**To:** Dean of Faculty

**From:** CAPP (Mark Milstein (chair), Todd Cowen, Steven Jackson, David Levitsky, Kathleen Long, Julia Markovits, Thomas Pepinsky, Fred Schneider, and Claire Tempelman)

**CC:** Associate Dean of Faculty, Qi Wang (on leave)

**Date:** December 7, 2021

**RE:** Summary of CAPP discussion of October 28, 2021 proposal on Part-time Bachelor's Degree for Non-traditional Students

CAPP is very supportive of offering a part-time bachelor's degree for non-traditional students who cannot afford the time or the cost of attending a full-time university degree program. For Cornell to offer such a program would be consistent not only with the university's founding as a land grant institution intent on educating "any person" in "any study", but it would also align to both changing (i.e., the prevalence of non-traditional students seeking 4-year university degrees) and competitive (i.e., peer institutions are offering such programs) market conditions.

However, CAPP has serious concerns not with _why_ such a program would be of interest to Cornell, but rather with _how_ such a program might be delivered effectively and efficiently while meeting the university's standards of educational quality as well as program participant needs. Recognizing that the intended next step in the process is to develop operational details of the program, CAPP identified the following issues that should be addressed or resolved before a program could be launched:

**Prioritization in Program Decision-Making**: As program details are developed, decisions that prioritize quality of education for participants should take precedence and not be undermined by the university's financial interests in creating a new income stream. CAPP is concerned that, to be profitable, the proposed program might cut corners on: 1) delivery of content; or 2) in providing support for a type of student who will require more specialized support given the environments in which they are attempting to complete their degrees.

**Quality of education**: The proposed program offers a potentially compelling expansion of the Cornell brand, but if that expansion comes at the expense of quality then it would undermine that brand.  It is critical that the proposed program be administered without compromising the quality of teaching current students. Given teaching loads, service requirements, and ongoing staffing needs, which have all been exacerbated by the pandemic, faculty are already overburdened in their attempts to provide quality education to existing students. Increasing the burden on the faculty without adequate changes to infrastructure (which would require alumni, foundation, and other support) will result in a failure to meet non-traditional student participant needs, as well as potentially erode the quality of Cornell's existing full-time educational programs.

The proposal calls for 'courses to be developed by Cornell tenure-track and teaching/RTE faculty who would also be the instructors of record and join the class synchronously once or twice a week', but it is difficult to see where such additional capacity exists among faculty in those departments that are most likely to be providing the courses sought by students in this program.  And, it is unclear whether the university would add faculty (as well as procure space and other associated infrastructure) in order to

meet these new obligations. Even if additional faculty are hired to meet this additional teaching demand, it seems essential that departments insure academic quality of both instructors and course content. Experience with the Summer Program within the School of Continuing Education, as well as with eCornell, has demonstrated that while departments may be told that they are given a say in program development, if alignment between program needs and department capacity does not exist, departments will be circumnavigated through temporary employment contracts to secure external content delivery options beyond existing faculty resources in order to meet deadlines closely tied to financial goals. This may be acceptable for certificate and one-off summer courses, but CAPP is concerned that it has the potential to devalue the Cornell brand if associated with a bachelor's degree program.

**Methods of Instruction**: Cornell faculty have used technologies during the pandemic to deliver content virtually to students when needed. That "success" should not be confused with the overall effectiveness of virtual teaching versus live instruction. Despite the fact that instruction continued during the pandemic, both students and instructors recognize the limitations of online learning. There is clear preference is for live instruction. While virtual teaching technologies suggest a mechanism by which Cornell could provide access for non-traditional students, it does not mean that non-traditional students' needs are met effectively by using those technologies or that instructors will be eager to engage in additional virtual instruction (as the report implies). While the proposal notes that courses should be modularized, departments are the appropriate unit to determine when smaller modules are an effective delivery mechanism, as well as whether there are implications for both the full-time and the proposed part-time programs, in terms of quality of education.

**Scaling**: Cornell's success in teaching one population does not imply that Cornell faculty can teach any population, regardless of what our peers may be doing/good at. The vision of the program is laudable, but to meet the goals of serving such a diverse non-traditional market requires considerable innovation, financial investment, and administrative restructuring. Given Cornell's lack of experience institutionally, CAPP recommends that any part-time program start in a more simplified form, with expansion contemplated only after gaining experience. A pilot that offers a single degree with a limited curriculum could establish a strong operational base, require fewer courses to develop up-front, and provide the time needed to attract faculty who can design/deliver appropriate content in an effective way. This evolutionary approach also would help the program succeed in its declared mission without increasing the burden on existing programs.

**Accessibility:** The report identifies key non-traditional students who could be served by the new program, including domestic and international working adults, active military personnel, Native Americans and indigenous communities, farmworkers, and incarcerated individuals. CAPP has concerns that the proposal is overly optimistic with regard to the complexity involved in effectively reaching and serving those populations. For example, it is well documented that internet access – let alone high-speed internet access – is not available widely in the area in which farmworkers live and work, including in New York State. Similarly, when the Ithaca City School District had to go online at the height of the first pandemic wave, many of their students (particularly the rural ones) lacked the devices needed to attend online classes and/or did not have reliable (if any) internet access. The district ended up having to invest to make sure that students appropriate computing hardware, as well as internet connections. In short, they had to create the infrastructure necessary to make education accessible to all students. Cornell would be facing comparable infrastructure issues in launching and growing a program which targets students who face similar circumstances who would be participating mostly or entirely online.