

## New Student Convocation Address

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You have already heard it from your fellow students on the Orientation Steering Committee, the Student Assembly and the Board of Trustees, but I, too, want to welcome you to Cornell. I met some of you under the tent on the Arts Quad yesterday afternoon – and I’m pleased to see that you’re still with us. John Winthrop, in his 1630 sermon, may have waxed eloquent about “a city upon a hill,” but he didn’t have to walk up Libe Slope or negotiate all those steps between North Campus and Martha Van.

By now you’ve probably had a campus tour, met your roommates, your RA, and the other students in your OC group. Over the next week, and throughout the next four years, you will continue to learn new things. Some of them -- like using the library and writing that first college paper with a minimum of stress -- will be immediately useful. Others -- like the public service projects and the cultural activities -- will help you get to know your community and your fellow Cornellians and to bond together as a class.

Some of you came to Cornell several days early to participate in the Pre-Orientation Service Trip – POST. You’ll find many other opportunities to connect with the community throughout the next four years, and we hope your service activities at Cornell will lay the foundation for civic engagement that will stay with you throughout your lives.

I especially recommend the various opportunities to meet Cornell faculty you will have during the coming week – in your individual colleges, in your residence halls and at campus-wide events. Orientation will be your first opportunity to get to know Cornell faculty members practicing their craft. You will find that, as teachers, they are sometimes controversial, often humorous, but always stimulating, engaging and eager to explore ideas. These events will whet your appetites for the intellectual feast that awaits you as undergraduates at Cornell.

Cornell is an unusual place. Although there are well over 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States, there is not another one like Cornell. Cornell is a distinguished private university with a strong public mission. Both land grant and Ivy League, it has tremendous strength in science and technology, rigorous professional programs, and robust liberal arts departments. It also has a strong commitment to using its resources to meet the needs of the larger world. It is a research university of the first rank, but it is also an excellent place to be an undergraduate.

In fact, Cornell is an excellent place for undergraduate education BECAUSE of the research, scholarship and creative work that go on here. Cornell's John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, for example, makes writing an integral part of learning and the responsibility not just of the English Department but of every discipline at Cornell. The Knight program is one of the oldest and most expansive in the country, with support from tenured faculty in 30 Cornell departments, and it is the reason that when a new Time Magazine-Princeton Review "best college" guide hits the news stands on Monday, Cornell will be featured as a "College of the Year."

Cornell has been charting a novel, independent, optimistic course through the American educational landscape since its founding in 1865. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, established colleges typically offered narrow and prescribed courses of study designed to equip well-to-do young men for the clergy and the learned professions. When Cornell burst upon the educational scene in 1865, it turned the conventional model on its ear.

Cornell's first president Andrew D. White explained in his inaugural address that the university's philosophy rested on what he called two "Permeating Ideas." "First, the development of the individual . . . as a being intellectual, moral, and religious. Secondly, bringing the powers of the [individual] thus developed to bear usefully upon society."

And White's "permeating ideas" still have meaning for those of you who begin your Cornell education today. They mean, first of all, that you have chosen a university that offers both breadth and depth, and I hope you will take full advantage of both. You will be able to delve deeply into your special interests through courses and opportunities for independent work. I hope you'll also go beyond your major and even beyond your own college to explore some topics simply because they are of interest to you.

Although only a relatively small number of Cornell students are music majors, for example, more than 2,000 students a year take the department's courses. Even more participate in the department's ensembles and performance groups. And they are guided by faculty members who are masters at their art – whether performance, composition or musicology. It is significant, for example, that the definitive work on Mozart's music is being done, not in the composer's native Germany, but by Prof. Neal Zaslaw here at Cornell.

With the completion of the Lincoln Hall Renaissance this month, Cornell's music faculty and Cornell students have a world-class facility in which to study, practice and

perfect their work. During your time here, performance facilities for music and for other major events will get even better – with the renovation of one of our major teaching and performance spaces: Bailey Hall.

Similarly, more than 1,500 Cornell students from across the campus take courses and participate each year in productions of the Department of Theatre, Film and Dance, although relatively few of them major in those areas. The students, who may be lawyers or politicians or computer scientists a decade from now, learn by undertaking an intense creative journey with experienced professional mentors. Looking back, many students say that the values they learned through theater, film and dance -- discipline, dedication to quality, a willingness to experiment and to risk failure in a very public arena – were among the most important educational experiences they had at Cornell.

And a broad academic background, firmly rooted in the liberal arts, can sometimes bring tangible rewards. A substantial number of Cornell's graduating seniors, for example, have won national and international awards in recent years, including both Rhodes and Marshall scholarships. These students not only had high grade-point averages and strong backgrounds in their majors; they also used the resources of Cornell to acquire depth and breadth. Virtually all of them found faculty members with whom to collaborate on research; they found mentors outside their departments and colleges to help them fill in gaps in their educational preparation and further their intellectual growth. Even those who were not ultimately selected for fellowships found the process worthwhile as an intellectual awakening. You can meet some of these scholarship recipients in Kaufman Auditorium later this afternoon. I hope that you, too, will aspire to great things at Cornell and use its resources to satisfy your curiosity and to reach your goals.

Second, Cornell will give you the best chance of your entire life to extend your horizons, to play with ideas, to think about thinking. Edmund Ezra Day – the Cornell President for whom the administration building is named – said it well: ‘A great university should be a place in which there are relatively undisturbed opportunities to live with ideas. Much of life is otherwise engaged. But on campuses such as this thoughtful men and women, of faculty and student body alike, should be led to seek out all sorts of ideas: ideas that are deeply rooted in human experience; ideas that, like constellations in the intellectual firmament, have guided the earlier mariners of human thought; ideas that have more recently opened the doors of new knowledge of nature and of man; they should, in brief, through their common interests and activities here in this university, come to know what is really meant by the intellectual life.’

One of Cornell’s most popular courses year after year is “Magical Mushrooms, Mysterious Molds,” taught by George Hudler, professor of plant pathology. Prof. Hudler makes his subject come alive by showing how fungi and mold have impacted social and political structure throughout history. He may be one of the few professors ever to have earned a Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching and an article on his work in *Rolling Stone Magazine*. As the popularity of Prof. Hudler’s course demonstrates, college is the time for being intellectually adventuresome, and Cornell is the place, because of its broad and deep intellectual resources.

Third, being at Cornell means that you will be expected to go beyond the facts and formulae presented in your classes to embark upon your own search for truth. In his inaugural address, White said, “I took pains to guard the institution from those who, in

higher education, substitute dates for history, gerund-grinding for literature, and formulas for science.”

You will find at Cornell, perhaps for the first time in your academic careers, that knowing the right answer is often not enough to earn an “A.” Your professors will look for something more – intellectual curiosity, a healthy skepticism, a zest for imaginative and critical thinking, and sustained effort to confirm or refute the information presented to you. They bring this critical spirit to their own research and scholarship. It is the way they move knowledge forward, and they will expect the same of you.

Of course, there will be many other activities competing for your time and attention at Cornell. The social activities that are a part of Orientation will continue throughout your Cornell years, along with opportunities to participate in volunteer service and more kinds of extracurricular activities than you may have thought possible. Cornell’s intercollegiate athletic teams will give you much to cheer about – fall, winter and spring. And you’ll find a lively program of intramural sports and fitness activities to balance your mental efforts -- and to ward off the extra pounds that can come from attending all those ice cream sprees and special Cornell Dining events.

Distinguished business leaders, political figures and intellectuals will visit periodically, often teaching classes and meeting informally with students and faculty members as well as giving a public lecture or two. Last year, these speakers ranged from Jay Walker, a Cornell alumnus and the founder of Priceline.com, to columnist William Safire, to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. I commend these activities to you as a way to add balance and perspective to your life.

But it is the faculty who will be your most important allies in the intellectual adventure of the next four years. This is not a place where a few faculty “stars” capture the limelight. At Cornell, virtually every member of the faculty is a leader in his or her field – or is on the way to becoming one. Cornell professors are researchers and scholars of the first order, and they are also committed teachers and mentors of undergraduates. Cornell's residential initiative, now underway, will make it easier than ever to connect with members of the faculty outside of class, both now, while you are freshmen, and in subsequent years.

I hope you will meet with your faculty advisers on a regular basis and talk about their academic life as well as yours. Get to know your faculty-in-residence or faculty fellow associated with your residence hall. I encourage you to find out more about the faculty and their intellectual interests. Pull up their Web pages. Read some of their publications. Find out what upper-level courses they teach. Then seek out those faculty members whose interests can complement and extend your own.

I hope you will spend some time this week -- and periodically throughout your time here -- thinking about exactly why you are here and what you hope to gain from the experience. Your parents can't do this for you. Neither can your professors, or your friends, or the university president. The problem with advice, they say, is that the person who has the answer doesn't have the problem. But here are some things to think about: Will you pursue a major because it will lead to a lucrative career? Because it's easy? Because it's what other people expect? Or because it's what you really want to do to fulfill your own curiosity? These are important questions that you need to be asking -- and answering -- for yourselves.

But don't worry too much – at least not yet -- if you do not have a clear idea of what you want to do after Cornell. You may have heard the story about the college student who was attending a conference at which several distinguished career experts were speaking. He listened patiently for a long while. Finally he could restrain himself no longer. "Excuse me," he said, "but I am in a terrible quandary. When I was a freshman I decided to major in geology. But before too long, I read in the *New York Times* that jobs for geologists were few and far between. So I decided to switch to pre-law. Sure enough, before too long, I read in the *New York Times* that the nation was experiencing a glut of lawyers. So I switched to computer science because it was such a hot field. But just a few days ago, I read in the *New York Times* that with so many dot-com start-ups failing, computer science isn't as promising a field as it used to be. But now I'm a senior – what should I do?" The verdict of the experts was unanimous: "STOP READING THE NEW YORK TIMES."

More to the point, there are no "bad majors" or "good majors" – especially at Cornell. In my own case, I majored in classics – specifically ancient Greece and Rome. I still remember my uncles saying to me, when I told them I was studying Greek and Latin, "How will you get a job?" As it turned out, I found a pretty good job, and a remarkably interesting one. The point is this: if you follow your own interests, pursue the subjects you feel passionate about, and work hard, you can eventually find a fulfilling job. The important thing is to have a fulfilling life, one charged with mental and cultural excitement.

My advice is to use Cornell's breadth to discover your intellectual passion. Do your very best work. Four years from now, you will be in the enviable position of having figured out what you most like to do and how to become really good at it.



There is another thing you should understand about this university. Your education here is basically a “do-it-yourself” proposition. A.D. White told students during his inaugural address, “You are not here to be made, you are here to make yourselves.”

And Jacob Gould Schurman, another Cornell president, elaborated the point a generation later: “The nature of the mind [is] self-expansive, self-creative; it grows by putting forth energy. . . . Rightly considered you have come here to develop, to enlarge, to create yourselves. . . . it is now in your power to make yourselves what you are to be.”

You can have a direct influence on the kind of education you receive here. You can make a class work -- or fall flat -- by your own contribution to it or lack thereof. You can seek out the opportunities to work with a faculty member on a research project that interests you both -- or you can remain part of the blur of faces in a large lecture class. You can find other students who share a passion for the life of the mind, who enjoy exploring ideas; or you can wall off your life in the classroom and laboratory from the rest of your experiences at Cornell and spend your “off” hours watching Regis or visiting the bars in Collegetown. The choice -- and the consequences of that choice -- are completely and exclusively yours. Cornell is an institution based on the idea of freedom with responsibility. You have almost undreamed of freedom to do what you choose here, but you also are expected to take responsibility for what it is that you choose to do.

Finally if you want to make Cornell your intellectual home, you should not try to make it into a little haven composed of people just like yourselves. Cornell’s diversity – with people from all over the country and more than 100 other nations – is one of its greatest strengths. This year the Orientation Steering Committee and the International Student Program Board have teamed up to offer a multicultural series – highlighting the crafts, food,

and cultures of our campus community and how we relate to each other and the rest of the world. And all of you should have found mouse pads waiting for you in your rooms with Cornell's "Open Doors, Open Hearts, Open Minds" statement printed on them as a reminder of what being a member of a diverse community means. You will discover that Cornell is not only a diverse community. It is also a pluralistic community, in which individuals have multiple identities and affiliations influenced by race and ethnicity, geographic origin, religion, sexual orientation, political philosophy, socioeconomic status and many other factors. In a pluralistic community with broad diversity, you should feel free to move effortlessly among your different interests. As members of an intellectual community, we are all here to maximize our individual potential while also being committed to shared goals of discovery, leadership and service. We support each other across differences. We accord every member of the Cornell community dignity and respect. Although we don't always agree with each other, we disagree in a civil manner that sustains rather than stifles discussion.

You are now full members and contributing partners in this diverse, pluralistic community of ideas. You are about to begin one of the most demanding, most stimulating, and ultimately most rewarding of life's endeavors. I congratulate you and your families on choosing Cornell. We value the contributions we know you can make to our intellectual community, and we look forward to getting to know you personally, to working with you closely, and to enjoying with you the rigors, the excitement -- and the fun -- of academic life.