinforcing.

Importantly, this barrier transcends Cornell's distinction between units that receive New York state support and those that do not: across the university, there are faculty members who have explicit extension responsibilities as part of their tenure-track appointments. That may offer a model that can be leveraged more robustly. In addition, many non-tenure-track research, teaching, and extension (RTE) faculty serve as critical contributors to our public-impact mission and need to be recognized as such. Finally, many faculty and staff who do not have formal extension responsibilities take on key elements of our public-impact mission through the variety of engagements and activities linked to their work.

---

[131] Kristina Douglass et al., "Engaged Archaeology in Tenure and Promotion: A Statement from the Archaeology Centers Coalition," *The SAA Archaeological Record*, May 2023, https://mydigitalpublication.com/publication/?i=792733&p=24&view=issueViewer.

[132] Leah R. Gerber et al., "Producing Actionable Science in Conservation: Best Practices for Organizations and Individuals," *Conservation Science and Practice* 2, no. 12 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.295.

A third strategic barrier relates to the lack of recognition that our public-impact contributions are a sustainable competitive advantage for the university. Our strong and longstanding commitment to public impact and community engagement distinguishes us from other Ivy League institutions and many research universities. It is not clear that we are leveraging this advantage enough in our broader university strategy and in our efforts to confront the core challenges we face and the drift from our core purpose.

Structural barriers

In addition to strategic barriers, the committee identified several persistent structural barriers to enhancing public impact.

First, outreach and extension units sit across colleges with extremely limited coordination or interactions, leaving a great deal of value untapped. Although we recognize the benefits of the decentralized structures at Cornell (see section 7.8), the committee contends that this decentralized structure can inhibit the coordination of public impact programs, activities, and events across different academic units, limiting both their visibility and their reach. That includes outreach programs within our contract colleges. As noted above, this is part of a broader trend toward fragmentation affecting many areas of the university. For public impact, the lack of integration has an especially pronounced effect on the ability to demonstrate our overarching public contributions.

A second barrier arises from the plethora of standalone, innovative, and impactful centers, programs, and institutes housed within a single institution. At Cornell, the proliferation of centers, programs, and institutes tackling critical issues, often with core public impact contributions, has been a real strength. But one unintended consequence of this proliferation is the existence of multiple units tackling related societal challenges with limited communication or connection to one another. Cornell, like other American universities, is not optimally structured to capitalize on emergent opportunities for collaboration that arise when units work across organizational boundaries. The result is that considerable value is left unrealized in multiple areas because of limited coordination and synergies across excellent centers and institutes operating in similar or overlapping areas.

Third, incentive structures that drive unit and individual faculty decisions are misaligned for effective public impact and engagement. Related to the discussion of strategic priorities above, many of the incentive structures and systems at Cornell, like most other universities, privilege research first and foremost, as well as on-campus, classroom teaching. Public impact activities in their traditional outreach and extension forms are a distant third. Research, teaching, and extension faculty who engage in public impact work are not always recognized or fully appreciated for their contributions. Tenured and tenure-track faculty are, for the most part, not rewarded or incentivized to participate more broadly outside of their disciplinary research expectations. Often, participation in such activities are instead seen as negative signals and

detract from colleagues' records. There was remarkable agreement across our stakeholder input and disciplinary domains around the lack of adequate incentives and recognition for public impact and engagement work.

Addressing these longstanding incentive structures will be essential if American universities are to expand their commitment to public impact. Taking tenure and promotion criteria as an important example, public impact has traditionally played a minor, albeit expanding, role in most tenure and promotion decisions and is often seen at best as contributing to service requirements. Here, too, many faculty have extension as a formal part of their role, but many others engaged in community engagement work do not. Increasing public impact through greater levels of integration and collaboration will require incentives for engaging in work that has meaningful and robust external impact and working with others to enhance and extend our reach.

Fourth, bridging the divide between scholarship and public impact infrastructure enhances the quality of higher education's contributions to their communities. Cornell University engages an impressive array of rigorous and high-quality scholarly activity with clear cultural value and implications for policy, practice, and action. We also have a strong foundation for public engagement and outreach. The linking of these two strengths is an area ripe for improvement. It also suggests models for better integration of research and public-impact-focused work. For example, one model might include both activities conducted by the same faculty member or team, with faculty incentivized to do the necessary public impact-focused work. An alternative model might include separate units with a strong external-engagement focus leveraging faculty members' research findings and work to translate those findings into public impact. Regardless of the model used, communication of the relevance of our academic expertise must reach a broad and diverse audience. Internal and external stakeholders commented that the current approaches, which often rely too heavily on academic jargon, are overly complicated, and speak primarily to a narrow segment of the public. This theme is also echoed in chapter four on research and scholarship.

Finally, external engagement work is constrained by the difficulties in being able to clearly point to and measure the aggregate impact associated with the range of activities, efforts, and initiatives. This difficulty stems, in part, from the wide array of impact work conducted across the university and the various models and approaches used to conceptualize and measure impact. Most individual centers, institutes, and programs provide rigorous analysis of the ways in which they are affecting outcomes for the stakeholders with whom they engage. The challenge is in translating these many different efforts into an overarching articulation of the impact we have as an institution. For example, the committee has been hard-pressed to produce robust accounting for the economic effects that Cornell has had at the local, state, and national levels. Similarly, it is difficult to point to the aggregate impact that Cornell has had on health and well-being outcomes. To be clear, developing tools and models that can produce these

impact estimates would require considerable investments in systems, capabilities, and coordination around activity and impact documentation, aggregation, analyses, and dissemination. The absence of accurate measures, however, also comes at a significant cost, as it leaves us unable to fully capture and articulate the multifaceted ways in which higher education's public-impact investments deliver for communities, organizations, families, and individuals. The absence of adequate data and evidence of public impact contributes to the communication challenge noted above.

5.4. Core Principle and Imperatives for Enhanced University Public Impact

Having identified the importance of public impact to the future of American universities alongside key barriers to more robust reach, our recommendations are shaped by a single overarching principle and six imperatives. This approach represents a foundation for elevating public impact at American universities in general and at Cornell in particular.

Core Principle: Having a positive impact on the public is central to the future success of the American university in an era of abiding uncertainty.

A thriving future for American universities is dependent on the ability to demonstrate broad societal value beyond teaching our students. The public makes substantial investments in institutions of higher education through significant federal and state support — beyond grant funding — driving expectations for concrete and tangible returns. If universities are to deliver on their promise to contribute to society at a time when knowledge and expertise is needed more than ever, it will require a strong commitment to the public-impact mission. However, commitment to public impact goes well beyond the responsibility that stems from local, state, and federal investments. It is a foundational principle linked to the university's responsibility to American democracy and to our educational mission, which calls on us to set an example for our students about the importance of contributing to the world around us.

Public impact is not simply another university mission running parallel to research and education — it actively strengthens and energizes both. Some members of Cornell's community expressed fears that investment in public-impact activities might reduce the institution's ability to invest in teaching and research. On the contrary, our committee believes that public impact work creates synergies that increase capacity to teach students and conduct research. For teaching, engagement with communities outside the university provides important pedagogical opportunities and allows faculty to complement classroom learning with hands-on, real-world experiences that provide context and perspective for on-campus courses. For research, public impact work fosters partnerships and opportunities that can lead to research funding and access to rich data, both of which are critical to the advancement of knowledge and discovery. Furthermore, engagement with external stakeholders and communities provides critical insight into important problems and questions that can stimulate novel theory and empirical investigation. University research is stronger when it is tethered to the world that faculty are trying to explain and understand, and public impact is a unique tool to do exactly that. Finally,

the trust that public engagement engenders is critical for the support that American universities have received for our research and teaching missions.

Over the years, Cornell has developed effective tactics for promoting its public-impact mission through outreach, extension, and other public-impact work. However, to help secure our institution's future, **Cornell must fully embrace its land-grant DNA, developing and implementing a university-level strategy that reflects the institution's commitment to public impact.** Commissioning a public impact inventory across all colleges and units to map existing assets, activities, and gaps would generate a shared baseline from which unified decisions and strategies could emerge.

This overarching principle of university-level commitment to impact gives rise to six specific imperatives, each addressing a distinct dimension of what it will take to realize the public-impact mission. For each imperative, we characterize what is at stake and an initial step that Cornell can take to begin moving in that direction.

Invest in translating and disseminating research and scholarship into public impact. Research and scholarship are deeply rooted within the research university's mission and a core engine for impact. Many of the outreach and extension models at Cornell and at other land-grant institutions are based on the promise that research and creative work conducted at universities will disseminate into the "real world," and that problems and challenges facing external stakeholders will inspire faculty research agendas and innovative efforts. This bidirectional and integrated vision has not always lived up to its potential.

To maximize the external impact of research and innovation, the structures and processes for connecting novel findings to policymakers, communities, organizations, and individuals must be reimagined. For example, Cornell and other universities could establish units responsible for incubating companies or non-profits that take impactful research outside the university's traditional boundaries and for translating academic advances so that they have the potential to shape action by practitioners and policymakers. These units could also be responsible for creating educational materials and lesson plans based on Cornell research and disseminating it to elementary and secondary educators. "Research to Practice" translation units within colleges, or a central unit, could focus on converting faculty research and scholarship into "boots on the ground" through real policy changes, educator guides, or practitioner toolkits. Our committee calls for a connection to public impact that extends beyond the traditional model of white papers and policy briefs and is driven by the need to guide action and concrete outcomes that benefit communities, families, and individuals. Relatedly, the university might establish a novel grant program that incentivizes the pairing of researchers, scholars, and artists with extension and outreach colleagues, or organizations outside the university that drive and inform change in the world. This imperative rests on improved tools and communication approaches. These must be accessible, understandable, and relevant to non-academic audiences. Many colleagues

that the committee spoke with stressed the need to improve storytelling abilities around research and innovation, the way it is conducted, and the impact it has.

Foster a two-way relationship between universities and the public.
Alongside the outreach that universities make to the public, they must also foster a bidirectional relationship in which they are responsive to needs, problems, and challenges originating from communities, organizations, families, and individuals. This approach requires a shift in a longstanding assumption that expertise resides in universities, and it is their responsibility to simply bring this out into the world. The stakeholders that universities engage with have a wealth of deep knowledge, expertise, and understanding of core barriers to better outcomes. A true shift in higher education's public impact focus is to reinforce and strengthen the two components of the bidirectional relationship with the public. Much of what universities study should be informed by their scholarly communities and prior scientific advances and, at the same time, should also be driven by the real-world problems that influence stakeholders and draw on their knowledge and expertise. Programs that bring and embed scholars within communities and open campuses up to the public more intentionally and thoughtfully are ways to advance this bidirectional imperative. This imperative also addresses the perception, held by some that we talked to, that the current model is extractive rather than reciprocal. The concern is that a unidirectional approach leverages our interactions with the public for the needs of students, faculty, and staff and not, fundamentally, as a way to co-create value for multiple communities. This ethos is strongly reflected in the Research and Scholarship chapter as well.

Increase public impact coordination, integration, and effectiveness across the university.
To implement a university-level commitment to impact, universities must develop ways of increasing coordination and integration across units and faculty that are engaged in public impact-focused work. Leveraging capabilities to advance the public-impact mission will require a university-wide strategy that serves to guide and amplify individual college and unit efforts.

At Cornell, we have an impressive range of public-impact assets already established. The committee heard concerns about the prospect of centralizing public engagement in ways that could undermine the powerful bottom-up innovations that emerge from college and unit activities. As such, recommendations about structural changes to public-impact work will need to preserve the autonomy and discretion that have long contributed to institutional nimbleness. At the same time, there is a need for structures and processes that streamline coordination, integration, and learning across related and synergistic efforts. These will enhance nimbleness by leveraging all that the public-impact infrastructure has to offer when responding to new demands, constraints, and opportunities.

Thus, for example, the committee discussed the creation of a center for public engagement innovation that would institutionalize public impact at Cornell. Such a center could support cross-unit collaboration, skill building, education, and training, and help socialize faculty and

staff to the public impact imperative. Increased coordination would also help in diffusing best practices, new approaches, and lessons across different units. This emerging recommendation builds on the success that similar existing units have had in helping to bridge across areas, such as the Einhorn Center for Community Engagement and Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability, which serve as hubs bringing together colleagues across the university to work together around issues related to community-engaged learning and sustainability, respectively. The Einhorn Center model for community-engaged learning closely mirrors what might be needed for community-engaged research. At a minimum, this approach can serve as a roadmap for public impact stemming from research. More broadly, one could imagine an expanded mandate for the Einhorn Center that includes community engagement beyond learning. Cornell Cooperative Extension could also be integrated with a wider range of departments across the university. Leveraging its impressive infrastructure and reach to engage the public around a broader array of emerging needs, such as AI literacy, is one example.

Stakeholders expressed optimism about the potential for universities to contribute to society through expanding access to knowledge about AI. There was general agreement that AI literacy is a broad public need that extends well beyond campus to K-12 populations, elderly, families, and diverse community members, and that AI tools can expand access to university education beyond the traditional residential model, especially given AI's evolving impact on labor. Given Cornell's land-grant mission, stakeholders argued that the cooperative extension model should be adapted to deliver AI literacy and practical technology support to communities, paralleling its historical role with agriculture.

Another way to achieve better coordination and integration is the creation of forums or networks that bring together colleagues across the university who work on public impact-related challenges. As part of our work, the committee assembled an advisory panel that brought together representatives from a broad range of public impact-focused units to discuss effective strategies and to learn from one another. Throughout our work with this advisory panel, it has become clear that it would be helpful to have a version of this group established on a permanent basis to serve as a coordination vehicle for public impact work across the university. Finally, incentives are also critical in promoting cross-unit collaboration. We recommend incentivizing work that cuts across centers, institutes, and units.

Recognize, reward, and expect external public engagement.
Enhancing the public impact of American universities requires a significant restructuring of incentive systems and expectations. First and foremost, institutions will need to think about the weight and importance of public engagement, including entrepreneurial activities, in recruitment, evaluation, and promotion decisions for faculty and staff. Importantly, much public impact work happens through research, teaching, and extension faculty. It is thus critical that universities reassess existing incentive structures for promotion and recognition for external engagement through a research, teaching, and extension context. Cornell needs to

reassess how it values and recognizes outreach, public engagement, and impact work, including entrepreneurial activities, for both tenure-track and research, teaching, and extension 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.

Revisiting incentives and expectations should also include tenure and promotion decisions. Much of the perceived lower status of public impact work on campus is driven by the relatively minor role it plays in the criteria for tenure and promotion. Research and teaching are seen as inextricable functions of the university and are therefore deeply ingrained in our expectations across units and roles, both tenured and untenured. Elevating public impact must include an opportunity for units to shift their expectations about the ways in which we all contribute to this mission. It must also include a shift in priorities among the existing commitments faculty are responsible for meeting. Incorporating more effort toward public impact should be offset with a reassessment of other responsibilities.

As with other recommendations, not everyone the committee spoke with agreed the universities should increase expectations around public impact work. Some argued for incentives that would allow for an organic increase in public facing activities. The committee has concluded that a shift in public engagement work requires a combination of expanded expectations and incentives. Revised expectations are critical, in part, for the signal they send regarding those who already engage in this work and often face negative perceptions.

The committee fully understands that the existing approach to tenure is longstanding and deeply rooted. But the Faculty Senate, university governance bodies, provost and deputy provost, and college deans should, indeed must, collaborate to develop a working definition of public impact contributions that can be applied consistently in tenure and promotion review, and explicitly incorporated in faculty annual reviews and activity reports. It may also be helpful to create a menu of possible public impact pathways to help faculty across disciplines envision how they can generate impact in ways that best align with their expertise and valued goals. Finally, there might be additional ways in which the university can signal the importance of public impact work. For example, faculty engaged in public impact work can receive credit for these activities in ways that recognize public impact as an extension of how universities engage in their educational mission.

Define, conceptualize, and measure impact thoughtfully and robustly.
Enhancing the public impact focus of the university requires careful attention to how institutions assess what constitutes impact. It is essential that universities develop the tools and capabilities to measure and track public impact. Throughout the FAU's discussions with internal and external stakeholders, a recurring theme centered around the absence of consistent and convincing measures of public impact. To be clear, this is not merely a "storytelling"

problem. Delivering on a public-impact mission requires thoughtful reflection. Central to this is the ability to capture, document, and showcase the concrete ways in which public engagement work translates into healthier communities, more capable youth, or better trained workers and managers, for example. The range of public impact work that happens across the university makes it impossible to develop a unified framework for impact definition and measurement. At the same time universities should find ways to develop collective priorities around the type of impact we should be having and, by extension, the ways by which impact is measured. Units vary greatly in terms of their public impact focus, and yet, there are commonalities that cut across areas of work. For example, there are multiple units that focus on K-12 educational outcomes. Identifying common and divergent methods and tools for capturing these outcomes would enhance the ability to both deepen impact and account for its effects.

Leverage public impact infrastructure to address emerging societal needs, such as navigating the opportunities and challenges posed by AI.

Our committee was formed, in part, because of the various pressures bearing down on universities today and shaping a very uncertain future. The committee's call for greater emphasis on the public-impact mission was motivated in part by the notion that it will allow universities to better address emerging societal needs stemming from these pressures and uncertainties. The rapid diffusion of AI technology and the anticipation of its widespread disruptive effects is a good case in point. Universities should be on the forefront of helping to guide the development of AI systems, their diffusion across society, the guardrails that are put in place to foster their ethical use, and the upskilling of communities, organizations, and individuals so that they have the necessary competencies to leverage this new technology in positive ways. Universities like Cornell, which have invested in robust public impact infrastructure, will be best positioned to serve these emerging needs. A reimagining of the twenty-first century land-grant institution will include new ways of engaging with communities around the evolving needs of the day.

Consider Cornell Cooperative Extension's impressive reach across New York state. This infrastructure provides an unparalleled vehicle through which to advance AI literacy to groups that might otherwise be left behind in the midst of this technological revolution. Similarly, Cornell's existing work with New York state agencies can serve as a foundation for efforts to help prepare the bureaucracy and the workforce for appropriate and effective use of AI to better serve the public. Put differently, a robust and prioritized public-impact machine is a tool through which universities can contribute to society in real time around rapidly evolving changes and needs.

5.5. Recommendations

The committee's analysis above is designed to position higher education — and Cornell University specifically — as thriving institutions in the decades to come. Below are a number of possible next steps that build on these discussions. These examples are neither exhaustive nor

mutually exclusive. They are meant to provide a sense of how higher education institutions might advance a public-impact mission in the near term.

Revisit rewards and recognition associated with public-impact work. Next steps should include an assessment of the ways that public impact work is viewed and prioritized with a focus on the signaling of organizational status attributed to this work and its contribution to the mission of the university.

Empower units to incentivize and enable public engagement in the scholarly processes and outputs of its faculty and staff. A clear next step would entail the development of criteria used to assess public impact contributions, taking unit differences and approaches into account. One of the inherent challenges associated with the recognition of public impact as part of tenure and promotion is the need for effective tools for assessment. We recommend building on reporting opportunities for publicly engaged scholarship that already exist in some colleges to develop best practices.

Establish a coordination mechanism for public impact and engagement. The creation of a center or other coordinating structure for public impact and engagement would provide a mechanism through which greater coordination across the many units, programs, and initiatives could be achieved. This would build on existing models at Cornell, that engage students and faculty, in similar areas, such as the Einhorn Center, Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, or Atkinson Center for Sustainability. Alternatively, expanding the role of existing units to include the breadth of public impact activities could also achieve this objective. Either way, such units will serve as a home to experts in research translation that will work with faculty on turning basic research into impact.

Create a public impact advisory council to work with and advise leadership. A clear and important next step is the creation of a public impact council that will institutionalize a mechanism for knowledge sharing and collaboration across units and activities in this space. The council should work in conjunction with the vice provost for engagement and land-grant affairs. Such a council would go a long way to building a collaborative muscle across our different public impact activities.

Increase the use of community advisory research committees when public impact is intended or likely. Already present in some disciplines and areas, universities should increase their reliance on structures that embed community input into research from the inception, especially when there are clear implications for public outcomes, activities, or policies. Other documented efforts to increase the bidirectionality of the relationship with the public can be done through citizen science programs that embed students and faculty in communities as genuine partners.

Expand local university-community relationships as a laboratory for two-way public engagement. We received much feedback on the potential for improved local community engagement with faculty, students, and staff. Enhancing our footprint locally is important in its own right. This relationship can also serve as a laboratory for public engagement with other communities in New York state and nationally with faculty, students, and staff.

Conduct an internal impact inventory. Universities should develop internal impact inventories of capabilities to catalog units, activities, and associated outcomes. Importantly, this should help to not only identify inputs and superficial outputs. Rather, what is needed is robust and thoughtful models for measuring our collective short-term, mid-term, and long-term impact on crucial societal outcomes stemming from substantive work.

Leverage public impact infrastructure to support communities affected by technological disruption. Land-grant institutions and others driven by a public-impact mission like Cornell should build on cooperative extension and other outreach and extension 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 ensuring that the benefits of AI — and of technology and innovation more broadly — are widely shared, and that the associated risks are mitigated equitably. The Cornell AI Initiative recognizes the university's responsibility to bring understanding of AI to a broader public by acting as a clearinghouse for best practices, resources, and collaboration. In addition, through its education initiatives, it is providing AI training for alumni and developing outreach to K-12 education. Cornell should continue to build in this direction.

Utilize corporate engagement to support public impact infrastructure. Cornell University has a long track record of linking research and associated entrepreneurial endeavors to practice through corporate partnerships and start-up activity. Given the importance of this arena for local, regional, and national impact, we recommend, as a next step, an assessment of our strengths around entrepreneurship and corporate engagement and the development of a strategic plan in this area.

Create opportunities for informal connections and relationships between the university and community members. Alongside the recommendations above that call for formal structures and relationships, it is also important to provide opportunities for the public and the different communities that the university engages with to be able to interact informally with faculty, students, and staff. These unstructured connections are often where real and long-lasting trust is fostered and sustained.

5.6. Conclusions

Higher education in the U.S. is at a pivotal juncture, facing unprecedented pressures. Securing a thriving future for American universities will require a significant reimagining of how core

missions are carried out. Integral to this reimagining, our committee has concluded, is an examination of how universities deliver on their commitment to the public through translation of research, dissemination of evidence-based practices and tools, and responsiveness to novel and persisting challenges, problems, and needs. Universities that invest in the infrastructure and systems needed for public impact and engagement capabilities are more likely to weather today's storms as well as the ones just appearing on the horizon.

Cornell University is uniquely positioned to serve as a leader in this area and to innovate and expand on models for robust university-public engagement. It has a rich history to draw on as well as a proven track record. But Cornell must improve the two-way relationship between our research enterprise and the needs of the public; enhance the coordination and integration across units, centers, institutes, and programs engaged in public-impact work; and better recognize, reward, incentivize, and expect public impact contributions from our faculty, staff, and students.

6. Graduate and Professional Education

6.1. Background

Graduate and professional education is where the university's learning ecosystem comes most fully into focus. It is where teaching, research, and public impact are drawn together into an integrated endeavor. To invest in graduate and professional education is to promote the sustainability of every other mission of the American university. And yet this endeavor is under enormous pressure.

Federal research funding and the availability of student loans, the twin sources that finance advanced study, are both under threat. Generative AI poses a profound challenge to the cultivation of expertise that is graduate education's very purpose. Eroding public trust has sharpened scrutiny of the return on investment in master's and professional degree programs. And new constraints on international enrollment threaten the global culture that has made America's research enterprise the world's leader.

Because graduate and professional education sits at the intersection of every mode of learning the university fosters, this pressure radiates across the whole institution. Graduate students are trained to be stewards of disciplinary knowledge and, as part of that training, many teach undergraduates the foundations of the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Student investigators are vital to the discoveries that define the research enterprise and serve as the bridge that binds the university to the professions, industries, and communities it serves. Moreover, America's globally diverse graduate student community provides the point of encounter for the dialogue across differences that drives learning forward. As students complete advanced training, they then bring their expertise to bear on all sectors of society in the U.S. and around the globe as doctors, lawyers, researchers, and professors, who will then train the next generation.

How, then, can we prepare graduate and professional education for the uncertain future ahead, protecting its central role in the university's learning ecosystem while strengthening its alignment with the wider mission of the institution?

6.2. Core Principles

Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University identified six principles that together define what graduate and professional education must become to navigate our uncertain future. Each of these principles has long animated the work of graduate and professional programs at American universities, albeit often pursued separately, unevenly, and without strategic integration. The committee's framework provides a coherent approach to assessing disruption and recommendations on a strategic path forward.

Retain a commitment to scholarly independence

Graduate and professional education rests on a first-order commitment to scholarly independence. That commitment is grounded in academic freedom and in the proven capacity of curiosity-driven research and teaching to produce innovation and creativity that no external directive could have anticipated. Advanced training is central to the autonomy of the university, providing a space where research areas can be preserved and advanced even when they are ignored, or repressed, by external political and economic forces. This independence embraces graduate and professional students themselves, not only the faculty who direct their work.

Provide a barometer of public needs

Scholarly independence is made valuable by its intentional relationship to the concerns, interests, and needs of the local, national, and global communities that the university serves. While undergraduate education trains students in the broad skills of citizenship and their application to a wide array of issues, post-baccalaureate education is the arena where the university responds to wider societal calls for expertise. Such calls arise in professional training, where market and societal needs for doctors, lawyers, and skilled workers shape a range of credentialing programs from the master's degree to the M.D. And they arise from state and federal governments, which power research and extension agendas through control over key funding sources. Scholarly independence provides advanced training with well-earned credibility. But it is the curricular and investigative responsiveness of universities to public needs and interests that gives that learning its purpose.

Cultivate judgment

Our committee's emphasis on the cultivation of judgment has profound implications for graduate and professional education. As defined earlier in this report, judgment is a composite capacity, analytic and imaginative, critical and creative, that equips experts not just to decide better but to also see more fully, and to act with wisdom and ingenuity. At the graduate and professional level, this means sharpening advanced expertise by focusing attention on epistemic reliability, contextual understanding, ethical reasoning, data literacy, and effective, trustworthy communication.

To call for advanced training to focus on the cultivation of judgment is not a call to remedy a gap in current curricula or to cast doubt on student preparation. It is instead a framework for highlighting the increasing importance of a variety of broad skills to advanced study. Most of these skills are already recognized as fundamental to disciplinary preparation. The committee's examination of learning outcomes across eighty-four of Cornell's graduate fields (discussed below) found broad interest in teaching the skills central to the committee's understanding of

judgment alongside the specialized knowledge that preoccupies disciplinary traditions.[133] What the committee calls for is greater visibility, attention, and coordination around the core capacities of judgment already deemed vital across the institution's post-baccalaureate programs.

Undergraduate education cultivates judgment alongside foundational knowledge, teaching students to think critically about material they are encountering for the first time. Graduate and professional education is different in kind, not just degree. It requires that emerging expertise, built over years of focused study, be exercised under conditions of uncertainty, where no single correct answer points to an obvious solution. What advanced training provides students, then, is not instruction in skills of judgment that they lack, but rather structured opportunities to test and sharpen the acuity of their understanding against real problems arising from new discoveries, original research, ambiguous cases, and unresolved dilemmas. Honing judgment in advanced training is to enter a form of thought in which hard-won expertise is put to work under conditions that textbooks cannot anticipate, discerning the best among several defensible paths forward.

The advent of AI sharpens the urgency of centering advanced training around the cultivation of judgment. As AI transforms access to knowledge, deep expertise remains essential, but its purpose shifts from mastering what is known toward synthesizing, connecting, and critically evaluating across an expanding field of available knowledge. This suggests that we must advance the refinement of skills initiated as undergraduates, such as critical thinking, argumentation, persuasion, ethics, teaching, effective communication, though with a broader range and greater depth. For example, a graduate student should not just learn to write clearly, but to write for multiple audiences, from the narrowly disciplinary to the general public knowing how and when to speak to the different communities. In some settings, effective communication must involve clear and cogent justifications of funds spent on research of uncertain consequence; in other settings, it might require creative translation of advanced analysis into new forms of creativity. But in all such work, judgment is not a substitute for expertise. It is its highest expression, and it is the advanced skill that a world of ubiquitous information will make precious.

Renew the university's truly global vision, at home and abroad

Expert judgment requires a breadth of experience and understanding that can only be truly cultivated from a global outlook. Universities nurture the global vision of their advanced students in two ways. First, they bring the world to campus. For decades, American universities have drawn aspiring scholars from around the world to the U.S. in a remarkable migration of intellectual acumen. Generations of the most talented students from other countries have

[133] The committee thanks Ayham Boucher, Head of AI Innovations for Cornell Information Technologies, for his work developing a dashboard to analyze Cornell's graduate field learning outcomes.

chosen to start their careers here, and that choice has been one of American higher education's most significant, and least appreciated, competitive advantages.

Second, American graduate and professional education is conducted not just on campus but around the globe, examining problems and asking questions that are not just local or national but global in scope. Climate systems, pandemics, financial markets, cinema, art, literature, historical processes, and the governance of artificial intelligence, for example, are not phenomena delimited by national borders. Training scholars and professionals who can think at that scale requires an intellectual community that is itself genuinely international.

Being a truly global university does not just mean operating internationally. It also requires the full cultural and intellectual richness of the U.S. be present on campus. Operationalizing that breadth can build on models like Cornell's Global Hubs initiative to expand recruitment with explicit outreach plans for underrepresented regions at home as well as countries abroad. There is no reason Global Hubs could not be established in Florida, Alaska, and Maine with a pedagogical mission not unlike those in Ecuador, Singapore, and Denmark.

Bringing the world's emerging experts to Cornell and then conveying expertise back into the world are mutually reinforcing phenomena. The migration of international talent to American universities did not happen by invitation alone. It grew out of decades of American research presence abroad made possible by a robust educational infrastructure of language instruction, historical contextualization, cultural understanding, and methodological training. It has been Cornell faculty and students working in locations around the globe that has led countries, institutions, and communities to send us their most promising students. Fieldwork, international research collaborations, professional placements abroad, and initiatives like Cornell's Global Hubs do not just enrich the students who take part in them. They build the relationships, reputation, and trust on which the inbound flow of global talent depends. A global vision that only brings the world toward Cornell without also sending Cornell into the world draws on a well without replenishing the water.

Build thick relationships

Graduate and professional education should be understood not merely as the conferral of a credential but as the foundation of a relationship, thick, durable, and capable of sustaining both learners and institutions through decades of uncertainty. Thick relationships are durable and meaningful. They bond people to institutions and to one another in ways that leave a mark. Thick relationships at the graduate and professional level are not built the way they are for undergraduates, through athletics, residential life, or student organizations. They are built through shared intellectual and professional labor: the extended apprenticeship of research conducted alongside an advisor and a lab, the shared trial of qualifying exams and dissertation committees, the collaborative exchange of workshops and clinics, and the disciplinary societies and conferences that induct students into a field's community of practice. These relationships

are also directed toward a different purpose. An undergraduate's thick relationships cultivate attachment to the institution itself. A graduate or professional student's experiences in community cultivate something closer to their core identity as a scientist, a lawyer, a historian, or a physician. That formation of professional identity, carrying with it a field's standards, ethics, and community of practice, is what advanced training is ultimately for. It is also what makes the relationships that graduate and professional education build worth sustaining long after a degree is conferred.

Commit to lifelong learning

Extending the university's commitments to its students across their lifetimes, rather than concluding them at graduation, is one of the most consequential investments the university can make in an era when trust between institutions and the people they serve can no longer be assumed. Graduate and professional education has traditionally been organized around two assumptions that no longer hold as true as they once did. The first is that advanced training concludes at the moment of degree conferral. Graduate and professional degrees have traditionally represented the apex of professional preparation, signaling a readiness to make the permanent transition from learning to practice. But changes in both the workforce and wider context of labor have long been signaling the need for transforming advanced learning into an ongoing process.

A Ph.D. awarded in archaeology in 1996 simply could not have prepared students for a future defined by the widespread use of satellite imagery, molecular analysis, geochemistry, and now, artificial intelligence. A graduate of an MBA program in 2000 could not have been prepared for a business landscape reshaped by social media, cloud computing, algorithmic trading, and, again, generative AI, developments that have rewritten what management requires. Law, medicine, engineering, and most other corners of the American workforce have similar stories. Regulatory change, new technologies, and evolving standards now rapidly outpace the shelf life of the credential that certified readiness to practice. A degree that once represented a permanent transition from learning to practice now speaks instead to a strong foundation in a practice that will keep changing. The challenge for advanced training is not to foretell the future, but to build an educational program flexible enough to extend past the credential to support a career.

The second assumption built into the structural organization of advanced training holds that the Ph.D., the master's degree, the professional degree, and continuing and executive education are all distinct, idiosyncratic undertakings. Each is pursued through its own program, its own administration, and its own point of entry, rather than as a single continuum of advanced learning available to a person at different points in their life. The one complaint that our committee heard loud and clear from graduate and professional students was that they wanted to be students of Cornell University, but were instead students of a single program, isolated from the wider community of scholars, peers, and professionals. While the policing of scholarly borders and the insistence on intellectual idiosyncrasy is part and parcel of the last century and

a half of disciplinary segmentation, it cannot define the future when most pressing problems require the bridging of academic silos. This topic is briefly touched upon in chapter four as well.

A doctoral student who wants to build entrepreneurial skills through executive education, a law school student interested in patent law who wants to understand the underlying science, or a Ph.D. student in anthropology who wants to train in public communication to reach audiences beyond the discipline, each runs into the same bureaucratic obstacle: institutional regulations and systems that prevent traversing between domains. Advising, too, stops at the boundary of a single program. No one is charged with helping a student identify or navigate a path across units. As a result, the work of discovering new paths, and then charting a course, falls entirely on the student.

Our committee envisions graduate and professional training as an open forum that provides diverse skills and training as needed over the long course of an extended career. In this vision, the Ph.D., professional degrees, master's programs, and continuing and executive education are all understood as points on a continuum rather than as separate endeavors sharing a campus (or a server room). Graduate and professional education, understood this way, is fully aligned with the university's continuing education mission. By opening its doors to students at all stages and encouraging a culture of continuous learning and reinvention, the university becomes a hub for acquiring new skills, advancing techniques, and enhancing its own areas of expertise, opening lanes of entry not possible at the undergraduate level, and expanding access to the institution.

The American workforce is changing in ways that make upskilling a recurring event rather than a one-time transition. Careers now routinely span multiple industries, technologies displace entire categories of expertise within a decade, and the credential that opens a door at age thirty may not be the one that keeps it open at fifty. This trajectory in part underscores the value of master's degrees as a category. But universities cannot simply wait for needs to arrive and respond to them program by program. They must anticipate them, building the flexible infrastructure, online, hybrid, modular, and in-person, that lets students move in and out of advanced training as their careers actually unfold, rather than as a traditional degree calendar assumes they will.

Taken together, these six principles describe an ambitious and coherent vision. But a vision is only as good as its capacity to hold up under pressure. The disruptions now facing graduate and professional education, in the economics of advanced study, in the disruptive potential of AI, in the erosion of public trust, and in new constraints on international exchange, will test every one of these commitments. Disruption, though, cuts both ways. The same forces that threaten advanced training also create the occasion to affirm our collective commitment by building the coordinating structures, funding the partnerships, and establishing the durable relationships that a calmer moment might not have required. The section that follows takes up

these disruptors in turn to anticipate the future where these six principles will need to be put into practice.

6.3. Disruption

The erosion of trust in higher education among some segments of the American public (discussed at length in several other chapters as well), in part symptomatic of rising populism and suspicion of expert knowledge, creates substantial pressure on post-baccalaureate education whose very reason for being is the cultivation of deep expertise. Yet our uncertain future will require experts equipped with the judgment needed to arrive at innovative, creative, and ethical solutions. A range of factors, some analogous to concerns surrounding the undergraduate mission, appear to be diminishing public trust in advanced education.

The cost of research and professional master's degrees, for example, has raised concern as to whether these programs provide adequate return on investment. While many master's degrees deliver real returns — median earnings for master's degree holders in 2022 ran roughly 20 percent higher than for those with only a bachelor's degree[134] — these aggregate figures conceal wide variation across fields and institutions, and the overall picture is complicated by upward pressures on credentials that threaten to raise the costs for students to reach the workforce entry points that a bachelor's degree formerly opened. Thus, while the need for experts remains, we cannot continue to train them in the same way and hope to regain public support.

AI is reshaping the evaluation of expertise. The impact this will have on the job market is as yet unknown. But it is already transforming training as it expands access to information and enhances the value of judgment. The disruption of work driven by artificial intelligence poses profound challenges and opportunities for professional training in particular, especially in fields like law and business where the substitutive and complementary roles of the technology are becoming clearer. Studies from AI developers also point to vulnerabilities in disciplines like computer science, math, and finance. Profound uncertainty reigns, as some sources even predict growing labor demand resulting from technological advance.

AI impacts graduate and professional students not only by disrupting the workforce but also transforming the learning environment, raising questions of both academic and research integrity. Moreover, because graduate and professional education often relies on apprenticeship and participation in disciplinary or professional practice, scholars have raised concerns that the faculty, staff, and postdoctoral scholars' use of AI to achieve these tasks may reduce some of the opportunities through which novices traditionally develop expertise and professional

[134] National Center for Education Statistics, "Annual Earnings by Educational Attainment," Condition of Education, US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, May 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cba/annual-earnings.

judgment.[135] Finally, AI raises questions about how doctoral students are socialized into the norms, identities, and responsibilities of scholarly communities.[136]

At the same time, the demise of the longstanding partnership with the federal government has precipitated a sharp decline in doctoral enrollments, imperiling the pipeline of scholars that has driven America's research apparatus for the last seventy years. Data from fifty-five Association of American Universities member institutions show a 15 percent drop in Ph.D. admissions for fall 2026, following an 11 percent reduction in 2025, a decline driven primarily by funding uncertainty not strategic reallocation of resources.[137] The University of Chicago's plan to reduce the number of funded doctoral students by 30 percent by 2030 illustrates how disruption in direct federal research support imperils the pipeline of new scholars.[138]

Federal disruption of graduate and professional education is not limited to reductions in research funding. Efforts to limit borrowing for some advanced degree programs and undermine the flow of international students to America represent an unprecedented intrusion into the marketplace of advanced education.

These are not passing disruptions that can simply be resolved by the next election. The American university is at a crossroads and choices need to be made as to how advanced training is conducted and financed. Although there appears to be bipartisan support for research funding in Congress, universities cannot plan for an uncertain future based on a hope for renewed federal supremacy in the funding of advanced training.

Many of the challenges facing graduate and professional education pre-date the disruptions of the past year. The supply of master's programs, for instance, has responded to demand in ways that now outpace it. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, private nonprofit and public universities together added 13,688 new master's programs between 2005 and 2022, growth of almost 69 percent.[139] At Cornell, the growth of master's programs has been steady if more

---

[135] April De Crescentis and Biff Baker, "Apprenticeship after AI: Bridging Gaps in Early-Career Knowledge-Work Roles," *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 26, no. 3 (2026), https://doi.org/10.33423/s2eem175.

[136] Evelyn Wu, "From Production to Verification: Generative AI, Doctoral Formation, and the Leadership of Digital Education," *Frontiers in Education* 11 (July 2026), https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2026.1890769.

[137] Vimal Patel, "Decline of Ph.D. Admissions Could Imperil a 'Generation of New Talent'," *New York Times*, July 6, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/06/us/research-universities-fewer-phds-science.html.

[138] Sara Randazzo and Heather Gillers, "Colleges Face a Financial Reckoning. The University of Chicago Is Exhibit A.," *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/colleges-face-a-financial-reckoning-the-university-of-chicago-is-exhibit-a-8918b2b0.

[139] "The Future of Graduate Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 2024, https://store.chronicle.com/products/the-future-of-graduate-education.

restrained, standing up 22 new programs between 2015 and 2025. More dramatic are the numbers of students enrolled in master's programs, which at Cornell more than doubled between 2006 and 2025. The issue that this growth in master's education points to, both locally and nationally, is not first and foremost a question of their value, although that concern animates a portion of the national conversation[140] and was raised by our stakeholders. But students see considerable return in this form of advanced training and dismissing them as naive is neither accurate nor analytically useful. Rather, the challenge for master's programs following two decades of substantial growth is coordination and oversight.

The growth in the supply of master's programs now faces a significant potential constriction in demand. The impending demographic cliff in college-aged youth in the U.S. must presumably at some point ripple through the market for advanced training. It is uncertain how significant demographic fluctuations will be for graduate and professional education. Those fluctuations undoubtedly will have a greater impact on some sectors of post-baccalaureate education than others. However, a contraction in any area of higher education's learning ecosystem will have consequences throughout, so a significant reduction in undergraduate students further depresses the already lagging demand for Ph.D.s needed to teach them, supervise their lab work, or provide supplementary instruction. A number of disruptive forces thus seem to converge on the conclusion that change is coming for advanced training.

The academic job market has already undergone a broad transformation. In 1992, almost 52 percent of new Ph.D. graduates went into academic positions; by 2022, according to the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates, that figure was just under 33 percent, with industry absorbing most of the difference — from just over 20 percent of Ph.D. graduates in 1992 to over 48 percent in 2022.[141] More highly trained Ph.D.s in industry is good for the workforce. But sending a larger share of our most talented specialists away from the academy also affects the university's capacity to train the next generation, and the resulting mismatch between how doctoral programs train students and where those students actually build careers was among the most frequently raised concerns stakeholders brought to our committee.

Facing social, technological, political, and economic headwinds, to defend graduate and professional education at this moment cannot be to argue for a return to prior conditions. We must rather set forth a new vision. The future of graduate and professional education must be shaped by a steadfast commitment to invest in the future of American innovation, creativity, and expertise. But how that future is cultivated must, of necessity, change.

---

[140] Kevin Carey, "The Great Master's Degree Swindle," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 5, 2021, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-masters-degree-swindle.

[141] National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities: 2022*, NSF 24-300 (National Science Foundation, September 28, 2023), https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf24300/report.

6.4. Prior Studies

A 2016 Mellon Foundation Report on Doctoral Education reviewed twenty-five years of reform efforts and concluded that redesigning advanced graduate education proved "harder than imagined at the outset" and that actual improvements in practice over the long term have been "modest and generally disappointing." As the report notes: "graduate school is conservative even by academic standards. So little about it has changed that we might rightly describe it as rigid, not conservative."[142]

Graduate education, in large measure, has been shaped by the entrepreneurialism of the faculty, whether through the pursuit of grants or the development of master's programs. The result has been a system that is well-managed locally but only marginally led at the institution level as decision-making is highly distributed. In the absence of leadership empowered to define strategic goals and effect change, it will be extremely challenging for graduate and professional programs to converge on a strategy for turning the disruptions of the current moment from challenges into opportunities. At most research universities, there are substantial obstacles to empowering institutional leadership to set strategic direction. Yet there has been no lack of effort to spark reform.

Over the last decade there have been a number of thoughtful efforts to reform graduate education, each articulating slightly different visions of the core principles that should shape the future of post-baccalaureate education. Yale's 2021 blueprint for modernizing humanities doctoral education emphasized innovation, inclusion, and interdependence — pushing intellectual frontiers while building communities open to the world.[143] Brown's 2022 task force foregrounded student-centered values: diversity as a condition of excellence, interdisciplinarity as a driver of collaboration, and student autonomy within a multigenerational scholarly community.[144] The Mellon Foundation's reports, spanning its ambitious 2016 overview to the more focused 2023 report on interdisciplinary programs at Columbia University,[145] evolved from a stewardship model emphasizing disciplinary responsibility and broader social applicability toward a more structural focus on cohort-based learning, cross-disciplinary

---

[142] Robert Weisbuch and Leonard Cassuto, *Reforming Doctoral Education, 1990 to 2015: Recent Initiatives and Future Prospects*, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, June 2, 2016, https://www.humanitiescareers.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/A.W.Mellon%2C%20Reforming%20Doctoral%20Education%2C%201990–2015.pdf.

[143] *Report of the Humanities Doctoral Education Advisory Working Group* (Yale University, February 1, 2021), https://gsas.yale.edu/documents/report-humanities-doctoral-education-advisory-working-group.

[144] *Report of the Task Force on Doctoral Education* (Brown University, September 2022), https://provost.brown.edu/sites/default/files/reports/Report-Task-Force-on-Doctoral-Education-2022-10-06.pdf.

[145] William McAllister, *Bringing Disciplines Together in Graduate Education: The Mellon Interdisciplinary Fellows Program, Incite @ Columbia University* (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, November 20, 2023), https://doi.org/10.7916/rtn6-fj91.

engagement, and accountability through student outcomes.

Each framework offers genuine insight. Yale emphasizes innovation and inclusion; Brown makes a commitment to student autonomy; Mellon insists on accountability. Each of these analyses provide hard-won lessons that any responsible vision for graduate education must take seriously. But each envisions a future shaped primarily by forces internal to universities. The future of graduate and professional education envisioned by our committee, in contrast, is shaped by transformations within universities and by powerful forces outside them which create conditions of radical uncertainty. These pressures demand a new openness to experimentation, collaboration, and coordination: principles that emerged loud and clear from our extensive conversations with a wide range of stakeholders.

6.5. Feedback

Our committee's recommendations for graduate and professional education developed out of an intensive process of stakeholder engagement. Between February and April 2026 we convened four advisory panels (see Appendix D). Based on recommendations from committee members, administrators, and faculty, we established separate panels focused on Ph.D. Education, Master's Education, and Professional Education. In addition, we invited the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GPSA) to assemble its own ad hoc committee to consult and provide extensive student input.

Our subcommittee on graduate and professional education met with each of the degree-specific panels at least twice, once for open discussion of the challenges facing their area and once to workshop specific recommendations. We met three times with the GPSA committee, with additional exchanges by email. These detailed conversations sit alongside a sizable body of input from town halls; meetings with the Employee Assembly, GPSA, and Faculty Senate; and conversations with individual faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders.

Stakeholder conversations were not our committee's only source of evidence. To test whether the cultivation of judgment called for above already has a foothold in Cornell's post-baccalaureate programs, the committee conducted a systematic review of stated learning outcomes across eighty-four of Cornell's graduate fields, drawing on the curricular materials, handbooks, and program descriptions each field maintains publicly. The results show a broad, if uncoordinated, convergence: communication skills appear as a stated learning outcome in 85 percent of programs, encompassing academic and public writing, presentation training, and grant and proposal writing support; research competence appears in 74 percent, covering research methodology, data analysis, and literature review; professional ethics is a stated outcome in 57 percent, addressed through responsible-conduct-of-research training (clearly this number should be closer to 100 percent); and teaching and mentoring skills appear in 56 percent, supported through graduate teaching certificates and mentoring workshops. This evidence corroborates what stakeholders told us directly: Cornell's graduate fields already

share far more educational purpose than their administrative separation from one another would suggest, each emphasizing its own version of largely the same principles.

Areas of convergence

The committee's conversations with stakeholders produced substantial areas of convergence. **Graduate training should prepare students for diverse careers rather than assuming an academic position is the default outcome.** The tenure-track faculty job can no longer serve as the measure of a successful Ph.D.: only about a third of new doctorates now enter academic careers, down from roughly half three decades ago.[146] Stakeholders across administration, faculty, and staff agreed that curricula built primarily around producing the next professoriate leave most graduates unprepared for the paths they actually take. The significance of this consensus is hard to overstate. The shift in career outcomes has not been accompanied by new approaches to training, suggesting that current degree programs could be failing to prepare a majority of students.

Shrinking graduate cohorts create shortages in the classroom, laboratory, and beyond that have not been anticipated. Graduate students currently teach the majority of First-Year Writing Seminars at Cornell and staff many undergraduate laboratories, a dependency stakeholders raised repeatedly and with urgency. As doctoral cohorts shrink under funding pressure, that teaching capacity does not appear elsewhere on its own. This contraction matters because it ties graduate education's future directly to undergraduate education's ability to function at scale, making it an institution-wide problem rather than one confined to graduate programs. At present, universities are seeking creative ways to ensure high-quality teaching support, like supplemental AI tutoring and opportunities for undergraduates to learn skills in peer mentoring. But none of these can replace the skill and training of a graduate student. So universities must develop a coordinated plan. Increasing graduate student cohorts may be a solution in some fields. But in areas where the job market cannot support a return to earlier cohort sizes even under an expansive view of demand, units will need to experiment and innovate.

Master's programs require coordination. While growth in the sector has made the raw number of master's enrollments particularly visible, the real need is for greater alignment of master's programs with institutional purpose in order to prevent redundancy, ensure quality, and find opportunities for collaboration, experimentation, and innovation. Faculty and staff pointed to the 2014 advent of Cornell's hybrid Responsibility Center Management budget model as having incentivized the expansion of master's programs at the individual unit level but left them often

[146] Audrey Williams June, "Oh, the Places They'll Go with a Ph.D.," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 2022, https://www.chronicle.com/article/oh-the-places-theyll-go-with-a-ph-d.

unregulated at the institutional level.[147] The result has been at least a few cases of duplicated administrative structures and programs of uncertain long-term financial and/or pedagogical viability. This was primarily framed as a governance failure more than a quality complaint: no single office currently has the authority or the information to evaluate whether the present mix of master's programs serves students or the institution.

Industry, which benefits directly from America's highly trained workforce, should invest in advanced education, including professional degree programs. Numerous stakeholders expressed frustration that universities absorb the financial risk of advanced training while employers capture much (arguably most) of its return. The concern is both practical and ethical. In practical terms, the current model that relies almost entirely on federal grants and private tuition payments to finance graduate training has become increasingly precarious, as research funding and loans become less reliable. Likewise, as long as the federal government supported advanced training there was an ethical argument to be made that universities served as the means for broad public support of private industry. That argument no longer holds when the university uses its own resources, and those of its students, to subsidize private corporations by bearing the costs of training.

Graduate curricula need to build professional skills alongside disciplinary expertise. Writing for general audiences, learning how to teach and mentor, and managing complex projects were all named as vital skills that advanced training currently treats as incidental rather than core. This is what makes the cultivation of judgment forwarded in this report more than an abstraction. Stakeholders are already naming the specific competencies they believe advanced training is failing to build deliberately. Our committee's analysis of Cornell's graduate field learning outcomes found that a large number of fields already list some core professional aptitudes as goals, like writing for the public and effective teaching strategies. So the problem is not neglect, it is coordination: Cornell already values these skills in principle, but no single office or structure is responsible for turning that stated goal into consistent, resourced practice across programs. Stakeholders were clear that graduate students need the skills of the liberal arts too, just at an advanced level.

Areas of disagreement

Although the committee surfaced important areas of consensus — areas of broad agreement that shape the majority of our recommendations for reform — we also encountered issues where stakeholders are sharply divided. On several of the most consequential questions facing graduate and professional education, stakeholders disagreed, and these disagreements mark places where a real choice will be required to lead advanced training into our uncertain future. The divergences below are presented as stakeholders posed them, in tension.

---

[147] "Provost Outlines University's New Budget Model," *Cornell Chronicle*, May 10, 2012, https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2012/05/provost-outlines-universitys-new-budget-model.

Is the purpose of advanced training to cultivate deep expertise or to address public needs? One group of stakeholders, spanning administration, faculty, and staff, argued that graduate education's defining purpose is producing deep expertise and the next generation of scholars. These stakeholders warned against subordinating that mission to public service metrics that accord greater (or even equal) value to engaged scholarship. A different, sociologically overlapping group, which included alumni and faculty, argued the opposite: that graduate training should be far more intentionally responsive to public impact rather than narrowly academic. Some stakeholders went further still, worrying that the committee's framework language about responsiveness to public needs could be misread as demoting expertise. This is precisely the tension that our "barometer-of-public-needs" principle was written to hold. The committee understands academic independence and public responsibility as symbiotic rather than ranked priorities. But this divergence amongst our stakeholders highlights what is at stake in getting that balance right in practice, not just in principle.

Should the existing Ph.D. model be defended, and incrementally adapted, or fundamentally restructured? Some stakeholders wanted the core architecture of doctoral training (e.g., the dissertation, the cohort model, individualized scholarship) preserved and strengthened against disruption. Others argued for a genuinely different model that would make possible shorter timelines, team-based research, new forms of evaluation, and deeper industry integration. This would include reassessing the dissertation as the sole medium for demonstrating accomplishment. One reader of our initial framework argued that even the committee's most forward-looking language defaulted to defending existing structures through new coordinating mechanisms rather than asking whether the arrival of AI means questioning the underlying model. This is not a disagreement about preference. It is an active, important dispute about what a Ph.D. is actually for, in an environment where the job market itself suggests fewer graduates will build careers inside academia.

Should master's programs be expanded to respond to the American workforce's continual need for reskilling and reinvention, or do they need to be restrained following two decades of explosive growth? Many stakeholders see master's programs as a key to workforce preparation in an uncertain age. Others described current growth as undisciplined, producing quality, governance, and internal cannibalization problems that demand consolidation before any further expansion. Both sides are responding to the same underlying fact: master's programs have grown in both number and total enrollments. They simply draw opposite conclusions about whether the fix is more growth with better rules or less growth until the rules are promulgated.

What are ways to make sure that Ph.D. training, professional education, and lifelong learning include opportunities for strategic coordination? As a result, there are few occasions to ask how the pieces fit together. Some stakeholders cautioned against extending coordination too far, arguing that professional programs have fundamentally different goals and public

missions than Ph.D. training and should not be structurally conflated. That caution is warranted, and nothing in this report proposes uniform regulation across such different enterprises. But a Cornell Law student pointedly encapsulated a broader sense of student regret, noting that his experience provided him with a solid sense of belonging to his degree program but little opportunity to be a fully realized student of Cornell University. This was, he noted, a missed opportunity for himself and for the institution.

Other areas of concern

Not every consequential issue in graduate and professional education today surfaced with equal force in our stakeholder conversations. Some subjects are active, even urgent, in national debates about the future of advanced training, yet appeared only faintly, or not at all, in what the Cornell community raised with us. This is not evidence that these issues are unimportant, and indeed several weigh prominently in the public discourse. Rather, it points to the complexity of the issues at hand, and perhaps limitations in the committee's purview. We set out the most telling of these issues here in order to ensure that this report does not mistake the results of our investigations for the full extent of the problem.

Online and hybrid degree programs, especially at the master's level, are a fast-growing feature of the national graduate education market and yet remain largely invisible to most of the Cornell community. Nationally, institutions that have invested heavily in online delivery at scale have matriculated students who would never consider a residential program. At Cornell, this activity is concentrated almost entirely within eCornell. The result is a striking asymmetry: a business line that may be central to Cornell's competitive position and reputation nationally barely registered as a topic across the hundreds of conversations behind this report. Any serious treatment of graduate education's future must bring online delivery into the big tent of advanced learning and consider its strategic and pedagogical relationship to residential programs. And yet the committee emphasizes that in-person education should, and indeed must, remain the lodestar of American higher education.

Graduate and professional student debt is a subject of sustained national concern, and yet only a single stakeholder raised it directly in the committee's engagement. In part, this may be a reflection of the comparatively low debt burdens that Cornell students carry after graduation. But low does not mean no debt, and the well-documented national conversation around graduate lending, unfunded master's programs, and the debt loads carried by professional degree holders in law, medicine, and other fields, suggests it must be an element in any strategic plan for advanced education. The lack of visibility around the issue for the committee's stakeholders should prompt more inquiry, not less concern.

Whether professional degree programs should compress and accelerate, or protect the breadth of a fuller education, is a live and increasingly consequential question in professional education nationally, one that surfaced for the committee only in fragments.

Law schools nationally have begun adopting 3+3 programs, letting students finish a bachelor's degree in three years and begin law school in the fourth, and a smaller but growing number of medical schools have introduced three-year M.D. tracks on the same logic. Advocates frame these as a direct answer to student debt and time-to-practice; critics argue the compression cuts the broader scientific and humanistic grounding that produces thoughtful practitioners rather than narrowly trained technicians. That debate showed up in our own data only as scattered remarks, not as an actual exchange. One stakeholder raised, in the abstract, the vital role a liberal arts background plays in the skillsets of professional students. In a separate meeting about Cornell's overall institutional scale and footprint, another stakeholder proposed combined degree programs as a potential answer to cost pressures and debt burdens. The committee did not investigate this particular approach to the integration of the undergraduate and professional degrees, but it warrants discussion.

Viewpoint diversity within the professoriate is one of the most frequently invoked concerns in the committee's broader stakeholder data, yet it surfaced only once in conversations specific to graduate education. A single stakeholder suggested that graduate programs are the university's most durable leverage point for producing a more intellectually and ideologically diverse new generation of faculty, since hiring pipelines run substantially through graduate training. That claim received no sustained engagement in our graduate-education conversations, even as the underlying concern about homogeneity, self-censorship, and viewpoint diversity generated some of the most extensive commentary anywhere in the committee's process. If graduate training is in fact where faculty ideological composition is substantially set, as national critics of higher education frequently argue, its near-absence from our graduate-specific conversations is worth the community's attention to better understand whether that finding is a sign that simply greater problems weigh more heavily, or whether it is itself a confirmation of an intellectual thinning.

These three bodies of evidence — what stakeholders agreed on, what they contested, and what they left largely unaddressed despite wider attention — informed the parameters for the committee's recommendations around graduate and professional education. The recommendations that follow build directly on the areas of convergence. At the same time, we take positions on the areas of contention based on the committee's guiding principles, arguing for a strong sense of coordination and direction rather than settling for continued drift. And where the Cornell community's own conversations left gaps, we have tried to extend the same judgment forward. What stakeholders ultimately gave the committee, in addition to their time, expertise, and care, is not a blueprint but a foundation on which to build.

6.6. Recommendations

Our recommendations for graduate and professional education advocate for two things at once that must be held in productive tension: coordination sufficient to bridge the silos that have let each form of advanced training exacerbate institutional drift and enough openness to

experimentation that individual programs can adapt their content and structure to meet student aspirations and workforce needs. Neither aim is subordinate to the other, and the two work better in concert: experimentation is only sustainable when there is a solid institutional backstop for when experiments fail. And coordination is only catalytic when it is pursued in a spirit of collaboration. What follows should be read as a set of recommendations for where Cornell's advanced training most needs a shared structure, and where it most needs room to try something its neighbors have not.

The Ph.D. and the academic job market

Our committee sees no path forward for Ph.D. education that does not confront the realities of the academic job market. Approximately two-thirds of new Ph.D.s no longer enter academic careers, and doctoral training has been slow to catch up with that reality. This is not an argument for training fewer or lesser scholars. The formation of the next generation of experts remains one of the university's most distinctive contributions to society. The roughly one-third of Ph.D.s who go on to build careers inside the academy deserve preparation as deliberate as anything this framework proposes for those who do not. That preparation should include academic civics (see chapter seven): explicit grounding in shared governance, the norms of collegial self-rule, and the obligations of institutional citizenship that fall to every professor the moment they join a department. These are obligations that current doctoral training rarely addresses. A field can train a scholar in research methods for years without ever explaining how a faculty meeting works, how tenure and promotion decisions actually get made, or what it means to treat institutional citizenship as seriously as scholarship itself. Students whose aspirations do not lie in the academy would not need such training. But for those who see universities as a potential destination, academic civics will be a vital skill. Academic civics thus belongs as an opportunity inside doctoral training and not just in orientation programs for faculty who have already arrived.

Training Ph.D.s for our uncertain future means preparing them not only for the academy but also for the workforce most of them will actually enter. This means broadening curricula to include transferable skills like writing for general audiences, teaching, project management, and mentorship. These are abilities that graduates will need whether they land in a department, a company, or a community college. Units should be building structured pathways into an array of industries and applied practices rather than leaving them to individual initiative. Some of these ties are direct and already well-worn, with alumni returning to campus to ensure the path remains clearly visible. But many units have little or no experience forging any pathway other than the one that leads to the professoriate. These units need assistance. They need training on how to engage their alumni, how to seek out partners that may not be obvious, and how to muster faculty to cultivate non-academic partnerships. There will be costs involved in developing these pathways at the institutional and unit level that should be shared by industry and government, the primary beneficiaries of the skilled workforce created by advanced training. At the same time, pilot programs developed from institutional funding will be needed

to help point the way for units unclear on how to move forward. Collaboration with existing organizations like UIDP can help reduce the structural, operational, and legal friction that happens when academics and corporations try to work together.

A reassessment of Ph.D. programs in this moment will necessarily entail reexamining the traditional, individually authored, single-discipline dissertation, not only because AI complicates conventional assumptions about authorship, but because universities have been slow to recognize the range of media forms through which advanced scholarship can now be conducted and shared. A multimodal capstone may suit some fields; a public-facing, high-impact project may suit others; and the traditional monograph will remain right for many disciplines. That variation should be welcomed. What should not vary is the depth of knowledge and rigor any new form demands: judgment, as we have noted, is the highest expression of expertise, not a substitute for it. Because any serious revision of the capstone will reshape expectations for hiring, tenure, and promotion, faculty should think downstream from the dissertation to understand the costs and opportunities that arise from an openness to new capstone projects.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendations for Cornell:

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.

Reconsider the dissertation and capstone. Welcome disciplinary variation in the form advanced scholarship takes, hold every form to the same standard of depth and rigor, and involve faculty governance from the start of any change, given its consequences for hiring, tenure, and promotion.

Develop a program in academic civics for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers, building on the committee's model addressed directly in chapter seven.

Bring the cultivation of judgment explicitly into stated learning outcomes, working field by field with the Graduate School.

Build cross-field curricular and co-curricular infrastructure to improve training in pedagogy for students who envision careers in the classroom.

Teaching labor and the postdoctoral stage

Graduate students are not only researchers in training. Between fall 2023 and spring 2026, annual cohorts of approximately 214 graduate students taught 62 percent of Cornell's First-Year Writing Seminars, reaching approximately 3,500 of the over 5,700 students enrolled in these required seminars.[148] Graduate students also staff many undergraduate laboratories. As doctoral cohorts shrink and undergraduate enrollment holds steady, that arrangement becomes harder to sustain. Stakeholders were clear that the dependency runs in both directions: the university relies on graduate labor to teach at scale, and graduate students rely on teaching to fund portions of their training. Moreover, developing teaching ability is critical to advance training, in, for example, communication and synthesis of knowledge. It is critical that the university protects the teaching assistantships available to graduate students. At Cornell, this currently involves complicated negotiations between the Graduate School and the colleges due to the decentralized, highly distributed approach to student funding. Addressing the emerging gap between need and capacity will require real analysis on the supply side that assesses the virtues of regrowing graduate cohorts, expanding postdoctoral teaching positions, and negotiating a larger role for full-time faculty. Cutting teaching assistant roles when budgets tighten without a clear-eyed analysis of the pedagogical consequences merely postpones substantive programmatic choices.

Postdoctoral scholars, also addressed in chapter four, warrant more sustained institutional attention in relation to both the teaching and research mission. Postdocs are, by stakeholders' own account, foundational to the academic pipeline and largely absent from institutional planning. There are real costs to the scholar and the institution from postdoc isolation within individual labs. A 2024–2025 survey by the Cornell Postdoctoral Association that is discussed in chapter four also gives that isolation a number: nearly half of respondents drew most of their professional and skill development from their own lab or department alone, more than a third reported insufficient opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration, and in a follow-up survey spanning multiple colleges, just 37 percent of postdocs reported a genuine sense of belonging at Cornell, with the remaining 63 percent neutral or lacking it entirely. The same survey surfaced a gap this framework has not yet addressed: disability accommodation and mental health support were rated "not at all" or only "mixed" by a majority of respondents in both categories, a shortfall that looks less like a matter of individual lab culture and more like the absence of any institutional office responsible for postdoc welfare in the first place.

There are ways to structure postdoc positions that reduce isolation and at the same time bolster professional preparation, whether by including real teaching opportunities or enhancing coordination across research groups. Centrally administered models, like the Klarman Fellowships in the College of Arts and Sciences, tend to reduce isolation and build thicker ties to the institution, but they are not appropriate for many postdoctoral researchers, and they require

[148] Data was provided by the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell University.

substantial institutional resources. As this report notes throughout, enhanced coordination can pay extraordinary dividends to both the institution and the scholar.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendations for Cornell:

Sustain teaching capacity by prioritizing graduate student instructional support. Invest in postdoctoral teaching positions and expand the role of full-time teaching faculty to close the emerging teaching-labor gap.

Reform the postdoctoral stage. Establish three- to four-year postdoc positions that incorporate genuine teaching responsibility, provide for central coordination, and preserve an early-independence path for candidates who do not need one.

Professional and master's education

Professional programs like law, human medicine, veterinary medicine, and business have distinct goals, accreditation regimes, and public accountability, and stakeholders were right to insist that they be treated separately from Ph.D. training rather than folded into a single analysis. What they share with the rest of graduate education, however, is exposure to the same disruptive pressures and the same set of potential opportunities that arise from bridging silos. AI-enabled efficiencies will inevitably make some kinds of credentials more affordable, but they will also raise the value of the high-touch, in-person experience that allows for direct mentorship, cohort formation, and apprenticeship in judgment.

Of all the domains of advanced training, master's education needs the most immediate structural attention. The growth documented above happened largely without coordinated oversight, and stakeholders were direct about the consequences: duplicated administrative structures, uncertain long-term financial viability, and degrees that employers sometimes see as neither specialized enough for immediate application nor deep enough for scholarly credibility. The remedy is not to halt growth but to survey it, understand the full picture, conduct clear-eyed analysis of the market, match that with a responsive price structure and financial model, and then establish a well-designed process that provides for strategic governance that does not constrain innovation.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendations for Cornell:

Govern master's program growth. Require a real budget case, including break-even enrollment, for any new master's program; consolidate duplicated administrative functions; validate program design with industry partners.

Calibrate graduate tuition by program against market analysis, lowering price where doing so would expand participation.

Lifelong learning and new pathways to advanced study

Graduate and professional education has historically been built around fixed entry points and linear progressions. Enter in one's twenties, finish within a set number of years, and exit into a career that stretches out to retirement. That model no longer fits either the demographic reality of a shrinking traditional-age cohort or the professional reality of careers that require re-skilling every few years. Multiple on- and off-ramps, entered and exited without stigma for any age group, would serve students and protect the institution against enrollment volatility at the same time. One concrete step: reintroducing the M.Phil. or a comparable intermediate credential, positioned between the M.A. and the Ph.D., so that students who make it to the "all but dissertation" stage can leave with meaningful recognition, a practice already established at some British and Canadian universities. That credential would also formalize a distinction this framework has tried to draw: the advanced capacity to evaluate and synthesize existing scholarship is not the same achievement as the capacity to design and execute original research. But both are highly valuable, point toward rewarding career paths, and deserve recognition on their own terms.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendations for Cornell:

Build real off-ramps into graduate training. Reintroduce the M.Phil. or a comparable intermediate credential for students who complete coursework, and treat entry, pause, and return as normal trajectories rather than exceptions.

Explore a subscription model for lifelong learning, in partnership with the School of Continuing Education.

Community, mentorship, and career infrastructure

The core values promoted in these recommendations — judgment, lifelong learning, strategic coordination — are only credible if they shape the concrete conditions of daily life for students. Stakeholders rightly pushed the committee hardest on exactly this point. A vision of lifelong learning needs to be paired with visible investment in the well-being of the students already here.

Community amongst graduate and professional students needs deliberate institutional support. Some of Cornell's strongest examples of graduate community-building are self-organized almost entirely by graduate students themselves. The importance of that work for building thick ties to one another and the institution should be recognized and supported. So should mentorship that extends beyond the advisor-advisee relationship. Students benefit from a wider network of faculty connection, and programs that establish structured cohort activities, cross-lab or cross-field pairing, and dedicated time for informal contact measurably improve both retention and the quality of the training students receive. Gaps in cohort size, a direct consequence of enrollment and funding decisions, are not only a staffing problem; they are a

community problem since a thin cohort has fewer peers to learn alongside and lean on. Building cross-field connections — another way to bridge silos — will be critical to the health of the students, the success of the fields, and the life of the institution.

Career infrastructure deserves the same concrete investment. Cornell's Careers Beyond Academia office does essential work. It needs not just investment but clear points of articulation with every field in order to support the diverse career paths of our students. Employer connections and alternative-academic opportunities should be organized at the university level rather than left to individual disciplinary graduate student associations to assemble on their own each year. That articulation should take a concrete form: a portfolio of microcredentials, open to students in any program regardless of field, certifying the transferable skills this framework has argued advanced training too often leaves to chance. Public communication, teaching, and community impact are the obvious starting set, each already a stated learning outcome across many of Cornell's graduate fields, but built independently and unevenly program by program rather than in conversation. A fourth critical area is applied AI fluency tailored to a student's own discipline: AI for the humanities, for the qualitative social sciences, or for clinical or design practice. The Cornell AI Initiative has established three minors for undergraduates, but there is need for similar programs to be made available to graduate and professional students, either as part of their degree programs or as microcredentials earned alongside. The ability to use these tools with judgment is now as transferable, and as inconsistently taught, as the others. Stackable and portable across programs, these credentials would let any student build a documented record of exactly the capacities employers say they cannot see on a transcript, without requiring every department to build that infrastructure alone.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendations for Cornell:

Fund graduate community building and mentorship. Provide real institutional support for student-led community-building efforts that currently rely on volunteer labor and personal expense, and invest in faculty-student relationships that extend beyond the advisor-advisee pair.

Build out career infrastructure. Expand Careers Beyond Academia, organize employer connections at the university level rather than leaving them to individual units.

Build inter-field and inter-institutional mechanisms for cohort building where they are currently shrinking.

Establish a portfolio of stackable microcredentials in public communication, teaching, public impact, and applied AI fluency, with oral communication, ethics, and research design as candidates for future expansion given how often they already appear as stated learning

outcomes across Cornell's graduate fields.

Extend the university's investment in thick relationships, through alumni affairs and development among other channels, to graduate and professional cohorts, so students experience themselves as members of the institution rather than of a single program alone.

A genuinely global cohort

International students are indispensable to graduate and professional education at Cornell, but the pipeline that sustains them is narrower than it should be. According to the 2025 Institute of International Education's "Open Doors" report, 53 percent of all international graduate students at U.S. institutions came from just two countries, China and India,[149] and Cornell's own enrollment sits in line with that national concentration. That two countries of well over a billion people each supply so much of the pipeline is not a surprise, and both are internally diverse in ways that already enrich American campuses considerably. But that scale is part of the case for going further, not a reason to stop: a university with the ambition this report describes should be reaching as deliberately into the rest of the world's population as it has into its two largest sources. The concentration is also a strategic vulnerability at a moment of visa uncertainty and geopolitical volatility. Deliberate investment in new feeder programs, funding for students from a wider range of nations, and reciprocal exchanges of the kind Cornell's Global Hubs initiative already supports would deepen the range of intellectual traditions represented in our classrooms and labs, not just the size of the cohort.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendations for Cornell:

Diversify the international pipeline. Invest in feeder programs and funding partnerships beyond the two countries that currently supply a majority of international graduate students, building on models like Cornell's Global Hubs initiative.

Expand global recruitment with explicit outreach plans for underrepresented regions and countries.

Assess new Global Hubs locations, including possible new domestic hubs.

A coordinating home for advanced training

The diagnosis and remedies advanced in this chapter converge on a single, unresolved question. Cultivating judgment as the shared purpose of advanced training, building the thick relationships with students that outlast the degree, and giving every program access to career, community, and credentialing infrastructure are not problems any single field, college, or

[149] *Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange* (Institute of International Education, 2025), https://opendoorsdata.org/.

dean's office can solve in isolation. Many stakeholders had already drawn this conclusion long before their conversations with our committee. They told us, clearly and repeatedly, that graduate programs have grown for two decades without anyone positioned to ask whether the structures adequately serve students or the institution. What became clear from the committee's inquiry is that the same absence of strategic oversight is as concerning from decades-old Ph.D., professional, and continuing education as it is for newly launched master's degrees or online credentialing programs. Despite their clear relation to one another — the student cohorts, the advanced skills they each seek to cultivate — they have little occasion to examine how the pieces fit together or work collaboratively. The question this final recommendation takes up, then, is not whether Cornell's advanced training needs a more coordinated home. It is what kind of home it requires and how far its authority should reach.

The committee's own deliberations tested this question against a specific structural answer. An early draft of this framework proposed a College of Advanced Study: a single top-level academic unit that would bundle post-baccalaureate education writ large, currently distributed across multiple colleges and administrative units under one coordinating authority. That proposal met real resistance within the committee. Some of the counterarguments were ideological: a default suspicion of moving authority toward the center when innovation and entrepreneurship are most vitally located in grassroots units, closest to the educational enterprise. Some of the concern was pragmatic, grounded in concern that reorganizing administrative structures generates bureaucratic cost and disruption with little payoff. And some counterarguments were cultural, arising from Cornell's tradition of decentralized decision-making. As a result, our committee's preliminary framework released in April 2026 proposed the more modest, less structural, argument for enhanced coordination amongst the various advanced training programs but did not point to any unit or office that would be responsible for making sure that happened or defining how it might be accomplished.

What our committee recommends is clear: coordinated curricular and co-curricular support that can mobilize the whole campus on behalf of post-baccalaureate students; vertical integration from certificates through the Ph.D. and horizontal integration across units that have operated in isolation; a single institutional interlocutor that can approve new initiatives without routing them through multiple competing offices; and a durable, campus-wide commitment to the thick relationships this framework has argued should define the university's obligation to its graduate and professional students.

But we do not prejudge the structure that coordination should ultimately take. We continue to believe that true reform of graduate and professional education in line with the principles articulated by our committee will require bold organizational leadership given the rigidity in advanced training diagnosed by the 2016 Mellon report. But we remain genuinely open to what form reorganization takes. As this work is considered for strategic planning, every option for strengthening coordination across advanced training should remain on the table, including the

College of Advanced Study model this committee considered and set aside. We encourage the university to undertake a sustained examination of alternative structural models that can shake graduate and professional education from traditions that at times seem to border on torpor.

This report does not anticipate what such a structure would mean for the day-to-day governance of any individual degree program, and there are good reasons raised by our stakeholders to preserve real autonomy at the program level even as the university works to bridge the silos that currently separate Ph.D., master's, and professional education from one another. Coordination and centralization are not the same thing, and resolving which combination of the two Cornell actually needs is a decision for the next stage of this process, made with fuller information than the committee has had the capacity to gather.

The empirical case for coordination, whatever its eventual form, is strong. As the review of stated learning outcomes described above makes clear, Cornell's graduate fields already converge on a remarkable range of shared capacities, achieved so far entirely without coordination. Public communication in particular is an area of broad, cross-campus interest that no single department can build the infrastructure for alone. Whatever structure eventually carries this work, it should not flatten the real differences between a professional school responsive to its licensing industry, a nimble master's program, and a Ph.D. program built around original research; it should instead give those differences a shared infrastructure to draw on, without dictating how each retains the autonomy its field requires.

In sum, the committee makes the following recommendation for Cornell:

Conduct a full strategic and financial review of the costs and benefits of greater centralization across advanced study, the Graduate School, the School of Continuing Education, eCornell, master's programs, and professional schools, including the possibility of unifying them in a school or college of advanced study.

6.7. Conclusion

Graduate and professional education was built for a world that assumed a fairly stable set of conditions: that most Ph.D.s would go on to build careers in academia, that federal support for advanced training would remain reliable, that international students would keep arriving in growing numbers, and that each program could safely govern itself without much reference to what the program next door was doing. None of those assumptions holds today. In line with our committee's broader understanding of the future of higher education, this analysis of advanced training has taken the disruption of the traditional model as a harbinger of the future rather than a passing anomaly.

What we found, in hundreds of conversations across this community, was less a single crisis than a set of overlapping ones, each demanding a different response. The academic job market

has changed permanently, and doctoral training needs to change with it without abandoning the formation of scholars, whatever career they go on to build, as one of the university's most distinctive obligations. Teaching capacity and the postdoctoral stage need real investment rather than quiet neglect. Master's education needs governance, not restraint. Advanced training as a whole needs to become genuinely open to the careers most people now actually have, rather than continuing to assume a single passage from student to professional that ends at commencement. And nearly every one of these problems, examined closely enough, turns out to be a problem of coordination: of programs, colleges, and offices solving the same challenges in isolation, at real cost to students who experience Cornell's advanced training not as one university but as a federation of separately governed programs that share a campus and a mascot.

We have tried to hold two commitments in tension rather than resolve them prematurely: coordination sufficient to bridge the silos separating Ph.D., master's, professional, and lifelong learning from one another, and enough openness to experimentation that no single structure forecloses the different futures each program, and each student, may need. We do not believe those commitments are in conflict, but we recognize that reasonable people, including members of this committee, disagree about how much weight each should carry.

What we offer here is a reasoned assessment of the challenges faced by graduate and professional education and an aspirational path forward that articulates and protects the foundational principles to which we must adhere for a successful future. Cultivating judgment, sustaining scholarly independence, providing a barometer of public needs, keeping faith with a global vision, building relationships that outlast the degree, and treating learning as a lifelong rather than a bounded pursuit are not new aspirations for advanced training in the American university. They are fundamental to our long-established mission, but have been made newly urgent at this moment of disruption. In a world of increasingly ubiquitous information, it is judgment, fostered by real and lasting relationships between mentors and the students, and exercised in addressing collective challenges, that will continue to grow in value. This report asks Cornell's graduate and professional education to build toward that future.

7. Academic Civics, Collaborative Governance, and Institutional Structures

7.1. Background

The American university is a unique institution. Like many corporations, universities manage large budgets, employ personnel, and maintain a large physical infrastructure, yet they are not organized around profit maximization or a hierarchical command structure. Like government agencies, universities serve public purposes and depend on the public for legitimacy and, as we have seen, funding, but they have long retained autonomy from direct political control, even in moments of more intrusive oversight. Like religious institutions, universities steward traditions and cultivate communities devoted to higher ideals, yet their authority rests on systematic inquiry and the continual questioning of received truths rather than doctrine. And like professional guilds, universities control access to credentials and thus careers, while at the same time advancing forms of knowledge that often transcend any particular profession. While it shares characteristics with all of these institutional forms, the university's organizing purpose is learning, from which teaching, discovery, stewardship, dialogue, and deliberation all take their meaning. That purpose is realized only through the institution itself, through the relationships that bind its members together. This chapter examines how learning about and for the institution can help promote community solidarity, sharpen collaborative governance, and prepare universities for the next wave of disruption that is sure to come.

The forces disrupting the American university today undermine the university's missions and threaten the relationships that hold the institution together. AI wears away at the basic trust between faculty and students as instructors ask whether assignments were completed by machines and students wonder who — or what — is writing the lectures and doing the grading. Reductions in federal research funding have thinned graduate cohorts, left laboratories understaffed, and risk a zero-sum competition for a shrinking pool of support. Staff have absorbed a year of dramatic budget reductions that inevitably put more work on fewer people. The cumulative effect is a community that reports feeling more stretched, more exposed, and less understood.

These disruptors have become the accelerant in an already combustible institutional tinderbox, compounding decades of eroding trust within a structure that cannot thrive without it. The legitimacy of university governance depends on trust and shared understanding across constituencies. When that trust frays, as it clearly has, the university does not merely become a less agreeable place to work. It loses the actual means by which it governs itself. That is the danger of this moment. It is also, perhaps surprisingly, an opportunity. Because a university runs on everyday relationships, rather than on entrenched hierarchy or sporadic elections, restoring trust can be accomplished through the very activities at the heart of the university: study, deliberation, discussion, empathy, or, in a word, learning.

7.2. Stakeholder Perspectives on Solidarity, Civics, and Governance

This chapter's account of stakeholder input draws on the full body of evidence assembled across Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University community engagement process as questions of trust, governance, and institutional solidarity surfaced. The committee encountered perspectives on the fraying bonds of the university in conversations both on and off campus, in discussions with administrators and staff, and among both tenure-track and research, teaching, and extension faculty. Taken together, the committee compiled feedback on the erosion of institutional solidarity in almost four hundred of our stakeholder reports.

Two observations emerge most clearly from that record. First, what began as institutional specialization is at risk of calcifying into fault lines. The most conspicuous and oft-discussed of those fault lines separates faculty from administration. This highly permeable, regularly traversed boundary has grown in the sociological imagination of the university into an unbridgeable gulf. Our committee was itself a faculty-administration partnership — convened by the provost and led by faculty — but what the committee encountered was a vernacular conviction that the gulf was unbridgeable, despite evidence to the contrary. But the committee also encountered other fault lines pulling at the seams of the community, including fractures dividing tenure-track from research, teaching, and extension faculty, and dividing staff from the academic mission.

Second, when stakeholders were asked what would repair the university's fractured community, they converged on three primary remedies: a reinvention of the university's principles of solidarity, or what the committee calls academic civics; a revived investment in shared governance; and an institutional means to study, refine, and bolster both. This section sets out what we heard before turning to recommendations.

Between faculty and administrators

The structural relationship between faculty and university administration drew more sustained stakeholder attention than any other relationship in the committee's outreach. Across dozens of conversations spanning administration, faculty at every rank, alumni, university leaders elsewhere, and external observers, stakeholders returned to a single diagnosis: trust between faculty and administration has been damaged. Some faculty described being informed after decisions were made rather than consulted beforehand, advisory votes from shared governance bodies treated as optional, and public forums that read as performative rather than sincere.[150] A perceived history of committee recommendations that went nowhere has bred cynicism and a fear that any exercise in consultation is theater. Indeed, in our committee conversations the most regularly confessed fear is that a year of sustained, sincere labor will simply be lost to

[150] For reflections on faculty participation more widely in American universities, see Lee Gardner, *Building Trust: How Administrators and the Faculty Can Work Together Productively* (Chronicle of Higher Education, July 2025), 35–40.

indifference.

Several faculty argued that commitment to any single institution has become structurally transient as scholars come to identify with their discipline before their university. As a result, they are only invested locally until a higher-ranked university comes calling. The same critique suggested that faculty increasingly misunderstand tenure, regarding it as an entitlement derived from past accomplishment rather than an institutional investment in future promise and an expectation of leadership. One senior administrator observed that faculty distrust has become so ingrained as to be reflexive rather than responsive, suggesting that some have substituted cynicism for membership.

Stakeholders, unsurprisingly, split on where responsibility for the fractured relationship lies. One view holds administration primarily responsible, pointing to centralization of decision-making, over-compliance with external political pressure, and, in a small number of cases, a perceived failure to protect faculty who become targets. A second view holds responsibility as shared, calling on faculty to demonstrate greater accountability and engage constructively rather than with suspicion. Both views appear with real conviction in our committee's stakeholder record, and we make no claims as to how widespread either point of view might be. What can be said with confidence is that transparency and collaboration are not the same thing: Cornell faculty acknowledged that the administration is engaged on campus but there was concern about the lack of transparency around how decisions are made and the lack of consultation in reaching them. The result is that the sharing of governance can seem more performative than collaborative.

The great tragedy of the fault line between faculty and administration is that administrators at most American universities are once and future faculty. Faculty are constantly asked to take on administrative roles from leading programs and departments to participating in shared governance committees. This permeability between faculty and institutional leadership is what makes the university such a unique and exceptional institution.

The same specialization that has professionalized university administration — concentrating legal, financial, and regulatory expertise in offices whose daily constraints most faculty never encounter — has also made faculty increasingly opaque to the colleagues who now staff those offices, many of them faculty themselves not long before. Neither side has lost sight of the other through any real conflict of interest. Each has lost the vocabulary to recognize the other as engaged in the university's common work rather than toward separate, opposing ends. Administrators come to be seen not as colleagues temporarily discharging a demanding function but as a fixed managerial class; faculty come to be seen not as partners whose expertise administration exists to serve but as a constituency to be managed. This is the condition this report has elsewhere called a community of strangers: not the product of malice, or even disagreement, but of the quiet, cumulative loss of a shared civic vocabulary for describing what

colleagues in unfamiliar roles actually do, and why.

Misrecognition of this kind has a structural engine, and stakeholders were precise about how it runs, locating the problem in an inversion of institutional means and ends: strategy should lead structure, but at large universities structure now often leads strategy. New needs generate new offices rather than changes to existing ones, coordination costs rise, and the resulting system alienates the people it serves. Faculty experience this inversion directly, as compliance requirements and administrative systems consume time meant for teaching and research. The result is that universities have grown to be, as one stakeholder told us, "over-managed and under-led."

Between the tracks

The relationship between tenure-track and non-tenure-track research, teaching, and extension (RTE) faculty drew nearly as much sustained attention as the relationship between faculty and administration. Non-tenure track teaching faculty deliver a large share of Cornell's instruction, including 49 percent of undergraduate courses and 38 percent of graduate courses as of fall 2025 (per accounting by our subcommittee on undergraduate education). Extension faculty carry out the university's land-grant mission in every New York county, tending the university's obligations to the state and its communities. And research faculty sustain a share of the research enterprise, a role made increasingly precarious by federal funding cuts. Together, these three tracks make RTE faculty vital to the discharge of the university's most distinctive commitments.

RTE faculty described a pattern of structural and cultural marginalization that undermines faculty solidarity and the ambitions of shared, collaborative governance. They reported exclusion from committee assignments, email distribution lists, and policy notifications. They detailed the impact of titles on career opportunities (a concern that motivated Cornell's recent adoption of new Teaching, Research, and Extension Professor titles). And they pointed to a Cornell bylaw capping RTE contract terms at five years as a hurdle that makes the university less competitive than its peers in retaining strong teachers. The structural and cultural marginalization of RTE faculty, coupled with the precarity of untenured, short-contract employment, discourages the kind of long-term program building and intellectual risk-taking that promotes thick relationships and a strong sense of institutional civic engagement.

Stakeholders did not converge on a clear remedy but there was consensus that the problems were both structural and cultural. As a structural issue, attention focused resolutely on tenure and the differentiation this creates in terms of both job security and academic freedom protections. Although some stakeholders raised the prospect of tenure for all faculty or tenure for none, thus erasing the distinction, others argued that the maximalist solution was not in the interests of either the institution or many RTE faculty, whose interests do not conform to the general expectations of tenure. And yet our committee is in strong agreement that the academic-freedom interest of RTE faculty, from both an individual and institutional perspective, is

indistinguishable from that of tenure-track faculty.

Our committee advises two paths forward to the structural position of RTE faculty. The first focuses on security. We advise raising or removing the current five-year cap on RTE contracts. The brevity of this duration prevents RTE faculty from undertaking the kind of long-term career planning that is vital for effective curricular, research, and public impact planning. Rather than continually running up against a terminal contract year, contracts should renew on a rolling basis: a successful third-year review should result in a substantially lengthier contract (exact length best determined separately by different units), initiating a rolling update so that RTE faculty are never approaching a final, non-renewable date. Moreover, RTE contracts should come with language that speaks to the institution's commitment to academic freedom as it bears upon the terms of employment.

The second path forward centers on remedying the cultural marginalization felt by RTE faculty. Tenure-track and RTE faculty are both vital to the future university and to mistake their horizontal collaboration in the work of learning for vertical hierarchy is a grievous error. Here, the remedies are less about job security than about enhancing legibility and promoting collaboration. The issue is not just one of elevating the visibility of RTE faculty within university units, but also articulating the value of teaching and public impact work for all faculty, including those on the tenure track. Establishing more robust channels for collaboration in teaching, research, public impact, and collaborative university governance should be a priority for any new initiatives, opening opportunities for RTE and tenure-track faculty to work together.

In looking to enhance the thick relationships that bind all faculty to the institution, RTE faculty should be represented on future strategic planning committees, so that the questions raised here remain present in Cornell's strategic vision.

Between faculty and staff

No finding in this consultation was more consistent, or more uncomfortable, than what staff told the committee about their own standing in the university. Across nearly fifty meetings on how staff understand their role, and more than a dozen focused specifically on staff equity and voice, the same complaint returned with striking uniformity: staff are systematically excluded from the institutional governance and strategic planning that shapes their working lives — a pattern, it was pointed out, this committee's own process reproduced by convening without staff representation. This sense of disenfranchisement was undoubtedly accentuated by the unfortunate timing of our committee's deliberations alongside the Resilient Cornell initiative, a cost-cutting program that trimmed $350 million from the university's operating budget, which entailed significant reductions in staff primarily through attrition, voluntary retirement, and controls on position growth. Our committee's outreach thus landed at a moment of profound insecurity.

There is a longer history behind this complaint. A 2015 Cornell faculty committee report on administrative burden traced the erosion of direct staff support for faculty to the centralization of administrative functions beginning in the early 1990s, a turn which thinned the link between the people doing the university's core work and the people enacting its primary functions.[151] National data suggest Cornell's experience was not unusual. Federal Reserve research using federal workforce data found that between 1987 and 2011 the share of university employees in clerical and secretarial roles, the staff historically embedded in direct, day-to-day department support, fell from 20 percent to 12 percent, while the share in specialized "other professional" roles (human resources, information technology, compliance, and legal staff) grew from 18 percent to 26 percent.[152] The number of administrators, notably, barely grew at all; this was not simply more bureaucracy, but a different kind of bureaucracy, in which support work moved from the department to the compliance office, from standing relationships to systems and forms. For faculty, this shift left more of what the Cornell report calls "shadow work": routine administrative tasks displaced onto scholars poorly trained to do them. For staff, it meant more time spent operating the university's bureaucratic apparatus and less at the frontlines of the teaching and research it exists to serve.

The exclusion described by staff appears to be enforced less by rule than by norm. Staff described being told they are "out of their lane" when they offer institutional ideas, and reported that pay grade, not expertise, determines whose contributions get heard. Set against that culture of deference, staff pushed back forcefully on any framing of their work as auxiliary. They described holding essential institutional knowledge and operational expertise that faculty committees routinely lack, providing continuity through leadership transitions that faculty and administrators, who come and go, cannot. One recurring formulation captured the tenor of these conversations well: staff are the driving force and the knowledge reservoir behind the mission of the institution.

Staff who work directly with students — academic advisors, career counselors, residential life professionals — argued forcefully that they are co-educators of Cornell's students. And staff described the material consequences of recent budget pressure directly: hiring freezes and staffing cuts have left fewer people with more work, wages that have not kept pace with the cost of living, and career ladders that encourage staff to leave their units in order to advance.

Despite these pressures, staff members also described a hunger for the intellectual life of the university that their roles currently forestall, including an eagerness to engage with our

---

[151] Sol M. Gruner et al., *Report of the College of Arts and Sciences Committee on Streamlining Research Administration* (Cornell University, November 24, 2015), https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.cornell.edu/dist/3/6798/files/2016/11/Streamlining-Administration-1x4k5pj.pdf.
[152] Peter L. Hinrichs, "Trends in Employment at US Colleges and Universities, 1987–2013," *Economic Commentary*, no. 2016-05 (Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, June 13, 2016), https://doi.org/10.26509/frbc-ec-201605.

committee and its planning for institutional reform. It is clear that the path forward must involve a more visible, more intellectually consequential engagement of the deep reserves of institutional knowledge and practical wisdom that reside in the Cornell staff. In particular, they will be vital to our committee's overarching goals of thickening community ties and advancing a more robust commitment to academic civics described later in this chapter. Faculty in particular must better understand the contributions made by university staff, as their work would be impossible without it.

7.3. Academic Freedom and Tenure

Beneath the structural relationships this chapter has described — between faculty and administration, across the tenure line, and between faculty and staff — sits the central animating principle of the American university: academic freedom. It is the condition that makes learning possible. A scholar who cannot pursue an unpopular conclusion, publish an inconvenient finding, or teach a contested text without professional consequence stops learning and starts repeating: reciting the understandings that are convenient for the present rather than testing them. Academic freedom lets a hypothesis be unsupported today and still worth pursuing tomorrow. It protects the long, uncertain work of scholarship long enough for that work to reach its end. But academic freedom should not be understood as a privilege extended solely to faculty. It is the fundamental precondition for an institution of learning.

The founding declaration of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) established the principle of academic freedom not on the private interests of faculty but on the university's obligations to the public. Unlike proprietary institutions built to propagate the fixed opinions of whoever endows them (e.g., corporations and religious institutions), American universities operate as a public trust, a "refuge," as the AAUP describes it, from the tyrannies of vested interests, legislative favor and "concentrated public opinion." Universities in democratic societies, and in the U.S. in particular, play a critical role in training citizens to be "more self-critical and more circumspect, to check the more hasty and unconsidered impulses of popular feeling," or in other words, to exercise the habits of sound judgment. As the AAUP went on to argue, should the public come to believe that the conclusions of academic inquiry arise not from "unbiased inquiry" but rather the proprietary interests of those who fund them, the university's authority collapses into special interest, and the trust its independence depends on disappears with it.[153] The embrace of academic freedom is thus fundamental to confronting the contemporary crisis of trust in American universities.

And yet not all articulations of academic freedom are the same, and the difference matters for how the university defends it. An absolutist reading treats academic freedom as covering nearly

[153] *1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* (American Association of University Professors, 1915), https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf.

anything a tenured professor might say, on any subject, in any forum. The AAUP's 1915 and subsequent 1940 declarations conceptualize academic freedom more narrowly, not as "the absolute freedom of utterance of the individual scholar" but rather as a professional "freedom of thought, of inquiry, of discussion and of teaching" bound by expertise, accuracy, and restraint. Matthew Finkin and Robert Post provide a persuasive account of academic freedom as "the liberty necessary to advance knowledge" arising not out of the interest of the individual scholar but the collective interest in a "professoriate that can accomplish its mission."[154]

If academic freedom is circumscribed by the empirical, ethical, and epistemological responsibilities of professional practice, then one core skill of scholarship emerges as fundamental to both its enactment and its protection: judgment. This vital capacity that our committee holds as central to the university's purpose is exercised through the application of rigorous standards of evidence and argument that resist reduction to opinion or dogma. Academic freedom protects that exercise of judgment and is reciprocally preserved through the demonstration of sound judgment. However, academic freedom cannot be guaranteed merely by the sound judgment by faculty. It must rest on the judicious use of institutional practices that formally protect scholarly research and teaching from proprietary interests. This is the role of tenure.

Tenure is the American university's most powerful instrument for securing public trust, a means to assert not the infallibility of scholarly conclusions but merely their independence. However, tenure is often misunderstood, both within and outside the university. It is regularly mistaken within universities as a reward for past accomplishment summarized in lists of courses, grants, and publications. It is not. Tenure is an institutional investment in future promise, made on the strength of the case that a scholar's most important work still lies ahead rather than behind. Off campus, tenure is often mistaken as a private good, a perk that benefits the individual faculty member and no one else. It is not that either.

Tenure is an institutional good. It gives American universities the capacity to compete for the most innovative scholars against industries that can pay far more but cannot offer the opportunity to pursue the rewards of curiosity rather than needs of the market. Tenure is also a fundamental driver of the American university's innovation and education machine. It encourages faculty with long-term security to bring the next generation of scholars into the research process, training the next wave of discovery. Without tenure, incentives to regularly innovate would encourage information hoarding in place of teaching and information sharing.

But like any human practice, tenure is not infallible. Faculty promise, like any investment, can fail to materialize; pathways for research and instruction that once seemed ripe can go stale;

---

[154] Matthew W. Finkin and Robert C. Post, *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

hypotheses that generated heat and attention can often turn out to be unsupported by evidence. But surveyed across the institution's portfolio of faculty, tenure investments do not need to be right every time, just most of the time. Likewise, there is potential danger that tenure could potentially reduce rather than augment scholarly independence should it be a means to reproduce an echo chamber rather than protect scholarly independence. This is the critique at the heart of recent accusations of ideological capture.

While both a narrowing of viewpoints and thinning of productivity are potential hazards of tenure, they call out not for withdrawal of tenure but a recommitment to its institutional purpose: securing the academic freedom that is the source of public trust. Predicating scholarship on political favor or vested interests is not a strategy for enhancing trust, but a path to demolishing it. As universities today face intense pressure to reshape research and teaching to align with political priorities it is vital that the commitment to academic freedom remain unwavering. At the same time, the AAUP was very clear that the integrity and sustainability of tenure as a practice relies on scholars holding one another to account.

Among our stakeholders, we found a number of thoughtful reflections on tenure and academic freedom that pushed beyond the misunderstandings that at times shape calls to either end tenure or make academic freedom absolute. Stakeholders converged, above all, on the understanding that academic freedom exists in order to promote and protect learning through research and teaching protected from proprietary interests. Faculty also acknowledged that tenure is sometimes treated as an entitlement rather than a profound commitment that has to be continually earned. At the same time, faculty across ranks reported deep concern that university administrations had not sufficiently risen to the test of the current moment with a more full-throated defense of academic freedom as classrooms and research are targeted by vested interests who seek to curtail what can be studied, what can be taught, and to whom. Amid a climate of self-censorship and fear, it is more vital than ever that leaders of American universities articulate the national interest in academic freedom and clearly identify the threats and the cost of their ascendancy: that a university without academic freedom is no longer an American university.

Our committee recognizes two complementary paths forward. The first is for institutions of higher education to clearly articulate the obligations that come with tenure explicitly rather than leaving them implicit. Cornell's Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Values and Commitments has already begun this important work. The second path obligates the institution to demonstrate that it will stand behind unpopular scholarship not just when it is easy, but also when it is hard. But this obligation falls not just on central administration but on every tenure-granting unit on campus. Tenure and academic freedom are only as strong as the commitment of faculty to hold fast to the standards of their profession and the values of the institution. How we define, share, and inculcate those commitments is the work of what our committee has come to call academic civics.

7.4. An Introduction to Academic Civics

The achievements of the modern university in research, teaching, public engagement, professional education, and discovery depend upon forms of expertise that no single individual can fully possess. And so connecting these roles and responsibilities into a cohesive institution is a daunting challenge. But universities also ask the same constituents to self-organize: faculty participate in decisions about curriculum and academic standards; staff contribute operational and organizational knowledge to questions of policy and practice; students serve in representative bodies and help shape institutional life; administrators balance competing responsibilities across units whose needs and priorities do not always align; and trustees exercise stewardship on behalf of present and future generations. Universities thrive because they possess expertise and because they create opportunities for different forms of expertise to inform collective judgment that shapes the direction of the whole.

The challenge of institutional regulation is especially significant in higher education because universities attempt something comparatively rare among modern institutions. As this report has clearly demonstrated, they are not organizations assembled to achieve a single objective, but communities whose members are engaged in the pursuit, preservation, transmission, and application of expert knowledge. The achievements of the modern university are inseparable from academic specialization. The relevant question is therefore not whether specialization is desirable, but what forms of institutional understanding, civic responsibility, and shared purpose are needed to connect increasingly specialized communities to a common institutional life.

Throughout its work, the committee repeatedly returned to a question that underlies the capacity of the institution to achieve its purpose: how do members of increasingly large collections of specialized and professionally differentiated units develop the knowledge, relationships, commitments, and habits that allow them to participate meaningfully in the life of the university as a whole?

Cornell already supports a wide range of programs intended to orient, educate, and develop members of the university community. Academic civics seeks to build upon these efforts by identifying the capacities most important to self-governance and institutional solidarity and by asking how existing efforts might be strengthened, connected, and extended across the university.

A building civic crisis

Over the last century, universities have become increasingly specialized, differentiated, and professionally complex institutions. At the same time, many functions once carried out through relatively informal structures have become professional domains in their own right. When admissions evolved into a legally complex, highly competitive, and data-intensive enterprise, universities created admissions professions. As financial aid became central to questions of

access and affordability, institutions developed increasingly specialized expertise to administer it. Student affairs expanded as universities assumed broader responsibilities for student wellbeing and became subject to growing expectations for reporting, accountability, accessibility, and regulatory compliance. Research administration grew alongside sponsored research, federal oversight, technology transfer, and partnerships with government and industry. Communications, information technology, counseling, community engagement, and many other dimensions of university life followed similar trajectories.

These developments enabled universities to educate more students, support more ambitious scholarship, and engage more effectively with the world beyond campus. The committee regards them as strengths. They reflect adaptations to genuine institutional needs and evolving societal expectations. Faculty frequently encounter the university through their disciplines, departments, laboratories, studios, and students. Staff often possess extensive knowledge of institutional operations. Students experience the university through courses, degree programs, residential communities, research groups, and extracurricular activities. Administrators navigate responsibilities that span multiple constituencies and competing priorities. Trustees are charged with thinking about institutions whose obligations extend beyond any single department, office, or generation. Each perspective provides valuable insight. None provides a complete view of the institution.

As a result, members of the campus community have lost the shared civic vocabulary that once, at least as an aspiration, held them together. The forces driving disengagement have accumulated over decades. Regulatory and compliance obligations have made administration an increasingly specialized professional culture, operating under constraints it often cannot fully share with the communities it serves. The expertise required of faculty, staff and administrators alike has made specialists of us all, leaving little bandwidth for fluency beyond our own domains. Faculty are embedded in disciplinary communities that extend around the world even as they may be less fluent in the institutional life immediately around them. Staff contribute indispensably to daily operations while the work they do remains unappreciated by many of those who depend on it. Students typically move through their programs with little meaningful understanding of how their campuses work.

The result is a community of strangers created not by deliberate choice, but by the quiet, cumulative pressure of the modern university. This estrangement cannot be cured by nostalgia for institutional arrangements long past. What this moment demands is not civic restoration but reinvention. Universities can strengthen their capacity to confront difficult questions when they create more intentional opportunities for mutual understanding and informed participation in institutional life. Academic civics and shared governance represent complementary responses to that possibility. Academic civics cultivates membership in a common enterprise, while shared governance establishes the structures and practices through which members of that enterprise deliberate, exercise judgment, and assume responsibility for its future.

Cultivating membership in a common enterprise

Academic civics begins from the recognition that universities are more than loose collections of specialized functions. They are communities sustained by purposes that no individual office, discipline, or constituency can achieve alone. The challenge facing contemporary universities is not simply complexity. Complexity is one of the conditions of their success. The challenge is ensuring that increasing specialization does not weaken the sense of shared responsibility that allows institutions to function as communities rather than merely as organizations. Academic civics therefore seeks to cultivate the habits, relationships, forms of understanding, and commitments that help each constituent of the community to see themselves as both occupants of particular roles and participants in a common enterprise.

Universities are held together by more than organizational structures. They are sustained by commitments that persist even as individual members, disciplines, programs, and priorities change over time. Members of a university inherit traditions, freedoms, responsibilities, and institutional purposes shaped by earlier generations. Academic freedom, open inquiry, scholarly rigor, intellectual pluralism, and the pursuit of knowledge are not merely abstract ideals. They are among the foundations upon which university communities are built. Understanding the history of higher education, the development of particular institutions, and the evolution of university governance provides important context for contemporary debates. More fundamentally, however, such understanding reminds members of the community that they participate in projects larger than themselves and more enduring than any single moment. Academic civics therefore includes opportunities to engage questions of institutional identity, institutional purpose, and the values that bind diverse university communities together. It encourages reflection on what it means to belong to a university and on the responsibilities that accompany that membership.

At the same time, universities depend upon relationships among people whose responsibilities differ substantially. Faculty, staff, students, administrators, and trustees encounter the institution from different vantage points and possess different forms of expertise. Academic civics encourages members of the community to approach these differences not as obstacles but as opportunities for learning. Meaningful participation in institutional life depends upon curiosity about how others experience the university, respect for expertise developed in different contexts, and a willingness to engage disagreement constructively. Greater understanding may reveal genuine differences in priorities, values, or obligations. The objective is not consensus. The objective is more informed disagreement, deeper mutual understanding, and more thoughtful participation in institutional life. At its best, academic civics helps members of the community understand the responsibilities carried by others and the constraints under which those responsibilities are exercised. Such understanding cannot in itself eliminate conflict. However, it can strengthen the relationships upon which self-governance depends.

Academic civics also asks members of the university community to consider what they owe to the institution itself. Universities depend upon participation. Committee work, mentoring, governance service, advising, leadership, trusteeship, and numerous other forms of institutional engagement require individuals to contribute to purposes extending beyond their immediate interests. Academic civics encourages members of the community to view participation not merely as organizational labor, but as stewardship. Whether serving on a curriculum committee, a representative assembly, a search committee, a faculty senate, a staff council, a student assembly, or a governing board, participants help sustain capacities upon which the institution depends. A university's civic life is therefore not confined to formal governance structures. It is expressed through the countless ways members of the community contribute to, care for, and assume responsibility for the institution they collectively inhabit.

Meaningful participation, however, depends upon understanding. Members of the university community are better equipped to contribute to institutional life when they possess familiarity with governance structures, financial realities, administrative responsibilities, legal obligations, and the ways decisions are made. The goal is not that everyone becomes an expert in every dimension of university operations. Universities are too large and complex for that. Rather, the goal is to cultivate sufficient understanding that members of the community can situate their own responsibilities within a broader institutional context and engage institutional questions with broader perspective. Institutional literacy is therefore best understood not as the purpose of academic civics, but as one of its tools. Academic civics ultimately concerns the development of members of a university community who understand what they share, what they owe one another, and what they owe the institution whose future they help shape.

It is worth being clear about what academic civics is not. It is not compliance training, and it is not an occasion for the institution to explain its decisions to a passive audience. It is also not a synonym for shared governance, though the two are closely related and mutually dependent. Shared governance, discussed below, is the mechanics of collaborative decision-making: the committees, the votes, the assemblies, the board. Academic civics is the knowledge and disposition that make those mechanics meaningful rather than hollow. **Shared governance without academic civics produces the kind of performative participation that stakeholders complained about. Academic civics without shared governance produces only well-informed spectators.**

7.5. Shared Governance as Institutional Judgment

Shared governance begins from the recognition that universities are constituted by different areas of responsibility informed by differences in expertise. Faculty carry primary responsibility for curriculum, pedagogy, scholarship, academic standards, and faculty status. Staff contribute organizational and operational expertise across all the university's missions. Students contribute perspectives grounded in the experience of curricular and co-curricular activities. Administrators coordinate institutional operations and strategy. Trustees exercise fiduciary

stewardship on behalf of present and future generations. These different areas of expertise are the reasons why governance must be shared.

Universities routinely confront questions for which no formula provides an obvious answer. Decisions about academic priorities, resource allocation, public engagement, research directions, student experience, and institutional partnerships, voice, and identity rarely present simple choices. More often, they require balancing competing interests and navigating uncertainty, a deliberative process made sharper by the application of sound judgment.

At its best, shared governance creates opportunities for members of the university community to weigh competing considerations, learn from one another's expertise, and reason together about the future of the institution. Deliberation serves universities by informing decisions and helping institutions learn from the distributed knowledge they contain. In this sense, governance is one of the ways universities think.

Boards of trustees

American universities owe much of their extraordinary growth over the past century to the stewardship of their governing boards, and this report does not seek to overhaul a structure that has served the university well. But this moment and our uncertain future requires that we examine every level of university governance and seek opportunities to fully realize our commitment to restoring public trust. The governing boards of America's universities, public and private, carry particular weight in that project, because it is precisely the place where a university most risks being mistaken for a proprietary institution. The question, then, is how best to structure university governing boards to secure campus confidence and public trust.

The legal scholars Daniel Hemel and David Pozen have recently taken up this question directly.[155] They offer an intriguing hypothesis that university governing boards, especially ones that are largely comprised of board-appointed seats, are not structured in a way that maximally fortifies them against external pressure. Self-perpetuating boards cannot point to internal stakeholders who are empowered to remove trustees or overturn key decisions, and so they have no way to stall, or forestall, outside interference that threatens the institution's autonomy or finances. Politically appointed boards face a parallel risk: because they answer to state officials rather than the campus, they may be less inclined to resist pressure that aligns with those officials' own political interests. Hemel and Pozen suggest that a board with substantial direct accountability to internal stakeholders — students, faculty, staff, alumni — could claim an inability to follow through on external pressure due to electoral consequences, potentially strengthening a university's hand in disputes over funding, admissions, and curricula that have defined the last two years. The hypothesis is, in a sense, that the boards of American

[155] Daniel J. Hemel and David Pozen, "In Search of University Democracy," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 175 (2026), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6789598.

universities are too powerful for their own good and for the good of their institutions.

Cornell is an instructive case for assessing Hemel and Pozen's hypothesis, though an imperfect one. Among the eight Ivies, Cornell is the only university whose board includes elected faculty, staff, and student trustees. Describing Cornell's governing board, Edwin Slosson noted in 1910 that "Fifteen trustees, elected by the board, ten by the alumni, the librarian of the Ithaca Public Library, the president of the university, and the eldest male descendant of Ezra Cornell make up this curiously composite body, apparently an attempt to get the advantages of all known forms of governmental succession, having hereditary, democratic, scholastic, plutocratic, oligarchic, corporational, appointive, and elective members."[156] Today, of Cornell's sixty-four trustees, five are directly elected by campus constituencies (two faculty, two students, one staff member) and eight are elected by alumni. Thirty-seven seats are at-large or board-appointed.[157] That structure is a genuine institutional asset, and one universities might consider emulating, but it is an incomplete one.

Our committee has three recommendations. First, boards should undertake a full evaluation of how to best balance constituent representation with board-appointed seats. Second, at Cornell we see three potential constituent additions worth serious consideration: seats for young alumni, following the precedent Brown and Princeton have already set, to bring the most immediate understanding of student life into the boardroom; a standing seat for a representative from Ithaca, a community whose formal absence from the board is a real gap;[158] and seats for respected senior faculty from peer institutions across a diversity of disciplines, to bring informed outside perspective without diluting Cornell's own constituent voice. And

---

[156] Edwin E. Slosson, *Great American Universities* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1910), 316.

[157] Four seats on the Cornell board are held ex-officio by the President of the University, the Governor of New York, the New York State Senate Majority Leader, and the Speaker of the New York State Assembly. Three are appointed by the Governor of New York to three-year appointments. One seat is held by the eldest lineal descendant of Ezra Cornell. Among the at-large seats, six are appointed to serve as representatives of three New York industries: agriculture, business, and labor.

[158] There is precedent on the Cornell board for a seat dedicated to the Ithaca community. At its founding, Cornell reserved a seat on the board for the Cornell Public Library librarian (now the Tompkins County Public Library librarian). This seat remained part of the board until 1971, but was replaced with four board seats often referred to as the "outside" or "community" trustees. These seats were elected by the University Senate (then a multi-constituency campus governing body) and could be occupied by anyone "outside the university community." The inaugural recipient was a leader in the local Black community, but none of the subsequent trustees to occupy the seat represented the Ithaca community. Nearly all were Cornell alumni who had become notable academics elsewhere (e.g., president of Clark University, dean of undergraduate studies at Stanford, dean of law at Hofstra). The seats were eliminated when the board decreased in size in the 1980s. The current deputies appointed by the New York State Senate Majority Leader and the New York State Assembly Speaker happen to be the representatives from the districts that include Ithaca (NY Senate District 52 and New York Assembly District 125). This effort to provide local voices would seem to affirm the salience of the larger structural recommendation forwarded here. But there is no requirement that the Assembly or Senate Speakers appoint deputies from the region.

third, the board should reconsider the constraints placed on what constituent trustees may share with the communities that elected them. Providing seats for elected representatives but then strictly limiting their ability to report back to the electorate undermines the democratic value of those seats.

Collaborative governance

Collaborative governance at Cornell and other American universities joins the governing board to a set of elected assemblies, including the Faculty Senate, the Employee Assembly, and assemblies representing student constituencies. These deliberative bodies have come under considerable pressure[159] in some parts of the U.S. over the last year as external interests seek to reengineer university power structures to make them more open to either intimidation or accountability, depending on one's perspective (this is precisely the centralization of authority that Hemel and Pozen seek to counter in their approach to governing boards). At the same time, these bodies are confronting skepticism at home as many campus stakeholders come to see the assemblies as ineffective[160] and participation as a waste of time. But deliberative bodies are fundamental to the American university, promoting constituent solidarity, enhancing the quality of decisions on campus, and protecting academic freedom. Like any deliberative body, university assemblies will be places of debate, contestation, and argument. They should be. This is how judgment is sharpened and learning happens. But their processes can and should be improved.

Our committee's stakeholders were specific about where assembly processes currently fall short. Resolutions too often reach a vote without deliberative care or full information. Voting has become less transparent as online systems can make it harder for constituents to track how their representatives voted. And representation has thinned as ties between representative and constituent are not tended in academic units pressed by more immediate governance issues. All three of these issues can be remedied in ways that reinvigorate collaborative governance.

The first remedy is procedural. Assemblies typically field a range of committees attuned to specific issues from academic freedom to university finances. These are the bodies with the access to information and the attention to details of language that should vet resolutions thoroughly before they come to the full body. At the same time, deliberative bodies should develop procedures that allow votes to be more transparent and for information to flow back to the constituent units. A department that sends a representative to the faculty senate and then never discusses issues, advises on voting, or considers results is not participating in shared governance, it is merely delegating its authority.

---

[159] Jeffrey Sachs and Jonathan Friedman, "Shared Governance Is Crumbling," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 20, 2025, https://www.chronicle.com/article/shared-governance-is-crumbling.

[160] J. Clara Chan, "A Common Plea of Professors: Why Can't My Faculty Senate Pull More Weight?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 6, 2017, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-common-plea-of-professors-why-cant-my-faculty-senate-pull-more-weight/.

A second set of remedies speaks to the quality of deliberation itself. Our committee regards sound judgment — the capacity to weigh competing considerations and act under uncertainty without collapsing to formula — as a discipline that healthy governance bodies cultivate. Structured deliberation, in which participants state their reasoning before advocating a position; two-meeting rules that let representatives consult constituents between a proposal's introduction and its vote; and an empowered chair equipped to prevent any single voice from dominating debate are modest procedural investments with an outsized effect on what a governance body actually produces.

Clarity about jurisdiction is as important to the health of collaborative assemblies as the procedures that govern deliberation. The AAUP's 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities[161] sets out clear areas of primary responsibility for governing boards, administrations, and faculty even as it also recognizes the collective joint effort involved in stewarding institutions. Shared governance, properly understood, does not mean every decision belongs to everyone. It means each body's authority is matched to its competence. Once jurisdiction is established, though, the areas of expert judgment it protects deserve real deference in practice. The same statement suggests that a body with final authority over a matter should overrule the judgment of the body with primary responsibility for it only in exceptional circumstances and for reasons communicated back. The obligation runs in both directions: expert judgment, once its jurisdiction is settled, must be engaged in good faith and answered, not simply overridden, ignored, or treated as advisory in name only.

Representative assemblies should not be mistaken for the full extent of collaborative governance. At Cornell, several colleges hold regular all-faculty meetings for open deliberation. But in the largest colleges, these occur rarely if at all. They should be restored as an annual, genuinely bidirectional practice, an occasion for administration to hear from the full faculty, not simply address them. Shared governance is ultimately the responsibility of the collective. Assemblies provide the opportunity for regular consideration and bidirectional information flow across a complex organization. But governance need not be exerted only through assemblies when consequential issues call for the wisdom of the full collective.

7.6. Cultivating Academic Civics

A healthy self-governing community depends upon broad participation in institutional life. Faculty, staff, students, administrators, and trustees each encounter dimensions of the university that others may not see, and bringing these perspectives into conversation strengthens collective understanding and improves institutional judgment. Meaningful participation depends upon access to information and opportunities for explanation, discussion,

---

[161] *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* (American Association of University Professors, 1966), https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/topical-reports/statement-government-colleges-and.

and feedback, enabling members of the community to engage institutional questions with greater understanding.

Universities must also create space for disagreement. Disagreement is not a failure of institutional life, nor should it always be understood as an obstacle to collective action. Universities exist because important questions deserve sustained examination, and communities govern themselves best when competing viewpoints can be expressed, challenged, and refined through deliberation. Shared governance likewise depends upon reciprocity and recognition of the different responsibilities and constraints carried by various members of the university community. Trust grows when disagreement is met with explanation, engagement, and continued conversation. Ultimately, participation in institutional life is not merely a matter of representation or consultation. It is a form of stewardship directed toward the long-term health of an institution that each generation inherits and, in turn, passes on to those who follow.

It is clear that the first challenge of academic civics lies in building bridges across the silos that specialization has created. The professionalization of university administration and enhanced student support is a genuine institutional asset, not a loss to mourn. The task is not to reverse it but to build the civic knowledge that lets the rest of the community engage with it as informed partners rather than as suspicious outsiders. The same is true in the other direction: administrators, staff, and trustees benefit from a working understanding of how faculty governance, teaching, and research actually function. This bridging work produces something beyond information transfer. It produces shared understanding, empathy, and a genuine appreciation for the constraints and contributions of colleagues in other roles. This recognition is what allows communities of specialists to understand their shared stake in the institution's future.

The second challenge of academic civics is to strengthen institutional understanding across the university community. Cornell already invests substantial effort in this work through faculty orientation programs, graduate student professional development initiatives, employee leadership programs, and numerous college-level efforts designed to introduce members of the community to institutional life. Academic civics does not begin from the assumption that such efforts are absent. Rather, it seeks to identify the forms of knowledge, engagement, and participation most important to cultivating a healthy, self-governing community and to ask how existing efforts might be strengthened, connected, and extended. No member of a contemporary university can fully apprehend the institution in its entirety.

Many faculty still receive little introduction to the history of their governance structures or the financial architecture of the institution they are asked to govern. Staff are too often excluded from institutional conversations deemed to fall outside of their formal responsibilities despite possessing essential institutional knowledge. Students frequently move through degree programs with little opportunity to learn how the broader institution functions. Administrators

may possess broad knowledge of institutional operations while having fewer opportunities to engage directly with the full range of teaching, research, extension, and public engagement activities taking place across the university. The challenge is therefore not simply to add more training, but to create opportunities for members of the university community to develop a richer understanding of the institution they collectively sustain. This suggests the need for a more intentional and continuous approach to academic civics, one that begins in graduate education, extends through faculty and staff onboarding, is reinforced through leadership development and governance participation, and remains an ongoing feature of institutional life. The same institutional understanding that helps faculty appreciate the constraints under which administrators operate can help administrators better understand the realities of teaching and scholarship, help staff connect their work to the broader academic mission, and help students to see themselves as participants in a larger community rather than merely recipients of its services.

Lastly, in order to sustain the commitment of the community to one another, we must redefine the collaborative labor that is typically described as service. Service describes work reluctantly undertaken to assist someone else. Civics, in contrast, is a shared responsibility undertaken to advance a collective. Whether serving on a departmental committee or a term as faculty-elected trustee, it is all civic participation, not service, and should be named and valued as such. Civics should be a core consideration in tenure and promotion. Contracts that have previously stipulated time allocations to service should, moving forward, articulate instead an expectation of civic participation. Ultimately, how we value the labor of civic participation, alongside teaching and research, depends significantly on how the endeavor is framed vis a vis the institution.

7.7. Securing the Future

The central lesson of our committee's inquiries is that universities can no longer afford to defer self-examination until a moment of crisis. The pressures on university operations are too great, the stakes of failure too high, and the real opportunities for innovation too exciting to fall back into the studied isolation of the ivory tower. Throughout this report, the committee has mapped the pressures confronting higher education, examined their impact on the university's core missions, and identified cross-cutting challenges and opportunities that require institution-wide responses. But the real challenge lies in transforming this vision into grassroots culture change that strengthens the American university in general and Cornell in particular.

This report calls for a different kind of university — one that treats continuous self-examination as a core institutional function rather than an occasional response to crisis. As has been pointed out at several of our town halls, that kind of change requires a shift in the culture of the institution itself, in the habits and expectations of the people who constitute it. Culture change of this kind cannot be demanded. It has to be grown from within using the tools and practices fundamental to the university's missions: sustained engagement, genuine inquiry, and the

accumulation of shared understanding across the university community.

We recommend the formation of an institutional home that can carry our committee's questions forward, convert recommendations into sustained inquiry, and extend the energy of this work to the wider university community. The proposed Future of the American University Forum (FAU Forum, described in Appendix H) would also provide a home for the many critical issues that the committee identified but did not have the time or bandwidth to address.

The institutions best positioned to make a convincing case for their public value are those that demonstrate they take their public responsibilities seriously enough to examine them openly. An academic unit that produces visible, rigorous, publicly accessible work on the future of higher education turns this committee's pilot study into an enduring contribution to American higher education. It offers a model for other universities and institutions about meeting this moment with intellectual seriousness rather than defensiveness.

The FAU 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 kind of speculative futuring and experimentation envisioned in our reports. The FAU Forum would be an engine for academic civics, enabling a flow of ideas and rigorous inquiry into the possibilities of institutional life between faculty and staff and the administration. In modeling academic civics as a means for working with and within the institution, the FAU Forum would provide a training ground for the skills of self-governance more broadly, enabling Cornell to not simply teach civics, but to be governed in ways that build our collective civic capacities.

A fuller sketch of the FAU Forum and its thematic areas is included as Appendix H. But its most immediate undertaking should be pedagogical, developing the programming that can help advance institutional literacy. The simplest effort in this regard would be to develop a course for graduate students on the American university — its past, its present operation, and the challenges it faces in meeting the future. American universities every year graduate the next generation of faculty. And yet rarely if ever do we teach them about the university as the institutional workplace that they will inhabit. This is one of the most peculiar blind spots in university curricula that our committee uncovered. We proudly train graduate and professional students, as well as postdoctoral researchers, many of whom aspire to join and lead America's institutions of higher education. And yet we give them almost no formal instruction in how these enormously complex institutions operate and why. This is such an obvious oversight in graduate and professional training that our committee has already joined an initiative to develop a course syllabus, convened by the American Enterprise Institute with colleagues from Harvard, Johns Hopkins, University of Florida, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Vanderbilt, and Yale. It is very easy to envision development of a program in academic civics

that would offer aspiring faculty a credential certifying their advanced understanding of higher education's history and operations.

While programs for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers in academic civics would prepare them to inhabit the wide landscape of American higher education, from research universities and liberal arts colleges to community colleges, tribal colleges, and historically Black colleges and universities, efforts to make the university more visible to Cornell's community would necessarily focus more on precisely how this university operates. Programs for faculty, department chairs, deans, and staff would all be tailored to making the institution and its operations more visible and, most importantly, developing in participants an abiding commitment to shaping its future.

7.8. The Challenge of University Structures

If the American university's main purpose is integrated learning — as this report has argued throughout — that has implications for how the university organizes itself, not merely for what it teaches or researches. Much of the disciplinary department system in place at Cornell and most American research universities took its current shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organized around the boundaries of academic disciplines as they stood at that moment. Whatever the merits of that arrangement, it was not designed with the challenges of the twenty-first century in mind: the demands of interdisciplinary inquiry, the scale of the contemporary research enterprise, or the kind of cross-cutting collaboration this report's argument for academic civics and judgment presupposes.

To test this claim, our committee ran a brief internal thought experiment: given several different, plausible definitions of the university's core purpose, what organizational structure would each imply? Beginning from the premise that the university exists to preserve disciplinary traditions of knowledge yields one kind of structure, close to the department system already in place at most American universities. Beginning instead from the premise that the university exists to address open-ended, evolving problems — climate, health, inequality, technology — yields a different organizational logic, one that separates the stewardship of a method from the pursuit of an intellectual mission. And beginning from the premise that the university exists above all to cultivate judgment suggests yet a third structure, organized not around disciplines or problems but around the specific capacities that judgment requires. The point of the exercise was to demonstrate that organizational structure is not intellectually neutral.

Our committee takes no position on how academic units at Cornell or elsewhere should be organized. But the committee does believe departmental and college structures are worth sustained, serious examination on their own terms, asking not simply whether a given unit is administratively convenient, but whether the university's overall map of departments, programs, and colleges still serves learning as well as it once did, or whether it now persists

mostly out of habit.

Where academic civics centers on the dispositions of those who inhabit the university, and governance defines their obligations to one another, university structures determine the alignment of organizational units with the overall operation of the institution. Structural fragmentation of the "multiversity," as noted in the introduction to this report, has allowed university activities to drift from one another. This is the same dynamic that academic civics diagnoses in university relationships, but here it plays out at the level of academic and administrative units. While fragmentation and decentralization can encourage a culture of entrepreneurialism, it also leads to a breakdown in the coherence of the learning ecosystem. The stakes in realigning university structures with one another are not merely organizational. Structure shapes how readily knowledge and best practices move across the university, how nimbly it can respond to external pressure, and how much traction any effort to reimagine the institution for the coming decades can actually gain. The challenge is to bring university structures back into alignment without destroying the autonomy that makes them nimble and responsive. The answer is greater coordination, made possible by leadership that provides a clear sense of purpose.

American higher education is decentralized at every level. As an industry, it lacks the kind of coordinating national authority found in most other countries: nearly 4,000 degree-granting institutions compete, cooperate, and evolve with little shared direction, governed by a patchwork of state regulations, variable accreditation requirements, and institutional commitments to self-governance rather than any unified system. This has generally been a significant asset to scholarship and teaching. But the current wave of disruption has led the American Association of Colleges and Universities to recently call for greater collaboration "within and across institutions to defend the mission of higher education against government overreach."[162] Individual colleges cannot successfully defend academic freedom or combat public cynicism in isolation.

That same commitment to decentralization also shapes the internal organization of American universities. Universities have a tendency to encourage the proliferation of institutes, initiatives, and programs designed to make use of specialized expertise to advance innovation, scientific inquiry, and to solve societal problems. Cornell's defining structural feature has long been its decentralization: decision-making authority generally resides within colleges and units rather than at the center. This has been a genuine engine of innovation, entrepreneurship, and responsiveness to local conditions, and it accounts for much of what is distinctive in Cornell's scholarship and teaching. But the same decentralization that enables this responsiveness has also produced the silos this report has described, limiting coordination and cross-university

[162] Jeremy C. Young et al., *The Trust Agenda: A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2026).

learning.

The instinctive remedy — centralization — trades one problem for another, buying coherence at the price of the local autonomy that makes Cornell's units nimble and distinctive in the first place. The answer instead is coordination: horizontal bridges and mechanisms for information sharing, cross-unit learning, and partnership that leave local decision-making and autonomy intact. Centralization achieves alignment through direct control: a central office decides, and units comply. Coordination achieves alignment through subtler means: shared awareness of what other units are doing, transparent information about resources and priorities, and incentives and persuasion that make alignment attractive rather than mandatory. This makes coordination a much harder task for university leadership than centralization. It cannot be imposed by fiat, and it depends on the willing participation of units that retain the power to decline. But what it demands of leadership in difficulty, it returns in durability. Coordination that units choose to join can sustain itself in a way that coordination imposed on them rarely does.

7.9. Recommendations

To cultivate academic civics and strengthen shared governance, the committee makes the following recommendations.

Faculty tracks and tenure

Raise or remove the five-year cap on research, teaching, and extension (RTE) faculty contracts, and/or move to rolling renewal after a successful review; add explicit academic-freedom language to RTE faculty contracts.

Elevate RTE faculty visibility and strengthen collaboration channels with tenure-track faculty.

Articulate explicitly the obligations that accompany tenure, building on the work already begun by Cornell's Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Values and Commitments.

Boards of trustees

Undertake a full evaluation of the balance between constituent and board-appointed trustee seats.

Add trustee seats for young alumni, the Ithaca community, and outside senior faculty from peer institutions.

Loosen constraints on what constituent trustees may report back to their constituencies.

Collaborative governance

Strengthen committee vetting of resolutions before a full vote, and improve the transparency of

voting and reporting back to constituent units.

Restore annual, bidirectional all-faculty meetings, especially in the largest colleges.

Academic civics

Redefine service as civic participation in expectations, contracts, and evaluation, and make it a core consideration in tenure and promotion.

Build a sustained, continuous academic civics curriculum spanning graduate education through ongoing institutional life.

Establish the Future American University Forum to carry this work forward permanently, beginning with a graduate course on the American university and a credentialing program in academic civics.

University structures

Develop processes for enhanced coordination across positions facing related challenges. An example is the provost's existing Deans' Council, where all of the deans convene weekly to discuss strategic and operational issues, including learning activities like the "Art of Deaning." Gatherings and activities such as these could be a model that could be extended to chairs, program directors, or other academic groups. At the same time, it is critical that in enhancing coordination in one area we do not create a new silo. A gathering of humanities chairs (as exists currently in Arts and Sciences) could be broadened to cut across the entire university. A gathering of social science department chairs that embraced units in business and law schools as well as colleagues in other colleges could create greater awareness of shared issues and restore a sense of the collective.

Enhance the University Assembly's role in shared governance. The jurisdictions of the Faculty Senate, Employee Assembly, Student Assembly, and Graduate and Professional Student Assembly are all clear and bounded. Only the University Assembly has the institutional ability to stitch those different constituencies together, allowing it to serve as a valuable forum for strengthening alignment between the administration and the broader university community, creating opportunities to communicate priorities, gather university-wide feedback, build shared understanding about institutional goals, and foster institutional solidarity and purpose across faculty, staff, and students. The effectiveness of the University Assembly could be enhanced with more regular engagement with university leadership. To that end, the president and provost might consider designating representatives to attend its meetings on a regular basis as well as periodic engagement with the Deans' Council on issues of broad institutional significance. Such structures create more opportunities for dialogue, transparency, and engagement around institutional priorities and initiatives.

7.10. Conclusion

Universities face a future that will undoubtedly bring new challenges, new opportunities, and new demands. Meeting those challenges will require more than expertise alone. It will require institutions capable of learning from the diverse forms of knowledge they contain, communities capable of sustaining meaningful participation across differences of role and perspective, and members who understand their responsibilities in the context of the larger enterprise of which that they are a part.

The importance of these capacities often becomes most visible during moments of institutional strain. Universities confronting political pressure, financial uncertainty, public controversy, labor disputes, or rapid organizational change rely heavily upon relationships, trust, and shared understanding developed long before such challenges emerged. Institutions do not create these capacities in the midst of a crisis. They draw upon capacities already cultivated.

Academic civics cultivates the habits, relationships, forms of understanding, and commitments that sustain membership in a common enterprise. Shared governance provides opportunities to exercise those capacities in practice. Together, they strengthen the university's ability to function as a healthy self-governing community and build the institutional resilience necessary to navigate an uncertain future.

8. Deliberation

8.1. Contentious Questions

In October of 1868, Ezra Cornell inaugurated the new university that would bear his name, declaring it "an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." The seriousness of his pledge was tested immediately. In June 1871, Cornell's trustees charged a "Committee of Five" — arguably the earliest ancestor of Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University — with deciding the question of coeducation. Two of its members, Andrew Dickson White, Cornell University's first president, and Henry W. Sage, a trustee and benefactor, set out from Ithaca that winter to visit five campuses already admitting women alongside men: Oberlin, Antioch, Michigan, Northwestern, and what is today the University of Illinois. Both men had championed the inclusion of women at Cornell since before the university opened its doors, but it remained a question that bitterly divided the faculty, students, and trustees.

What they produced, on their return, was not a manifesto but a report not unlike this one, albeit much shorter. White did not pretend that the decision to admit women to Cornell would be uncontroversial. He predicted, correctly, that the university would face "a more bitter storm of misrepresentation, sneers, and old-world arguments" than almost any university had encountered.[163] He recommended proceeding anyway. In 1872, Cornell's senior class voted on coeducation: fifteen in favor, thirty-seven opposed. White's decision did not end disagreement, but Sage endowed the women's residence hall that would carry his family's name, and Sage Hall's cornerstone was laid in 1873.

The year after Sage Hall's cornerstone was laid, Ezra Cornell's commitment was tested again. In September 1874, White responded to an inquiry about whether Cornell would admit Black students by writing that the university would be "very glad to receive any who are prepared to enter,… even if all our five hundred white students were to ask for dismissal on that account." That same year, White testified before the New York State Senate about Henry Sage's endowment of Sage Chapel, noting that in accordance with Cornell's charter, preachers at Sage Chapel could be from any religious denomination, Jewish as well as Christian. White defended the university's non-sectarian character, arguing, "We have several Jewish students in our institution, and among them some of our very best students, and I would never sanction anything which would infringe on their privileges, deprive them of their rights, or tend to degrade them in any manner."[164]

---

[163] Andrew D. White, *Report Submitted to the Trustees of Cornell University, in Behalf of a Majority of the Committee on Mr. Sage's Proposal to Endow a College for Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1872), 33.
[164] *Documents of the Senate of the State of New York: Ninety-Seventh Session—1874*, vol. 6 (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1874), 248.

White's defense of Ezra Cornell's founding commitment recalls us to our obligations in the present moment, even as our committee was asked to focus on the future. So it should be stated without caveat that Cornell University must never waver from its commitment to be an institution where any person can find instruction in any study. The defense of this original institutional principle is at once a defense of a diverse intellectual community, of academic freedom, and of institutional autonomy. These are not three separate goods but the indispensable planks of an American university. However, it is clear that the work of providing a good welcome to all who were, and are, prepared to enter the university was, and still is, unfinished.

Throughout this report, we have described the rise of the multiversity chiefly as a story of fragmentation: an institution whose expanding functions pulled its members toward increasingly specialized, increasingly separate ends, weakening the shared purpose that once held the university together. That diagnosis is accurate, but it is not the whole story. It was also the multiversity that broke open what had long been a closed shop. The earliest American colleges were not built for everyone. The multiversity's restless expansion of who a university serves and what it studies is what made room, eventually, for every community that had been systematically excluded from the university's earlier incarnation. And yet, a sense of being unwelcome remains even as there is widespread and passionate disagreement about who and what is missing and why. We take up that disagreement here because it turned out to be one of the most contentious questions before the committee.

8.2. The Conditions of Deliberation

If the purpose of the university is learning, then no practice is more indispensable than deliberation. Deliberation is both social and solitary. It is fostered through rigorous scholarship, deep engagement with different perspectives, careful discovery, consideration of evidence, questioning of assumptions, open dialogue, and intellectual humility. But deliberation does not arise automatically from putting people who disagree in the same room. It depends on conditions a university must deliberately cultivate.

This report, composed of over two hundred pages touching on nearly every aspect of an impossibly complex institution, is the work of eighteen faculty who came to the table from different disciplines, different instincts, and, on some questions, different convictions about the university's future. Across hundreds of campus conversations, town halls, and written submissions, and across an intense public debate over higher education that has been playing out over the last year in the press, in the chambers of the federal government, in courts, in state legislatures, and in the living rooms of alumni, aspiring applicants, and the wider public, we heard a community, and a country, in profound disagreement about the condition of deliberation on American campuses. We mean "condition" here in both senses of that word.

We encountered real disagreement about deliberation's condition: whether the university's

capacity to reason across real difference is fundamentally sound or badly compromised and in need of urgent repair. At the same time, we also heard strong disagreement about the conditions that universities cultivate to make deliberation possible. Deliberation, as this report uses the term, rests on (at least) three fundamental conditions. The first is presence: a genuine openness to "any person" that creates a community with real differences. The second is sustained engagement: once genuine difference is present, participants have to be willing to stay in the conversation, rather than avoiding the encounter or excommunicating the other party. The third is a deliberative disposition: the independence of mind to reach one's own conclusions through rigorous thought and study, the courage to speak those conclusions with conviction, the humility to learn from others, the empathy to engage respectfully, and the openness to change one's mind when reason demands it. There was considerable debate about which of these vital conditions for deliberation were most valuable and most strained.

On presence

The multiversity's unfinished promise to the communities it once excluded remains a pressing concern for many stakeholders today. There was deep concern that essential efforts to broaden the diversity of the university community are being rolled back amid an unprecedented political assault. At the same time, other stakeholders raised concern that universities had become hostile to some prominent intellectual streams and in so doing had turned into echo chambers of agreement rather than sites of disputation and debate. Despite the ideological polarization that partially, if incompletely, maps onto current debates over both DEI and viewpoint diversity, it is heartening that both are, at root, arguments for inclusivity. And as such there is ample scope for universities to respond "yes, and" in order to open space not only for currently marginalized voices to enter the campus space, but for those that will emerge in the future to also receive a good welcome. This is a call for universities to study their campuses to understand who is missing now and who is at risk of exclusion in the future.

On engagement

According to our stakeholders, the most threatened of the conditions supporting deliberation is engagement: the willingness to not simply sit with difference but to learn from it. Every stakeholder group that we spoke with reported that fear, not disagreement, is what most often stifles the kinds of encounters universities were built to host. Self-censorship on campus is real, stakeholders told us, and it is not confined to any one political position; wherever self-censorship takes hold, it corrodes the academic freedom vital to reasoning together. A smaller but pointed set of accounts described a starker version of the same fear arriving from outside the university's own walls: some international students described a climate of surveillance from their home governments, a form of transnational intimidation that is exceedingly challenging to address, but a genuinely global university must take steps to secure academic freedom for all. Today, transnational concerns are joined by a pressing domestic anxiety that funding pressure and political interference from Washington, D.C., are undermining institutional autonomy. The result is a future that appears disparate and divided rather than unified and purpose-driven.

The university cannot eradicate the fear that is driving students, faculty, and staff to disengage. But it can clearly articulate the pressing need for courage, curiosity, and compassion, not only for the future of the institution but of the nation as well.

On disposition

Disposition determines whether the university community comes to deliberation prepared with the courage, curiosity, and compassion they need. Stakeholders reported several forces working against them, though not always in the same way. The same fear that drives self-censorship corrodes the disposition to deliberate from within, especially under conditions of political polarization: it is difficult to remain curious about a view understood as a threat, courage fails when speaking feels more like contestation than conversation, and compassion is lost when disagreement turns to deplatforming. At the same time, increased siloing across the university reduces the opportunities for the chance encounters that allow individuals to be seen as fully human, warts and all, and not just as avatars of a position. Onto this brittle landscape, a new, fast-moving pressure has arrived: artificial intelligence. There was broad agreement amongst faculty and staff that students' capacity for sustained attention was already fraying under the pressure of digital devices and social media before AI arrived. Now, AI offers an even faster way to skip the effortful work that independence of mind requires: the patient struggle of assembling an argument, the critical eye required to hone it, and the humility demanded by the possibility of being wrong. Here, stakeholders were divided less over the diagnosis than the remedy. Some argued that the only way to protect the dispositions of deliberation is to restrict AI's use, at least in the settings where the struggle itself is the point; others argued that AI cannot realistically be kept at bay, and so the university's task is instead to insist that judgment remain a human responsibility no matter which tools assist it. What unites both camps is a shared premise: the disposition to deliberate is not innate. It is built through repeated, careful practice, and any technology that makes the path too easy deserves the university's close scrutiny.

None of these conditions of deliberation make independent judgment optional, or deliberation a substitute for arriving at one's own conclusions. A university that taught people only to reason together, without also cultivating their capacity to reach conclusions of their own, would produce a community skilled at conversation but incapable of judgment. The purpose of deliberation is to sharpen judgment, not replace it. If the university is where American democratic society practices the discipline of reasoning together, then deliberation is fundamental to the realization of the university's purpose. It is the mechanism by which learning becomes sound judgment, and judgment becomes the capacity for self-government that the nation depends on.

8.3. A Community — and a Committee — That Do Not Always Agree

There is real diversity of opinion, both within this committee and among the thousands of stakeholders who spoke with us, about where the gravest threat to the American university's

capacity for deliberation now originates: whether it lies in the use of AI to substitute for deliberation, government repression, political polarization, the systematic exclusion of marginalized groups, ideological narrowing, risk-averse university administration, scholarly activism, the repression of scholarly activism, doxxing, misinformation and disinformation, nationalism, cancel culture, threats from malignant state actors, orchestrated political campaigns, conservative viewpoints, or progressive viewpoints. The list itself is as contentious as the argument it describes. While the list is inclusive, it is not a set of equivalents. Some of the forces making demands on the university do so from positions of profound moral clarity; others from positions of epistemological concern; others from ethical claims that need to be answered. That these are not equivalent does not make any of them less pressing for either the university or for their claimants.

None of these disagreements stopped at the committee's door. Our own deliberations took place in the context of the same pressures of the present, even as our charge pressed us to envision the future. The members of the committee are drawn from the same community we interviewed, and the divisions that surfaced in our stakeholder conversations also appeared, in scaled-down form, around our own table. The committee found consensus in many places, reflected in the myriad recommendations that accompany this report. But no question, before the committee or before the thousands of people who spoke with us, was more contentious than how to secure the future of deliberation at the American university. Amid accusations of faculty monoculture on college campuses, the committee surfaced a debate around conditions on our campus that had not one position, nor even two, but in effect eighteen nuanced, thoughtful, distinct diagnoses and a broad set of potential recommendations that pulled against one another (see chapter nine). But across more than a year of discussion, our disagreements did not curdle into outrage. They produced, instead, sharper and more thoughtful analysis than any of us would have reached alone. The numerous recommendations in this report are the product of exactly the kind of deliberation described here: persistent, occasionally uncomfortable, and, in the end, decisive rather than paralyzed. Our inability to come to full agreement on a few issues, even as we advance a raft of consensus recommendations, is a better case for the value of deliberation than anything we could have asserted in the abstract. This report is itself an artifact of a deliberative process.

The committee's charge did not require us to adjudicate which forces shaping universities today constituted the most serious threat to deliberation. We were not asked, for example, to evaluate the relative merit of competing claims on greater inclusion, but rather to consider a future where the university of tomorrow was more broadly welcoming than the university of today. Our charge was, in other words, to imagine a road to the future, not to settle present disputes. That means reaffirming the conditions that make deliberation possible in the first place, and resisting — in ourselves, as much as we ask of the university — the temptation to belittle, dismiss, or stoke outrage at whichever version of the other side one finds least sympathetic. Arguably, the most formidable roadblock to this inclusive future is not the deterioration of any

one of the conditions of deliberation but a potent force that cuts across all three: the modern outrage machine. Deliberation is, in nearly every respect, the opposite of outrage. It is slow where outrage is instant. It is curious where outrage is defensive. It remains optimistic about the possibility of a good outcome even when disagreement is sharpest. The outrage machine, in contrast, assumes the worst from the start. Incentivized by contemporary media forms that favor reaction over understanding, outrage proliferates suspicion and conspiracy where deliberation is generous, preserving the assumption that the other is worth persuading, and worth being persuaded by, rather than simply worth defeating. Resistance to the outrage machine in no way forecloses judgment. There are regrettably many things in the world today that warrant outrage. But if outrage forms at the start, and forms everywhere, then it has no meaning when it is pointed at the truly deplorable. Disrupting the outrage machine does not invalidate our sense of outrage; it only asks that judgment be the product of deliberation rather than assuming a verdict at the outset.

8.4. Renewing the Commitment

This report's vision for the future of the American university rests on five commitments, the first of which is a commitment to deliberation: to cultivate sound judgment while building resilience against the pressures now bearing down on it. Fulfilling that commitment does not require that Cornell invent a new culture of engagement from nothing. The university already has real infrastructure in its Center for Dialogue and Pluralism, and there are other initiatives emerging, such as the course on Disagreement in the College of Arts and Sciences that brings students face to face with rigorous, civil argument between people who see the world differently. Both the Center for Racial Justice and Equitable Futures and the new Cornell Center on Democracy have critical roles to play in reinvigorating the deliberative conditions this chapter describes.

The task ahead is less to build something new than to make what already exists central rather than peripheral. This will require that the university community collectively treat the capacity for open, generous disagreement not as a temporary program but as a fundamental condition for the work it undertakes, as vital as the funding of a laboratory or the staffing of a classroom. At root, this commitment demands that the institutions of higher learning rededicate themselves to the protection of academic freedom, not just for the arguments we find congenial but most importantly for the ones we do not. It means hiring, admissions, and programming decisions that keep genuine difference present in the community, in whatever form its absence is most acute. It means treating AI the way that Cornell has learned to treat prior technology that arrived faster than the university's habits of judgment could absorb: with curiosity rather than either panic or uncritical adoption, and with a clear-eyed insistence that the tool serve human judgment rather than replace it. And it means measuring success not by the absence of disagreement, but by the presence of disagreement that refuses to harden into outrage.

To put these commitments into practice, we recommend the following:

Convene a full community conversation on how to bolster the conditions for deliberation at Cornell, potentially through the proposed Future of the American University Forum (described in Appendix H). The pressures of the present, and the implications for the future, are simply too great to be left to a small committee with a twelve-month mandate. The FAU Forum should be the place for productive disagreement and debate over the fundamental issues in American higher education, from an examination of who is currently being excluded from campus to the more abstract question of how the university cultivates deliberative dispositions. This conversation should draw on the existing expertise within the university, and it should continue the conversations this committee has already begun with think tanks across the political spectrum in Washington D.C., so that Cornell's effort to renew its own deliberative culture stays in dialogue with a debate that extends well beyond Ithaca. What the forum should not do is avoid controversy.

Integrate an ethical, human-centered approach to AI with a concentrated effort to enhance deliberation. AI is already reshaping how members of the community reason, judge, and decide what to believe. Cornell's AI strategy, therefore, cannot be written apart from the effort to bolster its deliberative culture. The two are now tightly entwined. Integrating deliberation into the university's AI strategy means not only grounding the university's response to AI in balanced, evidence-based assessments of the technology's opportunities, harms, and limits (a project already well-underway under the aegis of the Cornell AI Initiative), but also developing the strategies needed to counter AI's pathological effects on deliberative disposition and leverage its capabilities to improve them. AI is only the most visible case of a broader pattern: the slower, quieter adoption of other digital technologies has reshaped how this community works and learns together in ways AI's disruption now makes easier to see. For example, the same scrutiny should extend to the university's growing reliance on mediated communication (Zoom meetings, automated trainings, online forms) as the default interface between members of its workforce. The resulting loss of personal interaction has become an unexamined default rather than a deliberate choice, and it is one more source of the erosion of everyday engagement within our community. Neither AI nor the wider digital shift should be understood exclusively as a threat to the conditions of deliberation. The challenge is to clearly identify how and in what circumstances they can be effectively leveraged to promote the cultivation of those conditions.

8.5. Keeping the Promise

This report began with an account of how the American experiment survived its own revolution: not only by the sword, but by the slow, patient work of argument, reason, and revision that built the Constitution and, in time, the American university that would carry its civic mission forward. Cornell was founded eighteen days after Appomattox, in a country even more divided than today, on the conviction that a university open to any person, studying any subject, would make the nation wiser. That conviction has been tested many times since 1865, and it is being tested again today by the tidal wave of disruptive forces charted in this report. What was true at Cornell's founding remains true: a nation that wants citizens capable of self-

government needs universities capable of modeling the deliberation self-government requires. That is what makes the health of the American university a national question.

The multiversity that grew from that founding vision has always been engaged in an argument with itself: expansive enough to eventually welcome those it once excluded, fractious enough to occasionally lose sight of the purpose that binds the many together into one. Deliberation is what propels that argument toward ever greater learning. It is reflective in an age that rewards impulsivity, curious in a culture that too often rewards closed minds, and generous despite the prevailing mood of uncertainty and polarization. Deliberation asks the university to keep saying "yes, and" to those who are still owed a fuller welcome, while also asking its members to relearn how to sit with people they may not agree with, and may not want to. Doing all of this at once is difficult.

Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White believed deeply that universities like Cornell could make the nation wiser. They then handed that vision to the generations that followed as a promise to keep. Before the cornerstone of Sage Hall was laid in 1873, Ezra Cornell placed inside it a letter addressed "To the Coming Man and Woman." In it, he wrote of his hope that all who came to campus would "find free and easy access and a hearty and equal welcome." Cornell University, and American higher education more widely, has thrived not despite disagreement over its members, commitments, and purpose, but because of it and the productive ways of working through it. It is the deliberation that has shaped the institution into what it is today. The thirty-seven seniors who voted against coeducation in 1872 were also part of what shaped Cornell's future because they participated in deliberation. In the 153 years since, Cornell University has been propelled into the future by every faculty member, staff member, student, alumnus, trustee, administrator, and community member who has kept Ezra Cornell's experiment alive by showing up, by staying at the table past the point of agreement, by extending welcome to people they may not have wanted to extend it to. The vision that Ezra Cornell sealed in Sage Hall's cornerstone is still attainable. The obligation of this report is to pass it on to the future.

9. Reflections on Deliberation

As noted throughout the last chapter, the committee agreed about the fundamental importance of deliberation as the foundation of learning. At the same time and as documented above, there was a great deal of disagreement about the threats to the conditions of deliberation and what it will take to address them. Rather than view these deep disagreements as a failure to deliver on our charge, we celebrate these differences and leverage them to model the type of deliberation and engagement to which we are calling on our community to commit. Our committee decided to embrace the range of views and strong beliefs about Cornell's deliberation challenges and opportunities. To do so, members of the committee were invited to submit brief reflections specifically on the conditions of deliberation contemplated in chapter eight. Our goal was twofold: to promote our own growth and learning as committee members through the act of genuine deliberation and to provide a foundation for a university-wide conversation based on these nuanced, complementary, and, in some places, conflicting reflections. We think that it is fitting to conclude this report, and our work, with a portrait of deliberation in action.

9.1. Reflection by Anthony Burrow

The concluding section of the report makes a compelling case for deliberation as vital to the work of a university. By situating the claim atop three conditions — *presence* (an openness to including all people), *engagement* (sustained dialogue even in disagreement), and *disposition* (the autonomy to reach one's own conclusions without fear of dismissal) — the section begins to inform a vocabulary of what constitutes effective deliberation. Building that vocabulary within the historical context of the university's founding, when decisions about who ought to be admitted needed argument more than assumption, illuminates why deliberation must be more than an aesthetic for imagining a university and instead be leveraged for actively shaping it. Still, a university does not shape itself; its people do. Present, engaged, and free to weigh evidence as they choose, deliberation invites the pursuit of purposes that are as individual as they are collective.

It is my view that for all its utility, the closing perspective on deliberation underachieves by leaving a fourth condition unconsidered: *when*. *When* deliberation happens should not be overlooked nor treated as a separate project from what gets deliberated, or by whom. Neglecting the condition of *when* discounts the section's own premise given it was written by a committee established to consider the Future of the American University. The future is an explicit *when*, as were each of the unusually privileged moments the committee dedicated to discussing it. The contribution of committee members benefitted from a curated sequence of conversations that afforded time for deliberation amongst themselves and others, which then aided periods of active reflection, reconsideration, and eventual progression of ideas. Yet the repeated opportunities to deliberate distinguish the committee's work from other parts of university life that do not delineate, and may sometimes limit, *when* its people can productively engage in it.

There is an unfortunate insufficiency, then, in nominating deliberation as crucial without examining *when* it ideally happens. Should it be a constant practice, woven into every exchange of ideas and thus capable of influencing the direction and focus of even well-established institutional commitments? Should it be preserved for designated moments deemed worthy of broader participation, with the understanding that once an issue has been decided it should not be revisited? Or should it be both, thus requiring those who may not anticipate having to deliberate repeatedly to do so, and in the same spirit they would if motivated of their own volition? Some attention to these questions seems pertinent, particularly given the bespoke ways deliberations play out across university life. Consider how unmoored academic calendars might be from moments that might benefit meaningfully from deliberation. When do graduating students who have accumulated the most knowledge deliberate and share ideas to improve the curriculum they just completed? When does a university committed to public engagement deliberate with the communities it engages as stakeholders, if its schedules are not temporally aligned to the needs that arise within them? When do research, teaching, and extension (RTE) and contingent faculty who contribute substantially to student learning and outreach initiatives deliberate changes to core curricula if they are not always involved in departmental discussion or voting? No matter how well specified, the three conditions described as necessary for deliberation in the closing section require actual moments to be practiced. Their *when* cannot be ignored.

By attending to the condition of *when*, the shared purpose described in the closing section can be more than something merely found and instead be actively cultivated through doing one's work within the university. When opportunities to deliberate are made clear and accessible to all, deliberation exceeds its position as an intellectual ideal and becomes a practical accomplishment. Thus, I offer a provocation for readers and observers to notice *when* deliberation occurs (and insist on noting when it does not). If it is only visible against the inspirational backdrop of the institution's founding, its signal may be too weak. But if it is noticeable within the unfolding context of its everyday functions, even in the ordinary moments, then those may be renewable opportunities to create the conditions to pursue our purposes, individually and together.

9.2. Reflection by Milton S. F. Curry

with whom Abraham Stroock joins

"I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study."
Ezra Cornell

The American university has become an indispensable organ of the nation's nascent multiracial democracy. Cornell University and its peer institutions now face a changed America where the cherished benefits of the civil rights movement and other social movements that advanced human rights in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods are being rolled back. The

settled constitutional protections enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and other affiliated laws and legal precedents and policies are being systematically deconstructed. And our universities are being intimidated by the federal government into dismantling policies and practices designed to invite diverse faculty and students into our communities and provide the needed supports to make their experiences exceptional and meaningful.

Cornell's own vexed history is entangled with the choices that have animated the tensions between the university and American society since its founding: (1) expand access and opportunity to domestic and foreign students and faculty of any gender and of all races and ethnicities, religions, and nationalities — or restrict access and opportunity to a narrow few endowed by their racial/ethnic heritage, physiognomy, gender, or socioeconomic status; (2) expand knowledge and speech rights to include those who were formerly enslaved, indentured, dispossessed of their land, and who were deprived of rights of suffrage and franchise — or constrain speech and foreclose constitutionally-guaranteed rights based upon nativist and racist ideas on who belongs in the nation. The stakes are high — with those in power moving aggressively to replace the inclusive, expansive ideals of the egalitarian American multiversity with one in which the federal government forcefully asserts control over private universities' autonomy in selecting their students, deciding what to teach, and determining who to hire and the standards for their advancement and promotion. These are the conditions under which the report by Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University is being produced.

The report affirms Cornell's courageous leadership in admitting women and Black Americans in the early years of its founding. In chapter eight, the report outlines the purpose of the university as learning; and sets the conditions for deliberation as presence, sustained engagement, and a deliberative disposition. The mission of the university is in fact broader — to develop intelligent and thoughtful citizens whose moral character and ethical disposition are shaped by learning and sociality with faculty whose expertise and judgment are based on excellence in their fields as adjudicated by their peers. Therefore the conditions for deliberation — a critical component of developing students' minds and advancing faculty scholarship, research, and creative activity — must do more than tolerate difference, they must anticipate resistance. Presence can be undermined by claims of illegitimacy. Why else would critics imply that our universities are racially diverse due to waves of incompetent students and faculty whose entry into the university was solely due to their identity and not their intellect? And why else would universities voluntarily dismantle legal initiatives aimed at leveling the playing field for those for whom poverty and geography — the result of decades of redlining and disinvestment in their communities — has undermined any potential of achieving the American dream and living out their aspirations? Sustained engagement — when it means students or faculty are activist in their work (scholarship, teaching, research, creative activity), and that work leads to community engagement and advocacy for issues that are deemed uncomfortable

or controversial — can easily be characterized as brainwashing and entangling students in a faculty member's own political obsessions. Having a deliberative disposition — a subjective determination of how individuals show up — can be used to exclude members of our community whose innovative use of protest, nonviolent resistance, or provocative speech acts make others in the community feel uncomfortable because they do not conform to normative middle-class behaviors. The report describes a comfortable idealism yet fails to articulate the university's responsibility when its values are under duress.

Demarcating the university as a nonpolitical space where social activism and social movements are disallowed or tightly controlled is not the response to answering claims that universities are overrun by liberal ideology, or that universities are discriminating against conservatives based upon political affiliation. Nor is the solution to embrace "viewpoint diversity" as a path toward greater inclusion of conservative thought. Universities have expanded access and affordability and have accommodated new areas of knowledge that affirm emergent social and cultural conditions. Universities accelerate social mobility through the federal Pell Grant program and generous philanthropy that enable millions of students to afford a college education. In recent decades, new areas of study and research — such as cultural studies, ethnic studies, and feminism and gender studies — have impacted everything from the humanities to the social and natural sciences. Derided as progressive and "woke," these areas of study have influenced how medical and public health approaches women's health, research on environmental racism in redlined communities across the nation, food insecurities in rural and poor communities, and impactful research on the rise of evictions amongst vulnerable populations. Universities and federal and state governments joined together to do this important work. We should neither abandon the ideals that solidified these relationships, nor should we back away from the deep moral and constitutional commitments that fortified the work as necessary, meaningful, and impactful in creating a more just society.

In chapter eight, the report makes significant errors in flattening the distinctions between DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) and viewpoint diversity; and identifying a myriad of topics as reasons for the loss of public trust (including activism, politics and polarization, government overreach, etc.) — stating that "it is heartening that both [DEI and viewpoint diversity] are, at root, arguments for inclusivity." DEI, a set of strategies designed to diversify the academy and engineer deeper sociality amongst people of different backgrounds, was certainly imperfect, yet its goals were and are noble. Viewpoint diversity (associated with conservatives' assertion that universities suffer from the bias of a majority of left-leaning faculty and are incapable of teaching countervailing views), far from being inclusive, is the fulcrum from which a constellation of organized vicious attacks on higher education have emerged.

The committee's recommendations on fostering deliberation are not sufficiently robust to meet the existential challenges we are facing in higher education. Cornell, as the first American university, is uniquely positioned to lead a national conversation on new founding principles

for American multiracial democracy. Marshaling the moral force of Germany's Vergangenheitsbewältigung and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Cornell and its partners and experts could develop a framework to reconcile the legacies of American slavery, land dispossession, and migration — across areas of urban development, educational development, and labor participation. Through major convenings, courses, research, and creative work, significant contributions could be made in resetting the national divisions that continue to haunt our democracy. The effort could generate a groundswell of support for a national curriculum that cuts across party and identity, to educate a new generation of citizens to reconcile the nation's fraught legacies while thinking about speculative futures.

Collectively, these observations, critical reflections, and recommendations are intended to support the many productive inputs and conclusions reached by the committee as a whole in other sections of the report.

9.3. Reflection by Eve De Rosa

What Holds a University Together?

Serving on the Committee on the Future of the American University while concluding my term as the Dean of the University Faculty prompted me to reflect on the lessons these perspectives hold for the future of higher education.

My tenure in academic leadership coincided with an extraordinary period in university life. We navigated the return to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence, challenging conversations about academic freedom and free expression, the aftermath of the October 7 attacks and the tensions that followed, campus protests and an encampment, and a period of intensified public scrutiny of higher education. Serving in a university-wide leadership role allowed me to work closely with faculty, students, staff, administrators, trustees, and university leaders, often revealing how differently thoughtful people could understand the same issue.

The issues themselves varied considerably. Yet over time I became struck by a common challenge that seemed to underlie them all. How does a university remain resilient when its community disagrees about what is happening, why it matters, and what should be done in response? While individuals and institutions operate very differently, both must respond to changing environments, uncertainty, and competing demands. The experiences of the past five years led me to wonder what enables universities not merely to endure such periods, but to emerge from them stronger. *What holds a university together?*

Early in my academic career, I likely would have answered by pointing to the qualities most commonly associated with great universities: outstanding faculty, talented students, groundbreaking scholarship, and excellence in teaching. Those qualities remain essential. Yet my

years as Dean of Faculty persuaded me that a university's long-term strength depends on whether people continue to trust one another and the institution enough to work through difficult challenges together in service of its educational, research, and public-engagement responsibilities. I also came to appreciate how distinctive Cornell's responsibilities are. Many of the issues that came before us were not only about the internal life of the university, they were also about our responsibilities to the broader public we serve. That perspective deepened my appreciation for Cornell's land-grant tradition, which reminds us that discovery, teaching, and public engagement are not separate endeavors but interconnected commitments.

The most difficult leadership challenges I encountered often involved balancing legitimate but competing responsibilities. Faculty sought to preserve the academic freedom and intellectual independence that lie at the heart of scholarly inquiry while ensuring that universities remain places of rigorous teaching, discovery, and debate. Students sought an environment that supported their learning and well-being while also allowing them to engage difficult questions, challenge authority, and express their views openly. Trustees carried responsibility for safeguarding the university's long-term vitality, weighing immediate pressures against the institution's ability to fulfill its mission for future generations. Administrators were charged with translating mission into action, balancing legal and regulatory obligations, operational realities, financial constraints, and the needs of a diverse university community. These perspectives were not inherently incompatible, but neither were they always easily reconciled. I came to better appreciate that universities cannot depend on consensus to move forward. Communities built from such distinct constituencies are unlikely to agree on every important issue, nor should they. What matters is whether members of the community have confidence that difficult issues will be approached thoughtfully, that decisions will be informed by evidence, and that differing perspectives will be taken seriously.

That lesson shaped my approach to leadership. Whether addressing questions of governance, university policy, academic integrity, or the many challenges that emerged during this period, I found that people were more willing to engage difficult conversations when they understood not only what decisions were being made, but also why. They did not always agree with the outcome, but they were more likely to remain invested when they believed the process was transparent, fair, and grounded in evidence.

For this reason, I valued both shared governance and evidence-based deliberation. The strongest decisions, and the policies and actions that followed from them, were rarely those reached most quickly. They emerged from careful analysis, broad consultation, and genuine engagement across differences. I also became increasingly attentive to who was and was not part of important conversations. Some of the most productive discussions occurred when decisions were informed by a broader range of voices, experiences, and expertise than had traditionally been included. While doing so often added complexity, it frequently improved both the quality of decisions and confidence in the outcomes. One indication that confidence in

decisions had grown over time was the overwhelming support I received in my re-election as Dean of Faculty. I never viewed that outcome as evidence of agreement on every issue. Faculty are far too diverse and intellectually vibrant for that! Instead, I understood it as a sign that people believed difficult issues were being approached thoughtfully, openly, and with integrity.

Looking toward the next fifty years, universities will continue to face technological disruption, evolving public expectations, intensified scrutiny, and challenges we cannot yet predict. Artificial intelligence is only one example of the ways teaching, research, and public engagement are likely to change. The specific issues will evolve, but the underlying leadership challenge will remain remarkably constant: helping communities navigate uncertainty while remaining faithful to the values and missions that define them. For institutions like Cornell, those missions extend beyond educating students and advancing knowledge. As a land-grant institution, Cornell also carries a responsibility to apply knowledge in ways that benefit society. That mission will always require us to bridge differences, connect ideas to real-world challenges, and engage constructively with the communities we serve.

As a neuroscientist, I have long been interested in how brains and individuals learn and adapt under changing conditions. My experience as Dean of Faculty reinforced a similar lesson at the institutional level: resilience is not the absence of challenge or disagreement; it is the capacity to learn, adapt, and remain anchored in core commitments while responding to changing circumstances. That experience leaves me with both humility and optimism. Humility because no individual, office, or constituency possesses all the answers to the challenges universities face. Optimism because I have seen firsthand what is possible when people remain committed to engaging difficult questions together, even amid uncertainty and disagreement.

To me, what holds a university together is not unanimity, and not the absence of conflict, but a shared commitment to navigate disagreement while remaining true to its academic and land-grant missions.

9.4. Reflection by Rick Geddes

I offer my reflections comment on chapter eight of the report by Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University. Overall, the chapter is excellent. It provides an indispensable overview of the underlying conditions for the most essential element of any academic enterprise — careful deliberation — to take place. The chapter is essential reading for anyone concerned about the state of higher education in the United States.

There are several ways the chapter could be improved. First, the conditions for deliberation at Cornell could be strengthened if there were greater diversity of viewpoints. The chapter implicitly recognizes this by stating that deliberation "is fostered through rigorous scholarship, deep engagement with different perspectives, careful discovery, consideration of evidence, questioning of assumptions, open dialogue, and intellectual humility."

Although all measures of viewpoint are imperfect, the data reveals that Cornell (and virtually all top-tier universities) lacks widely varying perspectives. A large and growing left-leaning political dominance within U.S. universities is now well documented. What is under-appreciated, however, is the degree to which alternative views, whether defined as conservative, classical liberal, libertarian, or even "old-fashioned" liberal, are minimized or marginalized.

For example, a February 2026 FIRE/NORC survey of 1,092 adults showed that Americans systematically *overestimate* how many non-left-leaning faculty are on campus. The survey revealed that Americans believe that 54 percent of faculty are liberal against an actual 60 percent, which is reasonably close. However, Americans estimated that conservatives make up 29 percent, or almost a third, of the professoriate, when they in fact comprise only 12 percent, or closer to an eighth.[165] Given an electorate that is split almost evenly between Democratic and Republican, this means that views and ideas held by roughly half of the American electorate are either minimized or not fully represented for consideration by students when grappling with critical ideas, which reduces public trust.

Importantly, this bias in faculty perspectives has far-reaching effects. In addition to impacting the conditions for deliberation in obvious ways, it is likely to affect the curriculum, what courses are taught within that curriculum, and what topics are emphasized within those courses, as well as the hiring of new professors. How can the conditions for deliberation occur and sound judgment be developed when only a limited set of views are available for consideration?

Second, the low and declining level of public trust, which is well documented, also affects the conditions for deliberation. How effective can campus deliberations be when a cloud of public mistrust regarding the result hangs overhead? It is no accident that public trust in the American university and viewpoint diversity are declining in tandem. Conditions for deliberation at Cornell would be improved, and public trust would be regained, if viewpoint diversity were addressed head on.

Third, the conditions for deliberation would be improved if there were greater clarity regarding which university stakeholders should be involved in deliberations in the context of academic versus bureaucratic control of university priorities. Deliberation among faculty and students is critical and salutary, while bureaucrats and administrators should focus on executing those priorities. To be clear, the university should be controlled by its subject-matter experts.

The prevailing trend is in the opposite direction. There has been a substitution of faculty control

[165] Nate Honeycutt, "Higher Ed Doesn't Have a Perception Problem," *The Eternally Radical Idea* (blog), September 2, 2026, https://eternallyradicalidea.com/p/higher-ed-doesnt-have-a-perception.

for that of bureaucrats over time, which unsurprisingly has coincided with university bureaucratic growth as well as declining public trust. Not only does such bloat increase cost and thus tuition (suggesting that costs and thus tuition could be reduced if it were streamlined), it also further erodes trust in the university as control is moved away from its subject-matter experts and *raison d'être* — the faculty and students.

The importance of the faculty-bureaucracy distinction is illustrated by the era of required diversity, equity, and inclusion training, which emerged whole cloth from many university bureaucracies without broad faculty deliberation, input, or consensus. Although it was never required at Cornell, a Goldwater Institute study revealed that about 67 percent of surveyed major U.S. colleges and universities required students to complete DEI-related courses or satisfy general education learning outcomes containing DEI criteria to graduate.[166]

As related to faculty and student deliberation, it is laudable for faculty to conduct research on questions related to those important issues. It is an entirely different matter, however, when foregone conclusions are imposed on faculty and students from above by the university bureaucracy while carrying implied administrative sanctions. In this instance, not only was the statement of the problem to be addressed assumed, but so was the solution, with career-ending penalties for dissent included in the package. That era degraded the delicate conditions necessary for effective deliberation while further eroding public trust in the university by confirming its sense of narrowing viewpoint diversity.

Importantly, bureaucratic mandates from above are the opposite of outcomes from careful deliberation among faculty, students, and other subject-matter experts. The conditions for deliberation at Cornell would be improved by making a sharp distinction between faculty and student versus bureaucratic control of university governance.

9.5. Reflection by Durba Ghosh

As this report was reaching completion, I was working in the university archives to better understand the history of the Society for the Humanities, which I direct. The society was founded in 1966 based on a widespread agreement that while federal funding had been very successful in supporting scientific research after the Second World War, humanistic research and scholarship had been underfunded. Thus, Cornell committed to raising several million dollars in their centennial capital campaign to endow the founding of the Society for the Humanities. This year is the society's sixtieth anniversary, one we share with several other academic units that were part of an expansion of the university.

---

[166] Tim Minella, "DEI Required: 67% of Universities Mandate 'Diversity' Indoctrination," Goldwater Institute, April 15, 2024, https://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/dei-required-67-of-universities-mandate-diversity-indoctrination/.

During the first decade of the society's existence, from 1966 to 1976, Cornell experienced the kind of tumult that was described as "unprecedented." The first directors of the humanities wrote about student protests against the war in Vietnam, demands for women to have equal rights, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the national scandal of a president resigning to avoid impeachment. Soon after the founding of the Society for the Humanities, the Africana Studies and Research Center was established after a student occupation of the Willard Straight Hall student union. A program in women's studies emerged out of courses taught by colleagues who took on additional labor to teach an extra course on gender.

Through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, American Indian and Indigenous Studies, Asian American Studies, Jewish Studies, Latino/a Studies, and LGBT Studies programs were established. These interdisciplinary programs compelled changes in what was taught in Cornell classrooms and the research topics taken up by Cornell faculty. Gender, race, and ethnic studies approaches challenged foundational assumptions about knowledge and who has the power to produce it. Certain themes — such as migration, decolonial theory, diaspora, disability studies (among others) — were drawn into the curriculum and into our research projects. Researchers who worked on race, feminism, revolution, the politics of identity, and multicultural perspectives came to Cornell, some considering it an innovative hub. The Society for the Humanities gained national and international prominence for humanistic inquiry, a prominence that was aided by the founding of the important intellectual innovations of the programs I have listed. These programs worked to establish rigorous scholarly norms, knowing that when women and people of color join the academy, the academy tends to question their scholarly credentials.

In history, the field I know best, scholars writing the history of women, gender, and sexuality were told that women were not that important, and sexuality was a private activity left out of public records. Nonetheless, historians of women and gender persisted and challenged a long-held belief that history was only about "great men." Some of Cornell's most prominent historians of gender and ethnicity became leading figures in constitutional history, military history, and economic history, conventionally male-dominated subjects that some of the stakeholders we consulted claim have declined with the "wokeness" of the academy.

These transformations in knowledge, from Cornell's founding to the founding of these programs, took over a century. It took a century to acknowledge that admitting students and hiring faculty from a range of diverse communities would and should change what we study and research. From the faculty who worked in these programs to the students and staff who took these classes, it took the kind of patient argumentation, presence, and engagement the report encourages. We might applaud that slow deliberative process, or we might ask why it took a century for the inclusion of diverse perspectives to be accepted into the curriculum and to influence research projects.

We were asked to imagine the future of our university, with the agreement that the version of

the American university we have now is perhaps not the version we would have designed if we started from scratch. Perhaps, and not surprisingly, one of the most difficult issues was how to write about DEI, or diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cornell's original commitment to "… any person … any study" has been an anchor for the report, with the acknowledgment that the inclusion of students, faculty, and staff from different communities, religions, races, ethnicities, and cultures is central to Cornell's educational and research mission. This mission, however laudable, is increasingly under threat. We bypassed a definition of diversity in the service of concluding the report; yet our evasion renders the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion vulnerable to complete erasure.

While the committee agreed that being inclusive was an important value, we were left with questions about whether and how to accommodate politically conservative voices. The committee heard strong calls for viewpoint diversity. We also heard calls to teach and research conservative political thought; proposals to hire conservative faculty were floated. We debated whether the putative exclusion of conservative voices was commensurable with the historic exclusions of Black students, women, Latino/a, and Indigenous students, to say nothing about international students and faculty whose rights to speak freely are severely curtailed. As a historian, I am reminded that the groups that are calling for viewpoint diversity these days are descended from the groups that opposed diversity, equity, and inclusion over a half century ago when a range of academic programs, from women's studies and Africana Studies, were founded.

We are stewards of a university that made a strong commitment many years ago to admit women, Black students, and students from all religious denominations. Without an assertive and clear declaration about what we mean by diversity, we risk losing a vision of a future that is inclusive, welcoming, and just for all.

9.6. Reflection by Drew Margolin

I appreciate the invitation to reflect on this chapter. Overall, I am in support of it. I agree that "if the purpose of the university is learning, then no practice is more dispensable than deliberation," and I also agree that it is our responsibility to teach, model, and support its preconditions: presence, engagement, and disposition. However, my support is based on a particular interpretation of what these words mean, and how they respond to our present context.

One argument we heard is that committing to these principles was giving in to bad faith critiques from the university's adversaries. I understand this view. Many university critics do not seem particularly concerned with deliberation or its underlying ethos, so why take their charges seriously? However, as I argued in more detail in an op-ed for Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University, commitment to a principle means a commitment to self-

criticism by our own lights.[167] We are not recommitting deliberation to please anyone, or to answer criticism, but because we believe in these ideals.

A deeper question is whether deliberation is, in fact, a core value. I often hear both university critics and defenders imply that upholding deliberation is in tension with broader university goals, in particular, the aim of supporting "any person." This view can even be seen in this chapter, as in describing the ethos of "… any person … any study" it focuses on who is allowed on campus, rather than what they do once they get here. But there is more than one way to exclude people. One way is to keep them out. Another is to let them in and fail to deliver the thing they came for. These "any persons" are here *to study*. A university that fails to maintain the preconditions of deliberation is not an equitable one, because it fails to deliver on its promises.

But what do we mean by this word "study" or its sibling "deliberation?" Some may interpret these simply as working hard: students prepare for tests, faculty produce papers. I believe they carry two essential elements: humility and challenge. I study something, or deliberate about it, because I am aware of the inadequacy of my present knowledge and seek to improve that inadequacy via a confrontation with something else. I design a study to learn more by collecting data that might challenge my prior views. I listen to colleagues or read an author because they know things I do not. The result is a conflict in ideas; the thoughts I began with, the thoughts I am in contact with, and the product is always something new. Those new thoughts may change my mind, or merely deepen and fortify my original understanding, but in either case, there has been an improvement.

Because I see study/deliberation as both humbling and challenging, I see the university's promise to foster these as presenting a specific problem. It must, first, create conditions that initiate productive intellectual conflict. Without conflict in ideas, there is no "study." Yet it must also keep that conflict productive. It must keep it from spiraling into threats, violence, cynicism or despondency. It cannot simply eliminate the conflict or keep it outside of its walls, nor can it allow it to run amok. The university must bring it in, and foster it, the right way.

From these thoughts I realize the chapter is missing an element. Yes, we must encourage deliberative presence, engagement, and dispositions, but we also must recommit to identifying and demanding *quality*. When a deliberator comes to the table with humility and openness, it is our job to ensure they are nourished with high-quality ideas, thoughtful questions, and trenchant challenges, not low-minded name-calling, mockery, or microaggressions. The university cannot and should not wall itself off from the conflict in the world, but it can demand that its participants change its form. In a world in which social media apps and websites

[167] Drew Margolin, "Treat University Critics Like Reviewer #2," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, February 18, 2026, https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/02/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-treat-university-critics-like-reviewer-2.

provide the empty calories of toxicity, over-simplification, and tribal zeal, the university must insist on the opposite.

Thinking this way supports the chapter's recommendations but also reframes them. For example, the aim of "viewpoint diversity" is not, strictly or even mainly, to distribute "welcoming" in a fair, ecumenical way. It is to produce productive conflict. In competitive sports, teams go to great lengths to gain access to the thinking of their opponent, because this knowledge is so valuable. Similarly, faculty or students who wish to bring social change, from whatever perspective, will be much more effective if they have access to high-quality interlocutors from opposing positions.[168] Indeed, as the Cornell Political Union explained to our committee, they curate diversity not by welcoming students who simply have different ideas, but by welcoming students who are seeking productive engagement with ideas.

Similarly, if we see our goal is to produce constructive, intellectual conflict, other aspects of these recommendations may sit more comfortably. The chapter recommends listening openly and with empathy. This may imply that we are to extend legitimacy to views we find abhorrent. But for discerning minds, openness is not acceptance, it is only a starting point for scrutiny. Empathy does not imply legitimacy, only understanding. Just as when I scrutinize my own emotions, I can see that some feelings are valid to hold while realizing that the conclusions or behaviors they suggest are wrong. Openness and empathy are tools for eliciting clearer and more meaningful thoughts from ourselves and others, so that the conflict is worthwhile.

Finally, it occurred to me while writing this reflection that seeing deliberation as "productive conflict" may present it as an onerous obligation. This is risky at a time when there is a technology that wants to replace our deliberative capacity, that voraciously seeks "any study" on its own, and that peppers us with requests to study on our behalf. I fear that if we see deliberation as a burden, our inclination will be to let the machines take over. So I would like to close by pointing out that *deliberation is also fun*. As undergraduates learn in that first late-night dorm room conversation, it is a uniquely exhilarating experience. It is thus not only a precondition for, but a manifestation of, human flourishing. Indeed, this is why so many of us returned to the university for our professional lives. It is also why work on this committee, while long and intense, was so enjoyable.

9.7. Reflection by Jocelyn Rose

Overall, I found chapter eight to be a thoughtful contribution to the report. Its historical framing is engaging, and its willingness to surface rather than avoid disagreement reflects one of Cornell's strengths as an institution.

---

[168] Lauren A. Wright, "How Liberal College Campuses Benefit Conservative Students," *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/07/conservative-students-college-ideology/678934/.

As I read the chapter, I found myself thinking about the extraordinary breadth and diversity of the communities that make up Cornell and that Cornell serves. Over the last year, we repeatedly acknowledged that Cornell is not a single, uniform community. Those differences may be tied to geography across New York state, socioeconomic opportunity, educational access, professional roles, cultural backgrounds, or many other factors that shape how people experience the university.

One of the most important lessons I took away from this process was not how similar our experiences were, but how varied they were. While the committee brought together faculty from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, the thousands of stakeholders who contributed to our work included students, staff, alumni, extension personnel, community members, and stakeholders across New York state whose experiences of Cornell are often quite different from our own.

This distinction is particularly important in light of Cornell's land-grant mission. Again and again, our discussions returned to the responsibility Cornell has to people and communities far beyond our campuses. One of the strengths of this process was the opportunity to listen carefully to voices whose experiences, opportunities, and challenges often differed substantially from those represented around the committee table.

One element that I find largely absent from the chapter is a sense of pride. The chapter focuses on the challenges facing deliberation, but in doing so it sometimes underplays the remarkable strengths of this university and of the process that produced this report. I am proud to be part of a university that can convene a committee as intellectually diverse as ours and charge it with the ambitious task of thinking fifty years into the future. I am equally proud that our discussions surfaced genuine disagreement rather than superficial consensus, and that those disagreements were acknowledged openly. Throughout the year, I came to appreciate even more deeply the expertise, thoughtfulness, and commitment of colleagues whose perspectives often differed from my own.

Disagreement is not merely an obstacle to deliberation; it is evidence that deliberation is occurring. One of Cornell's greatest assets is its capacity to bring together people with different experiences, disciplines, values, and viewpoints and create the conditions for meaningful engagement. Reading the chapter, I found myself wishing for a stronger sense of pride in the university's capacity for deliberation. "Pride" may not be a word that naturally comes to mind in discussions of disagreement, but it captures something important about the experience of this committee: pride in our ability to convene diverse voices, pride in our willingness to engage difficult questions, and pride in a culture that recognizes disagreement not as a failure, but as an essential part of learning and discovery.

More broadly, this process reinforced for me the value of sustained engagement across

meaningful differences. Our work was enriched by the many perspectives we heard, both around the committee table and from the broader communities with whom we engaged. A stronger emphasis on that success might leave readers not only aware of the challenges ahead, but also more confident in the university's capacity to meet them.

9.8. Reflection by Phoebe Sengers

The Hope of Deliberation

My students and I study the social impact of technology. What I love about this work is that it brings me in touch with worlds beyond my own: those of Jamaican technology entrepreneurs, of Canadian villagers, of lower-caste Indian engineers, of Icelandic fishers. Such encounters force me, again and again, to see the limits of my own experiences, to reconsider my views, and sometimes, to question my core values. This is what it means to learn.

So, I was both shocked and astonished the first time a Cornell undergraduate told me with pride that he refused to talk to anyone who didn't share his political beliefs. Isn't the whole point of college to expand your experience of the world? Wasn't he curious about why other people see the world differently?

But eight years later, sadly, this no longer surprises me. We are exposed to more points of view than ever, but also to more pressures that make it hard to engage seriously across our differences: social media platforms designed for outrage, political leaders that stoke the flames, foreign actors separating us at our seams, AI agents that agreeably adapt to our preferences. Worse, we have had so many rounds of tit for tat in our disagreements — public shaming, professional retaliation, firing, doxxing, legislative shutdown, prosecution, visa cancellation, murder — each of which has produced more concrete evidence to cement the grievances we hold against each other.

In our country, such conflicts are often seen as between left and right. But to see the challenges to deliberation as fundamentally about where one lies on the political spectrum is a mistake. The same sense of existential disagreement animates the split between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine in blue communities, the split between Trumpism and establishment Republicanism in red ones. These are disagreements that seem to defy deliberation because too many feel that discussing them seriously, weighing evidence, and considering counterarguments would require tolerating, or maybe even taking seriously, views people find fundamentally abhorrent.

And people are *right* to draw the line on the values they hold most dear. Moral values should not be abandoned for a clear-eyed rationalism that is unconcerned with whatever cannot be calculated, weighed, and dissected. Sound judgment does not rely only on facts; it requires also knowing what matters.

But when listening becomes impossible, when persuasion has been abandoned, all that is left is

an escalating spiral of force against force, trauma against trauma, fear against fear. There seems to be no way out but a pure battle for power, driven by an increasing sense of the righteousness of one's own cause and the damage done by the other. Burn the universities down. Or resist the forces that would do so, whatever it costs.

But there is another way. It comes from recognizing the overall dynamic and refusing to play one's part in it. We move forward in these precarious times when we refuse to allow moral clarity to curdle into a moral certainty that rejects all challengers and, in the process, blocks us from seeing the world as it is, in all its complexity and nuance. The people who disagree with us are not blocks to our understanding, but opportunities to further it. Their challenges to our ideas and our values can help us see better what is at stake, whether or not we agree with those people, whether or not they are behaving fairly, whether or not they can be moved. This is the hope that deliberation carries — a hope that does not rely on the other person agreeing, but on our own commitment to see things more clearly, to recognize the limits of our own understanding, and to prepare to learn.

To break out of our cycle of mutual recrimination, universities must do something that can feel dangerous: acknowledge that our critics may have a point. We must not do this tactically to fend off attacks; we must do it because our capacity for self-understanding relies on the ability to consider challenges, weigh the evidence, and come to our own conclusions. We must reckon with the dwindling number of conservatives in the professoriate, and whether their number still provides enough rigorous challenge to sharpen the views of all at the university. We must address the sense of chilled speech across many perspectives, and the particular incapacity many feel to openly discuss race, gender, and inequality, as well as the Israel/Palestine conflict. And we must do this, not because we hope it will change others' minds, but because we hope it will hone our own.

This is a hope I kept finding in unexpected places over the course of our year of deliberation. The scholar on the right, who had lost an academic position to cancellation from the left, who nevertheless spent an hour patiently explaining how Cornell could navigate current political challenges. The scholar on the left, who had lost an academic position to cancellation from the right, who nevertheless urged us to take the public's concerns about liberal bias seriously. Students surprised that we came to listen. Young people debating the future of the university and the role of AI with enthusiasm and without rancor. First-year students considering carefully the opportunities and shortcomings of Cornell to propose a path forward. Our recognition in meeting after meeting with stakeholders across the political spectrum that the light and heat that animates contemporary discussions around universities masked many agreements about the nature of our problems. The moments when, in the midst of contentious but productive committee discussions, we stopped to say, "if only our students could see us now!"

This is what it means to learn: being willing to speak up about what one believes, to have one's ideas challenged, to disagree without exclusion, to be slow to take offense, to become angry about what someone said but still keep the conversation going, to seek evidence to confirm or disconfirm particular ideas, to develop arguments that integrate the best of apparently conflicting perspectives, to explain why one sees things differently, to change one's mind, to make peace with the fact that a final agreement may never happen, to move forward anyway. This is what Cornell must do for the next fifty years.

I doubt all those who invested their hope in us finally hearing them will feel they have been truly heard. We have so much to do to build our capacity to listen, to want to listen, and to feel safe to listen. But I hope they will join us in being willing to continue the conversation.

9.9. Reflection by Praveen Sethupathy

Is There Room for Religion in the Deliberative University?
A Reflection on Deliberation from the Angle of Faith and Science at Cornell

The presence of different ideas and viewpoints is the first condition that must be met for a community to be truly deliberative. This includes perspectives from those of different religions or no religion at all.

Cornell University was famously publicly condemned in 1865 as a "godless" university for its charter's bold proposal to start a nonsectarian institution of higher education at a time when most colleges had been founded not only in the Christian religion, but often in very particular theological strains of Christianity. This reputation continued for decades and arguably gained even more attention after the publication in 1896 of A.D. White's "conflict thesis," his rather militaristic portrayal of the incongruence and enmity between science and organized religion.[169] He felt so strongly about the imperialistic incursion of religion into the academy that he referred to Cornell as an "asylum for science."[170]

Cornell's unique founding and history might have set a default position of avoidance with regard to religion in the university. But this perspective may be misguided. White's historical analysis on the issue of science and religion has been closely studied, heavily scrutinized, and by some scholars, strongly repudiated. For example, based on White's work, some have forwarded the argument that paradigm-shifting scientists such as Johannes Kepler represent triumphs of science over religion. However, detailed historical examination demonstrates that Kepler and others were not just Christians in name only, but were deeply devout individuals whose scientific work was strongly motivated, rather than opposed, by their religious convictions. That said, White's central concern is about the pernicious effects of "dogmatic theology" on academic freedom. In an interview in 1885, he said, "Scientists have done much in

[169] Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896).
[170] Andrew Dickson White to Gerrit Smith, September 1, 1862, Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

the cause of education, *but science is not antagonistic to religion*, no matter what some persons may say."[171] He was not against religion in the university per se, but rather against religious imposition on the bounds of inquiry in the academy.

Even a cursory look into the lives of some of the world's most transformative scientists paints a surprising and inspiring portrait of the way that science and religious faith have informed each other. "The book of nature is a fine and large piece of tapestry rolled up, which we are not able to see all at once, but must be content to wait for the discovery of its beauty, and symmetry, little by little, as it gradually comes to be more and more unfolded, or displayed."[172] These poetic words are attributed to Robert Boyle, the father of modern chemistry. He championed a patient, transparent, and rigorous experimental approach to understand the laws of nature. Quite contrary to the assumption that this approach to the natural world stands in defiance to his religious faith, it actually reflects his deep conviction that God "wrote" nature, and that as a sacred text, it deserves to be studied with the utmost empirical rigor and impartiality.

Fifteen years before Cornell's founding, one of history's most influential experimental physicists, Michael Faraday, wrote in a letter to a colleague that "Nature is our kindest friend and best critic in experimental science if we only allow her intimations to fall unbiased on our minds."[173] Faraday was a scientific giant, and also a deeply religious man. His faith, like Boyle's, cannot be dismissed as a mere convention or product of the times; it was deeply studied and held. For him, religion did not pre-determine his scientific outlook, but quite oppositely, it deepened his commitment to the pursuit of truth with objectivity and humility. As articulated eloquently by the award-winning nuclear physicist Ian Hutchinson of MIT, himself a man of deep religious conviction, Faraday's faith undergirded not only his rigorous empiricism, like Boyle, but also his firm dedication to science as a practical public good[174] (here we hear echoes of Cornell's commitment to "put knowledge to work" in society). In a letter to Galileo in 1597, Johannes Kepler wrote, "I much prefer the sharpest criticism of a single intelligent man to the thoughtless approval of the masses."[175] I have wondered whether White might have sung a slightly more nuanced tune if he had the privilege of rigorous deliberation and engaged discourse with the likes of Kepler, Faraday, and Boyle.

None of this should obscure or minimize the anxiety that White felt about encroachments on

---

[171] "Interview with President White," *Cornell Daily Sun*, February 5, 1885, https://cdsun.library.cornell.edu/?a=d&d=CDS18850205.2.2.
[172] Flora Masson, *Robert Boyle: A Biography* (London: Constable & Company Ltd, 1914), 282.
[173] Peter Day, ed., *The Philosopher's Tree: A Selection of Michael Faraday's Writings* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2020), 102.
[174] Ian H. Hutchinson, "The Genius and Faith of Faraday and Maxwell," *The New Atlantis*, https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-genius-and-faith-of-faraday-and-maxwell.
[175] Dan Broadbent, "Order and Harmony: Kepler's Guiding Forces" (2021), Brigham Young University Faculty Publications, 5730, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5730.

open inquiry by religious institutions. This is an understandable concern, as it is with any other incursion on academic freedom by governments, political ideologies, or other powerful interest groups. But, as articulated in chapter eight, the presence of different ideas and viewpoints is the first condition that must be met for a community to be truly deliberative. This includes perspectives from those of different religions or no religion at all.

The famous polymath Henri Poincaré wrote, "The scientist does not study nature because it is useful; he [and she] studies it because he delights in it, and he delights in it because it is beautiful."[176] This sentiment has a quasi-religious quality to it, but Poincaré was an avowed atheist, rejected the idea that religion was needed for morality, and championed the "disinterested cult of truth."[177] Poincaré and Faraday were both ardent proponents of empiricism, but the way in which they arrived at this position could not have been more different. A university committed to integrated learning challenges its members not only to learn the details of the theories of electromagnetism or planetary motion, but also to reflect on the commitments, motivations, and aspirations of those who developed those theories, and engage with the full range of ways people make meaning and frame the world.

American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale refers to this practice in his book, *Religion in the University*, as dialogic pluralism. He states, "To enter the academy is to participate in an ongoing social practice with persons of diverse character-identities who embrace different comprehensive orientations [including religious]…. When a person enters a dialogue, she doesn't just talk, she listens, thereby exposing herself to critique… she does not immunize her beliefs against critique."[178] A deeply religious student who instinctively resonates with Kepler must be challenged to think about how Poincaré finds and defines beauty in a universe without God. A spiritually skeptical faculty member who is philosophically aligned with Poincaré must be invigorated to consider how the religious convictions of a colleague could be a strength and not a liability for their research.

Cornell was founded on the principle that religious dogma should not dismiss or prevent a particular course of academic study or research, not that religion itself should not be present or integrated in the university as a subject of individual practice, deliberative study, and open discussion. Given the importance of religious identity to many of our faculty, staff, and students, as evidenced by stakeholder feedback during the committee's process, we need to lift the sense of taboo and acknowledge religion and spirituality as an element of personal meaning-making and an integrated intellectual framework, and therefore as one of the many perspectives that should be included in university deliberation. We should explicitly give

---

[176] Henri Poincaré, *The Value of Science*, trans. George Bruce Halsted (New York: Science Press, 1907), 8.
[177] João Príncipe, "Henri Poincaré: The Love for Truth and the Relations Between Ethics and Science," *Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science*, no. 17 (2024), https://doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2024.i17.04.
[178] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

license to foster engaged discourse around religion, not only in extracurricular activities, but also in classroom settings in nonsectarian ways; faculty who have done so report students have a hunger for these discussions.

9.10. Reflection by Adam T. Smith

The Generosity of Deliberation

Ezra Cornell's founding aspirations for the university that bears his name are all over this report. They are in the first footnote, the last page, and liberally sprinkled throughout. The precise wording appears to have been dressed up by Cornell's first president, A.D. White, before making its way to Cornell's great seal. Morris Bishop, in *A History of Cornell,* suggests that the original phrasing might have been something like "I'd like to start a school where anybody can study anything he's a mind to."[179] But with White's confident pen, the phrase became: "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study," a phrasing Cornell himself would embrace.[180]

White's graceful edit of Cornell's institutional ambition was not mere stylistic polishing. It turned a passing statement of intention into a cardinal virtue that would shape Cornell University, and the American university, for generations: generosity.

"I would found" expresses the most vernacular form of generosity: philanthropy. Instead of stating a simple preference ("I'd like to start a school") or a firm intention ("I will establish a university"), the phrasing of "would found" reads as a vow, albeit one that remains open. The conditional mood resists closure, demanding that the university perpetually catch up to its founding aspiration. This report, undertaken in a time of financial pressure and austerity, approaches financial matters with caution. But the founding motto underscores that the act of giving is itself perpetual.

To open a university's doors to **"any person"** remains an act of radical social generosity. This openness was Cornell's original heresy. The disavowal of sectarian education, the embrace of coeducation, and the readiness to open campus to anyone forwarded the radically democratic presumption that all could be worthy. The committee names this form of generosity as presence. But presence is simply a headcount, a notation of "here" on a class roster. Generosity is what happens in the classroom after taking attendance. It is both "free and easy access" *and* "a hearty and equal welcome," as Ezra would describe it in 1873.[181] A hearty welcome is more than a seat at the table; it is an invitation to share.

---

[179] White first conveyed Ezra Cornell's vision in a Plan of Organization he presented to the Board of Trustees in October 1866, writing that "[Cornell] wishes to make such provision that every person can find opportunity here to pursue any study he desires," as quoted in Morris Bishop, *A History of Cornell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 74.

[180] Most notably in Ezra Cornell's 1868 inaugural address.

[181] Ezra Cornell, "Letter to the Coming Man + Woman," Ithaca, NY, May 15, 1873, Sage Hall Cornerstone.

The dream of a school for everything predates Cornell. In 1777, Dr. Samuel Johnson responded to a dinner companion's mockery of Oxbridge scholars composing new verse in "dead languages" by opining "I would have verses in every language that there are the means of acquiring. […] I would have the world to be thus told, 'Here is a school where everything may be learnt.'"[182] To open learning to **"any study"** is a form of intellectual generosity that refuses to rank one form of understanding above another. But it is harder to practice than it sounds. That kind of intellectual generosity is built on a willingness to grant that an archaeologist's evidence and an engineer's evidence, or a poet's claim and a physicist's claim, are different instruments tuned to the same underlying drive to understand the world.

The committee found generosity not only in Cornell's motto but in its everyday activities. To explore a university's nooks and crannies is to rediscover a kind of wonder. The students arguing with both passion and respect in the political union; the faculty teaching an additional class to meet the needs of their students and their own insatiable curiosity; the staff filling two, or maybe three, roles to make sure course schedules, budgets, and promotion dossiers all move on time; the administrator pressed by a seemingly unending set of crises searching not for an expedient argument, but an intellectual one. These are the members of a university community working with a spirit of generosity toward each other and toward the institution.

Yet generosity has never been extended equally. The land beneath Cornell's campus, and a substantial share of the endowment that made its founding possible, came to the university through the dispossession of Indigenous nations, peoples that the university's founding generosity has never adequately reached. That dissonance between an aspiration and the real human cost of founding is not a case against elevated ambition. It is the case for holding the institution to its ideals in perpetuity, a reaffirmation of the founding motto's conditional mood. Aim low, organize around the outrage machine, and an institution will hit exactly the target it sets. Aim instead for generosity, for the unity of the head's rigor and the heart's welcome, and it will not always arrive. But it will sometimes, summoned by a practice that the committee calls deliberation.

Deliberation is generosity in action: enabled by the presence of real difference, honed by genuine engagement, and practiced as a regular intellectual disposition. Generosity is the reason that cultivating presence, engagement, and disposition is worth the trouble, and the standard against which we should be measured. A report of this size, written by eighteen scholars who did not agree on everything, could have chosen to resolve its differences by papering over them, smoothing eighteen voices into one neutral bureaucratic voice. This committee, I think wisely, chose otherwise. It made room for its members to write beyond the consensus, to articulate arguments that the collective document could only gesture towards.

---

[182] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1791), entry for Tuesday, April 15, 1777, https://americanliterature.com/author/james-boswell/book/the-life-of-samuel-johnson/newcastle-aug-11-1773.

That decision is itself a small act of generosity, an extension of "… any person … any study" inward to the committee's members. Can American universities renew their founding generosity and, in so doing, rekindle the conditions of deliberation? The committee's points of agreement, which make up the bulk of this report, suggest they must; our practices of disagreement, concentrated around the report's final chapter, suggest they will.

Appendix A. Committee on the Future of the American University

Co-Chairs

Ariel Avgar, David M. Cohen Professor of Labor Relations; Director of the Center for Applied Research on Work, School of Industrial and Labor Relations

Phoebe Sengers, Professor of Information Science, Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science; Professor of Science and Technology Studies, College of Arts and Sciences

Praveen Sethupathy, Professor and Chair, Department of Biomedical and Translational Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine

Adam T. Smith, Henry Scarborough Professor of Social Science, College of Arts and Sciences; Associate Dean and Secretary of the Faculty

Committee

Anthony Burrow, Ferris Family Associate Professor of Life Course Studies in the Department of Psychology; Director, Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research; Senior Associate Dean for Outreach and Extension, College of Human Ecology

Brian Crane, George W. and Grace L. Todd Professor in the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, College of Arts and Sciences; Director, Weill Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology; Professor, Howard Hughes Medical Institute-Cornell University Research Transfer

Milton Curry, Professor of Architecture; Senior Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives and Engagement, College of Architecture, Art, and Planning

Eve De Rosa, Mibs Martin Follett Professor in Human Ecology; Professor of Psychology, College of Human Ecology; former Dean of Faculty

Rick Geddes, Professor of Policy Analysis and Management in the Department of Economics, Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy

Durba Ghosh, Professor of History, College of Arts and Sciences

Drew Margolin, Associate Professor of Communication, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Sheila Olmstead, Professor, Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy; Atkinson Scholar and Senior Faculty Fellow, Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability

Frank Pasquale, Professor, Cornell Tech; Professor of Law, Cornell Law School

David Rand, Professor of Marketing and Management Communication, Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management in the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business; Professor of Information Science, Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science; Professor of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences

Jocelyn Rose, Barbara McClintock Professor and Director, School of Integrative Plant Science, Plant Biology Section, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Marcus Smolka, Professor of Molecular Biology and Genetics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Associate Vice Provost for Life Sciences, Office of Research and Innovation; Interim Director, Cornell Institute of Biotechnology and the Biotechnology Resource Center

Abraham Stroock, Gordon L. Dibble '50 Professor, Robert Frederick Smith School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, Cornell Duffield College of Engineering; Adjunct Professor, School of Integrative Plant Science, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Director, National Science Foundation Center for Research on Programmable Plant Systems

Julia Thom-Levy, Professor and Chair, Department of Physics, College of Arts and Sciences

Staff Support

Corey Ryan Earle, Project Coordinator for the Committee; Chief Administrator, Office of the Provost; Visiting Lecturer in American Studies, College of Arts and Sciences

Jessie Hilliker, Administrative Support for the Committee; Executive Assistant, Office of the Provost

Nicole Romero, Graduate Research Assistant for the Committee; Master's Student in Archaeology

Appendix B. Events Featuring, Hosted by, or Co-Hosted by the Committee

November 4, 2025: Debate on "Does AI Do More Harm Than Good in Higher Education?" hosted by the College Debates and Discourse Alliance, a partnership of Braver Angels, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), and BridgeUSA, co-sponsored with the Office of the Provost; Center for Dialogue and Pluralism; Departments of Computer Science, Information Science, and Science & Technology Studies; HxA Campus Community; and the Cornell Speech and Debate Society

November 18, 2025: Speaker John Tomasi (Heterodox Academy Inaugural President) on "The University at a Crossroads — and How We Can Build Cultures of Open Inquiry," co-sponsored with the Program on Freedom and Free Societies

November 24, 2025: Virtual Town Hall for University Staff on "The Future of the American University"

December 1, 2025: Virtual Town Hall for University Faculty on "The Future of the American University"

February 4, 2026: Weill Cornell Medicine Rogers Colloquium featuring Kavita Bala (University Provost) on "A Changing Landscape: Reflections on the Current State of Higher Education and the Future of the American University," hosted by Weill Cornell Medicine

February 10, 2026: Workshop on "The University of 2075: Reimagining the Role of Faculty in the Classroom," in collaboration Cara Robertus (Cornell InterDisciplinary Education Research postdoctoral fellow) and Francis Ledesma (Active Learning Initiative postdoctoral associate)

February 19, 2026: Panel Discussion with the Committee on the Future of the American University, hosted by Cornell Academics and Professors Emeriti (CAPE)

February 25, 2026: Graduate and Professional Student Forum and Workshop, co-hosted by the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly

February 26, 2026: Speaker Rush Holt, Jr. (Former Congressman and CEO Emeritus of the American Association for the Advancement of Science) for the Sevin Seminar on American Political Values on "The State of Science in the U.S.," co-sponsored with the West Campus House System, Center for Global Democracy, Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, and Carl Sagan Institute

February 26, 2026: Panel Discussion: "What Professors Don't Understand About Students Today," featuring Corey Ryan Earle (Visiting Lecturer and University Historian), Daisy Fan (Teaching Professor in Computer Science), Erica Kryst (Executive Director of Cornell Career Services), and Marla Love (Robert W. and Elizabeth C. Staley Dean of Students)

February 27, 2026: Speaker Davarian Baldwin (Raether Distinguished Professor of American Studies at Trinity College) on "The Campus as Planning Apparatus — Land Controls, Labor Management, and Local Governance," co-sponsored with the Department of City and Regional Planning, Einhorn Center for Community Engagement, and Society for the Humanities

March 7, 2026: Speaker Kavita Bala (University Provost) and Panel Discussion on "The Future of the American University," hosted by Cornell Family Fellows

March 12, 2026: Speaker Ted Mitchell (President of the American Council on Education) on "The Real Challenges of Higher Education," co-sponsored with the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy

April 16, 2026: Alumni Webinar with Speaker Kavita Bala (University Provost) on "The Future of the American University," hosted by Cornell International Alumni Programs

April 21, 2026: Town Hall for the College of Arts and Sciences on "The Future of the American University"

April 22, 2026: Town Hall for the College of Human Ecology on "The Future of the American University"

April 24, 2026: Town Hall for the School of Industrial and Labor Relations on "The Future of the American University"

April 24, 2026: Town Hall for Cornell Law School on "The Future of the American University"

April 28, 2026: Open Debate on "The Future of the American University," hosted by the Cornell Political Union

April 29, 2026: Town Hall for the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning on "The Future of the American University"

April 30, 2026: Town Hall for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences on "The Future of the American University"

May 1, 2026: Town Hall for the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business on "The Future of the American University"

May 6, 2026: Town Hall for Cornell Tech on "The Future of the American University"

May 7, 2026: Town Hall for the Cornell David A. Duffield College of Engineering on "The Future of the American University"

May 7, 2026: Town Hall for the Graduate School, School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, Student and Campus Life, and Enrollment and Undergraduate Education on "The Future of the American University"

May 11, 2026: Alumni Webinar with Kavita Bala (University Provost) and co-chairs of the Committee on the Future of the American University, hosted by Office of Alumni Affairs

May 12, 2026: Town Hall for the Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science on "The Future of the American University"

May 13, 2026: Town Hall for Academic Innovation, AI Strategy, Budget and Planning, Facilities and Campus Services, Human Resources, Information Technology, International Affairs, Johnson Museum of Art, University Library, Research and Innovation, and University Relations on "The Future of the American University"

May 15, 2026: Town Hall for the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy on "The Future of the American University"

May 18, 2026: Town Hall for the College of Veterinary Medicine on "The Future of the American University"

May 29, 2026: Academic Citizenship Syllabus Workshop, co-hosted with the American Enterprise Institute's Center for the Future of the American University

June 5, 2026: Cornell Reunion Weekend Olin Lecture Panel Discussion on "The Future of the American University," moderated by Kavita Bala (University Provost) with Steven Knapp (former president of George Washington University and president and CEO of Carnegie Museums), Eduardo Peñalver (outgoing president of Seattle University and incoming president of Georgetown University), and Wendy Raymond (president of Haverford College), hosted by the Office of Alumni Affairs

September 2, 2026: Town Hall for Weill Cornell Medicine on "The Future of the American University"

Appendix C. Publications by Committee Members

To inform and engage the Cornell community, committee members authored a regular column in *The Cornell Daily Sun*, Cornell University's independent student-run newspaper. Committee members also authored op-eds in other publications.

Sengers, Phoebe. "Join Us in Imagining the Future of Higher Education." *Cornell Daily Sun*, November 10, 2025. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2025/11/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-join-us-in-imagining-the-future-of-higher-education.

Smith, Adam T. "The Crisis of Trust." *Cornell Daily Sun*, November 19, 2025. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2025/11/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-the-crisis-of-trust.

Sethupathy, Praveen. "As Higher Ed Looks to the Future, It's Vital to Understand the Past." *Cornellians*, November 25, 2025. https://alumni.cornell.edu/cornellians/sethupathy-higher-ed-history.

Sengers, Phoebe. "We Must Expand the Timeline of AI in Higher Education." *Cornell Daily Sun*, December 4, 2025. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2025/12/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-we-must-expand-the-timeline-of-ai-in-higher-education.

Avgar, Ariel, and Praveen Sethupathy. "A Matter of Expectations: Universities and Their Evolving Relationship with Government and the Public." *Cornell Daily Sun*, January 22, 2026. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/01/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-a-matter-of-expectations-universities-and-their-evolving-relationship-with-government-and-the-public.

Margolin, Drew. "Treat University Critics Like Reviewer #2." *Cornell Daily Sun*, February 18, 2026. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/02/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-treat-university-critics-like-reviewer-2.

Geddes, Rick. "Universities Need to Take a Human-Centered Approach." *Cornell Daily Sun*, March 5, 2026. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/03/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-universities-need-to-take-a-human-centered-approach.

Avgar, Ariel, Anthony Burrow, Corey Ryan Earle, Rick Geddes, David Rand, and Jocelyn Rose. "The Only Land-Grant Ivy." *Cornell Daily Sun*, March 23, 2026. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/03/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-the-only-land-grant-ivy.

Committee on the Future of the American University. "Seeking Feedback on Our Future." *Cornell Daily Sun*, April 23, 2026. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/04/future-of-the-american-university-seeking-feedback-on-our-future.

Avgar, Ariel, Anthony Burrow, Rick Geddes, David Rand, and Jocelyn Rose. "Why Cornell's Land Grant Mission Must Define Its Future." *Cornell Daily Sun*, May 11, 2026. https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2026/05/committee-on-the-future-of-the-american-university-why-cornell-s-land-grant-mission-must-define-its-future.

Smith, Adam T. "Academic Civics: What Does It Mean to Be a Citizen of Your University?" *Inside Higher Ed*, July 8, 2026. https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2026/07/08/academic-civics-and-future-university-opinion.

Appendix D. Stakeholder Engagement

The committee extends its gratitude to the more than 6,000 stakeholders who engaged with our work through events, meetings, focus groups, and emails, sharing time, expertise, guidance, and perspectives on higher education. These include faculty, staff, students, alumni, and trustees, as well as parents, higher education leaders, and government and policy leaders at the federal, state, and local levels. We especially thank the individuals, groups, and communities listed below for their input. Their inclusion in this list does not necessarily imply their agreement with the conclusions of the committee.

External Advisory Board

- Danielle Allen, James Bryant Conant University Professor; Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation; and Director of the Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University
- David Brooks, Presidential Senior Fellow at Yale Jackson School of Global Affairs; Staff Writer at *The Atlantic*
- Francis Collins, Former Director of the National Institutes of Health; Founder and Senior Fellow at BioLogos
- Yuval Levin, Senior Fellow; Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Public Policy; Director of Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies; and Editor in Chief, *National Affairs*, at the American Enterprise Institute
- Ted Mitchell, President of the American Council on Education

Cornell University Institutional Assemblies and Governance Bodies

- Board of Trustees
- Employee Assembly
- Faculty Senate
- Graduate and Professional Student Assembly
- Student Assembly
- University Assembly

Cornell University Employee Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of the American University

- Zora Blitz, Administrative Manager, Computational Biology, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- Bethany Dixon, Academic Human Resources Business Partner, College of Arts and Sciences
- Mark Fetzko, Senior Grant and Contract Officer, Industry Team, Office of Sponsored Programs
- Jeramy Kruser, Systems Administrator, Cornell Information Technologies
- Wendy Treat, Program Coordinator for Professional, Clinical, and International Services,

College of Veterinary Medicine; Chair, Employee Assembly

Cornell University Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GPSA) Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of the American University

- Nicholas Brennan, President, GPSA
- Irene Gatimi, Student Advocacy Committee Chairperson, GPSA
- Anurag Koyyada, Finance Commission Chairperson, GPSA
- Yuqing Wu, Physical Sciences Representative, GPSA

Undergraduate Education Teaching Advisory Panel

- Jim Baker, Lecturer in Physics, College of Arts and Sciences
- Erica Dawson, Assistant Dean and Director of the Selander Center for Engineering Leadership, Cornell Duffield Engineering
- Elizabeth L. Fox, Associate Professor of Practice in Public and Ecosystem Health, College of Veterinary Medicine
- Kyle Harms, Associate Teaching Professor of Information Science, Cornell Bowers
- Doug McKee, Senior Lecturer in Economics, College of Arts and Sciences
- Kate Navickas, Cornell Writing Centers Director; Senior Lecturer, John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, College of Arts and Sciences
- Maria Park, Associate Professor of Art, College of Architecture, Art, and Planning
- Jeffrey Perry, Senior Lecturer in Global Development, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- Chris Schaffer, Meinig Family Professor of Engineering, Cornell Duffield Engineering; Dean of Faculty
- Elliot Shapiro, Senior Lecturer, Jewish Studies Program; Director of Writing in the Majors, John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, College of Arts and Sciences

Ph.D. Education Advisory Panel

- Benjamin Anderson, Associate Professor of History of Art and Classics, College of Arts and Sciences; Graduate School General Committee Humanities Representative
- Jason Kahabka, Associate Dean for Administration, Graduate School
- Vida Maralani, Associate Professor of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences; Graduate School General Committee Social Sciences Representative
- Robert Weiss, Senior Associate Dean, Graduate School; Professor of Molecular Genetics, Department of Biomedical and Translational Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine

Master's Education Advisory Panel

- Kathryn Caggiano, Associate Dean for M.Eng. Programs; Professor of Practice in Operations Research and Information Engineering, Cornell Duffield Engineering
- Maria Fitzpatrick, Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Professor of Economics

and Public Policy, Cornell Brooks School
- Gen Meredith, Associate Director, Cornell Public Health Program; Associate Professor of Public and Ecosystem Health, College of Veterinary Medicine
- Timothy Wu, Lecturer in Microbiology and Immunology, College of Veterinary Medicine

Professional Education Advisory Panel
- Jodi Korich, Associate Clinical Professor of Clinical Sciences; Associate Dean for Education, College of Veterinary Medicine
- Paul Krause, Vice Provost for External Education; Executive Director, eCornell
- Jens Ohlin, Allan R. Tessler Dean and Professor of Law, Cornell Law School
- Kate Walsh, E.M. Statler Professor and former Dimond Family Dean, Cornell Nolan School

Research and Scholarship Advisory Panel
- Paula Cohen, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education; Director, Cornell Reproductive Sciences Center; Professor of Genetics, Department of Biomedical and Translational Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine
- Nicki Dell, Associate Professor of Information Science, Cornell Tech and Cornell Bowers
- Maria Fitzpatrick, Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Professor of Economics and Public Policy, Cornell Brooks School
- Tiffany Fleming, Director of Research Development, Office of Research and Innovation, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- Adam Seth Litwin, Associate Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations; Director of Graduate Studies, ILR School
- Steve Marschner, Professor of Computer Science; Associate Dean for Research, Cornell Bowers
- Verity Platt, Professor of Classics, College of Arts and Sciences; Director of the Humanities Scholars Program
- Lois Pollack, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies; John Edson Sweet Memorial Professor of Engineering, Cornell Duffield Engineering
- Adrienne Roder, Professor of Plant Biology, School of Integrative Plant Science, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Weill Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology
- Jenny Sabin, Chair of the Department of Design Tech; Director of Graduate Studies in Design Technology; Arthur L. and Isabel B. Wiesenberger Professor in Architecture, College of Architecture, Art, and Planning
- Suzanne Shu, John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing; Faculty and Research Director of the Behavioral Economics and Decision Research; Dean of Faculty and Research, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
- Nancy Wells, Senior Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education; Professor of Human Centered Design, College of Human Ecology

Public Impact and Community Engagement Advisory Panel

- Linda Barrington, Senior Extension Associate; Executive Director, Institute for Compensation Studies; Associate Dean for Strategy and Societal Impact, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
- Kristen Carter Elmore, Associate Director of the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research; Community-Engaged Learning Coordinator, College of Human Ecology
- Deborah Estrin, Associate Dean for Impact; Robert V. Tishman '37 Professor, Cornell Tech
- H. Oliver Gao, Director, Systems Engineering Program; Director, Center for Transportation, Environment, and Community Health; Associate Director, Cornell Brooks Center for Infrastructure; Howard Simpson 1942 Professor of Engineering, Cornell Duffield Engineering
- Monica Yant Kinney, Associate Vice President for University Relations
- Charlie Kruzansky, Associate Vice President for State Relations
- Betsy Lamb, Ornamental IPM Coordinator, Cornell Integrated Pest Management; Adjunct Assistant Professor of Horticulture, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- David Lodge, former Francis J. DiSalvo Director of the Cornell Atkinson Center
- Beth Lyon, Associate Dean for Experiential Education; Clinical Professor of Law; Clinical Program Director, Cornell Law School
- Jenny Weil Malatras, Executive Director, Cornell University Cooperative Extension-NYC
- Gen Meredith, Associate Director, Cornell Public Health Program; Associate Professor of Public and Ecosystem Health, College of Veterinary Medicine
- Dianne Miller, Senior Director of Federal Relations
- Zoë Nelson, Director of State Relations
- Ian Owens, Louis Agassiz Fuertes Director, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology
- Basil Safi, Executive Director, Einhorn Center for Community Engagement
- Tom Schryver, Executive Director, Center for Regional Economic Advancement; Visiting Lecturer; David J. BenDaniel Faculty Advisor for the BR Ventures Fund
- Rob Scott, Executive Director, Cornell Prison Education Program
- Lara Skinner, Executive Director, Climate Jobs Institute, School of Industrial and Labor Relations
- Julie Suarez, Associate Dean of Land-Grant Affairs, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Director of Translational Research Programs, Graduate School
- Jennifer Tavares, Director of Community Relations
- Andy Turner, Associate Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Director, Cornell Cooperative Extension

Other Cornell University Organizations and Communities that Provided Ongoing Input

- Cornell Political Union
- Meinig Family Cornell National Scholars Freshman Forum Participants
- Quill and Dagger Senior Honor Society

- Students enrolled in AMST 2001: The First American University
- Undergraduate Education Associate Deans Council
- University Student Services Leads

To better understand perspectives beyond the university, the committee conducted broad outreach and consultation with external stakeholders, including conversations with the following individuals and organizations.

Academic Leaders

- Julia Adams, Margaret H. Marshall Professor of Sociology at Yale University and Co-Chair of the Yale University Committee on Trust in Higher Education
- Musa al-Gharbi, Assistant Professor of Communication and Journalism at Stony Brook University
- Davarian Baldwin, Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor of American Studies at Trinity College
- Ryan Calo, Virginia and Prentice Bloedel Professor, Co-Founder of the Center for an Informed Public, Chair of the Technology and Society Task Force, and Member of the Strategic Planning Committee at University of Washington
- Michael Crow, President of Arizona State University
- Ron Daniels, President of Johns Hopkins University
- Jim Davis, President of University of Texas at Austin
- Beverly Gage, John Lewis Gaddis Professor of History at Yale University and Co-Chair of the Yale University Committee on Trust in Higher Education
- David Guston, Associate Vice Provost for Discovery, Engagement and Outcomes; Founding Director of the School for the Future of Innovation in Society; and Foundation Professor at Arizona State University
- William Inboden, Executive Vice President and Provost of the University of Texas at Austin
- Rakesh Khurana, Professor of Sociology, Marvin Bower Professor of Leadership Development, and former Dean of Harvard College at Harvard University
- Steven Knapp, former President of George Washington University; President and CEO of Carnegie Museums
- Sally Kornbluth, President of Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Jonathan Lash, former President of Hampshire College
- Maud Mandel, President of Williams College
- Martha McCaughey, Director, Free Expression, Intellectual Freedom, and Constructive Dialogue Program, University of Wyoming
- Eduardo Peñalver, President of Georgetown University
- Wendy Raymond, President of Haverford College
- David Skorton, President and CEO of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)

- Meghan Sullivan, Wilsey Family College Professor of Philosophy and Founding Director the Institute for Ethics and the Common Good at the University of Notre Dame
- Molly Worthen, Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Former and Current Federal Government Leaders

- David Cleary, Principal at theGROUP; former Staff Director for the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
- Tom Hammond, Senior Policy Advisor to the Chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
- Rush Holt, Jr., former U.S. Representative for New Jersey's 12th Congressional District in U.S. Congress; former CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS); former executive publisher of the *Science* family of journals
- Nicholas Kent, Under Secretary of Education in the U.S. Department of Education
- Robert Moran, Principal at Bose Public Affairs Group; former Senior Policy Advisor to the U.S. Undersecretary of Education
- Jonathan Pidluzny, Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Programs in the U.S. Department of Education

New York State Leaders

- Brian Bartlett, Associate Deputy Director for the New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee
- Christina Bennett, Associate Deputy Director for the New York State Assembly Office of Research and Public Policy
- Tyler Carey, Senior Associate Counsel for the New York State Assembly Minority's Counsel's Office
- Maria Fernandez, New York State Deputy Secretary of Education
- Robert Megna, President of the Rockefeller Institute of Government at SUNY
- Heather Mulligan, President of the Business Council of New York
- William Murphy, New York State Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education
- Olivia Noonan, New York State Assembly Minority Legislative Analyst
- Ben Verschueren, Executive Director, NYSTAR (New York State Foundation for Science, Technology, and Innovation)
- David Young, Deputy Director for the New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee

Tompkins County, New York, Government and Civic Leaders

- George Ferrari, President of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County
- Kurt Foreman, President of Ithaca Area Economic Development
- Rod Howe, Supervisor of the Town of Ithaca
- Korsah Kofi Akumfi, County Administrator of Tompkins County
- Rob Montana, Vice President of the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce

- C.J. Randall, Director of Planning of the City of Ithaca
- Dominick Recckio, Acting City Manager of the City of Ithaca
- Ben Sandberg, Executive Director of The History Center in Tompkins County
- Mike Sigler, Tompkins County Legislator
- Clark Young, Owner of Uncle Marty's, Collegetown

Think Tanks, Foundations, Institutes, and Consultants

- Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
    - Josh Greenberg, Program Director
- American Council for Education
    - Nick Anderson, Executive Director of Strategic Communications
    - Jesse O'Connell, Chief Advancement Officer
- American Council of Trustees and Alumni
    - Doug Sprei, Vice President for Campus Partnerships
- American Enterprise Institute
    - Beth Akers, Senior Fellow
    - Frederick Hess, Senior Fellow and Director, Education Policy Studies
    - Benjamin Storey, Senior Fellow; Ravenel Curry Chair in Civic Thought; Codirector, Center for the Future of the American University
    - Jenna Silber Storey, Senior Fellow; Ravenel Curry Chair in Civic Thought; Codirector, Center for the Future of the American University
- BridgeUSA
    - Manu Meel, Co-Founder and CEO
- Brookings Institution
    - Jonathan Rauch, Senior Fellow, Governance Studies
- Cato Institute
    - Allan Carey, Senior Director, Educational and Talent Programs
    - Scott Lincicome, Vice President, General Economics and Stiefel Trade Policy Center
    - Erec Smith, Research Fellow
- Data & Society Research Institute
    - Ranjit Singh, Director of AI on the Ground Program
- EducationCounsel
    - Art Coleman, Founding Partner
    - Jasmine Jett, Senior Policy Associate
    - Bethany Little, Managing Principal
- Heterodox Academy
    - Justin McBrayer, Director of University Partnerships
    - John Tomasi, Inaugural President
- Institute for Citizens & Scholars
    - Beverly Sanford, Executive Vice President, Chief Program & Fellowships Officer

    - Rajiv Vinnakota, President
- National Science Foundation
    - Ellen Zegura, Acting Assistant Director for the Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering
- Progressive Policy Institute
    - Richard Kahlenberg, Director of Housing Policy and the American Identity Project
    - Paul Weinstein, Jr., Senior Fellow

Authors and Journalists

- Cory Doctorow, Author and A.D. White Professor-at-Large
- Emma Green, Staff Writer with *The New Yorker*

Appendix E. Methodology

AI-assisted analysis of stakeholder data

Analysis of stakeholder data was led by committee co-chair Phoebe Sengers, professor in the Departments of Information Science and Science & Technology Studies. The analysis proceeded in two rounds, tied to the committee's two major phases of engagement. It was based on the committee's collected documents of stakeholder input, including meeting notes, emails from stakeholders, and survey responses. The AI processing that supported the analysis was carried out using Claude Code, Anthropic's coding agent, running the Opus 4.6 model.

The first round of analysis, conducted in March 2026 at the close of the initial stakeholder input period, covered 210 documents. Each document was first coded to identify the stakeholder group it represented. Within Cornell, this taxonomy included trustees, administrators, deans, faculty (distinguishing tenure-track from research, teaching, and extension faculty), staff, postdoctoral researchers, and both undergraduate and graduate and professional students. Beyond Cornell, it recognized university leadership at peer institutions, Cornell alumni, faculty at other universities, journalists, staff at think tanks and NGOs, federal officials (distinguishing Congress members and staff from the executive branch), state officials, state-related stakeholders, and parents.

The analysis also drew on a nested topic taxonomy. The committee co-chairs initially developed a structured topic list based on the committee's charge, adding issues raised in stakeholder meetings. An LLM-assisted scan then supplemented it by identifying emergent topics from the stakeholder documents that had not yet been captured. The additional topics were then placed (by humans) in an appropriate area in the overall taxonomy. The resulting round-one thematic taxonomy comprised 207 topics of varying granularity.

Each document was preprocessed into plain text, annotated with human-supplied metadata, and — in the case of meeting notes — separated into stakeholder speech and committee members' own commentary, before being read by a Claude agent. For each document, an agent produced a structured summary, which included an overall synthesis of the orientation of the document and key concerns mentioned, points of likely convergence with other stakeholder groups, notable absences relative to what one might expect given the stakeholder's role, and topics discussed that fell outside the existing taxonomy. The agent then identified which topics the document touched on, based on the full topic taxonomy. For each of these topics, the agent flagged the key points made, problems identified, solutions proposed, values and concerns raised, and fears and threats named, along with who the stakeholder felt should change and any resonant quotations.

In order to structure the output of the analysis for committee use while producing the report, Sengers identified nineteen high-level topic areas that were relevant to the emerging report, and

mapped the full topic taxonomy onto them. For each of these areas, a Claude agent collected arguments that had been made and proposed solutions. It clustered the arguments to identify common themes where there was significant overlap between the arguments, as well as areas of significant tension between arguments; Claude also determined algorithmically which documents supported each argument and which distinct stakeholder groups they represented.

The identification of common themes required support for that argument from at least four documents (or 10 percent of the documents associated with that topic, whichever was fewer), drawn from at least three distinct stakeholder groups (or 30 percent of the groups represented in that topic, again whichever was fewer), with no contradicting position on the same topic meeting the same threshold. Where a contradicting position existed but fell short of that threshold, it was noted in this report as a dissent from an otherwise common theme; where two or more opposing positions each independently met the threshold, the topic was instead characterized as a significant tension, reflecting a genuine split in collected stakeholder data. The results were compiled into an HTML summary, including links back to source documents to find further detail, for committee members to consult while drafting the text of both the preliminary and full reports. It was also compiled into a summary of the principal common themes and significant tensions between arguments. This summary was then manually audited against the underlying documents to confirm its accuracy.

The second round of AI-assisted analysis was conducted in July 2026. That work added the additional 190 documents received in response to the release of the committee's preliminary frameworks in April 2026. The topic taxonomy was expanded to capture issues that had emerged since round one, and the topics were regrouped into fifty-six categories tracking the anticipated structure of this final report. As before, the results were compiled into an HTML summary for easy reference. A second document was distributed to the full committee, organizing the feedback for each section of the preliminary report and enabling targeted revisions of this text in response to specific feedback. The descriptions of what we heard from stakeholders in this report draw on the complete dataset spanning both phases of engagement.

The committee's method for analyzing stakeholder feedback has real limits. Although we have notes for the vast majority of stakeholder meetings, we do not have them for every stakeholder meeting that took place. The data are heterogeneous; notes were taken by different committee members without a standard format, and meetings ranged from single-person conversations to town halls with hundreds of participants. Where a meeting involved multiple stakeholder groups, the views expressed in it were attributed to all groups present, since it was generally not possible to determine who said what. And while the analysis was extensively audited by hand, the scope of the underlying material makes exhaustive auditing impractical, and some errors of interpretation may remain.

Appendix F. Disruptors Identified by Stakeholders

AI-assisted analysis was used to identify and cluster stakeholder-identified disruptors to universities. The analysis was done based on data from the overall analysis of collected stakeholder input described in Appendix E. It specifically focused on the problems that stakeholders had identified. First, a Claude agent roughly clustered stakeholder problem statements to identify candidate themes for disruptors. Then, it systematically examined all problem statements to identify whether they fit in that list and produce new categories for the problem statements that did not fit. This list was human-audited to verify each category was actually a disruptor (some were overall themes like "governance," or conditions that have likely long been true, like "organizational rigidity"). For the categories that had been misidentified, the problem statements were reexamined to see if they were suggestive of other disruptors.

Among the major areas of disruption identified by stakeholders, two of the three from the provost's initial charge to the committee were also the top two most frequently raised by stakeholders (decline in public trust and rapid technological change). The third disruption in the committee's charge, the erosion of federal support, was in the top ten. Eight other disruptors raised by stakeholders were determined by the committee to be closely related to the original three disruptors:

- Decline in public trust
    - Doubts about the value proposition of university education
    - Rising sticker price of university education
    - Perception of elitism and inaccessibility
    - Lack of clear and transparent messaging to the public
- Rapid technological change (e.g., AI)
    - Transforming work landscape and labor market
    - Crisis of student attention related to social media and related technology
- Erosion in federal relations
    - Incursions on academic freedom
    - Threats to funding for research and scholarship

An additional sixteen disruptors were raised by stakeholders:

- Lack of viewpoint diversity and productive disagreement on campus
- Student mental health crisis including but also beyond the influence of technology
- Erosion of shared governance
- Level of investment in the humanities and liberal arts relative to STEM
- Campus diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives — backlash and concern about retreat
- Competition with alternative credentialing mechanisms including trade schools and online courses
- Student demographic cliff — projected major decline in student enrollment

- Campus protests and the response they engendered both on and off campus
- Immigration and related policies posing risk to the international student pipeline
- National security concerns pertaining to international collaboration
- Challenges with the public-good model of higher education funding
- Broken academic publishing system
- Erosion of trust within the university
- Administrative bloat and corporatization
- A separation between tenure-track faculty and research, teaching, and extension faculty; and between faculty and staff
- Mission creep and loss of focus

Appendix G. The Impact Agenda: Compiled Recommendations

In this appendix, we compile the specific recommendations from throughout the report. Background and detail on each are included in their respective chapters, although many are relevant to multiple missions of the university. These recommendations are directed at Cornell University, but we believe many will have relevance for other institutions.

Chapter 3. Undergraduate Education

- Promote sound judgment through whole-person education.
- Integrate the learning environment across classroom and campus life.
- Prepare students to exercise judgment about and beyond AI across the curriculum.
- Provide a hands-on, project-based education at a human scale.
- Educate through intentional development of human relationships.
- Show, not (only) tell — model the capacities that students need.
- Rethink teaching supports and incentives.
- Reclaim technology use and non-use as an institutional decision.
- Design spaces and artifacts for transformative education.

Admissions

- Recast the public description of what admission requires around preparedness, educational match, and responsibility, rather than maximal accomplishment.
- Report not only the factors considered in admissions, but their empirical effects.
- Justify admissions criteria against evidence and publish the evidence.
- Address persistent concerns about special-case admissions.
- Confront the competitive escalation of credentials directly, not just its symptoms.

Price and cost

- Establish a task force to develop a new tuition model at Cornell.
- Prioritize transparency and predictability in pricing and financial aid models.
- Develop a clear internal understanding of financial models and factors driving price and cost.
- Work with policymakers to reduce regulatory costs.

Chapter 4. Research and Scholarship

Faculty and staff

- Support all forms of scholarship – fundamental and translational, creative and technical, individual and team-based.
- Incentivize entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Reduce regulatory burden.
- Assess department structure for research.

Public

- Reassess tenure and promotion criteria for those involved in public engagement work.
- Create a central fund for named public engagement fellowships (e.g., "Sagan Fellow").

- Establish professorships of public impact in every college.
- Empower colleges to focus on fostering public engagement in the scholarly processes and outputs of its faculty and staff.
- Expand dedicated seed funds for research projects developed in collaboration with local community members.
- Create a "funding boost" program to incentivize faculty members to develop and sustain public engagement efforts.
- Create a course for postdoctoral researchers and graduate students across all disciplines to learn about public engagement through practicums.
- Create more opportunities to bring members of the local community to campus and engage with the research and creative activity of faculty and staff.
- Create an "ask a researcher" platform.

Undergraduate students

- Significantly expand and create new undergraduate research and creative practice fellowships.
- Enhance curricular integration of research.

Graduate students

- Enhance institutional support for research training.
- Create named research fellowships and fellowship programs through external partnerships.
- Expand programs for research mentoring partnerships.

Postdoctoral researchers

- Expand opportunities for more flexible postdoctoral positions.
- Bolster personnel and resource support for the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at Cornell.

Research funding

- Champion federal and state research investments.
- Establish centralized internal funding for moonshot teams for especially bold ideas and initiatives that advance fundamental knowledge, encourage novel human expressions, and/or solve pressing and emerging societal challenges.
- Establish a large discovery and creativity university foundation operating on dedicated investment vehicles.
- Develop or expand external partnerships — for example, with research institutes such as focused research organizations (FROs) — to address complex questions.
- Establish structures that empower coordination across colleges to achieve shared goals.
- Set up a consortium of research universities that would create a cross-university review panel or study section that solicits proposals and makes awards.
- Reassess research-related tenure and promotion guidelines.
- Advance opportunities to pivot or adapt research goals.

Artificial intelligence

- Develop a center for innovative and responsible use of AI, in coordination with a new unified computing infrastructure.

- Build a robust two-way AI communication pipeline with communities across the state.

Research accountability

- Promote productive disagreement in the scholarly process.

Academic publishing

- Invest directly in publishing capacity within the university's control, redirecting resources currently flowing to commercial publishers toward university press and open-access journal infrastructure.

Chapter 5. Public Impact and Community Engagement

- Revisit rewards and recognition associated with public-impact work.
- Develop best practices for recognizing public impact contributions in tenure and promotion.
- Establish a coordination mechanism for public impact and engagement.
- Create a public impact advisory council to work with and advise leadership.
- Increase the use of community advisory research committees when public impact is intended or likely.
- Expand local university-community relationships as a laboratory for two-way public engagement.
- Conduct an internal impact inventory.
- Leverage public impact infrastructure to support communities affected by technological disruption.
- Utilize corporate engagement to support public impact infrastructure.
- Create opportunities for informal connections and relationships between the university and community members.

Chapter 6. Graduate and Professional Education

- Broaden doctoral and postdoctoral training for a more uncertain job market.
- Reconsider the dissertation and capstone.
- Develop a program in academic civics for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers.
- Bring the cultivation of judgment explicitly into stated learning outcomes.
- Build cross-field curricular and co-curricular infrastructure to improve training in pedagogy.
- Sustain teaching capacity by prioritizing graduate student instructional support.
- Reform the postdoctoral stage.
- Govern master's program growth.
- Calibrate graduate tuition by program against market analysis.
- Build real off-ramps into graduate training.
- Explore a subscription model for lifelong learning.
- Fund graduate community building and mentorship.
- Build out career infrastructure.

- Build inter-field and inter-institutional mechanisms for cohort building.
- Establish a portfolio of stackable microcredentials.
- Extend the university's investment in thick relationships.
- Diversify the international pipeline.
- Expand global recruitment with explicit outreach plans for underrepresented regions and countries.
- Assess new Global Hubs locations.
- Conduct a full strategic and financial review of the costs and benefits of greater centralization across advanced study.

Chapter 7. Academic Civics, Collaborative Governance, and Institutional Structures

Faculty tracks and tenure

- Raise or remove the five-year cap on contracts for research, teaching, and extension faculty.
- Elevate visibility of research, teaching, and extension faculty.
- Articulate explicitly the obligations that accompany tenure.

Boards of trustees

- Undertake a full evaluation of the balance between constituent and board-appointed trustee seats.
- Add trustee seats for young alumni, the Ithaca community, and outside senior faculty from peer institutions.
- Loosen constraints on what constituent trustees may report back to their constituencies.

Collaborative governance

- Strengthen committee vetting of resolutions.
- Restore annual, bidirectional all-faculty meetings.

Academic civics

- Redefine service as civic participation.
- Build a sustained, continuous academic civics curriculum.
- Establish the Future American University Forum.

University structures

- Develop processes for enhanced coordination across positions facing related challenges.
- Enhance the University Assembly's role in shared governance.

Chapter 8. Deliberation

- Convene a full community conversation on how to bolster the conditions for deliberation at Cornell.
- Integrate an ethical, human-centered approach to AI with a concentrated effort to enhance deliberation.

Appendix H. The Future of the American University Forum: A Proposal

The questions raised by Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University 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.

The central lesson of the committee's work is that universities can no longer afford to defer self-examination until a moment of crisis. The pressures on university operations are too great, the stakes of failure too high, and the real opportunities for innovation too exciting to fall back into the studied isolation of the ivory tower. The committee has mapped the pressures confronting higher education, examined their impact on the university's core missions, and identified cross-cutting challenges and opportunities that require institution-wide responses. But the real challenge lies in transforming the committee's vision into grassroots culture change that strengthens the American university in general and Cornell in particular.

The Case for an Institutional Home

The university is uniquely capable of undertaking rigorous, disinterested inquiry into its own purposes and structures. It has not always lived up to that possibility but, at its best, it is the premier societal institution to do so. We must work to harness that potential. That is itself a remarkable and thoroughly underutilized capacity. A forum dedicated to extending the analytic, future-oriented vision of our committee would harness the university's intellectual tools (research, analysis, collaboration through dialogue, communication, and experimentation) and turn them on the institution itself. This is the kind of deliberative work that produces genuine innovation rather than *ad hoc* improvisation.

The questions the committee has raised around judgment, institutional structures and incentives, and the relationship between knowledge, creative output, and public life are serious intellectual questions that deserve sustained engagement. A dedicated institutional home creates the conditions for that treatment to be substantial, cumulative, and consequential.

The pedagogical argument is equally compelling. Students learn from curricula but they also learn from the customs of the institutions they join. A university that models continuous self-examination and a love of learning — one that asks hard questions about its own purpose and performance — teaches something about intellectual life that no course can fully capture. Graduate students and undergraduates drawn into the FAU Forum's work would be formed by that participation: learning to exercise the kind of judgment the committee places at the center of a genuine education, in a context where the stakes are real and the questions are open. Postdoctoral researchers who engage with the FAU Forum will take with them to their next position the ethos and practices of such a center, and in this way, they serve as ambassadors and leaders of this approach to institutions across the world, who may in turn develop their own versions of the FAU Forum.

The institutions best positioned to make a convincing case for their public value are those that demonstrate they take their public responsibilities seriously enough to examine them openly. A forum that produces visible, rigorous, publicly accessible work on the future of higher education turns Cornell's self-examination into a national contribution. It offers a model for other universities and institutions about meeting this moment with intellectual seriousness rather than defensiveness.

Finally, the FAU Forum offers a distinctive approach to pluralism. Some universities have responded to the current moment by creating institutes of civic thought that aspire to augment intellectual pluralism. But civic centers run the risk of becoming just another silo in the university. The FAU Forum aims to take a different and more genuine academic approach. It creates space for an expansive civic project that welcomes diverse perspectives; models the kind of dialogue, deliberation, curiosity, and judgment that democratic life requires; and expands the range of evidence-based ideas and claims that can find a serious home on campus.

The committee's work has opened a wide field of inquiry, and the questions it has pursued barely scratch the surface of what a sustained program of research could unearth: the changing relationship between American universities and the global ecosystem of higher education; the future of the information commons; the deep questions about academic community and belonging that stakeholders raised repeatedly; the transformation of college athletics in the age of name, image, and likeness policies. These are the kinds of consequential, complex, institutionally embedded questions that a research university is uniquely equipped to examine, and that the committee could not possibly have addressed in any depth.

Perhaps the most tangible asset the committee has created is a community of people — faculty and staff — who have done serious thinking, writing, and discussion about the institution they inhabit and found it genuinely rewarding. The FAU Forum would build on that energy by creating the incentive structures that make continued engagement attractive and sustainable: course releases, research support, convening resources, and the intellectual companionship of a working group committed to a common problem. The goal is not simply to retain the participants in a single committee but to establish a broad-based and durable culture of institutional self-examination — one that draws in new voices over time and becomes a recognized and valued part of what it means to be a scholar at Cornell. The FAU Forum would be Cornell's answer to that challenge: an institution serious enough about its own future to examine it continuously, rigorously, and in public.

Cornell's Opportunity

Cornell is unusually well-positioned for this work. As the "first American university," Cornell embodies in its structure the tensions that define higher education. The committee's central conceit was that this institutional heterogeneity is not a liability but both an asset and an obligation. Cornell has already demonstrated that it can lead higher education. The committee

process itself — its scope, its seriousness, its openness to genuine self-examination — is evidence of institutional will. The FAU Forum would channel that into something durable.

What would distinguish the FAU Forum from the growing number of bodies that study and comment on higher education is its position inside the institution it examines. The FAU Forum would create a setting where people actually doing the work of universities can develop thoughtful ways to do it better, respond to new pressures, experiment with novel solutions, and recommend best practices to peer institutions. No external center can run an experiment in curriculum reform, pilot a new model of faculty governance, or test an alternative approach to academic publishing at a research university of Cornell's scale and complexity. The FAU Forum can because it is not studying the university from a distance, it is developing it from within.

While the FAU Forum's activities would be grounded in robust, thoughtful, and collaborative scholarship, it would not be a research center whose activities would be structured around the need to produce publications for particular disciplinary audiences. Instead, the capacities of the university for collaborative problem-solving, rigorous analysis, and thoughtful debate would be harnessed to improve the workings of the university itself.

Cornell also offers a distinctive opportunity for the FAU Forum to serve as a hub for work already happening across the university but currently dispersed and disconnected. The Forum could provide an institutional collaborator for initiatives like Cornell's Center for Dialogue and Pluralism, which cultivates precisely the skills of engaged listening, perspective-taking, and productive disagreement that lie at the heart of our committee's vision. It could serve as a natural university-wide co-host for visiting faculty like the professors for public understanding that the College of Arts and Sciences is developing alongside professors of practice from across the colleges, bringing together practitioners and scholars around questions of how knowledge reaches and serves the public. And it could convene the broader conversations that Cornell's position makes possible: bringing together stakeholders from organizations as varied as the AAUP, AAU, and AEI, creating a forum for the kind of cross-ideological dialogue about the future of higher education that currently exists almost nowhere else. In each of these cases, the FAU Forum would provide the missing connective tissue that allows existing efforts to find each other, build on each other, and speak with a more coherent collective voice.

Mission and Goals

- Cultivate sustained inquiry into what universities are for, how they should be organized, and how they can do their core work better.
- Carry forward the recommendations of the Committee on the Future of the American University and subsequent strategic visions into experiments, pilots, and structural changes that can be evaluated and refined.
- Create context for continual examination and reinvention, embedding a practice of institutional self-scrutiny into Cornell's ongoing life.

- Curate a program of external facing media that carries the insights of the FAU Forum into national conversations, including an online ideas forum with moderated commentaries, podcast contributions, scholarly works, and policy-oriented white papers.
- Develop ties to partners at other universities as well as think tanks (e.g., AEI, Gates, Brookings, PPI) and industry organizations (ACE, AAU) in order to link innovation and experimentation at the FAU Forum to policy and discussions around best practices.
- Support campus-wide conversations around all forms of civic and governance activities.

These goals are deliberately interconnected. Inquiry without implementation becomes toothless and only academic, in the pejorative sense. Implementation without inquiry becomes rudderless and merely bureaucratic, which really only has a pejorative sense. The FAU Forum holds both inquiry and implementation together.

Potential Areas of Inquiry

Judgment

The concept of judgment runs through our committee's work like a spine. The undergraduate education framework centers on cultivating judgment as the defining purpose of a human-centered education. The graduate and professional education framework argues that judgment — not knowledge alone, but the capacity to deploy it wisely under conditions of uncertainty — is what advanced training at its best produces. The research framework calls for adversarial collaboration and intellectual humility, including asking not just whether we can accomplish something but also whether we should, as the institutional expression of good epistemic judgment. The public impact framework insists that universities must create reciprocal relationships with communities beyond the academy to support the cultivation of judgment to answer questions about which scholarly questions and forms of engagement are worth pursuing and why. Across all four missions, the committee is asking: what does it mean to educate people who can reason and discern well, not merely perform tasks with competence?

Arguably, the central practical question for sustained faculty engagement with this report is to ask what does it look like to take judgment seriously as an institutional commitment, across the full range of university work? In the classroom, this might mean asking which pedagogical approaches actually develop the capacity for judgment — and which merely simulate it — and identifying programs and courses that model what judgment-centered teaching looks like at its best. In research, it might mean examining what institutional conditions encourage the kind of intellectual risk-taking, adversarial collaboration, and epistemic humility the committee identifies as hallmarks of good scholarly judgment, and where those conditions are currently absent. In public impact work, it might mean asking how universities can model judgment in their external engagements — choosing partners, framing problems, and communicating findings in ways that demonstrate rather than merely claim intellectual integrity. Faculty groups working in these overlapping areas would survey existing approaches across Cornell

and peer institutions, identify programs worth developing or scaling, and open a broader conversation about what it would mean to embed judgment more deeply into the structures of university life.

Academic civics

Our committee's work has opened an opportunity to rethink the full range of relationships that constitute a university — between students and faculty, faculty and administration, staff and institution, trustees and the academic community they steward. Academic civics is the inquiry into what those relationships should look like at their best: what it means for a university to function as a genuine civic community oriented toward learning rather than a collection of competing interests, and how the working knowledge of how universities are governed, funded, and structured can become a shared resource rather than the private property of a professional administrative class. The committee has demonstrated that these questions can be asked seriously and productively. The FAU Forum would make that line of inquiry permanent.

Faculty and staff inquiry groups working across this area might ask what a renewed academic civic project would actually look like in practice, and how the FAU Forum could help bring it into being. This might include studies of comparative approaches to faculty shared governance in search of the most effective models, workshops that promote understanding of university finances across constituencies, collaborations within and between committees of the various assemblies to promote cross-campus work, discussions of bureaucratic and structural impediments to productive work, and engagements of trustees across university sectors to enhance understanding of the work happening across Cornell. Faculty are rarely given formal preparation in how their institution actually operates, so administration appears not as a system they help shape but as one imposed from without. Pre-tenured faculty are routinely socialized to treat service and governance as distractions from research, producing a vicious cycle in which disengagement generates ineffective governance, which produces further disengagement. The great irony is that faculty who engage seriously with governance bodies consistently find that participation transforms their understanding of the institution and reframes administrators as colleagues rather than adversaries.[183] And yet the dominant culture of academic socialization actively discourages them from seeking this experience.

Academic civics as a field of inquiry would address these structural and cultural challenges directly. In collaboration with the AEI and colleagues from a number of other universities, our committee has already developed a syllabus for graduate education on academic civics — a foundation that the FAU Forum could build on, extending and refining it for different university groups and contexts, piloting it on campus, and sharing it with peer institutions as a model for how universities might begin to take this work seriously. More broadly, inquiry

[183] Lee Gardner, *Building Trust: How Administrators and the Faculty Can Work Together Productively* (Chronicle of Higher Education, July 2025).

groups would develop and pilot programs — for graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators — organized around three pillars: the history of the university as an institution (origin stories, the foundations of academic freedom, the complex landscape of American higher education); the operations of the contemporary university (governance structures, financial architecture, the distribution of authority between trustees, administration, and faculty); and the normative questions about the university's future (what institutions we wish to inhabit, what we owe to the public we serve, how rights and responsibilities can be made real rather than merely declared). This inquiry connects directly to the committee's own work, extending questions into an ongoing campus-wide deliberation rather than allowing them to settle into a report.

Structural innovation

One of the most exciting opportunities this committee has opened is the invitation to treat the university itself as a site of genuine innovation and experimentation. The graduate and professional education framework makes this case directly: the same spirit of inquiry and risk-taking that universities cultivate in their students and researchers can and should be turned on the institutions themselves. Inherited structures — departments, tenure systems, budget models, publishing arrangements — are not sacred. They were invented to solve problems of their time, and they can be reinvented to meet the challenges of ours.

Faculty and staff inquiry groups working in this area would take up that invitation seriously. Rather than stopping at critique, they would do the harder and more exciting work of designing, piloting, and evaluating alternatives. This might mean exploring whether bottom-up models of disciplinary reorganization could take root in one or more of Cornell's colleges.

It might mean developing new approaches to tenure review that allow for substantive consideration of university citizenship (including participation in the FAU Forum), public impact and engagement, and teaching excellence alongside research productivity. It might mean working with the library and university press to pilot new models of scholarly publishing that restore the public function of academic communication. It might mean identifying budget and governance structures that reward adaptability rather than unnecessarily calcifying existing arrangements, some of which may have overstayed their welcome. Across all of these, the animating spirit is the same: universities that are serious about innovation cannot exempt themselves from it.

Pluralism

Pluralism is among the most contested and consequential questions facing American universities today and one more often examined by outside critics than by the institutions themselves. What the term means, how it is achieved, and what institutional arrangements best support it are all genuinely difficult questions on which thoughtful people disagree profoundly. The FAU Forum would not resolve those disagreements, but it would create a setting in which

they can be examined seriously, with the rigor and good faith that the university at its best brings to hard problems.

Faculty and staff inquiry groups working in this area might explore what genuine intellectual pluralism looks like in practice across different disciplines and institutional settings, what the relationship is between pluralism as a civic value and pluralism as an academic one, how universities can create the conditions for productive engagement across deep differences of perspective and conviction, how pluralism and academic freedom can be supported and strengthened together rather than traded off against each other, and what can be learned from institutions that have navigated these questions well — and from those that have not. The goal is not to prescribe an answer but to elevate the quality of the conversation.

Thickening relationships

Several of our committee's frameworks surface an underlying concern about the thinning of academic community — the erosion of the shared practices, rituals, and relationships that once gave university life its particular texture and meaning. This is not nostalgia; it is a structural problem. How do we cultivate the sense that members of the university are not lone rangers focused solely on their own scholarly agendas but valuable contributors to an institution larger than themselves and for which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts? Universities that cannot sustain genuine intellectual community struggle to transmit the dispositions that make education more than credentialing. Yet some of the most powerful community-building resources of the university were largely outside our committee's scope: athletics, arts and performance, museums and collections, K-12 partnerships, and the ties between the university and its surrounding communities.

Faculty and staff inquiry groups working in this area might ask how these dimensions of university life contribute to — or detract from — a thick and inclusive academic community, how they can be more deliberately integrated into the intellectual and civic life of the institution, and what new forms of academic sociality might be invented for an era of hybrid and distributed learning. This area connects directly to questions of belonging, mental health, and the quality of the student experience that the committee has flagged and opens them to a much wider range of inquiry than a committee focused on core missions could undertake.

The American university in the world

The American research university has been one of the most consequential institutional inventions of the modern world, and Cornell occupies a distinctive place in that story. The challenges and opportunities facing higher education are not Cornell's alone: they are shared across institutions nationally and internationally, and there is enormous potential value in learning from how peer universities in different contexts are responding to the same pressures, experimenting with new models, and imagining different futures.

Faculty and staff inquiry groups working in this area would look outward as well as inward — asking what Cornell can learn from universities around the world, and how engagement with the broader global ecosystem of higher education can sharpen Cornell's own thinking about its future. This is not a policy agenda, although it could shape one. Our committee was not in the business of prescribing national or international higher education policy, and neither would the FAU Forum. The focus instead would be forward-looking: scanning the horizon for emerging pressures before they become crises, building relationships with peer institutions engaged in similar work, anticipating disruptions — technological, demographic, geopolitical, and financial — that will reshape higher education in ways we can begin to map even if we cannot fully predict. The goal is not to react to the future but to help Cornell and its partners think and plan their way into it together.

The Working of the FAU Forum

Faculty and staff inquiry clusters

The intellectual engine of the FAU Forum would be clusters of three to five faculty and staff members working intensively on a specific question over two to three years. These would not be advisory committees; they would be working groups doing original inquiry. Each cluster would be resourced — with research support, convening capacity, and time — to produce genuine contributions: analyses, experimental designs, pilot programs, or publishable scholarship.

Example clusters might include inquiries into pressing issues in higher education such as:

- **Shaping a humanities education around principles of judgment:** A working group could design and pilot a curriculum organized not by disciplinary coverage but by the cultivation of practical reasoning and interpretive capacity. This work would take seriously our committee's directive to develop a truly human-centered university.
- **Higher education's information ecosystem:** A faculty-staff collaboration could examine how the university's information infrastructure has been impacted by increasing consolidation in the publishing industry, flooded by AI slop, and distorted by publish-or-perish incentives that emphasize quantity over quality. Students and citizens seeking reliable knowledge are increasingly confronted by information systems destabilized by AI and platform media. This cluster could develop and test open-access and university press models that restore the public function of scholarly communication, examine the library's evolving role at the intersection of these challenges, and ask what responsibilities the research university bears for restoring access to reliable knowledge in an era of AI-generated information. This work would draw in the Cornell University Library as an indispensable institutional partner.
- **Academic community and belonging:** A collaboration between faculty and student life could study the sociology of contemporary academic life and design new structures for intellectual community that can help build thick relationships in the classroom and beyond.

- **Assessment with rigor:** This cluster would consider issues from grade inflation to disability accommodations and how universities can respond with sensitivity and still retain high standards of academic performance.
- **AI collaboration on campus and beyond:** The disruption of AI suffused almost every committee conversation. While the technology clearly upends many traditional university practices, it is ultimately the human response to and engagement with the technology that will determine its long-term impact. An FAU Forum cluster focused on AI, working in collaboration with Cornell's AI Initiative, could provide a bird's eye view of best practices in different sectors of the university (humanities, social sciences, sciences, etc.), collecting information on new approaches and disseminating strategies both on campus and off.
- **Athletics and the future university in the age of name, image, and likeness (NIL) policies:** Our committee did not have time to turn its attention in a serious manner to athletics, but its presence on American campuses must be acknowledged. How can collegiate athletics in the age of NIL be aligned with the committee's core principles? The advent of name, image, and likeness compensation has accelerated the transformation of college athletics into a commercial enterprise, which would seem to promote the very transactional forms of connection between students and institutions that we seek to reduce. The cluster would ask what a principled relationship between athletics and the academic core looks like, and whether — and how — it can be reshaped to restore its role as a key factor in the public's thick ties to universities. This cluster would join faculty, staff, and students in a sustained conversation.
- **The American university in the world:** This cluster could examine how partnerships, competition, and the global movement of talent and ideas structure the ties between American universities and the broader international ecosystem of higher education. How can universities maintain genuine academic openness and global reach while navigating the security concerns, geopolitical pressures, and equity questions that now complicate international engagement — and what does it mean for an institution like Cornell, built on the free flow of knowledge and people across borders, to remain a credible global institution in an era of nationalism and retrenchment?
- **Religion, ethics, and meaning making in the American university:** This cluster could examine how a nonsectarian, pluralist university can be genuinely welcoming toward a broad range of ideas, scholarship, and discourse on topics of religion and ethics that are central to individuals within the university and to the communities that universities serve.

Faculty participation in clusters would be structured to be genuinely attractive: course release, research support, and intellectual community with a group working seriously on a common problem. Staff would get release time from regular duties for their time spent working in inquiry groups. Rotating membership would ensure that the FAU Forum draws widely across the faculty and staff rather than concentrating around a fixed cohort.

In addition to these longer-term working groups, the FAU Forum could also support lighter-weight engagements by self-organized groups of faculty and staff doing exploratory reading and investigation of specific issues related to academic life and producing preliminary recommendations. This will encourage engagement with issues and the development of bottom-up recommendations as a constructive approach to engaging with institutional questions.

Our committee's final report identifies a set of cross-cutting issues that span university missions and resist treatment within any single subcommittee's scope: the alignment of faculty incentives with institutional values, the reform of governance structures, the question of ideological diversity, and the relationship between academic freedom and institutional accountability. These cross-cutting questions are precisely where a campus forum, with the capacity to draw across units and disciplines, can contribute most. The FAU Forum would be explicitly charged with keeping these cross-cutting questions alive in Cornell's institutional life, preventing them from being resolved prematurely or deferred indefinitely.

External Fellows

In order to bring the work of the FAU Forum into the world, one opportunity would be to bring to campus external fellows whose work at Cornell can then be returned to their home institution. Each year the FAU Forum would bring in a cohort of external fellows — scholars from think tanks, researchers from peer institutions, practitioners from other sectors, and policy makers — whose work intersects with active inquiry clusters. External fellows would be in residence for a semester or a year, participating in cluster work, offering public programming, and building the FAU Forum's network in the broader field. Some fellows could be appointed for longer periods, giving them time to build rich connections across the institution and demonstrate the practical value of bringing in perspectives not currently represented at Cornell.

This external dimension matters for two reasons. It prevents the FAU Forum from becoming an insular navel-gazing operation, and it creates the conditions for Cornell's work on these questions to have broad influence. The FAU Forum would not just study the future of the American university; it would shape the conversation about it.

Curricular Integration

One way to ensure curricular integration of the FAU Forum's inquiries is to develop a model like the Society for the Humanities where teaching release for one semester is tied to a teaching obligation in another. The immense popularity of Corey Earle's "The First American University" course speaks to considerable student interest in understanding higher education. Classes on collegiate athletics, the American university, or principles of judgment would be highly sought after and align well with the ongoing curricular innovations that are in development in the College of Arts and Sciences to give students shared experiences in courses that ask big questions (e.g., IDEAS courses). The FAU Forum could also be a home for courses

on academic civics for faculty, staff, and graduate students.

The FAU Forum would also be a promising collaborator for units like the Center for Teaching Innovation in implementing the curricular transformations called for by our committee's report. As just one example, the report calls for collaboration across graduate fields in developing an array of shared learning outcomes like public communication. How will that be accomplished? Who will coordinate across units to help cultivate courses, develop standards for microcredentials, and promote integration? Without a unit like the FAU Forum, it is unclear who would take responsibility.

Rationale

Why the FAU Forum?

Cornell's Committee on the Future of the American University has demonstrated what a well-constituted committee can accomplish and also what it cannot. Committees are time-limited, staffed by faculty already carrying full workloads, and structurally oriented toward producing a report rather than sustaining inquiry and supervising implementation. The hard work that follows a report — experimenting, evaluating, revising, and institutionalizing — requires different conditions.

A forum provides a sustained conversation, resources, and a clear institutional identity. It can recruit dedicated researchers, build external relationships over time, develop a reputation in a field, and accumulate the knowledge that comes only from sustained engagement with a set of questions.

Why Now?

As this report clearly states, higher education is at a crossroads. The pressures this work has surfaced are structural and durable. Institutions that respond with energy and intelligence now will be better positioned for the decades ahead. Cornell has already invested significantly in this process. The intellectual capital it has generated in the frameworks, in the stakeholder conversations, and in the community of scholars who participated is a foundation for exactly the kind of sustained work the FAU Forum would do.

Cornell's subsequent strategic planning efforts will consider this report's recommendations; the FAU Forum would carry them into a durable, nationally visible program of ongoing inquiry into the future of the American university. Not creating the FAU Forum would mean allowing that investment to stop at Cornell's gates, when many of the questions the committee has raised are highly relevant to a wide range of private and public universities and colleges across the country.

Appendix I. Selected Bibliography

Committee members drew upon a wide range of books and articles to inform their thinking. This list highlights selected references that stood out as particularly helpful to our work; it is not a comprehensive list of works cited.

Allen, Danielle. "We've Lost Our Way on Campus. Here's How We Can Find Our Way Back." *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/12/10/antisemitism-campus-culture-harvard-penn-mit-hearing-path-forward/.

American Association of University Professors. *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*. AAUP, 1915. https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf.

Archibald, Robert B., and David H. Feldman. *Why Does College Cost So Much?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Autor, David H. "The Labor Market Impacts of Technological Change: From Unbridled Enthusiasm to Qualified Optimism to Vast Uncertainty." NBER Working Paper No. 30074. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2022. https://www.nber.org/papers/w30074.

Bollinger, Lee C. *University: A Reckoning*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2026.

Brooks, David. "How to Leave a Mark on People." *The New York Times*, April 18, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/opinion/how-to-leave-a-mark-on-people.html.

Brooks, David. "The People Who Will Thrive in the AI Age." *The Atlantic*, June 28, 2026. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/06/ai-open-ai-anthropic/687689.

Chetty, Raj, David J. Deming, and John N. Friedman. "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges." NBER Working Paper No. 31492. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023. https://www.nber.org/papers/w31492.

Daniels, Ronald J. *What Universities Owe Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021.

Dizikes, Peter. "Daron Acemoglu: What Do We Know About the Economics of AI?" MIT Economics, December 6, 2024. https://economics.mit.edu/news/daron-acemoglu-what-do-we-know-about-economics-ai.

Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. *Silence in the Classroom: The 2024 Faculty Survey Report*. FIRE, 2024. https://www.fire.org/sites/default/files/2024/12/Faculty-Report-2024-Final.pdf.

Gerber, Larry G. *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization and the Modern American University*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Gilman, Nils. "The University After AI." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 16, 2026. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-university-after-ai.

Ginsberg, Benjamin. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Hoffman, Andrew J. *The Engaged Scholar: Expanding the Impact of Academic Research in Today's World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021.

Inazu, John D. *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Kerr, Clark. *The Uses of the University*. 5th ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001. First published 1963.

Labaree, David F. *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Lear, Gabriel Richardson. "Aims of Education Address." Speech transcript, University of Chicago, 2018. https://college.uchicago.edu/student-life/aims-education-address-2018-gabriel-richardson-lear.

Lemann, Nicholas. "The Soul of the Research University." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 28, 2014. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-soul-of-the-research-university.

Levin, Yuval. *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

Loss, Christopher P. *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Musto, Ronald G. *The Attack on Higher Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. Edited by Frank M. Turner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. First published 1852.

Reuben, Julie A. *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Rhodes, Frank H. T. *The Creation of the Future: The Role of the American University*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Scanlon, Kyla. "Gen Z and the End of Predictable Progress." *Kyla's Newsletter*, February 19, 2025. https://kyla.substack.com/p/gen-z-and-the-end-of-predictable.

Shaw, Erin, and Shiri Spitz Siddiqi. *How Politically Diverse Are University Faculty? A Review of Studies on the Diversity of Political Viewpoints Among University Faculty*. Heterodox Academy, February 25, 2026. https://heterodoxacademy.org/reports/how-politically-diverse-are-university-faculty.

Shields, Jon A., Yuval Avnur, and Stephanie Muravchik. "Closed Classrooms: An Analysis of College Syllabi on Contentious Issues." Working paper, July 10, 2025. https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Closed%20Classrooms.pdf.

Shields, Jon A., and Joshua M. Dunn. *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Sorett, Josef, and Jonathon Kahn. "A Certain Amount of Bravery: What It Takes to Restore Student Trust." *Inside Higher Ed*, July 16, 2026. https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2026/07/16/formation-and-restoration-student-trust-opinion.

Storey, Jenna Silber, and Benjamin Storey. "Five Reasons Viewpoint Diversity Makes Academic Sense." American Enterprise Institute, January 26, 2026. https://www.aei.org/commentary/five-reasons-viewpoint-diversity-makes-academic-sense.

Sullivan, Meghan. "What Is the University For?" *Comment Magazine*, December 11, 2025. https://comment.org/what-is-the-university-for.

Twenge, Jean M. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. New York: Atria Books, 2017.

Whalen, Michael L. "A Land-Grant University." In *Cornell University 2001–02 Financial Plan*. Cornell University Division of Budget & Planning, May 2001. https://irp.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/1000046.pdf.

Wright, Lauren A. "How Liberal College Campuses Benefit Conservative Students." *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2024. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/07/conservative-students-college-ideology/678934/.