

Inauguration Address

President Elizabeth Garrett
September 18, 2015

The Road to Ithaka Full of Adventure, Full of Discovery . . . The Marvelous Journey

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.*

So begins the poem *Ithaka*¹ by C. P. Cavafy about the journey home undertaken by Ulysses—and about all our journeys to the Ithakas in our lives. As Cornellians know, Ithaca is not only a place that profoundly affects those who spend time on this campus, but Ithaca—Cornell—is also a state of mind, both a beginning and destination for a journey characterized by a “rare excitement” that stirs the spirit, body, and intellect.

The spirit of Cornell that frames our journey has been best described by our own historian, the late Carl Becker. Becker explained that Cornell's character is formed by a different sort of freedom than that which characterizes other universities. “Something less formal, something less self-regarding, something more worldly, something, I will venture to say, a bit more impudent.”² The Cornell spirit emanates from Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White, whose vision led them to invent many of the unique attributes of American higher education. The collaboration of Cornell and White—two “rebels against convention”—created a university dedicated to the liberal arts, while simultaneously affirming the imperative to discover useful applications for our research and creative work; an institution committed to egalitarianism—though not always well implemented—that affirmed the importance of higher education for women, people of color, and students of all economic backgrounds; a curriculum empowering students with greater choice; and an openness to new degrees and areas of study in disciplines ranging from veterinary medicine to electrical engineering, American studies to architecture, modern Far Eastern languages to industrial and labor relations.

This spirit of freedom, Becker told us, brings with it responsibility. We set the pace in higher education by re-evaluating and re-creating the work that we do every day to ensure that it meets today's challenges while remaining true to our deeply held academic values. As scientist and author Edwin Slosson challenged us more than a century ago in his analysis of *Great American*

Universities: “We expect more of Cornell. Cornell, in order to be conservative in the sense of being true to its traditions, must be radical and progressive, for that is the way it started.”³

So how do we remain true to our Ithaca—our state of mind, journey, and destination—as we embark on our next 150 years? First, the faculty of any great university define its spirit; they hold fast to principles of excellence and academic freedom while leading in discovery, creation, and innovation. How will we support and enhance this vibrant community of scholars, researchers, and artists as we move forward? Second, our journey is shared by talented and ambitious students. How can we continue to ensure that the value of their time in Ithaca is broadly appreciated and continually improved? And, third, our Ithaca now spans the globe, spreading our impudent and revolutionary idea far beyond Cayuga’s waters. How will we take advantage of this to augment all that we do?

~I~

Listen to Cavafy:

*Hope your road is a long one,
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;
...
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.*

When A. D. White began to implement his plan for Cornell University, his highest priority was hiring faculty. “Better a splendid and complete faculty in a barn,” he stated, “than an insufficient faculty in a palace.”⁴ The recruitment, development, and retention of the best faculty remain our paramount priorities: an exceptional faculty is the bedrock of our teaching, research, and creative work, and our public mission. It is the faculty who attract the finest students and inspire them to embark on their own adventures of learning. It is the faculty who seek to discover new knowledge, move us forward in our search for truth, and apply what they have discovered in ways that improve well-being around the globe. It is the faculty whom our alumni remember when they speak of their years at Cornell. It is the faculty, as well as our students, whose work inspires our dedicated staff to ensure that all aspects of our environment are conducive to our educational mission.

Our objective with regard to faculty is to strive always for excellence, excellence that is multifaceted and manifested in a myriad of ways. It includes an obligation to foster diversity of viewpoint, of experience, of identity, race, and gender, and of methodology. We celebrate excellence in fundamental research and scholarship pursued for the sheer joy of discovery. And, given our unique status as New York’s land-grant university and essential partner in its cooperative extension system, we also define excellence to include applying that knowledge to the world’s most pressing problems.

Related to the freedom we enjoy, faculty have many responsibilities—to each other, to junior colleagues, to the institution, to the staff who work alongside them—but none more important than our responsibility to our students. To send them off on their own journeys “to learn and go on learning” as they set sail to distant and unknown harbors. Cornell provides the opportunity for learning in and out of the classroom—in our residence halls, in the multiplicity of events on campus, in a conversation during a faculty member’s office hours, in the field doing research around the globe, and in a lab or studio playing a role in a collaborative endeavor.

Our teaching strategies are subject to constant review and revision as we seek to incorporate what is best about new technology, while retaining an appreciation for the beauty of a great lecture, a well-structured essay, or a closely reasoned argument. We bring our research into the classroom, refining our students’ innate curiosity so that they learn how to discover and create knowledge, not just how to absorb it. We move our teaching into the world through initiatives such as Engaged Cornell, allowing students to analyze problems with rigor, devise solutions, and apply those approaches in our local and global communities. We seek to develop in our students a resilience to face an exciting and uncertain future, an appreciation for the life of the mind, and a commitment to rationality and reason as the tools with which to approach the world’s challenges, while preserving an appreciation for the arts and humanities that help us understand what it means to be human.

How do we expect more of Cornell with regard to our faculty? Certainly, we need more outstanding faculty colleagues at all levels, and we must ensure that all our processes support them in their research, scholarship, and teaching, enabling experimentation, collaboration, diversity of perspective, global interactions, and risk taking. We are in a competitive global environment when it comes to attracting the best faculty talent, but we believe that Cornell provides a uniquely appealing environment for faculty committed to excellence in their work. We offer the support of the entire institution to facilitate their success as scholars and teachers and the opportunity to work in a university that is deeply collegial. We will continue to strive to bring the best faculty to Cornell and to create an atmosphere in which they can embark on their own journeys to the Ithakas to which they aspire.

But we must also heed the call to continue to be radical and progressive. In that regard, we must understand the motto given to us by Ezra Cornell—“I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study”—in a way that is compatible with the unwavering pursuit of excellence in a world infinitely more complex than he could have imagined. Certainly, we now offer access to “any person” seeking the best education more successfully than our founder was able to, following through on that promise to women, people of color, and students from around the world. We must do even better in that commitment, and we will.

We remain dedicated to the diversity of disciplines and subjects that we find on all our campuses, but realistically no institution can be excellent in “any study.” The faculty must focus our energy and resources strategically; we must critically assess all that we are doing and choose which studies to emphasize in our quest for excellence. We must organize ourselves in ways that ensure our work has the greatest impact, that propel us forward to innovations and new applications, and that allow for fruitful collaborations among faculty and students. In this analysis, we must be guided by the spirit of “any study” by defining our scholarly targets with

breadth, taking account of our history and public commitment; by defining excellence to include not only the best research and creative work but also our impact on policy and the quality of life throughout the world; and by an openness to new understandings of disciplines, collaborations, and methods of scholarship.

~II~

Ithaca—journey, destination, but also a way of perceiving the world. Turn, again, to Cavafy:

*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way.*

The foundation of a university is its faculty, but its future and a large part of its influence in the world lie in its students, who become alumni. President Jacob Gould Schurman described our founding vision with regard to the students we hoped to attract: “The people of New York saw a new type of university arise in their midst,—the first in the history of education,—an institution embracing the entire range of human knowledge and attainment and opening its doors to young men (and women too) who craved the light and power of intelligence for any purpose whatever, whether to live or make a living.”⁵

And with that Cornell began its radical and progressive approach to education, empowering students to make decisions about what they would study and brilliantly combining the liberal arts with study that was explicitly structured to equip students for practical endeavors. An education that sought not just to impart knowledge to students eager to learn but to make them partners in learning and discovery. It is their educational adventure—shaped both by the experience of this Ithaca and the objective of reaching their own Ithakas—that we celebrate today at Homecoming. Just as Cavafy observes, it is the *process* of learning and acquiring wisdom that is paramount, because our quest continues to the end of our days and then is pursued by the next generation.

I realize that higher education in the United States is the subject of great public criticism; politicians and pundits contend that the cost is too great, the experience not sufficiently valuable, and the opportunity not fully accessible to those who deserve it. Certainly, there is room for improvement in any institution of great durability, but it is beyond dispute that an intense residential undergraduate experience at one of America's research universities is one of the best investments any family can make. Because of the experience at Cornell, our graduates will have more fulfilling opportunities on their journeys; they will have brighter economic futures; and, most important, they will experience life's adventures more deeply and with greater satisfaction. Their education is worthy of their own investment, our country's investment, and the investment of Cornellians who have come before them, because our graduates will determine the future.

Professor Liberty Hyde Bailey, who helped shape the character of our College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, declared that “education is an inspiration, a taking hold of a broader life.”⁶ That

kind of education can be found across our campus every day—and around the world as our students explore the globe. It is evident in our residence halls where students of all backgrounds and diverse views come together to debate, reason, and learn. It is expressed through the discussion of a great book or a play as students meet in a welcoming nook of a Cornell library and wrestle with age-old questions of what it means to lead a valuable and engaged life. It occurs in the labs as students work with faculty to design experiments, not all of which succeed, but even then there is much to be learned together in an environment of discovery. It can be witnessed in our Johnson Museum of Art as students and faculty are inspired by creative work to think together about culture, identity, and beauty. It is on display in the incubators and offices where students move their ideas into society, experiencing the joy of invention and entrepreneurship.

In the face of criticism of higher education generally, we must defend what we know to be true: the educational journey that begins here in Ithaca in a unique undergraduate environment is worthwhile and valuable. There is nothing comparable anywhere else in the world; it is why the ambitious in every country aspire to study in an American research university. It is an opportunity that we will continue to make available to students from every walk of life, every background, every state and country, if they are equipped and eager to benefit from it. In the next months, we will focus even more intensely on the residential undergraduate experience, defining as a community what shared intellectual experience all Cornell students should encounter, and ensuring they can more easily navigate the complexities of our diverse university to construct meaningful plans of study. We also value our graduate and professional students for their many contributions to the academic and cultural life of our university, and we are confident that their Cornell experience profoundly enhances their potential for further contribution within and beyond the academy.

Of course, we must seek always to increase the value of the time spent in this particular part along life's journey. Not just through assessing how and what we teach but also by ensuring that all undergraduate students will be on the trajectory for their future journeys when they graduate, and that graduate students learn professional skills as well as refine their intellectual talents. We recognize that our students' aspirations may change during their time at Cornell, influenced by encounters with new ways of thinking and new experiences—and we celebrate that process of brave exploration. We also know that our graduates are likely to embark on different careers throughout the course of their lives. Accordingly, we will continue to focus on enhancing the already outstanding career services we offer our students, helping them think about each decision from their first semester at Cornell in terms of how it moves them forward to graduate study, particular professions, entrepreneurial projects, or other directions. This practical objective comes directly from Ezra Cornell's vision. Moreover, it supports a robust liberal arts curriculum for all our students, because it is the liberal arts that can best equip us to think critically, read closely, act ethically, react empathetically, and celebrate beauty.

~III~

Cavafy continues to lead us on this journey:

*May you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind.*

As we interpret our founding vision for the twenty-first century, we do so in an institution that has brought the Cornell spirit far beyond this serene campus. Those who are on this journey of discovery can stop at our “trading stations” around the globe: in Tanzania and Rome; in Geneva, New York, and Qatar; in Washington, D.C., and Maine; in every county of New York through our cooperative extension presence. Most significant, Cornell is not only established in a great college town but also has a substantial footprint in an international urban center—a duality that no other leading American university can claim. Our involvement in New York City has grown over more than one hundred years, beginning with the exceptional Weill Cornell Medical College and its many partnerships with clinical and research institutions; expanding to sites where several of our schools pursue teaching, research, and service missions; and now including Cornell Tech, which is already redefining graduate education. In about two years, Cornell will open a campus on Roosevelt Island, providing a new way station for those en route to their own Ithakas of invention and exploration.

Our decision to embark on the opportunity presented by Cornell Tech provides an example of our modern interpretation of “any person . . . any study.” Mayor Michael Bloomberg described our new educational endeavor in words Ezra Cornell would have appreciated: “This new land grant can help dreamers and entrepreneurs from around the world come to New York and help us become the world’s leading city for technological innovation.”⁷ But this opportunity becomes a defining moment for Cornell only if we work to bring Ithaca to Roosevelt Island and New York City and bring the lessons we learn there back to faculty, students, and staff here. We cannot allow physical distance to keep us from integrating all that we do in New York City with the long-established excellence in Ithaca, the campus that will always represent the wellspring of the Cornell spirit.

What does our expanded role in New York City mean for Cornell’s continuing journey to shape higher education for the world? At least three things. First, all our colleges must consider ways to connect with Cornell Tech, just as Johnson is doing with a new degree and plans for executive education on Roosevelt Island, and the Law School will launch in a few months with its new degree. I challenge every school to consider how deep collaborations—in teaching or research or creative work, or all three—can be developed to achieve excellence we could not have imagined had we not established this new port of learning.

These connections are imperative for our ambitions— we cannot lead the world in thinking about how advances in technology relate to human well-being, methods of communication, or the built environment without bringing all the disciplines to bear. The humanities must lead us to ask challenging questions about the values undergirding change and to develop new ways of explaining and understanding what we have learned. The social sciences must provide insight into the policies and practices that new technology will engender or require to reach its full potential. Diverse perspectives will force us to confront inequality of opportunity that limits and perhaps perverts technological advances. The connections of Cornell Tech to the life and

physical sciences in Ithaca and Weill Cornell are more evident but no less important, and the work our researchers pursue in fundamental, discovery-driven science will provide the basis for future applications by colleagues on Roosevelt Island.

Second, faculty at Cornell Tech and at the schools located in New York City are creating new graduate degrees that emphasize collaboration, practice-based pedagogy, and new delivery platforms. Our faculty have identified skills and original ways of thinking that people around the world need to succeed, and they are creating educational programs to meet those needs. All of us—not just those associated with our newest campus—must consider how Cornell can build on areas of excellence and, with flexibility and creativity, offer innovative graduate degrees, some through technologies that reach around the globe to ensure that more people are ready to meet the challenges of the future. Done at the highest levels of excellence, new ventures in graduate and professional education extend our influence and are fully consistent with our mission, expressed by President Edmund Ezra Day, “to perpetuate and to create.”⁸

Finally, we must work together to understand difficult problems of our age—among them, sustainability and climate change; new approaches to health and well-being; the challenge of growing global and domestic inequality; the influence of technology; and the design of effective democratic institutions—and devise solutions through interdisciplinary and intercampus collaboration. I will work with the provosts, deans, and faculty to put structures in place that generate and nurture those collaborations, not just internally but through increasing our ability to obtain external support from government, foundations, corporations, and philanthropy. The connections we are forming with outside entities eager to support our entrepreneurial aspirations, made salient by the Cornell Tech campus, must benefit not only our faculty and students in New York City but also reach to this campus, bringing new possibilities to faculty and students here and creating economic opportunities not just for New York City but for Ithaca and upstate as well. Certainly, we already have collaborations spanning Ithaca and New York City, but the potential for cutting-edge, influential research and teaching is much greater than we have realized so far.

Our academic community must be bold in our ambition. Our journey of exploration, which emanates from Ithaca and will always return to Ithaca, will wind through many ports of call, allowing us to learn and teach and discover more than if we merely stayed safe at home.

~IV~

And so I embark on a new journey, as the thirteenth president of this remarkable institution. I am confident that we will lead the world in creating new paths to knowledge, discovery, and the many ways we can move closer to the truth, and in launching our students on their own voyages. We are charting our course for the next 150 years, a period that will be “full of adventure, full of discovery, . . . a rare excitement.” We will remain true to Carl Becker’s exhortation, “hold[ing] fast to [Cornell’s] ancient tradition of freedom and responsibility— freedom for the scholar to perform his proper function, restrained and guided by the only thing that makes such freedom worthwhile, the scholar’s intellectual integrity, the scholar’s devotion to the truth of things as they are and to good will and humane dealing.”² And we enlist our students as colleagues on our travels, enabling them to strike out on their own at the right time and with success, fortified by

intellectual curiosity, by grace in dealing with others, by a faith in science and reason, and by a joy in the arts and humanities.

We began on this particular voyage with the opening words of Cavafy's great poem; let us conclude with his final words, which will comfort us on the journey ahead:

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
...
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these
Ithakas mean.*

I look forward to working with all Cornellians— faculty, students, staff, alumni, parents, and supporters—to navigate the next stage of our remarkable journey, traveling to the many diverse Ithakas that await our discovery.

Notes

1. C. P. Cavafy, "Ithaka," from *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).
2. Carl Becker, *Cornell University: Founders and the Founding* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 194.
3. Edwin Slosson, *Great American Universities* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), in Carol Kammen, *Cornell: Glorious to View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2003), 80.
4. Walter P. Rogers, *Andrew D. White and the Modern University* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1942), 147, cited in Becker, *Cornell University*, 124.
5. Jacob Gould Schurman, *Inaugural Address*, 1892, 41.
6. Liberty Hyde Bailey, inscription on bench, Cornell Sesquicentennial Commemorative Grove, dedicated October 17, 2014.
7. Michael Bloomberg, announcement that Cornell University, in partnership with Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, had won the bid for the applied sciences campus on Roosevelt Island, December 19, 2011.
8. Glenn Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick, *Cornell: A History, 1940-2015* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 77.
9. Becker, *Cornell University*, 204.