

Provost's Committee on the Future of the American University Preliminary Framework Introduction

Cornell University's Committee on the Future of the American University was charged with considering current disruptors of American higher education and envisioning a principled path forward for Cornell specifically and higher education more generally. The committee was asked to be bold and provocative, to intentionally propose transformative ideas that may seem implausible or impractical to some, and to suggest both long-term transformations and immediate opportunities. This document offers ideas emerging from the committee's work to date in order to solicit feedback from the Cornell community before developing them into our committee's report.

American higher education has never been more consequential or more contested. The complex system that took shape over the course of the twentieth century — with innovation and education distributed across research universities, liberal arts colleges, land-grant institutions, public flagships, and their hybrids — made crucial contributions to this country and beyond. It drove scientific discovery, scholarship, and innovation, stimulated local economies, and educated generations. It expanded access to learning for those historically denied it — the working class, women, first-generation students, descendants of enslaved persons, Indigenous communities, and immigrants — and in doing so helped make good on America's constitutional promise of equal opportunity. That achievement is extraordinary and the foundation for what follows here.

The world in which that system thrived is changing in ways that make current approaches insufficient, if not obsolete. The rapid advance of artificial intelligence (AI), political turmoil, realigning international relationships, and the transformation of traditional career pathways are all reshaping the environment in which universities operate. Meanwhile, trust in institutions generally, and universities in particular, has declined sharply. Universities have long understood, however, that their core strengths — curiosity, learning, discovery, creativity, and public engagement — provide powerful tools for responding to changing conditions, allowing them to flourish and lead even in challenging times. The uncertainties confronting higher education today are real and significant. They are also, for institutions willing to engage them seriously, an invitation to reimagine what a university can be and do. The committee's conviction is that Cornell is such an institution — and that this moment is an extraordinary opportunity to build something better.

The committee was charged with examining three major forces confronting American universities: the rapid pace of technological change, including AI; the evolving relationship between universities and the federal government; and the erosion of public trust in higher education. We were asked to articulate how Cornell should adapt its four core missions — undergraduate education, research and scholarship, public impact and community engagement, and graduate and professional education — to rebuild public confidence, productively engage with disruption, and better serve future generations of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and society at large. We were asked to provide bold visions that were not constrained to immediately implementable thinking. We took this charge as an invitation to ask a hard and important question: what are universities fundamentally for, and what does that mean for how American institutions of higher education can and should reshape themselves to lead over the next half-century?

This document focuses specifically on the committee's understanding of the core purpose of the university and its current reasoning about the four core missions. Our future full report will also comprehensively describe stakeholder feedback, analyze the three key disruptors the university faces, and address cross-cutting issues this work revealed. These include aligning the structure and incentivization of faculty and staff work with university missions, improving faculty-staff

relations, addressing academic freedom, reforming the structure of academic publishing, finding best paths forward for inclusion, reducing the weight of bureaucracy, strengthening governance, promoting strategic coordination across university units, making appropriate room for religious expression, and addressing concerns around the institutional effects of a narrowing ideological diversity among faculty. The full report will also consider contested contemporary debates, such as whether core curricula are needed, which intellectual traditions should anchor the university, academic rigor, and alternative grading systems.

The Future University

Envisioning the future is often confused with predicting it. If we can imagine what the future will be, the thinking goes, we can prepare for it. But prediction is a weak instrument — rarely accurate or timely, and particularly unreliable at a moment like this one, when the pace and scale of change outrun our ability to anticipate it. What universities can do — what they are, in fact, uniquely equipped to do — is assess uncertainty, envision its opportunities, map its risks, and reason deliberately about alternative paths forward.

The committee's approach began with sustained reflection on the fundamental purpose of the university, working to identify the principles that guide higher education in general and Cornell in particular. It joined that reflection to a practice of speculative futuring: a disciplined effort to transform today's challenges into scenarios of alternative possibilities. None of these futures are inevitable; all are meant to spur discussion. Where prediction asks what will happen, speculation asks what could happen — and in doing so, clarifies what we most want to become and most want to preserve. The preliminary mission frameworks offered here are built at the confluence of those two efforts — core principles and speculative futures. They are offered as both a challenge to examine what we do and an affirmation of the values that make universities worth defending.

Cornell and the American University

What constitutes an American university? The inheritance of American institutions of higher education includes the Western tradition and further draws on the vast global currents that shaped this country. The defining influences shaping the American university extend beyond European antecedents to include consequential contributions made by the enduring Indigenous communities of North America, formerly enslaved persons and their descendants, and successive waves of immigrants from every part of the world who built American society, and the intellectual and cultural traditions that America's citizens have carried, transformed, and integrated across generations. It is in that generative, revolutionary, tragic, hopeful, and always unfinished confluence that the American university finds its identity, and that Cornell finds its particular calling. And it is all the institutions of higher education founded from this history that the committee considers its partners in envisioning our shared uncertain future.

There is a productive ambiguity in the committee's charge between contemplating the future of Cornell and contemplating the future of American universities as seen from Cornell. The committee has sought to do both. Cornell's multiple hybrid structures — public and private, Ivy and land-grant, rural and urban, national and international — make it a distinctive and appropriate site for experimentation and innovation that may apply to a broader set of institutions. Moreover, our work builds on historian Frederick Rudolph's understanding of Cornell as "the first American university." By this he referred to the distinctive values Cornell embodied at its founding in 1865, which significantly departed from those of other institutions, particularly the sectarian colonial colleges. Its radical vision of "any person" and "any study" emphasized access and inclusion — with students admitted regardless of gender, race, religion, nationality, or wealth — as well as academic freedom and an openness to practical fields of study and new and emerging disciplines. Most American

universities now bear that Cornelian stamp far more than they resemble other Ivies in the early nineteenth century. The committee's mandate is to build on these founding values to envision what Cornell — and the American university — can become for the coming decades.

The Committee's Process

The committee's charge — to chart a path forward amid great opportunity, dramatic pressures, and deep uncertainty — required a process equal to its ambitions. The committee could not responsibly envision the future of the university without first listening seriously to our community and its critics. We therefore organized an intensive four-month process of engagement with more than 2,100 stakeholders across over 200 meetings and events. Those stakeholders included students, staff, faculty, administrators, trustees, and alumni of Cornell. It also included federal, state, and local officials; journalists; leaders of peer institutions; and outside experts on issues of particular concern to the committee. The committee's aim was not merely to gather opinions but to develop our own and our community's collective understanding — to surface a wide range of perspectives on higher education, what it is for, and what it should become. We deliberately sought out disagreement. Conversations with critics of the university were as important as those with its supporters, because the friction between competing visions reveals assumptions and raises new possibilities.

This document is the next step in this conversation. It offers a preliminary framework intended to elicit wide-ranging feedback on emerging understandings before the committee commits to specific conceptions in our report. We begin by outlining the case for change in higher education based on the committee's collective conviction that this is a moment of genuine historical transformation, an era of uncertainty that at once offers new opportunities for discovery, education, innovation, and impact and destabilizes many of the assumptions built into current models of higher education.

The primary contribution of this document is an articulation of the core purpose of the university and how that purpose must be instantiated in an age of uncertainty and rapid change. Numerous stakeholder conversations surfaced concerns about the degree to which American universities have become sprawling organizations with proliferating mandates, responsibilities, and activities. Without a coherent strategy, universities are rudderless, buffeted by internal and external forces. Change must rest in an articulation of our core purpose and the consistent use of that purpose to drive decision-making about what a university does and how it does it.

Accompanying this document, we provide preliminary frameworks from each of our four mission subcommittees — undergraduate education, research and scholarship, public impact and community engagement, and graduate and professional education. Each framework identifies key challenges and opportunities for that mission, articulates principles for moving forward, and offers speculative scenarios illustrating the range of futures those principles make possible. These documents articulate visions for how those missions must be renewed: by bringing existing strengths into clearer focus and greater coherence, and by consequentially transforming key structures, incentives, and activities of the university.

Disruption and Opportunity in an Era of Uncertainty

We begin by explaining why consequential change is necessary. Some of our stakeholders believe that today's pressures are aberrations that will dissipate with the next federal administration, the next market cycle, or the next shift in public mood. But the pressures confronting American universities today are neither temporary nor self-correcting. They are the visible manifestations of deeper, longer-running transformations in the relationship between universities and the society they serve — transformations that universities can and should address with deliberate, principled,

and consequential action. The committee was charged with examining three forces in particular that define both the challenge and the opportunity of this moment.

The rapid pace of technological change, including AI

The arrival of AI represents the most significant technological disruption to higher education since the dawn of the internet. And like the internet, AI brings both extraordinary promise and genuine risk. AI has already demonstrated enormous potential to accelerate discovery, enable innovative learning, democratize access to knowledge, and lower the cost and barriers of education. But the risks that AI poses to university missions are equally real, risks such as replacing human thinking, undermining scholarly integrity, and creating moral hazards for student learning. AI use also introduces societal risks such as displacing human workers, depleting natural resources, and concentrating power in the hands of a few large technology companies. Yet the deepest challenge AI poses to universities is not technical but philosophical. In a world where machines can synthesize, generate, and analyze at scale, universities must be more intentional than ever about cultivating the capacities and forms of engagement that remain indispensable to human flourishing, such as relationships, ethical judgment, and curiosity.

The evolving relationship between universities and the federal government

The partnership between universities and the federal government that took shape after World War II was one of the most productive in American history. It drove the research enterprise that made American universities global leaders, fueled scientific breakthroughs from medicine to materials science, and helped millions of Americans access higher education. That partnership is now under stress, as the world it was designed for has changed. Moreover, legitimate public questions about the cost of higher education, the return on investment of a degree, and the role of wealthy institutions in a democratic society deserve honest engagement rather than defensive dismissal. This is a moment to rethink the implicit arrangement between universities and the government and make principled choices about our commitments to the public.

The erosion of public trust in higher education

A 2023 Gallup poll found that confidence in higher education had dropped from 48% to 36% in just seven years, a concerning trend that is serious but not yet irreversible, and one that universities have both the obligation and the opportunity to address. So it is equally important to note that more than a third of Americans still express high confidence in higher education, and the deeper reservoir of goodwill — among alumni, employers, community partners, and the many publics that universities serve — remains substantial. The drivers of declining trust are real and must be taken seriously: the rising cost of education, questions about ideological balance, concerns about the integrity of scholarship, and anxieties around campus climate. As the cost of education climbs faster than incomes, it is entirely reasonable for families to ask whether college still retains the promise of economic and social mobility that drove the explosive growth in higher education enrollments after World War II. At the same time, an increasingly transactional framing of the relationship between educators and students threatens something more fundamental: the bonds of trust and mutual obligation that make genuine learning possible. Trust concerns are not simply political attacks to be deflected. They are invitations to demonstrate, concretely and consistently, that universities remain worthy of the trust that places them at the center of so many Americans' aspirations for their own, and our collective, future.

As if these challenges were not daunting enough, the committee's conversations with stakeholders surfaced myriad other pressures confronting American higher education today. Universities are simultaneously navigating a demographic cliff that will sharply reduce the traditional college-age population over the coming decade; the slow collapse of the traditional

system of academic publishing under the combined weight of commercial consolidation and stressed library budgets; threats of legislative incursions into what universities may teach and research; and an intense debate over academic freedom, including its rights and responsibilities. While real, these challenges should not discourage us from recognizing the opportunities of the moment that American universities can, and should, fight to realize. The committee's assessment is that proactive, strategic action is not optional — in fact, it is a historic opportunity. But understanding what needs to change, and why, requires first being clear about what universities are fundamentally for, the question to which we now turn.

Purpose and Principles of a Human-Centered University

American universities have met every previous period of crisis through reinvention. They bridged liberal and practical learning in response to the demands of industrialization, built an immense capacity for scientific and technical research in response to the imperatives of World War II and the Cold War, and expanded access to those previously excluded in response to the moral demands of the civil rights movement. In each case, reinvention did not mean abandoning the university's core purpose: it meant finding new ways to fulfill it. We are now at another such inflection point. The forces described above are disrupting the financial, political, and social foundations of American higher education in ways that demand a serious and honest response.

But the committee's conviction is that the path forward is not found by chasing every disruption or reinventing the university from scratch. It is found by recommitting, with clarity and intention, to what universities have always been fundamentally for: **to steward, impart, generate, and apply reliable knowledge and creative output**. This recommitment is necessary, as American universities have proliferated their missions, mandates, responsibilities, and activities over prior decades. The resulting incoherence leaves universities without clarity to guide decision-making over what we should pursue. In a period of rapid change, we must know what we are, and what we are not. This sense of purpose must shape everything that we do — from educating our students, to scholarship and discovery, to how we learn from and respond to partnerships with local communities and the broader public.

Further, we must fulfill our purpose in ways that are inextricably and unapologetically **human-centered**. We live at a moment when AI tools are capable of performing many of the tasks that have historically defined academic work: synthesizing information, generating text and other artifacts, modeling complex systems, even producing original research. It is easy to imagine a world in which human faculty, staff, and even students are no longer thought necessary. The committee's answer is unambiguous: universities are not merely knowledge factories; they are human communities organized around the pursuit of understanding. What AI cannot replace is the essential human work of judgment, relationship, curiosity, and moral responsibility that lies at the heart of genuine learning, discovery, and positive impact.

The choice to center the human is, however, not simply a response to AI; it responds to wider trends of dehumanization. At a moment when the commodification of education threatens to reduce students to consumers and degrees to transactions, and when many members of our community see hard-won rights under threat, the deliberate centering on the human is necessary and must be explicit. It is a declaration that universities exist not to process students or produce outputs, but to cultivate the full capacities of human beings in community with one another.

Universities are communities of people. They should, therefore, focus on the things humans need to flourish while addressing societal needs.

There are many principles a human-centered university could build on. To lead effectively in changing times, a university should intentionally focus on the following **four key principles**.

Foster discovery, creativity, and innovation

The discovery and dissemination of new knowledge has been a core purpose of higher education in America since the intentional adoption of the German research university model by thought leaders such as Andrew Dickson White (Cornell), Daniel Gilman (Johns Hopkins), and others around the mid-nineteenth century. In rapidly changing times, discovery, creativity, and innovation are essential in order to respond nimbly to challenges as they arise. This will require mechanisms to more rapidly and responsively adapt departments, curricula, degree programs, hiring practices, tenure and promotion criteria, licensing and entrepreneurship, methods of public engagement, and other university practices to changing circumstances than has been typical in the past. Nevertheless, we must exercise judgment and not follow every fad. And the need for flexibility must not overwhelm the stability of universities' core activities, including teaching key human competencies, performing fundamental research for the purpose of knowing and growing, and carrying out creative activities for the purposes of expression and impact.

Enable lifelong learning

In times that are fairly stable, universities can confidently equip graduates for well-defined future careers and communities with tools and skills with long shelf lives. In changing times, it is likely that the work and knowledge needs of our graduates and stakeholder communities will evolve more rapidly. We must, therefore, equip those we engage with for lifelong learning by teaching them how to continue learning, by instilling them with the curiosity and confidence to learn, retool, and upskill as needed, and by providing educational opportunities across a lifespan. Lifelong learning is a necessity not only for our students and engaged stakeholders, but also for our faculty, staff, and the institution as a whole, who must continue to develop their teaching, research, administrative, and other capacities to respond to changing times, opportunities, and technologies. The institution must structurally support and reward continued learning for all its members.

Promote pluralism

American universities are part of a pluralist democracy, and have a responsibility to contribute to its flourishing. By pluralism, we refer to (a) recognizing the value of building communities across myriad differences, including identity, experience, background, worldview, nationality, and values; (b) accepting that these differences will, at times, inevitably lead to conflict; and (c) nevertheless remaining committed to community, striving to understand difference, and working to resolve disagreement constructively while respecting the integrity, dignity, and freedom of community members. One of the most important contributions, then, that universities can make to democratic society, in the United States and elsewhere, is to lean into the crucial role that pluralism plays within the university community. A well-functioning university is a crucible in which ideas meet, are tested, and are refined; we rely on pluralism through debate, dialogue, collaboration, and peer review to challenge and develop them. Academic freedom relies on pluralism to anchor the free rein to explore new and possibly controversial ideas in research and the classroom.

A university that promotes pluralism will enact it at every level of the university. Students graduate with the capacity to engage productively across potentially deep differences, navigating conflict productively and effectively, and contributing effectively to their communities. Administration, faculty, and staff model what it means to engage critically and constructively as part of a pluralist community by speaking freely, listening to one another, accepting and navigating conflict and difference, committing to work together as a community, and holding one another accountable to further the institution's missions. And the institution itself commits to being a responsible member

of the broader world — not retreating into an ivory tower but engaging with, listening to, and serving other communities and institutions that may have different perspectives and priorities, including collaborative work with peer institutions across higher education.

Cultivate judgment

The ultimate goal of learning is not simply the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake, but the cultivation of the human ability to exercise judgment. Judgment is the capacity to transform knowledge, creativity, and innovation into purposeful action. It is particularly crucial in uncertain and changing times, when institutions and individuals must take action in novel and complex situations. Judgment is not one thing; it is a composite capacity. At minimum it requires: an understanding of epistemic reliability (Is this true? How do we know?), an awareness of contextual understanding across time and cultures (How did this come to be? Why in that place?), developed skills in interpretive literacy and relational empathy (What does this signify? To whom? What is another's experience?), an imaginative ability to anticipate consequences (What might happen? Under what assumptions?), abilities in ethical deliberation (What ought we to do?), and practical tools for how judgment can be enacted (How and when should we move to action?). Judgment requires rigor to identify what is relevant and what is irrelevant, recognize and address the limits of one's assumptions and experiences, and account for one's conclusions to others. It is vital to note that judgment is not just analytic; it also expands the space of the possible through discovery and creativity, allowing us to not just decide better but see differently and more fully.

The principles of fostering discovery, creativity, and invention, promoting pluralism, enabling lifelong learning, and cultivating judgment are not in themselves new. They, among others, have animated universities for centuries. But universities must now intentionally focus on these particular principles to make human flourishing possible in even the most uncertain times.

Strategic Imperatives

Over time, American universities became global leaders in higher education. This impressive accomplishment must be recognized and celebrated, serving as a solid foundation upon which to envision our future. But sustaining that achievement, in an era of notable disruption, eroding trust, and rapid technological change, requires more than reaffirming values. It requires strategic vision.

Across the university's core missions, we have identified five strategic imperatives, distilled from a myriad of possible directions, that can position institutions to realize their purpose and promote human-centered learning. These imperatives do not provide a generic prescription for institutional improvement. They are a direct response to the challenges and opportunities presented by this era of uncertainty. When public trust in universities is eroding, the proper response is not better marketing but rather a sustained investment in the **thick relationships** that bind people to one another and the institution in ways that last. Generic institutions command generic loyalty; **embracing a university's particular history, character, and commitments** makes the trust of its community worth earning and worth keeping. But when the structural conditions for genuine participation in the life of the university have weakened, **academic civics** cultivates an informed collective judgment about the purpose and structure of the university, as well as the roles, rights and responsibilities of all those who contribute to them, allowing institutions to govern themselves well. When the challenges confronting higher education are systemic and interconnected — spanning education, research, public engagement, and the university's relationship with society — **collaboration across missions** is not optional; it is the only way to bring the full strength of the institution to bear. That strength, however, is only as great as the breadth of perspectives, talents, and ideas that it can draw upon. So even as external pressures might tempt universities to turn inward, it is vital that they retain their **global vision**. Insularity, however understandable, would

deprive universities of a core source of their strength, and one of the most distinctive contributions they make to American society. These imperatives are a principled and ambitious response to a moment that demands nothing less. Let us set out each one more fully.

Invest in building thick relationships between and with the people who make our purpose both possible and meaningful.

Thick relationships are the ones that leave a mark. They bind us to one another and to institutions in ways that are both durable and powerful; they are the relationships we would not want to do without. They are, in other words, the very opposite of relationships built on transitory transactions. American universities are quintessentially thick institutions. At their best, they shape who students, faculty, and staff become, not just what they know. The lifelong loyalty that alumni of American universities feel toward their alma maters — demonstrated through decades of intellectual, political, social, moral, and financial support — is no accident. It grows from an education that sought to engage not just the mind but the whole person, creating a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself that no transcript can capture.

Thick relationships are the connective tissue of a human-centered university. They show up everywhere: in the mentorship by a faculty member of a rising scholar; in the alumni network that opens a door for a first-generation student; in the human connections that shape expression through art, music, and literature; at the lab bench where collaborative partnerships catalyze discovery and innovation; in the cross-disciplinary conversations that spawn ideas which transcend a single discipline; in the experience with an employer whose real-world perspective sharpens what was learned in the classroom. Thick relationships extend outward too, into the communities universities were built to serve, in part through extension programs that put knowledge into action and thereby make the university a genuine civic partner. They reach into the halls of government too, where partnerships with federal and state agencies identify shared priorities, shape the priorities and possibilities of post-baccalaureate education, and translate university expertise into public benefits. None of these relationships are incidental. They are the medium through which a university fulfills its purpose. Thick relationships are part of the historical legacy of universities that has been weakening through transactionalism, bureaucracy, and the changing nature of technology-mediated relationships; wherever it can, a human-centered university leans into them.

Embrace institutional identity as a foundation of belonging.

Thick relationships are built on shared values and sustained by the rituals and traditions that give an institution its distinct character. Over the decades, universities have begun to all look alike from the outside even as we cherish our distinctions. While universities share a common purpose, they achieve it through their diversity: their unique celebrations, origin stories, founding documents, and rites of passage. This distinctiveness is what gives thick relationships their particular texture and meaning. A relationship forged at Cornell, for example, is different from one formed at any other university: shaped by its public impact ethos, its natural environment, its founding commitment to educating any person in any study, and its peculiar fusion of the Ivy League with a land-grant mission. It is precisely that difference that gives the relationship its lasting hold.

Nurture a university-wide commitment to academic civics.

Thick relationships share certain essential qualities. They must be reciprocal, demanding something of both parties. They deepen through challenge, debate, and sacrifice rather than through ease and agreement. And they generate something that no transactional relationship can: a sense of genuine obligation — not just to the people within the institution, but to the institution's mission and to the shared work of governance that keeps it true to its purpose. Such thickness must be actively cultivated out of structural conditions that make genuine participation in

institutional life possible. By those measures, trust has been quietly eroding in the American university for decades. Faculty are socialized, from graduate school onward, to regard service and governance as distractions from the work that actually matters for their careers, producing generations of scholars who are genuinely expert in their fields but largely disengaged from the institutional life that sustains them. Shared governance, meanwhile, has weakened not through anyone's bad intentions but through a slow drift in which administrators, staff, and faculty have grown less fluent in each other's languages, constraints, and legitimate concerns. And over all of this hangs the exhaustion of a community that is overworked, under pressure, and increasingly under fire from forces beyond its control.

Academic civics is the committee's response to that accumulation: an investment in the shared knowledge and habits that allow a community to govern itself well, even in difficult times. It proceeds from two core convictions: that thicker institutional ties are built through shared knowledge, and that when members of a university community understand how their institution actually works, they are better equipped to see their interests as convergent rather than opposed. Cultivating academic civics is not a mere procedural exercise. It encompasses our origin stories and the values they encode, as well as the operational realities of how modern universities are financed and led. It also entails a clear articulation of and a normative commitment to community members' rights and obligations necessary to hold a diverse community together in pursuit of collective goals. Crucially, it includes the ongoing normative question of what kind of institution we wish to build together. That last question is not separable from the work of this committee: the future, however uncertain, is what we build collectively.

Expand our commitment to collaboration.

An outward commitment to collaboration begins at home. The true strength of universities is in their capacity to bring together, under one institutional roof, a set of distinct, but overlapping, missions that reinforce and enrich one another when they are allowed to work in concert. Those missions — educating undergraduates, advancing research and scholarship, serving the public, and training graduate and professional students — are not parallel tracks running independently toward separate destinations. They are deeply intertwined. The questions that animate research shape what gets taught in the classroom; the needs of graduate training drive the frontiers of scholarship; the challenges surfaced through public engagement reveal what research questions most urgently need answering; and the habits of mind cultivated in undergraduates are the foundation on which all the others rest. When these missions are siloed — when research universities forget they are also teaching institutions, or when public engagement is treated as an add-on rather than a core commitment — the whole is diminished. The same is true of siloed disciplines and structures. Collaboration and coordination do not require centralization; they require a culture and supporting structures that promote and celebrate efforts to work across the university in the service of its mission. The promise of the university lies precisely in their integration.

Sharpen a global vision.

The pursuit of knowledge has never been effectively constrained by national borders. From their medieval origins, universities have been cosmopolitan institutions, places where scholars, ideas, and methods travel freely across boundaries of language, culture, and geography. The American university inherited and deepened that tradition. Cornell was founded at a unique historical intersection: heir to the colonial college tradition of liberal learning, beneficiary of the Morrill Act's democratic vision of practical education for all, and self-conscious adopter of the German research university model that was transforming the production of knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century. Each of these traditions was itself a product of global intellectual exchange, and their fusion at Cornell created an institution whose ambitions were explicitly cosmopolitan from the start.

A global orientation is not an add-on to the American university's identity — it is constitutive of it. The research enterprise that made our universities beacons of discovery, creativity, and innovation was built on the free movement of talent, ideas, and collaboration across national boundaries. This flow of ingenuity into American higher education established the university as one of the country's most powerful ambassadors and a critical source of its global influence. The students who came from every corner of the globe to study here enriched not only their own education but the intellectual life of every American institution they attended. To retreat from that orientation now would not be a defense of American higher education — it would be an abandonment of one of the core sources of its strength. Critics of the university express legitimate concerns about the security of sensitive research, transnational repression, and the equitable distribution of opportunity between domestic and international students that warrant principled responses. But the answer is to find ways to safeguard what is vulnerable while preserving the culture of openness that made the American university the global leader in research and education.

Moreover, exposure to different cultures and perspectives and to a robust competition of ideas is an essential component of cultivating judgment, especially in a pluralist society. Discovery, creativity, and innovation also require a curiosity to learn and explore that extends beyond our borders. In our unsettled future, the problems our community will need to address will not stop at national borders, the competition we face will be global, and the solutions we develop will benefit from drawing from a wider range of perspectives. A university that is serious about human-centered learning cannot afford to be parochial.

Putting Purpose into Practice: The Four Mission Frameworks

The five imperatives described above — building thick relationships, embracing institutional identity, nurturing academic civics, broadening and deepening collaboration, and sharpening a global vision — are not ends in themselves. They are the means through which Cornell's four core missions are fulfilled. Accompanying this introduction are preliminary frameworks from each of the mission subcommittees, each one an attempt to answer the same fundamental question: what does it mean to pursue this mission with a human-centered purpose in the decades ahead?

An Invitation to Continue the Conversation

In the face of a future defined by uncertainty, the committee presents these initial frameworks for the core missions of higher education with deep intellectual humility. We do not know how the exogenous forces shaping the future will turn out. Some may reconfigure the world as we know it; others may flame out, leaving behind little more than burst bubbles and dated memes. But we know that higher education cannot stand still. The committee therefore offers these frameworks — contextualized by alternative visions of potential futures — not as final answers, but as a means to further catalyze the conversation among colleagues and community members whose thoughts, wisdom, and opinions we are eager to hear.

The work of this committee does not end with these pages. In the coming weeks, we will hold gatherings with campus assemblies, meetings with advisory groups, and universitywide town halls. We will use your feedback to shape our report, which will be the foundation for another year's work by a committee with broader composition, Shaping Our Future, to build a strategic vision for Cornell for the next five years. We note many existing Cornell programs and initiatives are relevant to the frameworks we offer; we do not catalog these in these documents, but will identify and build on this foundational work in strategic planning. [We invite your responses to these frameworks](#) to help us better understand the implications of our ideas, sharpen our arguments, correct our errors, and open horizons we have not yet seen, so that our report can build on your insights.