

Raising the Bar: A Plan for Graduate & Professional Student Excellence

Cornell University is a global leader in recruiting and educating graduate and professional students. Our stipends and health coverage lead American universities. Access to talented faculty, vast information resources, and state of the art facilities is unbeaten. In the seven years since graduate students rejected unionization, the graduate and professional student body at Cornell has partnered with the wider university community to define and develop our unique contributions. We have aimed to participate more fully in the governance of the university, developed a vision for improving our sense of community, and collegially presented our needs and concerns.

The Cornell graduate and professional student community recognizes that the university has welcomed our partnership as we work together to participate in shared governance. We sincerely appreciate the university's response to the Graduate Community Initiative (GCI), and references to the GCI that have been included to the March 11, 2010 Draft Strategic Plan. As Cornell continues to develop the Strategic Plan of 2010 and to prepare for our sesquicentennial, we offer the following suggestions for the university to consider with regard to the strategic benefits of continued emphasis on the development of a cohesive graduate and professional student community. We request the university to consider: "How do we encourage excellence in our graduate population in a value added way for our graduate students, the undergraduates they engage with, the faculty whose research they support and for the future of academic pursuits."

Building Student Excellence & Promoting Diversity

Primary pay and benefits have attracted and continue to help bring talented researchers to Cornell University. Maintaining a suitable annual increase in stipend minimums is essential to the university's strategic vision.

- ***The university should investigate the current funding and tuition structure for graduate and professional students, including graduate student alumni funded fellowships, tuition incentives for external funding awards, and equalization of tuition structure across campus.***

The graduate and professional student experience at Cornell University is defined not only by the academic services and success, but additionally by the resources and benefits available. The wide variety of graduate and professional students needs require Cornell University to continue to offer and expand a rich portfolio of student benefits to recruit a diverse and competitive graduate community.

- ***Graduate and professional student recruitment must include an assessment of modern housing close to campus, family and child-care support, and the community spaces that help graduate students socialize and network.***
- ***The current healthcare offerings and insurance available for graduate and professional students should be reviewed to maintain and exceed competitive levels across peer institutions.***
- ***Cornell University should centralize a mental health support system inviting to graduate and professional students with an additional focus on proactive mental healthcare.***
- ***Financial orientation, education, and services available should be expanded and publicized to promote life-long financial well-being.***

An Integrated, Interdisciplinary Graduate and Professional Student Experience

The Cornell field system is truly an asset to graduate education. Although it has provided a lot of flexibility and freedom for students, the wide variety of narrowly defined fields has at times restricted the numbers of interactions between students and research alike.

- ***Fields should be simplified and/or coordinated in consultation with stakeholders to achieve “critical mass” of graduate students, in a manner which encourages the growing necessity of interdisciplinary education and research towards the strategic benefit of the university.***

The field system, while providing essential flexibility in research emphasis, has done little to promote innovative cross-college educational experiences. Cornell benefits from world class research programs and professional schools alike, disciplines which often interface yet formal education does little to promote interactions between.

- ***The research and professional programs which bring prestige upon the university should be leveraged as resources to innovate, enhance educational opportunities and bring unique distinction to graduate and professional student educations at Cornell. Non-degree and seminar programs between professional schools and graduate programs alike should be formalized, to build cross-college opportunities to integrate the diverse graduate and professional student community.***

Interdisciplinary cross-college research is reliant upon strong departments as a foundation as well as shared core facilities to provide resources and equipment. As we move towards increased collaboration and interdisciplinary research and education, the strength of research within individual university departments will be reliant upon these shared core resources.

- ***Cornell should continue to foster the opportunities and research support capabilities provided by shared campus core resources, with consideration of the costs and benefits provided and the changing needs of core services necessary to promote the departments and increased academic excellence benefiting the strategic goals of the university.***

Research and Public Engagement

Cornell graduate and professional students are integral to the university’s research and public engagement mission. The university’s mission can benefit from specific efforts to support graduate and professional students as they participate in these activities.

- ***Graduate students should be encouraged to pursue external funding by removing institutional restrictions which can result in lower stipends for externally-funded fellowships and grants, and lowering barriers to graduate student participation in grant writing activities as co-principle investigators.***
- ***Cornell University should enhance support services for research activities that occur away from graduate and professional students’ home campus.***
- ***Professional school community outreach activities provide a key opportunity for Cornell University to actively engage with the local, state and regional community.***

Teaching and Mentoring Success

Graduate and professional students at Cornell University may teach courses as part of their funding or degree requirements. Time inside the classroom is an integral part of preparing future faculty and leaders. The Cornell Center for Teaching Excellence and the introduction of their Master Teaching Assistant (TA) Program has been a superb resource on this campus for graduate students. The support that it provides for both new and experienced teachers has been transformative. By serving the university as TAs, graduate and professional students offer the unique opportunity to be additional mentors to undergraduate students.

- **Examples of excellence in TAs should be recognized and awarded at the university as well as department level. An appropriate recognition system would serve to motivate and set the standards of how Cornell TAs engage with undergraduates.**
- **The Cornell Center for Teaching Excellence should further its coordination with faculty and department TA coordinators to develop teaching skills prior to and during graduate student TAs.**
- **Academic fields should consider allowing graduate and professional students the opportunity to develop and teach their own course, open to both the Cornell and local community.**
- **Graduate and professional students offer and require a source of mentorship at Cornell University. Cornell University should utilize the expertise of the graduate community in instructing, guiding, and transitioning undergraduates into their academic or professional careers. Additionally, the graduate community would benefit from a mentorship program with the faculty and staff.**
- **Training for graduate and professional students as mentors to undergraduates should be encouraged by all departments.**

Building the Leaders and Faculty of the Future

Former Cornell graduate and professional students have established themselves as global leaders in the fields of business, human and animal health, law and public affairs, applied sciences, research and scholarship. Cornell University should further aim to be an institution that ignites future “rising stars”.

Cornell must prepare its doctoral students to be future leaders in academia. Cornell Ph.D.'s should not only be exceptional researchers and teachers but also must be able to manage active research programs, translate research into practice, develop new methods of teaching, and steward scholarship through the challenges of the 21st century.

Our professional schools benefit from engaging faculty and comprehensive student and career support services. A commitment to enhancing these success factors is essential for the success of these students throughout their career.

- **Cornell's accessible and transparent tradition of shared governance makes it the ideal institution to prepare future faculty and leaders in higher education. Graduate fields and departments should include Ph.D. students in departmental decision making and faculty searches. Such involvement can prepare a wide number of students as they apply for tenure track positions as well as throughout their growth as future leaders in academia.**
- **Future faculty should be encouraged to develop their personal research goals and pedagogical style. The university should encourage small research grant programs and offer proven teaching assistants the ability to develop and design their own courses.**

- ***To ensure successful graduates, Career Services should be empowered to handle the diverse needs of graduate and professional students in their first steps onto both the academic and non-academic job markets.***
- ***Partnerships between the Law School, the Johnson School, and relevant applied science fields ought be built to support more graduate and professional student participation in technology commercialization.***
- ***A centralized space and database of graduate and professional student alumni information would prove valuable in network building and mentorship.***
- ***Our professional schools and programs must be assessed periodically to ensure that they are providing the education that each respective profession demands.***

The Road Ahead

As the 150th anniversary of Cornell University approaches, the role of the institution is being reimagined and redefined. University officials have called on the broader community to provide feedback and insights into the transformation and the strategic goals of Cornell Community. In response to this call, the Graduate and Professional Community continues to build on the progress of the Graduate Community Initiative to envision the role this unique body has in promoting academic and professional excellence at Cornell University. As the vision for the future of Cornell University becomes a reality, the graduate and professional student community looks forward to continued partnership with the wider university community in the process, and suggests continued discussion as we work to achieve these collaborative goals.