



Cornell University

**New York State Senate Public Hearing: Maintaining Quality, Equity, and  
Affordability in Public Higher Education throughout the Pandemic and Beyond  
Monday, November 22, 2021  
Van Buren Hearing Room A, Legislative Office Building**

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Good afternoon, Chair Stavisky, members of the Higher Education Committee, and staff. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Cornell is grateful for the deep partnership with our colleagues at SUNY, and with state agencies, the legislature, and the public. We value those partnerships and thank you for the continued support in the SUNY and agency budgets. Our state funding is used to support faculty in the contract Colleges, the NYS College of Veterinary Medicine, the NYS College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the NYS College of Industrial and Labor Relations, and the NYS College of Human Ecology, as well as extension appointments, NYS research, and NYS resident students attending our undergraduate degree programs.

**“Any Student, Any Study”**

Cornell is committed to making a Cornell degree affordable for all of our accepted students. Through federal, state, and institutional funding and alumni giving, Cornell is able to meet the full demonstrated need of students attending any of the undergraduate colleges. Aid is applied to the total cost of attendance, which includes tuition, room and board, fees, books, supplies and more. This commitment to affordability means that students who attend Cornell from families in the bottom 4 quintiles of income are receiving significant financial aid to attend. The average need-based grant award is \$49,022. For families with income below \$60,000 (with less than \$100,000 in assets) there is zero family contribution and zero loans in their student’s aid package. Because loans are capped at different levels of income, average loan debt for Cornell students is \$24,000 compared to the national average of \$32,600. In FY 22, Cornell University will expend \$321 million of institutional grant aid to its students, triple what it was 20 years ago. In the current school year, we have 100 Higher Education Opportunity Program

Diversity and Inclusion are a part of Cornell University’s heritage. We are a recognized employer and educator valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities.

(HEOP) students and 111 Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students. Our Opportunity students typically graduate at a rate above 90%. This is equal to or above the graduation rate of all Cornell students.

Cornell firmly commits to a student population that is inclusive and diverse. In Fall 2021, 25% of undergraduate students identify as Black, Hispanic, or Indigenous. Another 25% identify as Asian or Asian-White. We are proud of the measures we take to ensure access to a world class Cornell education for students from all backgrounds. We can do this because of our essential partnerships with state and federal governments and our generous alumni, and because of the investments made to ensure access for all future students.

### **COVID financial assistance to students**

Under the initial Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) passed as part of the CARES Act, Cornell received an allocation of \$12.8 million. While only half was intended for direct emergency relief for students, President Marth Pollack made the decision to distribute all funds directly to students based on financial need and as refunds for housing in Spring 2020. Another \$6.4 million was distributed to students as part of the CRRSAA Act, and \$11.2 million of federal funding as a result of the American Rescue Plan. In the spring and summer of 2020, we re-examined every student's financial aid package (and new applications for financial aid) in light of the financial impacts of the pandemic.

In addition, the Cornell Access Fund, started in 2019 to assist low and moderate-income students with unexpected financial demands or additional opportunities (such as financial support if a student takes an unpaid internship), pivoted to granting emergency funds to students as the campus shut down in March of 2020. Through May of 2020, over 1,000 students received grants totaling \$390,000. Over 400 students received funds to travel home, over 200 laptops were purchased and shipped, and \$125,000 was given to graduate and professional students to remain food secure. The Cornell Access Fund remains active to respond with grants of up to \$500 to address certain needs.

While supporting our on-campus students to financially achieve a Cornell degree, that commitment extends beyond the campus and into the NYS prison system. Since incarcerated people lost access to public financial aid in the mid-1990's, Cornell has operated a program delivering high-quality college coursework to students in all four prisons within an hour drive of Cornell. Our faculty and students provide instruction and teaching assistance, mentoring, and tutoring. The mission is to support students as they build meaningful lives inside prison and to prepare them for a successful re-entry with bona fide credentials.

Like our peers across the country, Cornell's student service units, including health services, are experiencing an increased need for support among students as the stressors of the global pandemic persist; and doing so in the face of staffing vacancies that are proving challenging to fill. While lessons learned during the pandemic have allowed us to embrace new solutions (e.g., virtual programming, telehealth services), we continue to struggle to meet student mental health and medical care needs.

### **Re-Opening Amid COVID**

Soon after closing our campuses in March of 2020, we began an intensive science-based modeling process to determine the safety of both our on-campus community and the surrounding communities. If there was a way to welcome students back to campus that was safer than remaining closed, we wanted to pursue that option. During the spring and summer, Cornell embarked on a faculty-led disease and safety modeling project that determined that with significant and frequent surveillance COVID testing and strict social, travel, and isolation protocols, instances of disease among Cornell community would be far less than if students returned to their Ithaca area apartments without on-campus learning. This proved very successful. Cases remained very low during both semesters of study and students were able to participate in-person in at least 1/3 of their courses. Importantly, they were able to have meaningful (albeit limited) interaction with their peers and professors.

The NYS College of Veterinary Medicine, which runs the New York State Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory in contract with the Department of Agriculture and Markets, set up a partnership with Cayuga Medical Center to test for COVID in human samples. The Lab continues to run testing for students, faculty, staff and surrounding areas. To date, over 1.5 million tests have been performed by the Cornell COVID Testing Center, all the while maintaining the capacity of testing for diseases in New York's animal agriculture sector and for companion animals. The cost to Cornell for this testing operation is north of \$30 million dollars. Surveillance testing continues today on a voluntary basis for many of the vaccinated members of our community and mandatory adaptive testing of certain students and staff. Once a vaccine was given Emergency Use Authorization in early 2021, Cornell became one of the first campuses to mandate vaccination for all students for Fall 2021.

### **About Cornell**

Each year, Cornell University educates nearly 15,000 undergraduates, 9,000 graduate and professional students, and employs over 10,000 employees in Ithaca, Manhattan, and on Roosevelt Island in NYC. Cornell students hail from 129 countries across the world, but nearly one-third of undergraduates are New York State residents. Cornell dedicates expansive research and outreach to improve the lives of New Yorkers through our historic public service mission outlined by the Morrill Act of 1865. Established by acts of the New York State Legislature are the NYS College of Veterinary

Medicine, the NYS College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the NYS College of Industrial and Labor Relations, and the NYS College of Human Ecology. Cornell administers Cornell Cooperative Extension with offices and outreach activities in nearly all counties and boroughs of the state, bringing expertise to meet local needs. Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cooperative Extension of New York City reach 1.7 million people each year.

Thank you for your time today and for the opportunity to speak with you.