

Institutional Vision and Strategic Priorities

Draft as of 6/10/26

The Cornell Vision: “For Better Things in Our Beloved Country”

In 1862, Andrew Dickson White laid out his plan for “a truly great university”: one that would educate students for lives of integrity and purpose, fuel the nation’s forward progress, and serve as a new model for American education. The vision, ambition, and commitment to our democracy that inspired Cornell’s founding resonate with renewed urgency today, as we seek new ways to address emerging and enduring challenges—and continue to build on White’s founding aspirations for the university to serve as an instrument “for better things in our beloved country.”

Educational excellence, access, and affordability

“An institution where any person can find instruction in any study,” Cornell University was established as a model democratic institution that would provide a world-class education to students of every background, regardless of their financial means. Through the steadfast support of generations of alumni, we have honored and strengthened that commitment—with need-blind admissions for our U.S. applicants, and grant-based financial aid that meets the full cost of attendance for all undergraduates and enables students from lower-income families to graduate free of debt.

A Cornell education is designed to equip every student, whatever their interests or area of study, to become confident, capable citizens ready to make their own contribution to society—able, in Ezra Cornell’s words, “to do the greatest good.” Our exceptional and independent faculty are free to shape academic programs in ways that strive for maximum meaning and impact: addressing contemporary challenges, exploring new ways of teaching, and guiding students on paths of growth and discovery. With innovative instruction, caring mentorship, and a vast array of academic and extracurricular opportunities, students graduate with both the deep disciplinary knowledge and the broadly applicable skills they will need to lead and thrive throughout their lives in a complex and globally interconnected world.

Democracy and civics

The Cornell Center on Democracy brings together more than one hundred scholars, from the social sciences, humanities, public policy, law, computer and information science, and engineering, to focus on strengthening democratic systems and institutions, reinvigorating civic life, and helping societies navigate rapid technological and political change. Through three research pillars—Rule of Law and Democratic Order; Values, Participation, and Pluralism; and Democracy and New Technologies—the center seeks to understand both the opportunities and challenges to strengthening democratic institutions, and translate its findings into practical, evidence-driven solutions to corruption, polarization, civic fragmentation, and technology-driven risks to democratic society.

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The center also works to strengthen civic education across Cornell by expanding research opportunities, experiential learning, and curricular offerings. Community-engaged partnerships; courses on civil discourse, pluralism, and democratic citizenship; and programs like Cornell in Washington and the Democracy Research Fellows provide students with the opportunities and education that will prepare them to participate meaningfully in public life—able to engage thoughtfully, advocate effectively, and disagree productively.

Intellectual diversity

Cornell historian Carl Becker memorably referred to university professors as those who “think otherwise,” positing that “the essential quality of a great university derives from the corporate activities of a great quantity of [the] otherwise-thinking.” A divergence of interests, ideas, and knowledge, as well as broad intellectual interests, are key to sparking the scholarly discussions and disputes that keep curiosity sharp, disciplines vital, and an academic community fruitful. The Becker Initiative brings this principle into practice by recruiting to our campus scholars whose perspectives broaden the scope of Cornell’s intellectual exploration—bringing ideas to our community from interdisciplinary areas overlooked by traditional hiring, disciplines narrowly represented on campus, and outside academia.

Through endowed professor and visiting scholar appointments, the Becker Initiative presents students with the broadest range of academic study, and enriches discourse at Cornell by ensuring that underrepresented viewpoints and emerging disciplines are part of academic discussion—fostering the broad exchange of ideas and intellectual diversity that are foundational to a university’s ability to challenge assumptions, shift paradigms, and make breakthrough discoveries.

Student experience

A Cornell education doesn’t just happen in a classroom. Our residential academic community is designed to enrich our students’ educations through all of the opportunities, connections, spaces, and relationships they experience at Cornell. Our athletics and physical education programs build leadership and community, and support student health and wellbeing—whether through competitive athletics, recreation, or outdoor adventure. Enhanced facilities—on campus and in Collegetown—provide spaces for students to connect, create, collaborate, and recharge, while neighborhood improvements support accessibility and community engagement. A broad and coordinated range of career development resources for students in every college and major provides sophisticated guidance, professional connections, and thoughtful mentoring that help launch students into meaningful and rewarding careers—bringing the ethos and identity forged through their time at Cornell out into the world.

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AI and emerging technologies

The Cornell AI Initiative is the university-wide nexus for Cornell's world-leading artificial intelligence research and education, pursuing the emerging opportunities that AI offers and tackling some of its most pressing challenges. Cornell's leadership in AI is crucial, because we are committed to defining a future with AI that meets human needs and puts humanity first. This includes preparing our students for AI-enabled lives and careers and staying true to our land-grant mission by using cutting-edge technologies to support communities. We also bring AI to our own operation, empowering our staff and improving work across all of our campuses. Ranked among the top 3 universities in research productivity in AI nationwide, we are in position to accelerate critical AI research in areas like agentic systems, human-robot interaction, sustainability, and human and veterinary medicine, and to speed AI-enabled discovery in disciplines throughout the university. From AI to other emerging technologies in data security, privacy, cybersecurity, cryptocurrency, and blockchain systems, Cornell is uniting scientific rigor and human insight to advance technological innovation informed by ethical principles and motivated by a drive for public good.

Sustainable future

With a proudly collaborative culture spanning an unparalleled breadth and depth of expertise, Cornell is uniquely well positioned to tackle the greatest sociotechnical challenges humanity has yet faced—bringing scientific knowledge, interdisciplinary understanding, and creative problem-solving to the complex and interconnected challenges of building a sustainable future on our warming planet. Through innovative and purpose-driven research across critical areas including carbon dioxide sequestration and removal, resilient agriculture, biodiversity and planetary health, stratospheric engineering, and extreme event mitigation, Cornell mobilizes deep theoretical and practical understanding across disciplines in the service of solutions for plants and animals, planet and people.

Biomedical research

Cornell's biomedical research spans human and animal medicine, engineering innovation, and basic science, leveraging interdisciplinary collaboration. Our Weill Cornell Medicine, Ithaca, and Cornell Tech campuses all contribute significantly to Cornell's strength in biomedical research. Investigations span nearly every aspect of health and disease, including cancer biology, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, neurodegenerative conditions, pediatric illnesses, and infectious diseases affecting global populations. Weill Cornell Medicine works from bench to bedside, with advanced research facilities that enable effective translation of cutting-edge science to patient care and disease prevention through precision medicine and molecular discovery. The Meinig School of Biomedical Engineering bridges engineering, biology, and medicine to design transformative devices,

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diagnostics, and therapies, while the College of Veterinary Medicine advances understanding of the complex interplay of human, animal, and environmental health through a “one health” approach encompassing genetics and reproductive sciences, comparative anatomy, and public health.

Clinical care

Weill Cornell Medicine is central to Cornell University’s broader commitment to advancing human health, and delivering compassionate, patient-centered care. Through the Weill Cornell Physician Organization, our physicians provide primary and specialty care to patients in New York City and beyond. In close partnership with NewYork-Presbyterian and other specialty care providers, this care is delivered through a comprehensive network of inpatient and outpatient sites, with expertise spanning cancer, cardiovascular medicine, brain health, women’s health, pediatrics and primary care. Clinical care is closely integrated with Cornell’s broader research enterprise, with physicians and scientists working together to translate discoveries into new diagnostics, treatments and preventive strategies. Patients benefit from access to clinical trials and emerging therapies informed by advances across multiple areas of research, including genomics, imaging, data science and engineering. Through continued investment in advanced facilities, technologies and clinical capacity, Weill Cornell Medicine is expanding its capabilities and reach, while reinforcing a model where exceptional patient care fuels discovery, advances education — including the training of future physicians—and improves outcomes.

Innovation and cross-disciplinary exploration

Cornell’s uniquely interconnected research enterprise moves easily past traditional disciplinary boundaries to address complex global challenges, enabling radical partnerships that catalyze innovation. Our fertile research ecosystem brings scholars together not only across departments and colleges, but across the Ithaca, Weill Cornell Medicine, and Cornell Tech campuses. The university supports these efforts through shared core facilities, multidisciplinary centers, and collaborative networks that accelerate research impact. Cornell’s approach extends beyond academia through robust frameworks for external engagement, including incubators, seed funding, and mentorship programs, ensuring research translates into tangible benefits while advancing cross-disciplinary knowledge—and driving the enduring excellence of an academic community where, in the words of President Michael I. Kotlikoff, “the walls between us are low, and the goals we reach for are high.”