



# Cornell College

Cornell College Alumni All-Call  
Phonecast February 28, 2023

Introductory comments from AJ Plummer, Director of Development:

Good evening everyone, and welcome to tonight's annual Cornell College All-Call. My name is AJ Plummer and I am the director of development here at Cornell, and I'm going to be serving as moderator for this evening's call. Now, before we introduce the others joining me this evening, I'd like to invite you to join the conversation, and you can do that tonight by pressing star three on your phone.

You're going to get into a question queue. It's a bit like raising your hand in class. It's not going to interrupt what we're talking about here, but it will let us know if you have a question. So we really hope to get to as many of your questions tonight as possible, so please don't hesitate; jump into that queue. And again, that's star three on your phone. And, of course, we're going to be mindful of your time tonight. So for anybody worried, we are going to end promptly by 8:00 PM Central Time tonight. So I think with that said, I'm going to go ahead and turn this over to President Jonathan Brand to introduce himself and the others joining him this evening. Jonathan?

Jonathan Brand:

Well, thank you, AJ, and it's great to be on the phone with everyone. I am joined by a couple of others whom I will introduce momentarily. We are on the Hilltop down in the Paul K. Scott Alumni Center, otherwise known for some as Rood House in the Crows Nest top floor. So I actually want to tell a little story real quickly about an experience that I have had at Cornell in the classroom. So here I am finishing up my 12th year and this December block four taught a class in politics that I've taught now six times on campus. And it's amazing. So I teach it every other year and it's a class called the Nature Functions and Limits of the Law, which basically studies the relationship of laws and human behavior and how one influences or doesn't influence the other, and ways that it can or can't. So every time I teach, I learn something more about Cornell, about the academic enterprise, about our students. It allows me to sort of connect with our faculty in this academic enterprise.

Well, so for this class that I taught in December, and of course note that we're in this, I don't know, post-COVID, but definitely in a period where COVID is still influencing students and all of us, it's waning. And there were three observations that I wanted to share with you about my class. So I had 18 students in my class and it was an incredible experience. Now I want to tell you why I say that there. So there are three major takeaways that I had in this class about Cornell students, all of which I hope will please you as much as they really pleased and impressed me. So the first thing I would say is that Cornell for me, we're really, some say that an education is what remains after you've forgotten everything you've learned in class, which is to say that we're really about teaching habits and routines and a way of thinking about materials.

And for me, I really value people who roll up their sleeves and work hard. And so in my class, I always encourage and tell my students, I will read and review and comment on as many drafts of a paper as you might wish to write before you submit your final paper. Very often, I would say historically, I would say students, you know, you might have two or three in a class who would take you up on it. This year, a significant number of students in my class kept working on their drafts to the point that they developed and produced really beautiful pieces of work. The part that I loved again is the habit, the habit that I saw in our students working so hard. That was one thing. Two, and maybe this is a micro point, but if you're in a class and every student is sharing their opinion, you might have 18 different opinions. But really, we're looking for people to build ideas off of each other.



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And so the number of students who would hear a comment and say, "Oh, and to follow up on that," or "To build off of that point," or "In contradistinction, in opposition, I think this." I was so impressed at our students' natural ability to hear something, reflect on it, and either build on it or even reject it and advance the conversation. So the last thing that I will say about the students in my class, and I consider this representative of Cornell students. So this year for the first time, thanks to the guidance of another faculty member at Cornell, I gave my students the chance to assess their own class engagement rather than me just giving them a grade for class participation. I wanted them to start by giving their own assessment of how they did in class. Now, traditionally, I would focus on how active, how vocal somebody was in class. And in this instance, in this class, I learned that our students think about engagement in an entirely different way.

And let me just give you an example. So yes, I did have students individually reflect on their participation in class in terms of the questions they asked. But what I also heard that I loved was that our students shared with me how they engaged with the class with their friends outside of class in the dining hall or in their residence halls, reflecting on how they were thinking about the materials outside of the classroom. Another part that I really loved, which showed me how well they listened to each other, is I had more students than I've ever had reflect on other students in class. So for example, one student wrote about engagement and said, "And I learned that X has this creative and innovative mind, and this person's scientific background really made a difference. And this person's philosophical background anchored our discussions." I loved that they were learning from each other and thinking about what they were learning from each other. So I'm going to stop there and just say that based, at least, on my experience in this last class, I am just so optimistic.

I continue to be so optimistic and bullish about what we do at Cornell. And our students who come here, they may not know that they have all the ability in the world, but they do. And our job is to help bring those latent talents to light and to give them the confidence to build off of what they're capable to build with what they're capable of doing. And my students definitely didn't disappoint. So I'm going to stop there and I would love to introduce our, I always refer to her as our fearless provost, Dr. Ilene Crawford, class of 1992. She is our Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs, Professor of English, and I think we're coming up on three years that she is... Yeah, right. She's looking at me like, "Wow." Yes, three years, three years back on the Hilltop. And as some of you who may know Dr. Crawford, Provost Crawford, a Cornell family from start to finish. So with that, to our fearless provost, Dr. Crawford, I turn it over to you.

Ilene Crawford:

Thank you so much Jonathan, and good evening everyone. It is wonderful to be talking with you tonight. It was a really beautiful day on the hilltop. It was bright and sunny and cloudless and in the forties, so that counts as an early spring for us here. It was also career expo day. So I've got some tidbits from our career expo that I wanted to share with you just as we get the call underway. We had 300 students in attendance today, speaking with 29 different employers and four universities, so 100 more students than participated last year. We had some pretty wonderful comments from the employers who participated as well. So my favorite one is somebody that was here recruiting our engineering students saying, "I was only recruiting juniors and seniors for engineering internships, but after talking to the sophomore students, it became obvious that they've taken a lot of coursework that's prepared them."



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So he is considering sophomores now. So that was great feedback for us and we have some wonderful student stories as well. Before the Career Expo, students had the opportunity to work with our great staff in the Berry Career Institute and to do some shadow interviews and to get some feedback on their resumes. So we had a lot of students that were doing that, and one particularly anxious student who was so anxious about the fair that she was near the point of tears before participating today, but today she not only spoke with three different employers, but walked away having been asked to submit her resume to one employer, and she has this interview scheduled with another. So a lot of really, really positive outcomes today in students thinking about next steps, not only our seniors but juniors and sophomores too. So terrific participation and hats off to our great staff and the Berry Career Institute.

So a little snapshot of life on the Hilltop today. So I have the pleasure of introducing to you now our third speaker tonight, and that is Jackie Wilson. Jackie joined us at the beginning of this academic year. She is our new Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students. She has been a terrific partner in the role. She has certainly hit the ground running and it's my great, great pleasure to let her share a few words and some opening statements with you Before we get to your questions. Jackie, hello and welcome.

Jackie Wilson:

Good evening everyone. Thank you, Ilene. While we are having fun here on the Hilltop, I wanted to share one quick story. Some of the work I'm doing has been around student conduct, and so like some of Jonathan's comments, watching students learn about themselves has been one of my favorite things about being at Cornell so far. So talking to a student who was really struggling with getting along with his roommate. The meeting, by the way, started with, "Hi Jackie, I actually don't want to be here at this meeting with you." So that's where it started. But then by the end, he said, "You know, Jackie, I crossed the line and I'm sorry for what happened with my roommate. Maybe we can do a mediation, my roommate and I, so we can move forward." And it was so beautiful just to see a bit of a light bulb as that student was able to hold himself accountable and think about the relationship he had with his roommate and wanting to move forward.

So I have tons of stories like that. But so far, I will say one of my favorite things at Cornell, one of my favorite groups is the Cosmonaut Improv Troupe, and one of my favorite places on campus is the newly renovated living room in the Ebersole Health and Well-being Center. So just a few fun facts about me. So looking forward to hearing your questions tonight.

AJ Plummer:

Well, terrific. Thanks so much to each of you for joining us, and we're going to go ahead and dive into the first question here, I think. If you've just joined us or have just logged onto the call, if you do have a question tonight, we're here to talk with you. And so don't hesitate. Please press star three on your phone to join that queue. You'll talk to one of our folks to get your questions submitted. And as a reminder, it's a bit like raising your hand. You're not going to disrupt what we're doing here, so don't be bashful. Star three on your phone. Okay, so our first question this evening is from Art in Austin, Texas, who has a question about the status of King Chapel and concerns about courses. So, Art, you are live with the gang here. Go ahead and ask your question.

Art:



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I'm on board, and greetings from Austin, Texas, where the bluebonnets are blooming and the trees have budded out. So sorry guys.

AJ Plummer:

Go ahead with your question, Art. Sounds great. Nice to hear you.

Art:

So the first question is for Jonathan. The status of King Chapel, how's it going? When do you think it's going to be open again? And the second question is, there's been a lot of criticism nationally for colleges and universities on what kind of courses they teach, where different people want to get more involved in overseeing that. Have you seen any of this at Cornell?

Jonathan Brand:

Okay, well thank you, Art. Let me take your questions. Let's take them serially, and it's great to hear your voice and we have a little daffodil starting to appear, so we're on our way. So King Chapel. Yes, a great question. And so for those who may not know or may not remember, two and a half years ago, we suffered a derecho, a word that many of us didn't even know at the time, sort of a land hurricane. Sustained winds of about 125 to 140 miles an hour for about 40 minutes on campus did a fair amount of damage. Thankfully no one was hurt or injured, and King Chapel in particular sustained massive damage, and in fact, we're very thankful that it did not have a catastrophic collapse. So here we are two and a half years later, and in fact, the engineers are very close to being able to tell us precisely what needs to be done in order to restore King Chapel to its pre-derecho state.

Now, for them to get to that point, it has required them to remove the pews from the building, to remove everything on the inside, and to put in scaffolding to get all the way up into the ceiling to look, because that's where the damage largely is, and along the walls. If you've been on the Hilltop in the last year, you will see enormous steel beams that are around. Well, there's first of all, sort of an I.M. Pei steel structure, an I.M. Pei-like steel structure on the west side of the King Chapel that is like a flying buttress, holding up that side of the building and steel beams on the others, on the other side, and then girders on the inside. So first, let me just say we don't yet know what needs to be done in order to restore King Chapel to pre-derecho state. We should know shortly.

I would anticipate that there will be, that King Chapel will be offline for another year. That's sort of what we're working with right now. And by another year, when you say that on a college in February, that really probably means until the academic year, that's a year and a half from now, is what I would anticipate the earliest that it would be open. In addition, it won't surprise you when I say this, that while the building is in a period where we're assessing how to restore it to its pre-derecho state, we're also starting to ask the questions, well, what else do we need to do to the building to improve it while we're doing this work? So I'll give you an example. The bathrooms on the first floor are absolutely not ADA accessible, and we know that we've got to, that to me is on a must-do list. Others will talk about the climate control in there and say, we really ought to add air conditioning.

I don't know, Art, how much of that will be possible, but we will definitely have that discussion. Insurance is in the mix, in the fact that our insurer will cover a portion of the cost to restore King Chapel to its pre-derecho state. But I would suspect, we suspect that they will not cover all of it. So there's



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going to be a gap there. And somewhere here down the road, we're going to talk about this campaign that we just ended and how we're thinking about our next campaign. It would not be my hope that we would be in a position where we're fundraising for King Chapel. At the same time, it is the most iconic building on this campus. It has a deep connection to many Cornellians. And so I do anticipate once we know the scope of the work that we intend to undertake and the cost to get that work done, that all Cornellians will hear about that project.

The good news is, the building is still standing. And really we were very close to losing it. And you may know that probably six, seven years ago we restored the tower and the clock, the Seth Thomas clock in the tower, and some engineers think, had we not done that work, we actually would've lost the building. So I'm really thankful to hear that. So I hope that that is responsive. If not, Art, you know where to find me, and I'll surely have an offline conversation. I will turn it over to Dr. Crawford to talk about your second question about our courses. And of course, I'll chime in if there's anything I could even remotely add that would be useful.

Ilene Crawford:

Well, thank you for your call, Art. So I think the thing to lead with is that our faculty develop our curriculum, and that's under a fairly regular state of discussion and revision. So we have a living curriculum that's evolving to meet the needs of our students. I think most recently we're seeing that in the ingenuity core curriculum. So we want to be front and center with our liberal arts identity and liberal arts roots. So we want, through the ingenuity core curriculum, for students to get some intentional experiences in a first-year seminar and a sophomore seminar where they're being able to investigate real-world problems through a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives.

So that's really the heart and soul of what we're doing. And we want to give them some applied experiences too, where they get the opportunity to think about some of the problems of the 21st century and how they can be solvers of those problems. So we want to continue to see students being able to think about and be prepared for a 21st century that's going to be characterized by climate change and other problems that are going to require solutions. And our curriculum is continually evolving to prepare them to be able to do that. So thank you very much for that question.

AJ Plummer:

Okay, great. Our next question is going to be from Jane in Winston-Salem. She's curious about who Cornell's target audience is. Jane, you're live with the group. Go ahead and ask your question. It's nice to hear from you.

Jane:

Okay, well, okay. Well, I live in the southeast and it's a stretch to get back for homecoming every year. I have two grandsons. One is a junior in high school, the other is a ninth grader. They are both thinking very seriously about colleges, and I cannot recommend Cornell to them. First of all, they are very, very good students. They're both within the top 3% of their classes, but they're both competitive swimmers. The other thing, the younger one is a gifted pianist and he would not even consider Cornell. So I began to think, what is the demographic that Cornell looks to for incoming students?

Jonathan Brand:



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Jane, Jonathan Brand. First of all, it's great to hear your voice and it's great to be able to put a face to a voice. And I appreciate your question. I will, first of all, say obviously we would love for your grandchildren to consider Cornell when that time, I know one is a junior, so starting to think about colleges. So our target demographic. So let me talk a little bit about Cornell's demographics, first of all, as a reflection of what our demographics are. So you probably know Cornell students come from 47 different states and 19 different countries outside of the United States. So we're very proud of the geographic diversity of the student body, first of all. Two, if I focus on diversity in terms of ethnicity and race and religion, 26% of our students in this incoming class are US students of color. So let me start by giving sort of that demographic, but let me give maybe a slightly less data-driven numeric answer to you, which is a couple of years, about seven, eight years ago, I was at a meeting with the president of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, the ACM.

We're one of 14 schools, the most prestigious, accomplished, prestigious, and accomplished schools in the upper Midwest, right? You've got Grinnell, Carlton, McAllister, Lawrence, I won't name them all. Cornell is in there. And the president of the ACM came to me. We are at a meeting and he said, "Do you know what I love most about Cornell? Cornell students know why they're at Cornell." They are naturally interested in the liberal arts. They're naturally interested in education, they're curious. They want to ask questions, they want answers, and they want to be connected. They want to be connected to each other. So if you were to ask what is the kind of student that Cornell attracts, our target demographic, it's a student who knows why, who's interested in being in an academic community with other people who want to learn and they want that connection.

Cornell students like to be a part of something bigger than them, which might sound obvious, but I have been on other campuses where that is absolutely not the cultural reality or the ethos of that school. So that's really, Jane, that's sort of the demographic that we're looking at. We attract a lot of students who again, may not know how great they are, but they are, and they come here and they find their confidence. Now, you did ask about the swimming pool, and I will say, we just built and just completed the Richard and Norma Small Athletic and Wellness Center. For those of you who haven't been on campus, I hope you will come visit it. It is gorgeous. I mean, it is jaw-dropping gorgeous. And when we started down the planning process for the swimming pool for the athletic facility seven, eight years ago, we call it the SAW, Small Athletic and Wellness Center, I went to the coaches and I said, I'm really focused on the swimming pool.

Swimming is a lifetime sport. We need it. We have a history of competitive swimming at Cornell. And the coaches said, yes, we get it, but boy, we have some really dire pressing needs for the programs that we're currently running. So could we please first meet those needs? And that made a lot of sense to me. But I can tell you, Jane, as God is my witness, that the swimming pool is on the radar and we're going to get to it. We raised over \$20.5 million for this project. We figure that a swimming pool along the lines of what we think we need is like a \$15 million project. We just didn't have the funds to do it, and so we had to make some hard choices. But I'm telling you, we want it. We need it. We know it. And your grandson, your elder grandson is exactly the point we know, which is their incredible students who would thrive at Cornell who won't come here because they want to swim, and we can't offer that.

So I hope that's responsive, Jane. As I said to Art, you know me, you know where I am. If you want to talk further about it, just reach out to me. We'll definitely continue the conversation.

AJ Plummer:



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All right, thanks for that president Brand. Our next question is from MJ in Washington DC who has a question about diversity equity inclusion initiatives at Cornell. Go ahead, MJ, you are live with the gang.

MJ:

Yeah. Thank you, AJ and everyone, and Lisa for taking my call. Good to talk with you again. I go by MJ with the Cornell family, partly because I was interested in identity issues even at the tender age of 18. My given name is Main Lowe. My question is, where is Cornell on DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion? Thank you.

Ilene Crawford:

Hi MJ, thanks for your call. So this is Ilene Crawford. So I think that what we are doing institutionally is really preparing for demographic changes that are already underway. We know that students that will continue to come to us will be more and more diverse in all kinds of ways. That's racially, that's ethnically, more students that are first-generation children of immigrants. So it's really important to the college at a number of levels that we're preparing to serve those students. So that happens in a number of ways. First of all, with an eye toward recruiting, how do we intentionally diversify our student population? So we're working with some great partners. For example, the Posse Organization, which helps us to identify student leaders with potential that are overlooked in the traditional college application process. They go through a series of competitive interviews in order to become part of a group of 10 that come and enroll here at the college.

So we've successfully welcomed several posses to campus already. We anticipate bringing in two more posses in the fall, including our first posse from Puerto Rico. We're intentional about this program, in that as a group of students coming in, they have a mentor that works with them on campus, and that gives them some individualized attention, particularly during the first two years that they're with us. And this is a model that we feel like we can replicate with some other students as well. We've done some great investment in our core services for the college. So our student success center is really focused on supporting the success of all students, but particularly first and second-year students. So we know that that's a time when students from their point of admission to when they're choosing their major, that we're most likely to retain them all the way to graduation if we give them strong support at that time.

So we really have an eye on our students of color and their needs during this time. We also want to be thoughtful about our recruiting processes for our faculty and staff. So we've invested in some new procedures to operate our searches. So we really have an eye on building diverse candidate pools for our faculty and staff searches, and really expecting candidates for any position at the college faculty or staff to be able to speak specifically to their experience working with diverse student populations and their ability to join the team here at Cornell as well. And I would say institutionally, we're doing our homework in terms of looking at our own processes and looking at our own data as a way to see where the gaps are and where we can continue to do better.

So we had a cross-divisional teamwork over the summer to participate in an equity and retention academy, which really took a careful look and analysis at our own data around different patterns of success that we see in students. So we know where to go next in terms of increased services and providing the support for all students that they need. So I hope that gives you a sense of some of the different strategies that we're employing. As we enter into our next strategic planning process of the college, diversity and equity and inclusion really are going to be central to that effort as we continue to build the



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college and prepare for the demographic change that we know lies ahead and that's already happening. So thanks so much for your question.

AJ Plummer:

Great. Thanks for that response, Dr. Crawford. Our next question is going to be from Carl in Freeport, Illinois, who has a question about our current enrollment and where the endowment is at. Go ahead. Carl, you're live with the group.

Carl:

Thank you for taking my question. And I just have a couple of general questions concerning how we're doing economically and how are we doing with the endowment fund, and basically how's the enrollment holding.

Jonathan Brand:

Thank you, Carl, Jonathan Brand. I will take this and it's great to hear your voice. So let me take enrollment first and then from there, move into the endowment. So first of all, our total headcount last fall when we started the academic year was 1,074 students. That is up 72 students from two years ago. Last year we were at 1,055; the year before that at 1,002. So I'm pleased to report to you and to all Cornellians who are on this call that we're growing. And there are lots of schools that are not growing right now, so I'm really proud of that. We are all very proud of that outcome. It takes a lot of work. It takes a village to educate a student. It takes a village to recruit a student and to retain the student. And so that's one thing. And I will say our goal for next fall has us continuing to grow so that we're on a good trend, on a good path.

And we think that trend will, that's our goal, is for that trend to continue. I had mentioned earlier, when you're on the block system, it won't surprise you that it's a part of our national and international identity. So to have students who come from 47 states, as I had mentioned in 19 countries, is something that we're very proud of. The top five states for our students, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Colorado, and California are the top five. But then, of course, you have another 42 states on top of that group. Incoming class, 26% of our students identified as US students of color. I will say, before COVID, our international enrollment was closer to 8-9%. Right now, 2%, only 2% of our students are international students. I would fully expect as we come out of COVID that that number will rebound again. A lot of people have an interest in Cornell College.

So that's on the enrollment side. On the endowment side, let me go all the way back to June of 2021. And of course, that was nearing the end of a really great run in the market and growth, our endowment was \$93.8 million at the end of June in 2021. One year later, so that would be June of 2022, our endowment was at \$82 million. So that's down \$11 million. Now, I could tell you that that's all because of the market, but it's not entirely from the market's own decline, because the college is also permitted from the Board of Trustees to draw on that endowment for the operations of the college. So that's also in that \$11 million down, that's 12.6% down. At the end of the calendar year, so six months later, the endowment had gone up a little bit, maybe \$900,000 up from the \$82 million.

And there too, that also doesn't take into account another draw, a permissible draw on the endowment. So I guess for purposes of this question, I don't know how January and February, January was a better month. February was not as good a month. So I'd say that we're somewhere in that \$82, \$83 million. When we were at \$93.8, we were all starting to see that \$100 million goal, which is where we want to get to on our way up to a much bigger number than that. So I hope that those are





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responsive. So thanks again, Carl, for those questions.

AJ Plummer:

And thank you to everybody who has participated so far. I'm noting the time. We're about halfway through the call, and so I thought we'd take a quick break for station identification here. Just a reminder, if you're interested in making a question, asking a question tonight, you hit star three on your phone. You'll go into a queue, you'll talk to some of our friendly people, and they'll get your questions submitted to us here. So I want to share two important upcoming dates with you while we have you. First, our day of giving, which is a big deal for all of us here on the Hilltop, Color It Purple that is fast approaching on March 29th. And so we're hoping for a really strong show of participation from alumni and friends this year.

And then second, of course, mark your calendars for Homecoming this fall. It's going to be October 6th through the 8th. It's going to be a great time, and we hope to see you all there. So before we take more of your questions, and again, that's star three to get in the queue, I'm going to pass the phone over to Kristi Columbus, Associate Vice President of Alumni and College Advancement. She'd like to say a brief word of thanks to many of you for the Greater Than Campaign. Kristi.

Kristi Columbus:

I just wanted to say how pleased we were with the alumni response to the Greater Than Campaign. For anyone that followed that, it was a seven-year mission. We had over 9,000 donors. Most of those donors were alumni donors. We raised over \$118 million for the college, which is the largest campaign in Cornell's history. So just a phenomenal response. We couldn't have been more pleased. The alumni support, the alumni and friends that give us the support are what make Cornell a great institution. And just wanted to jump in for a brief moment and say, thank you so much. We appreciate your engagement and your financial support and just the love that you have for Cornell and spreading the good word of Cornell in all of the places that you do that. We couldn't be more pleased and more grateful. So thank you.

Jonathan Brand:

So thank you Kristi for that. I do want to add one thing, and if it's okay, Carl, I hope you're still on. I'd like to come back and build off of something that Kristi just said, which is as you know, we just successfully completed this gGreater Than Campaign, and it probably comes as no surprise that we are already starting to focus on that next campaign. Now, obviously with the market where it is, we are really, first of all, colleges very often don't take the time to celebrate campaigns and their successful completion. So we are taking the time to thank all of you and to thank our alumni and friends who made this last campaign possible. But to go back to Carl's question, I do want to say that one of the historic realities at Cornell is we are often fundraising for our pressing and urgent priorities of the day.

And as our fearless board chair, Jeff Jensen often says to me, sometimes institutions focus on the urgent to the exclusion of the important. And I'm always mindful, we will always have things that we desperately have to get to today. We're getting to a point where I'm very much committed to us



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focusing on the important, and that's the endowment. That's the future of the college. That's what's going to sustain us going into the future. And earlier, there was a question about our enrollment. And the one thing that I didn't mention, which is worth noting, that in the last three years, our financial aid budget has grown from \$27 million to \$35 million. We are running a financial aid budget that is almost the size of our operating budget for the college. That is not going to be sustainable in the long term. And that's where endowment support, for example, for financial aid or endowment support, that endowments that support the operations of the college, our incredible faculty and staff and their salaries, that is not the urgent.

That is the urgent. It's also the important. So I just wanted to say as you're asking questions about enrollment and the endowment and hearing about this incredible campaign that you all made successful, thank you. To know that we're getting to a point where we think we're in a place where we get to focus on the longer term, and that's the important. And the endowment really allows us to go to bed at night knowing that what we need to accomplish to achieve our mission for our students, that we can do it on a daily and yearly basis. So just wanted to put in that little plug. And with that, I will turn it back to our, how do I say this, our impresario, AJ Plummer.

AJ Plummer:

Okay. We're going to keep taking your questions here. Again, it's star three to get in the queue if you have a burning question you'd like to ask. We're going to go to Carol in Madison, Wisconsin who has a question about the humanities. Go ahead, Carol. You're on live with the whole group.

Carol:

Okay. So you can hear me, right?

AJ Plummer:

Sure can, Carol. Go ahead, yep.

Carol:

Okay. All right. So yesterday I read an article in the online version of the New Yorker discussing a decline in majors enrollments in the humanities over the last decade. And at the same time, it noted the growth of the majors in the STEM categories. So my questions are related. How have English, history, philosophy, foreign languages, music, other humanities departments fared at Cornell, a small liberal arts college, and the magazine article looked at mid-size in March, in terms of majors and enrollments in recent years? And what are some of the creative programs or curriculums the humanities at Cornell have developed in response to new trends in the humanities professions?

Ilene Crawford:

Well, hi Carol. It's Ilene Crawford. I'm happy to take your question on this. And for those of you who haven't read the article yet, it's in this week's New Yorker, the March 6th edition of the New Yorker. The name of the article is The End of the English Major by Nathan Heller. It's actually, as you said, a look at a number of humanities departments in general and not just English, but it's a good piece that I know that a number of you on the call have read because you've sent it to me already. So thank you for



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sharing that. For those of you who haven't read it yet, it shows some of the broad trends that are influencing students to select STEM majors more than humanities majors. And as you might expect, some of these forces are particularly influencing and are changing student demographics. So students who are overall more first generation, more often children of immigrants, students of color, and for many reasons, this changing student population continues to move away from the humanities into STEM majors.

So I am happy to report that the humanities are alive and well at the college. That doesn't mean that we haven't seen some declines in these areas and that we're not seeing some of the same shifts to STEM fields. That's true. So we're definitely not immune to these forces. But I would say that faculty in all of the departments named, all of these humanities departments are actively renewing their majors to attract students and really are holding their own. So some things that I see us doing as a college and also within individual majors, I think are pointing out here. First, we're leading with the liberal arts. We are a liberal arts college. And our ingenuity core curriculum places a liberal arts experience front and center for our students. So in our first-year seminar, students are exploring the question, how do we know what we know from the perspective of multiple disciplines, humanities included?

And in the sophomore year seminar, second-year seminar, they begin to, in practice, apply liberal arts, engage citizenship, explore that theme, and they're really applying different disciplinary perspectives to a real-world project. So some of our humanities departments have really taken advantage of these courses as opportunities to successfully recruit majors. So our philosophy second-year seminar explored issues of home and homelessness, for example, and one of our English second-year seminars engaged students in some exploration and some projects in our own archives at the college. So the second thing I see these departments doing, humanities are partnering with other programs. So our business majors, for example, take an ethics course that's offered by our philosophy department, and we see our engineers and the coursework that they do really addressing ethical issues and applying a sociocultural lens of analysis to the projects that they engage in as well.

And third, the humanities are embracing the digital. So we have a digital humanities coordinator who's joined our staff at the Center for Teaching and Learning. They're really working with faculty who are already incorporating digital tools into their courses. So we have history majors that are engaging in simulations. We have language students that are connecting with native speakers in the target language through apps and other platforms. We have English majors exploring podcasting, music majors and music students making digital music. And many of these majors are actively in the process of some larger scope revisions as well. And they're really intentionally focusing on post-graduation professional opportunities, but ways to continue to partner with some of these other programs as well. So I hope that answers your question, Carol, and gives you a little bit of a sense of some of the ways that we're holding onto our liberal arts identity but also evolving. So we're continuing to be attracting new students into some of those disciplines as well. Thanks for your question.

AJ Plummer:

Thanks, Ilene. Appreciate your response. We have a question that was submitted by a class of 1984 alumni who unfortunately couldn't join us on the call, but she submitted her question beforehand. "What are the key activities that Cornell is implementing to impact student success and retention of students?" Dean Wilson, would you be willing to speak to that?



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Jackie Wilson:

Sure, thank you. I can talk about, maybe I'll kick off with the student success center and Ilene and Jonathan, if you want to chime in later, of course, please do. As some of you may know, our student success center has had a new shift in space. So all of our student success advisors are now on the OC level of the commons. So you'll remember the infamous orange carpet level of the commons, and that's been a game changer. So it is a one-stop shop, the student success center. So a student one-stop shop for advising first-year experience, athlete success, and disability services. The Student Success Center is also taking on all the early warning system. So anytime a faculty member will let the student success center know that a student's missing class, for example, the student success advisors are on top of it. So this has really created an opportunity for a streamlined approach to intervention design to reach each student.

Our care team is also coordinated out of that center to again, streamline and coordinate intentional and compassionate responses. I would say some of our initiatives as we're thinking about retention, especially as we're going into some pilots for the fall, maybe I could focus on mental health and wellbeing, which is something we're working really hard on here at Cornell and one of my areas of expertise. We have really added some new resources for the Ebersole Health and Wellbeing Center. So for example, we will be adding a new counselor for the fall of 2024, or excuse me, fall 2023. We're also creating a new peer student health educator program. Some of the research tells us that students talking to peers is a very powerful way to make sure that mental health intervention happens at sort of a low level. We'll also be making sure students have consistent transportation to appointments off campus. We've got a renovated living room space out of Ebersole Health and Wellbeing.

We've also fully integrated our director of health promotions into Ebersole Health and Wellbeing. We're also looking at some new support groups focusing on neurodiversity and intersectionality. So that's race, gender, and identity. We've also hired already a new assistant director of residential life and a Deputy Title IX coordinator. So we're really refocusing some of our resources to really make sure that we have mental health as a number one priority in terms of retention here at Cornell.

Ilene Crawford:

Yeah, I mean, I think that's a great summary, Jackie, and I would just point to some of the success we're having with that. I mean, retention is the focus of our current strategic plan, and that's something where we're seeing our investments pay off as well. So we are increasing first to second-year retention from the entering class from 2019 all the way to 2021, year over year, the last few years. And I'll just remind you that yes, that is during the pandemic so that we were successful in doing that. So we're really, really happy to see these services coming together and being intentional about retention. So thanks so much for the question, Julie.

AJ Plummer:

Okay, great. Our next question is a good one. I think you all will enjoy answering this one. This is from Lawrence in St. Louis who has a question about the future of the college essay. Lawrence, you are live with the gang. Go for it.

Lawrence:



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Hi everyone. I'm Class of '81 and I'm always encouraged every time I dial-in, and re-energized by the likes that I hear coming from the Hilltop. So keep up the great work. I'm interested in yet another article that came out, I believe the New York Times, about the death of the college essay at the results of the introduction of artificial intelligence and ChatGPT. And I myself have tried it as a writer. I've used something called Hypotenuse AI, which is a downloadable app and you place in five or six concepts and it goes to town, and it's a nice way to deal with the blank page, which is always the hurdle anytime you're doing a writing project. So I wonder, how are you all thinking about managing this problem? Do you see this as the death of the college essay? Are you being proactive in using it as best you can to promote creativity? How do you at the same time prevent cheating? Are we going to have a Turnitin-style app, which is going to allow us to screen for when the student's essay is entirely generated from an AI bot?

Ilene Crawford:

So Lawrence, this is Ilene Crawford, so thanks for your question about that. So we've had already a couple of faculty development sessions around ChatGPT and just artificial intelligence in particular. So those conversations have absolutely started on campus. I think you put your finger on it when you talk about, something like ChatGPT is something to help confront the blank page. So I think part of our strategy is absolutely going to be, how do we incorporate this into some of our thinking about teaching writing and use it as a tool in some ways? I think we had, at some point when laptops and then phones and such came into the classroom, with every wave of technology, I think initially a sense of like, "Oh, how do we keep this out of the classroom?" And then some thinking around, "Okay, how do we incorporate this into the classroom and into what it means to learn?"

So I think it can be a potentially interesting tool. So our conversations have started around this and we are thinking about next year, as we start to plan for courses where this is going to be more and more the reality of students' lives where they have tools like this at their disposal. So I think in terms of cheating and some concerns about that, some of the answers to that are what they've always been. So assignment design and thinking about what are we asking students to write and why? And so some of that is really conversations that help us reflect on the purpose of having students write in the first place. We've just been engaging in some pretty interesting assessments of our students' writing ability and we were able to share out some initial results of that just in the last couple of days with faculty, where we are seeing gains from the time when students come in and do their first writing with us in their first-year seminar all the way to 300, 400 hundred level courses when they're seniors across the disciplines. Measurable gains in their writing.

So that's the happy news to report. And so to be able to continue to be thoughtful with assignment design, that was really one takeaway from that experience as well, that the better writing that students were able to produce really correlated with things where audience and purpose was clear and students had a sense of themselves as writing in a particular discipline and writing for an audience that was beyond themselves, beyond the instructor, and more towards a broader audience. So there's lots more to come here. So thanks for your question for now. Definitely more to come on this as this continues to unfold. Thank you.

Jonathan Brand:



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And Lawrence, if I can actually add one little thing. So I'm on my laptop and I pulled up ChatGPT, and I asked a question, what is the meaning of life? And just let me play with this for a second. So it says, and I'll just read two sentences, there's a lot more. "The meaning of life is a philosophical question that has been debated by scholars, theologians, and philosophers throughout history. There is no single answer or consensus on what the meaning of life is, as it is a deeply personal and subjective question that can vary from person to person." So about seven years ago I asked my wife's Apple phone, Siri, what's the meaning of life? And it said, "Oh silly, it's chocolate. Don't you know?" So I'm still skeptical that ChatGPT is going where we need it to go.

AJ Plummer:

All right, well on that note, let's take another question. We're going to go to Sarah in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who has a question about the challenges Cornell is facing. Sarah, you are live with the group. Go ahead and ask your question.

Sarah:

Thank you so much. Well, my understanding is that there are many smaller colleges like Cornell that are really struggling to maintain their current enrollment. I was very encouraged to hear President Brand say that Cornell's enrollment is growing, and I'm just curious to know some of the strategies that you use to try and maintain your enrollment and to grow it in the future. We know that demographics will simply make it more challenging. So I'm curious to know how Cornell is dealing with that.

Jonathan Brand:

Well Sarah, thank you for this question. And for those who may not be following this, Sarah mentions this demographic decline or cliff that is coming. And the reality is in 2008 when the great recession hit, people stopped having children. So fast-forward 18 years and here you get to 2025, 2026, and in the United States, we predict a decline of about 15% in the number of high school graduates, a 25% drop in, for example, in New England. So we know that a competitive landscape for recruiting students is going to get yet more competitive. So we're very focused, as you would expect, on recruitment and retention of our students. So in our current strategic plan, we really went in and asked three questions of ourselves. What do students want? What do students need? And what can we do at Cornell that basically no one else can do? And there I'm referencing, of course, our one course at a time methodology and philosophy.

And so we are working very hard across the institution to stay laser-focused on, again, what students want and what students need and what we can do that no one else can do. I will also come at this from a slightly different direction, which is our head of enrollment management, our VP for enrollment, Wendy Beckemeyer. Based on the data that she collected, she knows that students today are really focused on three, there are three areas that are at the top of their priority list. One, in terms of institutions that they want to attend, they want to attend institutions that care about diversity, equity, and inclusion. And let me say, when they say that they want to attend a school that cares about DEI, is what I'll call it, they don't want it just to be words. They want to know that the school is living those values with them.

Two, students these days are very focused on mental health and wellness. They want to go to schools that care, take a holistic approach to their lives and care about them thriving, not just in the classroom,



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but in everything that they do on campus and off campus. And then the third area that students are very focused on is the cost. And by that I mean graduating with low to no debt. So we are very much focused, and your question sort of affirm that you similarly have an interest in these areas. We're very much focused on, again, those are what students are telling us they want and what they need. And so we're very much focused on those three areas. And in fact, at a more micro level, in the last few years, and this is again thanks to Wendy Beckemeyer and her leadership in the financial aid area, I mentioned our \$35 million financial aid budget.

But what's more exciting about it is how we use those dollars. So for example, we created, she created, we created several years ago an Iowa Promise scholarship. For every student in Iowa, they receive a \$31,000 scholarship. It was so successful. I mean, our Iowa enrollment is up to about 30%. It was so successful. We launched the next year something we called the Freeway scholarship, which is those adjacent states that surround Iowa. That was so successful we then spawned a new scholarship that we called the Runway Scholarship. You can see a theme here, freeway, runway. Who knows what'll be next, highway? It won't be runaway, I can tell you that for sure. Which was for states where students could fly into Iowa. So we focused on Colorado and California and Texas. And then finally, again, a part of this financial aid piece is, we launched something that we call the Debt reduction program, which is really one of a kind nationwide reduction program.

It's been incredibly popular. We're into our second year. We received national attention for this, for its innovation. Where a subset of students who apply, they're selected, and we will, if they meet certain conditions of academic progress and live in the residence halls, graduate within four years, we will pay off up to \$12,000 of their federal student debt, provided they meet those conditions. And last year, well, yeah, a year ago we had 180 families that applied for 65 spots, and we're doing that and we're doing that again for this fall. So that's really how we're thinking about it. And I'll make one last point, Sarah, which is schools like us need to keep innovating, and that's what we're going to keep doing.

AJ Plummer:

Okay. We'd like to hear from a young alum now. Caleb, class of 2019 from Clive, who has a question about early career assistance. Caleb, you are live. Go ahead.

Caleb:

Yes, thank you so much. I actually have a two-part question. So firstly, I'm just curious to hear what actions Cornell is taking to expand their early career services, and would love to hear if the school is doing anything to actively build and maintain partnership networks with companies for internship and new grad pipelines. Secondly, just curious to hear how participation by our student-athletes in early career activities and planning is being emphasized or encouraged.

Ilene Crawford:

So, hi Caleb. It's Ilene Crawford. So I'll try to take your questions and then see if Jackie or President Brand have anything to add to that. So I think if you were on at the top of the call, you heard me talk about today's career expo. So that's really an anchor event for the Berry Career Institute, and they really, really work carefully with students throughout their time at Cornell to prepare for their career after Cornell. So in terms of resume support, but also different skill building, there are different events and support services that they offer. So we had 300 students participating today, 29 employers for



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universities who are really, really thrilled with the quality and the preparation of Cornellians for their next steps. We know because we look at this every year in terms of where our graduates are going. Our placement rate is very high. It's 96, 97%.

So that's the percent of employed or in graduate school of those seeking. So students that we survey, all students within six months of graduation. So we're very, very happy with that placement rate and seeing that students are going on to good career options and graduate school. And we're also getting an interesting picture on where they're going as well. Recent alumni data, so over 1,000 of you responded to the alumni survey that was sent out over the summer, and we're seeing that out of our graduates, we're getting a lot that are moving into healthcare, for example. Our information technology, local, state, federal government services. So we're getting a good sense of where our employees and our students are going to, and that's giving us some new insights on the kinds of pathways that we want to create for them. We have some programs in particular extremely focused on this.

So I think you heard me tell the story about our engineering and the kind of recruiting that they're doing. But our engineering program is very intentional with getting students connected with local employers. And of course, the fellowships that we have available for students through the Berry Career Institute allow for sophomore and junior and senior year opportunities as well, to get them on that runway to post-graduation employment and success. So I think those are opportunities open to all students, and including athletes as well. I don't know, President Brand, if you want to add anything to that, or Jackie, to any piece of that. But Caleb, thank you so much for your question.

AJ Plummer:

Thank you, Provost Crawford. I am mindful of the time here and we certainly want to be respectful of your time as well. And so before I pitch this over to President Brand for the last word, I'd just like to say a few thank-yous. Thank you to President Brand, Provost Crawford, Dean Wilson for joining us this evening. And of course to each of you for listening at home for your wonderful energy and just terrific participation tonight. I'm certainly sorry, we're all sorry that we didn't have a chance to answer each of your questions, but please do note that your question has been recorded if you submitted it, and our staff is going to be following up with you in the coming days. If you have a question that you have not yet shared, you can stay on the line as soon as the call is finished and you can leave a voice message with your question and then we will do follow-up afterward. So President Brand, would you like to have the final word?

Jonathan Brand:

Thank you. Yes. So I'd like to end with a story that I shared during homecoming with the classes of '70, '71 and '72, and also with our Board of Trustees. So I'm sorry if you've heard this, but it's such a moving story. So last fall, we partnered with a couple of organizations, one called Second Chance and another one called the African Leadership Academy to matriculate seven incredible international students. So Second Chance is an organization that helps students from around the globe who have been admitted to the finest colleges and universities around the world. I mean, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT, but they just can't afford to attend those schools. And this is where Second Chance steps in, and their mission is to find exceptional schools that will accept these students and make college financially feasible for them. So last fall, we matriculated seven, as I said, seven. Seven second chance and ELA students from countries such as Nepal and Turkey and Egypt and Zimbabwe.





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And they are incredible students with incredible spirits. One of them was in my class. Not only are they going to have life-changing experiences themselves like you did, they're also making an enormous impact on campus as members of our community. And they are so thankful to be at Cornell. It is a joy to be around them. Well, in the fall, the director of Second Chance came to Cornell to visit the students and to learn about Cornell. And I want to share with you all what she wrote to me after her visit just a few days after she left. And I quote, "As a college counselor who has been in the field for 22 years, I have seen and visited 400 plus universities in the United States, Canada, UK, Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore, and this visit to Cornell blew me away. I left feeling that I was not just a witness to Cornell College, but a part of your community for a few short days, and feel that Cornell College is the epitome of the Danish word "hygge", which depending on how you translate it, means cozy, hugged or welcomed in."

So I just want to say to all of you, I hope you can see that we have at Cornell something very special, a culture of care that so many schools would do anything to have. And our future success is really going to be a part because we have this culture and have had it for decades, and it directly influences how our students feel about their experience here, the quality of their experience. It influences recruitment and retention. And I just want to take this moment and thank you for playing such a central role in our progress. A part of the progress that undergirds this sense of hygge or feeling hugged or welcomed in. Everyone on our campus really appreciates you. So thank you again everyone for this hour together.

AJ Plummer:

Thank you again for joining us and we wish you all a very pleasant rest of your evening. Take care.