

Founding Principles

More than 150 years later, A.D. White's vision still resonates



Since becoming Cornell's fourteenth president, I have spent many hours immersed in the history of our university and its founders. One piece of that history I find particularly intriguing is a letter written by our first president, Andrew Dickson White, in 1862 to social reformer Gerrit Smith, laying out White's vision for "a new university, worthy of our land and time."

The letter is remarkable in many respects, but what struck me most was White's belief that creating a university founded on the revolutionary ideal of "any person . . . any study" would be pointless if the university itself were small, its faculty mediocre, or its facilities limited. White's goal was not simply to found an institution "where the most highly prized instruction may be available to all—regardless of sex or color." He argued, in detail and with passion, that such an institution must be made great—capable of transforming not only the lives of its students, but all of American higher education. In this new university, truth would be sought for truth's sake, and "liberally minded men of learning now scattered throughout the land [would] cluster—making the institution a center from which ideas and men shall go forth to bless the nation during ages."

With the presidency of Cornell, I inherited responsibility for that vision. In my inaugural address, I laid out four priorities that I see as key to furthering our legacy, building on Cornell's signature strengths and advancing its founding mission. These priorities continue to guide me in planning for Cornell's future as a university where truth is sought for truth's sake, where knowledge has a public purpose, and where ideals are matched by excellence.

Academic distinction. As White made clear, the success of Cornell's mission depends above all on its excellence as an institution. Investing in our faculty, building on our breadth of expertise, and supporting cross-disciplinary collaboration make Cornell a place that attracts remarkable people who do remarkable work. Today Cornell is indeed the sought-after institution of which President White dreamed: last year, 51,000 applicants competed for places in the Class of

2022, a 9.1 percent increase over the year before. More tellingly, we are also seeing a steady increase in the number of students who make Cornell their first choice.

Educational verve. Cornell is first and foremost an educational institution. We are here, as our mission statement says, "to discover, preserve, and disseminate knowledge, to educate the next generation of global citizens, and to promote a culture of broad inquiry throughout and beyond the Cornell community." It is a responsibility to be approached as we approach everything at Cornell: in a way that is creative, evidence-based, and mindful of our larger goals. Through endeavors like the Active Learning Initiative, the Office of Global Learning, and many others, we constantly seek new and more effective ways to teach and to learn.

Civic responsibility. The notion of knowledge and truth has never been something to take for granted. In our time as in White's, it requires vigorous and constant defense, as do our uniquely American ideals of free

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speech, diversity and inclusion, and equality of opportunity. In the last two years, Cornell has moved to create a more open, inclusive, and respectful campus through the Presidential Task Force on Campus Climate and numerous diversity and inclusion initiatives.

One Cornell. Cornell was established as a rural university with broad connections to the larger world. Today, with an expanding presence in New York City, including Cornell Tech and our new hub in Manhattan, we are better equipped than ever to build new paths to collaboration and discovery, fulfilling our mission as a research university that improves lives.

Reflecting on President White's letter today, I find it all the more remarkable for its context. White wrote "in one of the darkest periods of our national history": the depths of the Civil War. It is perhaps no coincidence that, at a time of unprecedented national division, White saw hope for the nation in education—in teaching and sharing the value of truth, beauty, science, and knowledge. ■

— Martha E. Pollack
president@cornell.edu