

Provost's Committee on the Future of the American University Preliminary Framework on Public Impact and Community Engagement

Subcommittee

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Background: Reimagining Public Impact and Community Engagement

Public impact is a very broad umbrella that includes a wide range of models, strategies, and activities. The Public Impact and Community Engagement Subcommittee of the Committee on the Future of the American University defines public impact as the myriad ways that universities engage with the world outside their campuses. Community engagement is one powerful way in which this can be done but not the only model for public impact, which can include activities such as the development of new and revolutionary technologies, translation of research and making it more accessible to non-academic audiences, influencing policy, and working with organizations, among others. Research universities like Cornell University already do many of these things and invest in dissemination of new knowledge. Land-grant universities have an even more robust and explicit commitment to public impact that includes direct and meaningful engagement with external stakeholders to advance a range of outcomes for communities, families, and individuals in their states and beyond. Our dual status as a research university and land-grant institution means that we have a complex and demanding responsibility to the public. It also means that we have a unique advantage in delivering on this core mission of the university.

Of the three pressures examined by the committee, many of our subcommittee discussions focused on the ways in which our public impact and community engagement function can address the significant decline in public trust and the changing relationship with the federal, state, and local governments.

Over the course of our work, we focused on defining public impact and community engagement programs and activities, identifying barriers and challenges to expanded reach, and proposing overarching principles that can guide a reimagining of this domain. Our work is motivated by the overarching premise that universities have a responsibility to leverage knowledge, insights, and scientific advances to make life better for communities, families, and individuals. We make a distinction between external impact that leads to better health, education, and economic outcomes and efforts to shape ideologically influenced values and norms. The focus of our subcommittee's work is on the former.

In addition to our subcommittee deliberations, we assembled and consulted an advisory panel of representatives from critical and leading outward-facing university units that deploy different models of public engagement and impact. The advisory panel engaged in discussions about strengths of existing programs, models for delivering public impact, types of metrics and tools for assessing the quality of impacts made, and areas that need to be strengthened to enhance these efforts at Cornell University and in higher education overall. Our discussions have also explicitly brought together our public impact mission with our research mission to explore ways that these can be better integrated and coordinated. Finally, and as part of the broader committee's efforts, our work included meetings with internal and external stakeholders who shared a wide range of perspectives related to the public impact mission of the university.

The core principle and imperatives associated with our public impact mission outlined below are the product of our subcommittee discussions, the rich input and insights from the advisory panel, and our engagement with both internal and external stakeholders.

Overarching Approach: The Role of Public Impact in Today's Higher Education Landscape

The work of the committee has brought into sharp relief the erosion of public trust in institutions of higher education and their shifting relationship with the government. Interestingly, despite the erosion of trust around certain elements of the modern university, there are relatively high levels of trust in the public mission of the university. In an American Higher Education Barometer report from Fall 2025, 83% of respondents recognized the importance of universities for economic growth and 76–79% viewed universities as having positive local community, economic, and healthcare impact. Viewed in this light, universities' public impact mission is an antidote of sorts to the broader loss of confidence in our societal role. Compare this to the 42% of respondents in a 2025 Gallup-Lumina Foundation survey who had a “great-deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education. Research universities, we believe, should lean into this source of support from the public and use it as a means of adopting best practices in other areas to engage with the public in trust enhancing ways. Put differently, in a time of eroding trust in universities, leaning into the areas that have significant public confidence is a powerful way to help support other missions, like research and education.

While these negative perceptions are, of course, antithetical to our core mission and to the real impact that we have on critical societal, community, and individual outcomes, they present a significant threat to our longstanding legitimacy. As such, it is important that we address this issue head on. To bolster trust, reimagine the university's value to society, and expand the areas for which we do have strong support, Cornell is uniquely positioned to offer a much-needed model for the American university writ large through its integration of knowledge, teaching, and discovery with extensive public impact. As the only land-grant institution in the Ivy League, we sit at the intersection of a leading private research university and the democratic ideal of serving the people within the state and beyond. **This dual identity is not a contradiction — it is our greatest strength.** This duality provides us with the ability 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 and activities that will benefit the public. It also offers us 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. Our subcommittee believes that the Cornell model — a combination of rigorous research, a commitment to education, and a public-facing mission — 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 our land-grant mission should, therefore, be bolder and more ambitious. We should build on our tradition to serve as the “Land Grant to the World” by placing our public mission on equal footing with our commitment to research and education.

Shaping our future requires understanding our past. Ezra Cornell [wrote](#) of his own goal to “do the greatest good to the greatest number of the industrial classes of my native state, and at the same time to do the greatest good to the state itself.” He joined with his fellow state senator, Andrew Dickson White, to convince New York State's 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 our Ithaca campus. It is this foundation that put into motion Cornell Cooperative Extension, an impressive part of Cornell's unique presence in every county in New York state supporting the needs of communities from agriculture and health to youth programming leadership development. Despite this fact, there are many New York residents unaware of the role that we play throughout the state and of our land-grant status and mission. Throughout our discussions with internal and external stakeholders, it also 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. He persuaded New York state to partner with Cornell to establish contract colleges that addressed specific state needs, beginning with Veterinary Medicine in 1894 and 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. This identity and mission mean embracing a fundamentally different relationship with society than our Ivy peers. Our 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. Our mission calls on us to recognize where we have fallen short and to aspire to always do better. We have an obligation to engage with real-world challenges and problems, directing university knowledge, expertise, and resources to communities and individuals through accessible education and training, applied research, and evidence-based policy recommendations.

The work of engaged scholarship has flourished across Cornell since our 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. And yet, at this moment of great societal need, there is more we can be doing across all academic units, state-affiliated or not. At the heart of our proposed core principles below is the subcommittee's view that higher education has always had a deep responsibility to broader society and that this responsibility has grown over time. Putting universities on a solid footing for the coming decades will require reimagining how we build on existing academic infrastructure to more boldly integrate research and public impact and to expand the communities we work with as well as the problems we seek to address. For Cornell University, this is inextricably linked to our founding ethos of doing the "greatest good" but applies, we believe, to universities overall. At a time when our value as an institution is being questioned, our public impact potential 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 — our public engagement mission is more important than ever. 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.

As we consider ways to reimagine our institution, we should remember and realize our foundational attributes. Academic excellence and public impact are not competing values; they are mutually reinforcing imperatives that represent Cornell at its best and offer a roadmap for other universities. Living up to our “People’s University” promise is a critical component of fostering trust in Cornell.

The Continuum of Public Engagement

We do not view community engagement and public impact as a binary or categorical set of efforts, but instead as a continuum that spans from light-touch, unidirectional interactions intended to inform a public of research insights or new knowledge to deeply reciprocal, co-creative partnerships intended to generate novel or transformational solutions. Recognizing this continuum is important because it allows all members of the university community to contribute to its public impact mission, regardless of their role or discipline. A guest lecture to a public audience, a media interview, an assignment in a community-engaged learning course, or sharing research findings in a community newsletter can each represent genuine forms of public engagement. The intentionality behind each of these and the recognition that they, together, contribute to a broader system of interactions that unfold over time and across sectors is of great importance. Recognizing engagement as a continuum also allows us to set realistic expectations for participation while revealing opportunities for faculty, students, and staff to engage and contribute in ways that best align with their priorities.

Barriers to Stronger Public Impact

What is preventing universities, like Cornell, from delivering more fully on a public impact and community engagement mission? Our subcommittee spent considerable time discussing this gap and reflecting on stakeholder input around this issue. Across the range of barriers to more robust public impact, we identified two overarching categories: strategic and structural.

Strategic barriers

Our public impact efforts at Cornell are affected by a very strong perceived separation between contract and endowed colleges in terms of contributions to our land-grant mission. This is an artificial separation that obscures the many ways in which we are delivering on our land-grant mission across the entire university. 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, we believe, is a university-wide public impact strategy that leverages the different strengths and ways of engaging in public impact across our colleges and units.

A second underlying barrier is related to deep and persistent perceptions of outreach work as secondary to research and teaching. To deliver on our land-grant and public impact mission more fully, we need to chip away at this longstanding challenge. Although public impact-related work exists across the university, the perceived status of this work and of the faculty and staff who conduct it is often seen as not equivalent to those engaged in and supporting on-campus research and teaching. We view this as a strategic barrier since it is inextricably linked to university-wide priorities and the signaling of these priorities. It is important to note that this barrier transcends the contract and endowed college distinction: across the university, there are faculty members who have explicit extension responsibilities as part of their tenure track appointments, which 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.

A third strategic barrier that our subcommittee identified is the need to better recognize and acknowledge our public impact contributions as a 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 in our broader university strategy and in our efforts to confront the core challenges we face.

Structural barriers

In addition to strategic barriers, the subcommittee has identified a number of 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. We, of course, acknowledge the importance and benefits of the decentralized structures at Cornell. Nevertheless, it is also clear to us that this decentralized structure comes at a cost with respect to integration and coordination of public impact programs, activities, and events across our different units, including outreach programs within our contract colleges.

Second, and related to Cornell's decentralized structure, is the wealth of standalone, innovative, and impactful centers and institutes. As with our decentralized structure, the proliferation of centers and institutes tackling critical issues, often with core public impact contributions, is a real strength and one of the characteristics that make us unique. At the same time, an unintended consequence of this feature is the existence of multiple units tackling related societal challenges with limited engagement and connection. We are not optimally structured to capitalize on emergent opportunities for collaboration that arise when units work across organizational boundaries. Thus, we are likely leaving considerable value on the table in multiple areas as a result of limited coordination and synergies across excellent centers and institutes operating in similar or overlapping areas.

Third, many of our subcommittee discussions focused on the incentive structures that drive unit and individual faculty decisions. 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 teaching, with public impact activities in their traditional outreach and extension forms as a distant third. Research, teaching, and extension faculty who engage in public impact work are not always recognized or appreciated sufficiently for their contributions. Tenured and tenure-track faculty are, for the most part, not rewarded or incentivized to participate more broadly outside their disciplinary research expectations. Addressing these longstanding incentive structures will be essential if we are to expand Cornell's public impact. Taking tenure and promotion criteria as an important example, public impact plays a minor role in most tenure and promotion decisions and is often seen as contributing to service requirements at most. Here, too, many faculty have extension as a formal part of their role. Increasing public impact through greater levels of integration and collaboration will require, we believe, incentives for engaging in work that has meaningful and robust external impact and working with others to enhance and extend our reach.

Fourth, our subcommittee has discussed the challenge inherent to bridging the divide between our research expertise and our public impact infrastructure. Cornell University produces an impressive

array of rigorous and high-quality research with implications for policy, practice, and action. At the same time, we have a strong foundation for public engagement and outreach. The linking of these two strengths is a clear area for improvement, and our subcommittee has discussed models for the integration of research and public impact-focused work. For example, one model might have both types of activities conducted by the same faculty member or team, with faculty incentivized to do the public impact-focused work. An alternative model might be one in which separate units with a strong external engagement focus leverage faculty members' research findings and work to translate those findings into public impact. Alongside our discussions, the research and scholarship subcommittee of the Provost's Committee on the Future of the American University is also thinking deeply about ways to make our research more relevant, applicable, and accessible to outside audiences.

Finally, our external engagement work is constrained by the difficulties we face in being able to clearly point to 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. Thus, for example, we have been hard-pressed to produce robust accounting for the economic effects our university is having on the national, state, and local economies. Similarly, we struggle to point to the aggregate impact that we have 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. The absence of these, however, comes at a significant cost, as it leaves us unable to fully capture and articulate the multifaceted ways in which our public impact investments deliver for communities, families, and individuals.

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 subcommittee has put forward an overarching principle and six imperatives that will guide our final recommendations. This represents a foundation for elevating and expanding public impact at American universities in general, and at Cornell in particular.

Core Principle: Having a positive impact on the public beyond our campuses 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 our ability to demonstrate broad societal value beyond the students that we teach on our campuses. The public makes substantial investments in our institutions through significant federal and state support and is increasingly expecting to see concrete and tangible returns. If universities are to deliver on their promise to contribute to society at a time when our knowledge and expertise is needed more than ever, it will require a strong commitment to the public impact mission. Our commitment to public impact goes well beyond the responsibility that stems from federal, state, and local investments. It is a foundational principle linked to our responsibility to society, irrespective of funding, 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.

Importantly, public impact is not simply another university mission running parallel to research and education — it actively strengthens and energizes both. Some members of our community expressed fears that investments in public impact activities will reduce our ability to invest in teaching and research. On the contrary, we believe that pursuing public impact creates synergies that increase our capacity to teach students and to conduct research. For teaching, engagement with communities outside the university provides important pedagogical opportunities and allows us to complement classroom learning with hands-on, real-world experiences that provide context and perspective for their 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 instrumental 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. Our research is stronger when it is tethered to the world that we are trying to explain and understand, and public impact is a unique tool to do exactly that.

At Cornell University, we have been providing these returns in the form of our outreach, extension, and other public impact work. Colleges and units have, over the years, developed effective tactics for promoting the public impact mission delivered by these assets. However, in order to help secure our institution's future, **Cornell must fully embrace our land-grant DNA, developing and implementing a university-level strategy that reflects our 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 our public impact mission. For each imperative, we characterize what is at stake and an initial step that Cornell University can take to begin moving in that direction.

Invest in translating and disseminating research and scholarship into public impact.

Research is a deeply rooted mission within the research university and a core engine for the impact that we have. Many of the outreach and extension models at Cornell and at other land-grant institutions are based on the promise that research conducted at universities will disseminate into the “real world,” and that problems and challenges facing external stakeholders will inspire faculty research agendas. This bidirectional and integrated vision has not always lived up to its potential. To maximize our research's external impact, the structures and processes for connecting novel research 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 out into the world; for translating academic advances so that they have the potential to shape action by practitioners and policymakers; and 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 into “boots on the ground” through real policy changes, educator guides, or practitioner toolkits. Our call is 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 grants program that incentivizes the pairing of researchers with extension and outreach colleagues or organizations outside the university that affect change in the world.

Foster a bidirectional relationship between universities and the public.

Alongside the outreach that universities make to the public, we must also foster a bidirectional relationship in which we 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 our responsibility to simply bring this out into the world. The stakeholders that we 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. What we study and research should be informed by our scholarly communities and prior scientific advances and, at the same time, should also be driven by the real-world problems that influence the stakeholders that we engage with and draw on their knowledge and expertise.

Increase public impact coordination, integration, and effectiveness across the university.

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

At Cornell University, we have an impressive number and range of public impact assets already established. We are aware of the strengths and the longstanding commitment at many universities, including Cornell, to a decentralized approach. As such, recommendations about structural changes to our public impact work will need to recognize strong autonomy and discretion for the units contributing to public impact. These features have long contributed to our nimbleness and ability to quickly respond to changes in the external environment. At the same time, there is a need for structures and processes that simplify and encourage greater coordination, integration, and learning across related and synergistic efforts. These will enhance our nimbleness by leveraging all that our public impact infrastructure has to offer when responding to new demands, constraints, and opportunities.

Thus, for example, we have 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. This emerging recommendation builds on the success that similar existing units have had in helping to bridge across areas, such as the Einhorn and Atkinson Centers, 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, for example, leveraging its impressive infrastructure and reach to engage the public around a broader array of emerging needs, such as artificial intelligence (AI) literacy.

Another way to achieve better coordination and integration is the creation of forums or networks that bring together colleagues across the university working on public impact-related challenges. As part of our subcommittee's work, we have assembled an advisory panel that brings 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, we have been considering the extent to which such a group should be constituted on a more 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 our public impact requires a significant restructuring of incentive systems and expectations. First and foremost, we will need to think about the weight and importance of public engagement in recruitment, evaluation, and promotion decisions for faculty and staff. Importantly, much of our public impact work happens through research, teaching, and extension faculty, and it is critical that we reassess existing incentive structures for promotion and recognition for external engagement through a research, teaching, and extension context.

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 the expectation we have across units and roles, both tenured and untenured. Elevating public impact in the ways that we are calling for must, therefore, include a shift in the expectations that we have for 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 responsibilities for public impact should be offset with a reassessment of other responsibilities.

We realize that the existing approach to tenure is longstanding and deeply rooted. But the Faculty Senate, university governance bodies, and college deans could 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 (non-exhaustive) 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 might receive teaching buyouts, and this would be structured in a more systematic manner across the university.

Define, conceptualize, and measure impact thoughtfully and robustly.

Enhancing the public impact focus of the university requires careful attention to how we conceptualize and think about what constitutes impact and the type of outcomes we are seeking to promote in the world. Furthermore, it is essential that we develop the tools and capabilities to measure and track our impact and contributions to society. Throughout our discussion with internal and external stakeholders, a recurring theme centered around the absence of consistent and convincing measures of our public impact. To be clear, this is not merely a "storytelling" problem. Delivering on our public impact mission requires us to be thoughtful and sometimes critical in the outcomes we seek to affect — and central to this is the ability to capture, document, and showcase the concrete ways in which investments translate into, for example, healthier communities, more capable youth, or better trained workers and managers. 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 and in the spirit of greater coordination, we should find ways to develop collective priorities around the type of impact we should be having and, by extension, the ways by which we measure this. 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 our ability to both deepen our 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, as a result of the various pressures and underlying uncertainties that universities face. The call for greater emphasis on the public impact mission of the university is, among other things, motivated by the notion that it will allow us 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 shape and guide the development of AI systems, their diffusion across society, the guardrails that are put in place to foster ethical use, and the upskilling of communities, organizations, and individuals so that they have the necessary competencies to leverage these new technologies in positive ways. Universities, like Cornell, that have invested in robust public impact infrastructure, will be best positioned to serve these emerging needs. A reimagining of the 21st century land-grant institution will include new ways of engaging with communities around the evolving needs of the day. Take 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, our 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 machinery is a tool through which universities can contribute to society in real time around rapidly evolving changes and needs.

Speculative Scenarios: Pressure Testing our Core Principle and Imperatives

During the work of the committee, we were confronted with a number of possible future scenarios that might challenge higher education in ways that go beyond the current uncertain environment. In our discussions with stakeholders, we heard a series of concerns about possible scenarios. As a way to pressure test our overarching principle and associated imperatives, we built on these concerns and developed three possible future scenarios that highlight the role that a robust public impact approach would play in mitigating possible negative effects. **These scenarios are not recommendations and do not imply support from the committee.** Rather, they are illustrations of the wide range of options that these principles could open in practice and a way to play devil's advocate around some of the concerns articulated both inside and outside of Cornell.

Scenario 1: Federal government dramatically cuts or eliminates grant funding for university research

In a scenario where the federal government drastically reduces or eliminates grant funding for university research and sharply cuts indirect cost recovery rates, Cornell's survival would hinge on even stronger public support for our scholarly mission. The motivation for reimagining our public impact is a fundamental commitment to deploying our research infrastructure to benefit society. A consequence, however, of adopting our overarching principle — that having a positive impact on the public beyond our campuses is central to the future success of the American university — would be Cornell earning a broad public constituency that understands and values our role in driving societal progress.

In this scenario, we see our six imperatives working together: recognition and incentives would spur faculty participation in public-facing work; translating our research into policy tools, community

interventions, and educational resources would make our contributions visible; fostering bidirectional relationships with the public would ensure those contributions are directly useful and valued; leveraging existing impact infrastructure would enable scale; thoughtful measurement would make our value quantifiable; and coordination across the university would unify and amplify messaging and efforts.

Together, the result of implementing these imperatives would be a dramatic increase in the public seeing firsthand the ways Cornell's work benefits them. This would deepen trust, strengthen credibility, and help galvanize grassroots advocacy in defense of university research. In an era of funding scarcity, such a foundation would position Cornell to mobilize public opinion in favor of maintaining government investment in research and higher education, counterbalancing political pressures toward cuts — and reaffirming our commitment to societal impact beyond funding considerations.

Scenario 2: Decline in demand for higher education due to AI

If advances in AI significantly reduce demand for higher education — whether by replacing instructional faculty or diminishing the perceived need for human-acquired skills — universities would face a profound existential challenge. Teaching, long considered a core justification for public and private investment in universities, might no longer carry the same weight in the eyes of society. In such a future, Cornell's continued viability would depend on making a compelling case for investment based on the measurable public impact of our research, innovation, and outreach.

Our six imperatives would offer an interlocking strategy for navigating such a scenario. Recognizing and rewarding public engagement would promote faculty and staff commitment to, and participation in, external-facing contributions as traditional teaching roles and expectations evolve. Fostering bidirectional relationships with communities, industries, and governments would enable us to directly understand the challenges AI is creating in diverse sectors, so that our investment in translating research into tangible solutions and outreach will address the urgent, real-world needs the public is actually facing.

Leveraging existing public impact infrastructure — such as cooperative extension and statewide agency partnerships — would allow rapid deployment and broad uptake of these solutions, programs, and policies. Measuring our impact would provide credible evidence of value in this new context, and coordination across the university would amplify visibility to ensure this work reaches the widest possible audience.

These changes would allow Cornell to position itself as a vital public problem solver and knowledge driver even if classroom-based instruction declines. Imagine Cornell creating and disseminating community health interventions rooted in Cornell science, spearheading public-private partnerships to address rural economic challenges, or issuing widely-used policy briefs on climate change resilience — as a result of a culture that rewards and recognizes public engagement. In this AI-driven future, universities that have robust systems for turning research into societal value will command continued public and philanthropic support, even as traditional teaching roles diminish.

Scenario 3: Intensifying political polarization and perception of elite universities as not aligned with beliefs and values

In a possible future where political polarization causes different groups to steer their children away from elite institutions perceived as misaligned with their beliefs and values, universities like Cornell could be vulnerable to enrollment decline and reputational harm. Sustained commitment to public

impact work that is demonstrably beneficial to people across the political spectrum would help to insulate against this risk.

Our six imperatives provide an integrated strategy for countering such perceptions. Recognizing and rewarding public engagement would encourage faculty and staff to pursue projects with diverse communities, strengthening inclusivity in our outreach. Fostering bidirectional relationships would ensure that the priorities we address are informed by, and responsive to, the needs of politically varied groups, making our contributions relevant across ideological lines. Translating research into tangible solutions — particularly on bipartisan issues such as agricultural innovation, broadband access, workforce development, and public health — would make our role as a nonpartisan problem solver visible.

Leveraging impact infrastructure like cooperative extension programs would allow us to deliver these solutions at scale to rural, suburban, and urban constituencies alike. Measuring our impact would provide credible evidence of the benefits we bring to all demographics, and coordination across the university would unify messaging so that politically diverse audiences see themselves reflected in Cornell's work.

This approach could help counteract ideological caricatures of Cornell, fostering the perception that our university is a partner to all Americans, regardless of political affiliation. By demonstrating consistent, tangible public impact for people across the political spectrum, we could build broad-based trust and support, safeguarding both our enrollment and our long-term role in serving the public good.

Example Next Steps

The framework proposed above is designed to position higher education, and Cornell University specifically, as thriving in the decades to come. It also helps to flesh out some clear next steps that will be needed to set us on this longer journey. Below are a number of examples of possible next steps that align with our public impact framework and build on the discussion above. 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.

Extend tenure standards to include public impact pathways.

A clear next step would entail the development of criteria used to assess public impact contributions, taking unit differences and approaches into account.

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.

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 an existing model at Cornell in similar areas. 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 work.

Conduct an internal impact inventory.

Universities should develop internal impact inventories of capabilities that allow for a mapping of units, activities, and associated outcomes. Importantly, this should help to not only identify inputs and superficial outputs. Rather, what is needed are 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 and programs to develop AI training for communities affected by technological disruption.

Cornell University can leverage cooperative extension and other outreach and extension units embedded within communities to develop AI literacy training and programming. Universities have an important role to play in making sure that the benefits from AI accrue widely and that the risks are mitigated consistently. Cooperative extension and other outreach and extension units will be critical to our ability to play this role.

Utilize corporate engagement to support public impact infrastructure.

Cornell University has a long track record in linking research and associated entrepreneurial endeavors to practice through corporate partnerships and start-up activity. Given the importance of this arena for national, regional, and local 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.

Conclusions

Higher education in the United States is at a pivotal juncture and facing unprecedented pressures. Securing a thriving future for American universities in general, and for Cornell in particular, will require a significant reimagining of core missions. Integral to this reimagining, we believe, 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 and 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. We have a rich history and tradition to draw on and a proven track record. We must invest in and improve the bidirectional 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 staff, faculty, and students.

In addition to these imperatives, our draft framework provides several initial steps that can help us continue to build and enhance our public impact work. The Provost's Shaping our Future Committee, which will follow the work of the Committee on the Future of the American University in

positioning Cornell for the coming decades, will have a range of options from which to choose. We know that there are multiple ways to push our public impact agenda forward. What is critical is that we do so with urgency and enthusiasm for a path that at once reconnects us to our past and prepares us for a very uncertain future.

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