

Provost's Committee on the Future of the American University

Preliminary Framework on Undergraduate Education

Subcommittee

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The Problem and the Opportunity

American universities have, at different times, emphasized different purposes for undergraduate education, including moral formation, the establishment of an educated citizenry, the acceleration of social mobility, the development of specialized expertise, racial and ethnic integration, and the production of a strong workforce. In recent years, the dominant model around which students, parents, employers, alumni, policymakers, and other stakeholders frame the purpose of a highly selective university has focused on a particularly private vision: a university will select the most talented, high potential individuals from a highly competitive pool, these individuals will pay a large sum of money up to what their family can afford, and they will be rewarded with a degree that gives them a high-paying job. The term we heard repeatedly from stakeholders describing this conceptual model was return on investment (ROI): students pay handsomely to receive something that returns even more handsomely to them over time.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this model. A high-quality education is often expensive, and graduates should certainly expect that this initial expense will provide a sufficient long-term benefit. But when this return is framed too narrowly and transactionally, it contributes to the present precarity of undergraduate education at American universities: a sense from students and parents that the education is not sufficiently useful, from employers that the education is not sufficiently effective, and from broader stakeholders that the education is not sufficiently trustworthy.

The first shortcoming comes from the fact that a narrow model of ROI has worked well in a stable, well-functioning external economic environment. However, in a world where markers of a successful adulthood such as home ownership are increasingly out of reach, there is profound uncertainty about American students' economic futures. Students we spoke with at Cornell overwhelmingly reported a sense of pressure to get a well-paying job — one that could justify the high expense of attendance. In a rational response to this anxiety, some are trying to get through school as quickly as possible to limit this financial burden. Students also report that this pressure makes it difficult for them to engage in learning for learning's sake. Faculty have noticed and complain of increasing numbers of students being checked out of their classes. However discouraging, these behaviors are understandable responses to this uncertainty.

The second shortcoming comes from the disruptive, destabilizing effect of artificial intelligence (AI), which has accelerated longer-standing concerns that higher education may be too disconnected from the workplace. The rapid advance of AI has made the expectation credible that the jobs of the future will be radically different from the jobs of today. In this context, students, parents, faculty, and policymakers all express concern that our modal forms of teaching at American universities may not prepare students for what will be demanded of them. Cornell students express anxiety about the impact of AI on their future employment and worry that both curricular offerings and faculty restrictions on AI use are unconnected to the skills actually needed for a career. Meanwhile, our faculty are unsure how to assess student learning in a world of AI, particularly in the face of a student body trying to get their degree done with as quickly as possible. These faculty and student concerns are by no means unique to Cornell.

The individualistic focus of this approach has also brought three related but distinct challenges. One is in the student culture it can foster. Cornell students report feeling pressured into competing, rather than cooperating with and supporting one another. If jobs are scarce, then students must outcompete other students for signals of job-worthiness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the culture of highly competitive extracurricular clubs that our students believe provide the networking, skills, and credentialing needed to be successful on the job market. Concomitant with this competitive environment, Cornell students describe problems of isolation and a lack of belonging. These challenges are by no means universal, and the university has taken numerous steps to address them. But students speak of isolation as a (forced) choice — the price to pay for obtaining a successful career. For many, they have operated this way since high school.

A second challenge is rooted in the capacities that graduates hold, or rather do not hold, when they leave American universities. Ironically, employers report that American college graduates lack critical professional capacities that would be better developed in a more cooperative environment that is less focused on immediate returns. Specifically, employers and those who speak with them regularly — staff, state, and federal officials; think tanks; alumni; and trustees — report they are generally not so much seeking specialized skills, high GPAs, or specific majors. What they value instead are advanced capacities that integrate intellectual, interpersonal, and personal skills. These include sound judgment and effective decision-making in ambiguous situations; critical thinking and problem-solving abilities; teamwork, collaboration, and conflict management skills; strong communication and networking capabilities; and adaptability — characterized by intellectual curiosity and the ability to learn rapidly. Employers say that recent graduates of American universities lack the experience and skills to work in teams, communicate across difference, and deal with messy, unstructured situations. In other words, they say college graduates are generally capable of doing what they are taught to do — demonstrate proficient knowledge — but this is not all that employers seek from them. Neither is it likely to be their comparative advantage as AI moves through the economy; as AI automates entry-level tasks, judgment, human connection, and collaborative capacity are becoming ever more valuable. In both the current and an emerging AI-infused workforce, employers describe an excellent employee as someone who has the broader fluency with knowledge, prudent judgment, and social interaction that enables them to integrate human and artificial intelligence in the solving of complex problems.

Finally, a narrow ROI model recognizes no role for civic contribution. All parties assess the student's education strictly in terms of their economic product — what they can earn — with the faith that the economic growth this arrangement produces speaks for itself in terms of social value. However, recent trends in the socio-political environment suggest the public is no longer willing to trust and fund institutions to teach students to maximize their earnings, without any sense of duty to the larger society. This complaint comes from across the ideological spectrum and takes varied forms, from concerns that students are focusing on personal financial enrichment rather than larger social concerns, to worries about students' possible cosmopolitan detachment from local civic life, weakening commitments to pluralism, and declining dedication to excellence and rigor.

These developments are ominous in the sense that, taken together, they make the current model seem unsustainable. However, a closer analysis reveals an opportunity. There is a consistent through line in what employers demand, what society requires, and what students need: **an education that develops socially connected, emotionally resilient, and civically minded graduates who are comfortable navigating uncertainty, and are able to leverage knowledge and sound judgment to produce constructive solutions in the face of this uncertainty. These graduates will have the capacities and dispositions needed to lead responsibly, and the social and emotional skills to engage with others across significant differences in identity,**

experience, worldview, and values and to navigate the conflict that will inevitably result.

This is what the world will pay them for, this is what society needs from them, and this is what they need for themselves.

Fostering these capacities — long understood by many educators as central to the university's purpose — now requires a more systematic re-orientation of education away from transaction and toward transformation. In prior years, students were assumed to arrive on American campuses with many of the interpersonal and personal abilities employers are now asking for, so the focus of their education was more on instruction in the specialized knowledge that was held at the university. But that world has changed. As we heard from experts in student services and campus life, teenagers today grow up in a very different environment, one in which high-achieving students often have much more technical mastery than their counterparts decades ago, but fewer life experiences and social contexts in which the other essential capacities would be developed. For example, they generally have followed more structured educational pathways; have lived in communities more segregated by class, race and ethnicity, and viewpoint; and have less work experience. Their social lives have been funneled increasingly through structured, supervised contact and through online interactions that foster the management of reputation over the opportunity for deep connection. Moreover, current and future AI will likely outpace students' ability to master technical minutiae and force a recalibration of learning priorities for university students.

These conditions make explicit and far more central a role universities have long played, but a transactional approach has been diminishing: cultivating the whole person, not only transmitting knowledge. Fortunately, universities already possess much of the capacity and infrastructure to provide this kind of transformative education. Universities hone moral and intellectual judgment through direct engagement with other students and rigorous thinkers in their respective fields. They offer the unique opportunity to build deep social connections through residential life. What this moment demands, then, is not a wholesale rejection of the university, but a principled re-orientation that elevates and integrates its most enduring educational commitments. This re-orientation builds new capacities needed for the coming decades while re-enlivening some historical values of the university. We refer to this orientation as **human-centered education**.

Principles

Providing a human-centered education for the coming decades means producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable, but also prepared to navigate a changing workforce and a complex and uncertain future. Doing so effectively builds on the following core principles.

Cultivate constructive engagement with uncertainty.

In an age of profound uncertainty, universities must provide students with the capacity to confidently navigate unpredictability. In the uncertain world our graduates are entering, it is not enough to teach knowledge; students will need to be able to apply their knowledge creatively, flexibly, and effectively in unanticipated situations. This requires critical thinking — overwhelmingly identified by faculty, staff, and alumni as the core capacity for the 21st century. But it requires more: sound judgment and the intellectual capacity and emotional fortitude to make informed, ethical decisions in situations where rules do not neatly apply and any decision will necessarily have downsides.

Foster the capacity for pluralism.

Graduates will enter a world that is characterized by deep differences in identity, experience, background, worldview, and values. To enable them to succeed and thrive in that world requires developing the capacity to engage productively with difference: to recognize, accept, and even

value the reality of difference, to work effectively across differences, to recognize where and how commonalities exist and can be built on, and to leverage differences in perspective and experience to develop their own understanding. They also need capacities to manage conflict: to recognize that in human society conflict is unavoidable, to have the skills needed to work through conflict, and, where possible, to develop constructive resolutions. These skills are not only beneficial for society; they are named as crucial by employers.

Promote civic-mindedness.

A narrow understanding of return on investment frames education as a private good, one whose aim is the personal advancement of the student. The capacities that a human-centered education develops are those that are needed for the jobs of the future and therefore valuable for individual students. But providing these capacities is not only a private good; it is also a responsibility that universities hold to fulfill the public trust and produce a next generation that is civically engaged. This is especially the case for elite universities, which pride themselves on providing opportunities for graduates to move into positions of significant power. As these universities prepare their students to potentially move into positions of influence, we owe it to the public to educate them so that they can best contribute to society, not simply seek a high income or defer to technology. If elite universities in the United States fail in this educational mission, they weaken civic life by producing an elite unprepared for the responsibilities they will hold.

Develop the whole person.

Over the past decades, many universities have split academics from student and campus life. With this division, faculty generally see intellectual learning as the province of the classroom, while social, emotional, and interpersonal learning, meaning-making, and career skills are seen as the province of student services and campus life. The latter capacities are becoming ever more crucial to career success, while they are ever more challenged by societal pressures and the rapid adoption of technology, in ways that also show up in the classroom. It is thus becoming ever clearer that undergraduate education must be approached holistically. We must intentionally develop intellectual, interpersonal, and personal skills together and reinforce them consistently across academics and student and campus life.

Educate through intentional development of human relationships and presence.

Human-centered education must be relational, rather than transactional. It does so by intentionally identifying and fostering opportunities to develop meaningful personal relationships throughout the educational experience. These relationships include those with students' peers and classmates, with faculty and staff, and with alumni, potential employers, and other mentors. This shift is necessary to model and teach the interpersonal skills that graduates will need to succeed and to foster a sense of personal accountability. Crucially, it is needed to develop the relational community and sense of belonging our students need to flourish and to take on the risks and challenges required for transformational growth. And it is needed to equip our graduates with the strong social networks that can sustain them across their careers.

The Goals of Education (What We Teach)

The goal of a human-centered education is to produce the range of qualities that a graduate will need to navigate effectively through a changing world. Building on the principle of educating the whole student, human-centered learning requires graduates to develop three kinds of capacities: intellectual capacities, interpersonal capacities, and personal capacities.

Intellectual capacities

A human-centered education foregrounds **constructive thinking**. We define constructive thinking as conceptualizing, developing, and advocating for specific solutions in situations where there is no clear right answer. This capacity is necessary for the workforce, crucial for working effectively with AI, and central for producing engaged citizens.

- Such thinking must be **nuanced**: it must thoughtfully navigate complex topics and situations, ambiguity, and contradictory ideas.
- It must be **critical**, i.e., identifying the shortcomings and limits of current approaches and perspectives. This includes intellectual humility: recognizing the limits of one's own point of view and considering countervailing perspectives. Being critical is important, but on its own, not enough to produce solutions or motivate action.
- To avoid the trap of nihilism, thinking must also be **affirmative**, evaluating what is valuable about existing approaches or a proposed solution and thus should be built upon.
- To be effective and convincing, constructive thinking must also be **rigorous**: grounded in reliable knowledge and methods, analytical and precise.
- Finally, constructive thinking demands the development of **sound judgment**: developing discretion and weighing approaches in consideration of their epistemic grounding, potential consequences, and related social and moral commitments.

Interpersonal capacities

Preparing students to navigate an uncertain future effectively also requires three core interpersonal capacities: connection, pluralism, and leadership.

- **Connection** refers to the capacity to develop deep, multidimensional relationships built on humility, empathy, effective communication, and the development of shared values and goals. Historically, the American university has fostered rich relationships organically, and the resulting development of strong social networks has been an asset to alumni across their lifetimes. In the current moment, as social relationships are being reconfigured digitally, universities must foster the capacity for relationship-building intentionally.
- **Pluralism** means communicating and collaborating across consequential differences in identities, values, experiences, and worldviews. To do so requires self-awareness, effective listening, compromise, and negotiation amidst a commitment to being in community together, as well as an understanding of how difference is embedded in sociocultural and historical structures. It also requires recognizing the reality of conflict and competition and having skills to navigate them productively.
- **Leadership** in the human-centered model is defined relationally: not by the accumulation of power or resources for their own sake, but by integrity, service mindedness, intentional seeking of feedback, ethics, and accountability. Leadership is not limited to those who will hold high positions; it includes principled “followership” — being accountable for and exercising influence through whatever power one has.

Personal capacities

While these intellectual and interpersonal capacities are important, students also need to develop specific personal capacities to support education and the lifelong learning that will be necessary to navigate a changing world.

- **Resiliency** encompasses self-discipline, self-care, and effective management of setbacks, uncertainty, and change, which set the stage for healthy success in and beyond the university.
- **Flexibility** is crucial to enable our graduates to fluidly respond to a changing world and workplaces over the course of their careers; it involves curiosity, knowing how to learn, and creativity.

- **Courage** refers to the mental and emotional habits needed to accept and work through the challenges that produce growth; it is fostered by repeated exposure to tolerable levels of discomfort.
- **Meaning-making** involves knowing one's values and how to put them into action, as well as developing a sense of purpose that provides an internal compass to guide one through life after college. This capacity is crucial because it enables the consideration and integration of academic content — including specialized knowledge and ethics — into personal moral systems. It must be an enduring reference point for an education that is more than transactional.

The Methods of Education (How We Teach)

Pedagogy for a human-centered university must be designed to consistently foster these capacities, through the following strategies.

Faculty must model the intellectual and interpersonal capacities that students are intended to develop in curricula and in their interaction with students in and out of the classroom. For faculty, this includes modeling constructive, nuanced, critical, affirmative, and rigorous thinking, being accessible to and mentoring students, addressing a range of perspectives on course material, teaching material in ways that speak to the diversity of experiences and viewpoints that may be present in the classroom, enabling these experiences and viewpoints to cross-inform each other, actively seeking feedback from students and modeling how to respond effectively to it, keeping one's word to students, and holding oneself accountable when this is not possible. While many faculty already do these things, a human-centered university requires a clear articulation of core expectations for faculty that will allow consistent, intentional modeling of these capacities across the student experience.

Align goals across curricular and co-curricular activities, recognizing that student education spans both domains. This includes teaching the whole student by addressing relevant personal and interpersonal skills within the learning of each academic topic. For example, the career skill of being accountable to show up on time should not only be taught by the career center; it should also be built into expectations in classes, for example through shared and effective norms around timeliness and attendance. Furthermore, residential life at Cornell is already organized developmentally, with undergraduate students having different opportunities and freedoms over the course of their time at a university. This developmental lens should also be reflected in the classroom, where faculty can provide more support with interpersonal and personal capacities in early years and incrementally add expectations and challenges as students gain skills. As another example, a human-centered university will intentionally integrate meaning-making, ethics, and purpose throughout student life. On the curricular side, this could involve courses in ethics and exploring purpose. This also means purposefully incorporating spaces for meaning-making outside the classroom, such as co-curricular events and student clubs that support spiritual and religious meaning-making. Better integration of academic and campus life also supports the development of relationships between faculty and students by bringing them together outside the classroom.

To cultivate constructive engagement with uncertainty and educate the whole student, **complement practical education with the liberal arts**, which moves beyond providing technical skills in a particular discipline to cultivate well-rounded human beings. Leaning more deeply into this founding principle of Cornell offers an opportunity to address the wider range of skills and capacities needed for moving forward in a changing world and in AI-infused workplaces. The liberal arts can encourage flexibility and resiliency by exposing students to a variety of disciplines across the visual, spatial, and performing arts, humanities, sciences, and beyond. It supports grappling

with big questions, including through study of epistemology (how we know what we know), aesthetics, morality, and ethics. The liberal arts also supports exploring meaning-making and fostering wonder, creativity, and curiosity. A liberal arts perspective need not only be reflected in distribution courses; it can also be integrated into professional courses, such as including units on ethics or integrative projects in technical courses.

Provide a hands-on, project-based education at a human scale. Large lecture courses are often framed around one-way transfer of information, a fairly anonymous student body, and material that students see as unconnected to their vocational goals. The primary pedagogic model for the human-centered university promotes constructive thinking in context, interpersonal learning, and personal accountability. It does so through three primary mechanisms:

- The majority of education should be **dynamic**, where students learn basic material outside of class, then use class time to demonstrate and apply their knowledge in hands-on projects and cases. Such pedagogy can draw on many models, including the humanities seminar, engineering capstone projects, the studio model in the arts, lab courses, section-based teaching, flipped classrooms, active learning, peer tutoring and peer-led learning, learning through dialogue, and field-based courses. Such classes cultivate constructive engagement with uncertainty by shifting from knowledge transfer as primary mode to putting knowledge to practice. Assessment in such classes is AI-resilient because students are demonstrating their capabilities in action in every class session. These classes produce students who are prepared for dynamic interaction with co-workers and AI.
- All students need regular access to **classes that are small enough** that students are personally known, especially in the first two years. These classes offer opportunities to develop interpersonal capacities and personal relationships, including with outside guests (academics, alumni, professionals). They create organic settings for personal accountability. Small, dynamic classes replicate in structured settings across the university the skills and connections students seek in competitive clubs.
- Hands-on learning can also take place through **experiential learning**, which promotes constructive thinking while building flexibility and resiliency. A human-centered university leverages thoughtfully constructed and well-integrated mechanisms such as engaged learning, co-ops, internships, gap years, and study abroad experiences.

Intentionally leverage use and non-use of technology. The use of technology in education has dramatically transformed in the last twenty years. Some uses have been a boon to education, for example, by making a range of learning resources accessible that earlier generations could only imagine. Other uses, such as the ubiquitous use of phones and laptops in classes, are often more of a distraction from learning than a support. The choice of whether and how to use technology in classes must not be left to chance or to lobbying by students. It must be an intentional choice by the faculty teaching the class, driven by principled understanding of effective and non-effective uses, and supported institutionally.

Promote intercultural learning. Preparing for a complex and uncertain world benefits from exposure to a range of perspectives and experiences that extend across national borders. Domestic students benefit directly from interaction with their international classmates, which produce organic opportunities to become aware of the limits of one's thinking and the possibility of other ways of seeing the world. Experiences with other cultures grow capacities for resiliency, flexibility, courage, and meaning-making. Human-centered universities must continue to invest in cultural collaborations, partnerships, and opportunities to study abroad.

Institutional Infrastructure for Education (How We Are Able to Teach)

A human-centered university must structurally embody what it teaches: cost, admissions, incentives, structures, spaces, and community culture all need to match the educational vision. Fortunately, universities already have many resources that can be built out and enhanced to produce these outcomes. However, a human-centered education is not a simple tweak of a model that is optimized for ROI. There are places where we will need to make fundamental changes to how the university operates.

Rethink teaching supports and incentives. Producing a student that is not only credentialed, but educated, requires an investment in undergraduate education. At their best, research universities integrate learning across the classroom and lab or studio. This model provides students access to cutting-edge knowledge and experiences of creating scholarship, fosters understanding not only of *what* we know but *how* we know, and develops awareness of the forms of judgment needed for principled truth-seeking. At their worst, high faculty workload at these institutions and its fragmentation between many competing responsibilities challenge even the most dedicated faculty to excel across all domains of their work.

When education and research come into conflict at a research university, tenure-track faculty members may squeeze undergraduate education between research activities that are more highly rewarded in promotion and in those members' disciplines. At many research universities, including Cornell, a substantial share of undergraduate teaching is done by non-tenure-track teaching faculty, and at some much is done by adjuncts. In fall of 2025, at Cornell 49% of undergraduate courses and 38% of graduate courses were taught by non-tenure-track faculty. These faculty are deeply committed to and selected for teaching, but they have less job security, and their promotions and contract renewals are more reliant on student reviews. This structure incentivizes faculty to cater to rather than challenge students. Tenure-track faculty have generally not been systematically trained to teach, an issue also addressed by the Graduate and Professional Education subcommittee. There is little structural incentive post-tenure to excel at teaching other than the pressures placed and rewards offered through interaction with students themselves. Cornell in particular provides strong teaching support services and a growing community of practice, but these are generally used by those who already care about teaching. Across higher education, there are few mechanisms to hold post-tenure faculty institutionally accountable for poor teaching. These structural factors mean that faculty do not always prioritize undergraduate education, and those who do may struggle to implement the educational practices they believe to be best for students. What is remarkable is that even under these incentive structures, many faculty remain deeply committed to and excel at teaching.

We understand addressing this challenge to be a question of academic civics: what kind of an institution do we want to be? How do our institutional structure and incentives currently work? How can we better align these structures, workplace practices, and our mechanisms of governance with the transformational education many faculty and staff value and strive for as a vocational ideal? How can we make it structurally easier for instructors to do this work?

Making a deep, consistent, and consequential institutional commitment to excellence in teaching will require aligning practices of hiring, evaluation, promotion, and teaching assignments. To develop transformative education, faculty must commit to a rigorous standard of excellence in undergraduate education, including investing in evidence-based approaches. Current incentives will need to be adjusted and structured support made available to make it both possible and rewarding for faculty to engage in this work. Universities will need to develop mechanisms to

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

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

Finally, a human-centered university **must model the intellectual, interpersonal, and personal capacities we aim to engender in our students in the actions of all members of the community**, including faculty, staff, and leadership. This includes intentionally supporting the development of personal relationships across our work practices in a world dominated by mediated communication. It also means connecting students, staff, and faculty in meaningful activities and projects across disciplines and roles. It demands of us that we engage with each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect, modeling constructive disagreement, evidence-based argumentation, and curiosity about other perspectives.

Barriers to Public Trust in the Human-Centered University

A human-centered university must take its civic responsibilities seriously. As such, it must address two top public concerns that are eroding trust in the institution.

Rethink cost and pricing as barriers to human-centered education and public trust.

The top concern expressed by stakeholders about American higher education is its high sticker price. Published tuition at private, nonprofit four-year colleges has increased 27% in the last ten years in inflation-adjusted dollars, with tuition, housing, and fees reaching an annual cost of \$60,920 this year.¹ At Cornell for the 2025-2026 academic year, the total cost to attend is nearly \$93,000.² These are eye-popping numbers at a time when the U.S. median household income is around \$83,000, and they turn many families off before their students have even applied.

In discussing the cost of higher education, it is important to note that, due to financial aid, the net price that many students pay is significantly different from the published sticker price. The average tuition, housing, and fees actually paid to attend a private nonprofit four-year college in 2025 was around \$32,830, a number that has not changed significantly in inflation-adjusted dollars in the last

¹ Tuition at public four-year colleges also rose steadily from 2006 to 2020, but has since fallen significantly; average annual tuition, housing and fees total \$30,990 for 2025-2026. Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Xiaowen Hu, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025*, New York: College Board, 2025.

<https://research.collegeboard.org/trends>

² "Cost to Attend," Cornell University. <https://finaid.cornell.edu/cost-to-attend>

twenty years.³ But even this number, multiplied by four (and again by the number of college-attending children), is a huge investment — more than many families will spend on anything else except perhaps a mortgage. Many of our students report intense pressure to make their families' investment worth it, mentally weighing the return on investment for every activity. This can crowd out the curiosity-driven learning, exploration of meaning and purpose, risk-taking, and formation of rich relationships necessary for an education that is truly transformative.

The high price of education is a recurring discussion point in the loss of public trust in universities. Universities' response has been to increase the amount of financial aid given, which allows access to the university even for those with modest means. Holding net price steady over twenty years is an impressive accomplishment. This is not a minor commitment, especially at Cornell.⁴ But the widespread strategy of pairing high sticker price with high financial aid also unintentionally produces an opaque pricing structure that erodes trust by pairing an ostensibly high price with a secret (but often still high) price “just for you,” which is usually not known until the student has already been accepted.⁵ This opaque pricing structure and the accompanying information asymmetry — the college knows how it calculates tuition but the families paying the tuition do not — reinforce the idea that college is a variably priced consumer good comparable in its unpredictability to other variably priced consumer goods such as hotel rooms and airline tickets. In addition, while this model has had remarkable success in making education more financially attainable for low-income families, it is pricing out the middle class.⁶

Cost was a difficult issue for the committee to resolve, as we quickly learned that it is not at all straightforward on the basis of current data to determine what drives tuition costs up and what could bring them back down, aside from the obvious solution of making a sizable increase to our endowment. We also recognize that making education more personal by reducing class sizes can increase the costs of delivering an education. We note, however, that creative solutions are possible, with and without AI, to change how courses are delivered to focus faculty time more on in-class interaction and reduce time spent outside of class on grading and course prep, which would allow some increase in course assignments without increasing workload.

One obvious solution to reducing prices is to pivot to online education, which would eliminate the costs associated with residential life, enable more flexibility in delivery, and potentially allow us to reach many more students. However, online-only education is not well-suited for developing the interpersonal and personal skills that our graduates need, nor for fostering deep attachments to peers and the institution.⁷ Instead, we recommend reducing costs through a rigorous assessment of what university activities are mission-critical and leaning into academic civics to foster a broader

³ For public four-year colleges, the average net tuition, housing and fees has decreased in the last ten years from \$18,450 to \$16,200. Ma, Pender, and Hu, 2025.

⁴ With the largest undergraduate student body in the Ivy League, Cornell gives more aid to more students than any of the other twenty top-ranked private universities in the US, aid which largely comes directly out of our operating budget.

⁵ While colleges are required to provide an upfront cost estimator, the calculations involved are complex and require significant financial data.

⁶ Raj Chetty, John N Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, Danny Yagan, Income Segregation and Intergenerational Mobility Across Colleges in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135.3, (2020): 1567–1633.

⁷ We do see it as a possible solution for mature students who have already gained many of these skills through life experience, particularly if close attention is paid to fostering strong relationships between students, with instructors, and with the institution.

understanding of and responsibility for how our activities affect the finances of the institution, from which many faculty are currently insulated.

Reform the opaque admissions processes that erode trust and incentivize credentialism.

The current admissions model widely used at highly selective universities brings in excellent students, but it comes at the cost of public trust. Typically, highly selective universities receive applications from many more applicants than they can enroll. Even the pool of highly qualified applicants, ones who could thrive at a university like Cornell, is significantly greater than can be accepted into the next year's class. From these qualified applicants, admissions staff at these universities select admittees by considering whose attributes most align with an institution's goals, crafting a class that is well-distributed across factors such as geography, majors, interests, and skills, and weighing how likely it is that a student, once admitted, will actually enroll. The result is that it is difficult for families to understand what is required for student admittance. For example, college visits and other "engagements" with universities are understood by many families as a pre-college requirement to signal that their student is "likely to accept." With the admissions process so opaque, families that have the means often hire consultants to help them navigate it. When a high-achieving applicant is rejected from a top university, it can be difficult to understand why they did not get in, eroding trust in the fairness of the admissions process.

Trust in the selection processes of these highly selective universities is further eroded by the obvious advantages that wealthy families have in producing a qualified applicant, leveraging things like private schools, tutors, high-cost travel sports and extracurriculars, unpaid internships, and admissions consultants.⁸ Certainly, producing an uncommonly credentialed applicant whose uniqueness demands acceptance is significantly easier for families in high income brackets. Such factors are weighed in the holistic admissions process to mitigate against such advantages, but that process is invisible to the public. In addition, factors such as legacy admissions, athletic admissions, and the "Varsity Blues" scandal, in which wealthy parents bribed college officials to gain admissions advantages, reinforce a public perception that admission to America's top universities is stacked in favor of the well-off.

The admissions model as currently constituted also leads to adverse impacts on matriculating students. With many universities adopting the Common Application, which allows students to apply to many colleges at once through standardized qualifications, the volume of applications to already selective universities ballooned. As a result, high school students find themselves in a race to accrue Advanced Placement courses, club leadership positions, and other credentials that may boost their chances for admission. For many college-bound students, "getting into college" has become their dominant high school activity, making it harder for them to take risks and explore their own interests. It is unsurprising if they continue the credentials race once they arrive at those universities, or if they have little sense of their purpose, except, perhaps, to achieve the next career goal.

There are two possible approaches to addressing these public concerns. One is to make incremental changes to the current admissions process that address them, for example, by redefining what a university is looking for to better align with human-centered education goals, increasing transparency by clearly communicating which university engagements are considered, and addressing factors that visibly favor wealthier families, such as limiting the number of

⁸ Chetty, Raj, David J. Deming, and John N. Friedman. "Diversifying society's leaders? The determinants and causal effects of admission to highly selective private colleges." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 141.1 (2026): 51–145.

extracurriculars considered or ending legacy admissions. But the current model is highly optimized, making any significant change difficult. The other approach is to make a radical change, for example, by shifting to an admissions lottery among all qualified applicants, or by organizing with highly selective institutions to do joint admissions through a system like the medical school matching process.⁹

The project of human-centered education begins with whom a university admits and the manner in which it does so. Whomever a human-centered university admits, its processes should model accurate judgment, civic-mindedness, and moral purpose. To the degree possible, the criteria and process for admission should be transparent and comprehensible to the public, especially high school students. Fostering civic-mindedness means it should not implicitly favor socio-economic advantage; fostering pluralism means it should not favor certain ideologies. It should select for students who are expected to thrive in the cultivation of the capacities that the university teaches, not necessarily students who hold the most advanced technical proficiency.

Speculative Scenarios

What could it look like to practice human-centered education building on these principles? Below, we provide speculative scenarios for what undergraduate education could look like at future universities that embody the principles we propose in different ways. We provide two admissions scenarios and two scenarios for curricular structure. **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.

Admissions Scenario 1: Justified Admissions Criteria

A future university decides to address the limitations of the current admissions model to align it better with the expectations of rigor that it aims to cultivate in its students. It decides to justify the criteria used to craft its class based on rigorous research on outcomes for matriculants after enrollment. To do so, it engages in a series of rigorous audits of student satisfaction and performance to find out who actually benefits from their education, who is learning and thriving, and which graduates are demonstrating the capacities they promise to teach. This analysis is derived from anonymized, statistical analysis of application materials, subsequent major and grades at the university, and survey data, using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. The university uses this as an opportunity to train students on data analysis in a real-world project.

This analysis serves two purposes. First, it gives the university transparent justification for its decisions at the aggregate level. Second, it offers the university the opportunity for self-reflection and improvement. If these criteria do lead to classes that fail to meet a core goal of human-centered education, why? Why do students from some backgrounds thrive at the university whereas others do not?

The study is published by the university, with the key principles of selection derived from it. The resulting principles of selection are presented to the public through ambient knowledge streams — the dominant popular media form of the time for prospective applicants and their parents — to explain “What are we looking for and why?”

⁹ This solution would require cooperation between institutions and an act of Congress to address issues of collusion.

The transparency of this approach causes the number of applications to the university to decline, because students who are not a good fit know not to bother applying. This would have hurt the university on the historical U.S. News & World Report rankings list, but by this point the number of rankings systems have diversified to reflect a range of different values and perspectives. No single ranking therefore needs to be overly optimized for. Moreover, the university feels that choosing transparency and rigor over gamified, artificial prestige is modeling exactly the process and behavior it wants students to learn.

Admissions Scenario 2: Lottery Above a Threshold

Another future university does not engage in annual audit studies to inform its decisions when crafting the class. Lacking empirically grounded and transparently justified reasons for these late-stage admissions decisions, it chooses to not make a decision at all. Instead, the university sets minimum criteria for admission and then issues spots to all highly qualified students by lottery. Advantages for this university include a significant increase in public trust due to the perceived fairness of its approach and an enormous reduction in the time and effort involved in making admissions decisions, a reduction it uses to shift staff to support the teaching mission.

It had been difficult for the institution to decide to pivot to the lottery model, because some faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees objected, correctly noting that this model cannot possibly find the optimal class. This model relies less on selection and more on the university's capacity to educate, and the reality that they had many more very qualified applicants than they could reasonably admit. Because the faculty, staff, administration, and trustees had confidence in their curriculum, they saw a benefit to leveraging that confidence and communicating it to the public. As long as they choose reasonable markers for success and set the base threshold high enough, matriculants should be able to thrive at their university. General factors that matter for the composition of a good class from the perspective of the school (for example, geographic distribution) were built into the lottery and communicated transparently.

When this model is first introduced, it radically changes the composition of the university. There are fewer of the truly unique students who had previously been selected for — the ones who had started charities in foreign countries, launched a successful startup in tenth grade, or played piano at Carnegie Hall. There are more students who are simply smart and capable, and a lot more from middle-class backgrounds; they learn at the university to make the most of their education and social networks to launch themselves into successful careers. Over time, however, the advantages of the education the university provides lead to elite K-12 schools gaming the system — changing their grading techniques and extracurriculars offered so their students all pass the bar of the current algorithm. This begins shifting the composition of the university back towards families with high educational and financial capital. After internal reflection and discussion, the university decides to shift to a new model, where it alters the criteria for selection every four years to continue shaking up the composition of its classes.

Curricular Scenario 1: Split-Phase University

This future university divides its curriculum into three distinct, developmentally appropriate phases. The first focuses intensively on the development of interpersonal and personal capacities while developing general cognitive capacities; the last focuses on the development of specialized cognitive capacities, based on an expectation of high interpersonal and personal abilities. Between these two phases, the students engage in experiential learning away from the university.

The first phase is for intense, in-person character formation and social bonding. All students enter by taking a three-semester intense “humanization” curriculum. The curriculum is standard to all

students across colleges. It consists of small classes that involve heavy discussion, group projects, and wrestling with complicated issues. These classes have a heavy focus on humanities and arts, including philosophy, literature, epistemology, and aesthetics. Both residential life and focused coursework are designed to enable the development of a shared understanding of civic responsibility, alignment with democratic principles and ethical norms, and navigating difference. In the final semester of the first phase, students build on these capacities in interdisciplinary coursework that explores complicated histories (such as grappling with the marginalization of certain political viewpoints, reckoning with American slavery and Reconstruction, and considering global conflicts around immigration and citizenship). The use of technology in academics is highly restricted, especially the use of AI. Students are required to live on campus, and the university has developed explicit ways to foster connection without technology. Courses are graded credit/non-credit to allow students to be able to take intellectual risks.

After this three-semester period is complete, students must leave campus for at least one year. The university facilitates finding employment, but employers are identified for their ability to pay a reasonable wage and offer relevant job skills experience, not technical expertise. The job is not a career-track job; civic service such as K-12 teaching, military service, or a placement through International Helpers (a global follow-on to the earlier American Peace Corps) are particularly encouraged. The goal of this phase is to expose students to real-world situations and to test their human capacities in them. During this time, students participate in regular small-group reflection meetings with a faculty member where they are encouraged to reflect with curiosity about the world they are experiencing. When they return to campus, each student produces a podcast episode reflecting on their experiences, the most compelling of which are released as part of a student-run collegewide podcast series. Tuition during this period is minimal and students are able to support themselves with their earned wages.

After completing at least a year of employment, all students return to complete four to six more semesters, which focus on learning to apply specialized problem-solving approaches. This education is decentralized to the colleges and majors. Each major teaches its students their specific *mode of judgment*: how do adults trained to think in this specialty assess situations and make decisions? Distribution requirements are determined only by major, since basic distribution was covered in the humanization curriculum. AI or other technologies are permitted as the major and instructor decide is appropriate. There is no residential requirement, though most classes are in person. Majors select the appropriate modality of class for their discipline: large, hybrid, flipped, and asynchronous classes are all possible. Grading is rigorous and hierarchical. Students' three semesters of humanization and year plus of work experience have taught them to accept their own imperfection and learn from feedback to improve.

This structure ensures that students have a certain maturity and perspective before they dig into a technical expertise. At this university, teaching faculty are considered particularly crucial to the humanization curriculum — so crucial that they are professionally evaluated for their performance and given tenure on this basis. This empowers them to design a challenging curriculum that prepares students to learn in the real world and from technical experts. What were formerly called tenure-track faculty — ones who have a specialty in research and good but not excellent teaching capacity — focus primarily on the students in the final phase of learning. They can expect students to be mature and respond appropriately to feedback, focusing on content. The students are prepared to learn from them even if they are not excellent teachers.

Curricular Scenario 2: Interdisciplinary, Project-Based Curriculum

A future university structures its curriculum to embed a liberal arts curriculum in project-based work, through cohorts whose communal challenges develop strong relationships, personal engagement, and deep understanding. Students across all majors are assigned to a specific, interdisciplinary cohort with which they engage in collective project-based learning each semester. These projects involve real-world challenges that call on the humanities (e.g., for exploring ethics and historical context), social science (e.g., for understanding economics and communication), creative disciplines (e.g., for considering aspects of design), and scientific and engineering components of increasing complexity throughout the eight semesters of the program. This university is structured along standard departments and disciplines, and it requires distribution learning that spans liberal studies (e.g., humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences) and practical studies (e.g., engineering analysis, accounting, and leadership). Students can major in any discipline, but they also emerge with deep cross-disciplinary, project-based competencies.

The university articulates its commitment to this hybrid model to drive self-selection among student applicants. It modifies its required application materials to allow for selection based on student readiness to engage in STEM-Humanist curriculum, which requires interest in a broader array of disciplines and questions than is typical for admissions based on capacity for a single major. As a consequence, application numbers drop, but the percentage of applicants who are appropriate for the education the university offers significantly increases, giving the university an ample pool of excellent matriculants.

To support this form of intensive, project-based learning, the university broadens the definition of who teaches and mentors students to include more active, practicing professionals and outside stakeholders, who are paired with RTE and tenure-track faculty to produce shared learning experiences. This also enables interweaving undergraduate learning with university priorities and obligations in extension and community engagement, as community-engaged learning becomes the norm and is used as a foundation for training civic engagement. The university also updates hiring and promotion criteria to include tenure-track paths for faculty with excellence in project-focused applications of the discipline's core principles.

Example Next Steps

Cornell has plentiful resources to build on in developing human-centered education, starting from our institutional heritage: any person and any study, the integration of the liberal and practical arts, and our land-grant, public impact mission. Through our stakeholder conversations, we learned about numerous initiatives, centers, programs, and courses at Cornell that already reflect human-centered principles, and we are certain there are many more we have not yet discovered. Making Cornell a human-centered university therefore does not require a wholesale reinvention, but an intentional focus on and integration of human-centered principles and strategies throughout our undergraduate experience. This involves identifying, building on, and cross-informing existing initiatives, dismantling existing barriers to human-centered education, providing new supports, and fostering and learning from experimentation. Here, we provide some concrete starting points, most identified by stakeholders rather than the committee.

De-silo our institution.

Education at Cornell is highly decentralized, largely organized by colleges that admit their own students. There is a lot of value to this federated structure for education, especially in the ways in which it enables bottom-up innovation and adapts education appropriately for different disciplines. We understand it as an institutional example of fostering pluralism. But we must also recognize that, for human-centered education, students need opportunities to learn across disciplines, to be

exposed to a variety of perspectives, and a chance to develop a transformative understanding of themselves that may move them away from the college to which they originally applied. The university must therefore strengthen opportunities for deep, meaningful, programmatically aligned engagements across disciplines, degree programs, and colleges and make it easier for students to change majors out of their current college. One barrier to such alignment is the budget model (i.e., the rules that define how money flows through the institution). Stakeholders at Cornell repeatedly emphasized that the current model fosters competition between colleges that can lead them to sever collaborations and instead corral resources for the benefit of their own college in ways that harm the overall mission. The university must also address institutional practices that incentivize competition between students in their silos, for example, by providing lotteries for oversubscribed classes rather than portioning out seats on a first-come, first-served basis.

Create default teaching policies that align with human-centered goals.

Producing default teaching policies based on best practices for human-centered learning eases the burden of faculty to adopt human-centered education and create synergy in learning expectations across classes. These policies should be the default expectation across all classes, but can be modified by instructors as appropriate for their specific class or discipline. For example, extensive evidence in educational research demonstrates that screens in the classroom reduce the effectiveness of learning. A blanket no-tech classroom policy creates a general expectation that individual faculty can modify, rather than requiring each faculty member to (unpopularly) police technology use in their own classroom. As another example, a default policy of in-person office hours could be implemented to encourage students to build richer relationships with their professors and teaching assistants. This policy, again, would be modifiable by faculty as necessary and have exceptions for students who have disability- or language-related needs.

Realign tenure-track and teaching faculty expectations and evaluation.

Set higher expectations for excellence in teaching and academic civics for the hiring and promotion of tenure-track faculty. Define best practices and expectations for hiring committees, faculty interviews, salary improvement, and assembly of promotion packages to rebalance merit criteria toward commitment to and skill in teaching and support of student experience. Shift teaching faculty after their first review to ten-year rolling contracts that recognize their crucial role in our institution, provide enough security to build a life based on the institution, provide more academic freedom, and shift them from dependence on a customer service model in teaching. Continue to strengthen mechanisms to enhance and improve student feedback on teaching to close the gap between instructor practice and student experience. Develop and encourage an experimentalist mindset around teaching at the faculty, department, college, and all-university levels, encouraging creativity, learning from experience, and the ongoing cultivation of Cornell as a community of teachers and learners.

Catalogue and build out existing human-centered initiatives.

We have numerous human-centered learning initiatives at the university that can be built on and expanded. As only one example, Cornell's Center for Dialogue and Pluralism (CDP) was mentioned as a model to build on in numerous meetings with Cornell students, faculty, and staff. CDP provides practical skills for dialogue across difference as a form of democratic practice. These stakeholders suggested embedding it in the curriculum and expanding training opportunities for students, faculty, and staff. To foster human-centered learning across the university, we can identify, build on, build out, and cross-inform these initiatives.

Integrate societal implications and ethics across the curriculum.

To develop moral and ethical foundations, consistently restructure majors so that they incorporate coursework in societal implications and ethics either as components within existing courses or through additional focused courses. Additionally, a series of X-and-society majors and minors could be developed, along the lines of Cornell's Biology & Society major and AI & Society minor. These integrate specific areas of science and engineering with reflection on their societal implications, policy, and ethical issues.

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