

EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

(Excerpt from Cornell's Strategic Plan)

Introduction

Public engagement refers to the proactive involvement of faculty, students, and staff designed to have an impact on the world outside the university, from local to global communities. It subsumes the full panoply of ways that Cornell's faculty, staff, and students make meaningful contributions to local, societal, and global issues (e.g., problems of environmental sustainability, health, and poverty), from participating in public discourse or the performing arts to applied research and formal extension programs. Conceiving of the university's outreach mission as "public engagement" is an important shift because it recasts that mission in broader and more inclusive terms.¹⁴

Objectives and Actions

Objective 1: Make public engagement a distinctive feature of education at Cornell.

Rationale: Cornell has a unique capacity to interweave public engagement with its educational and research programs for students, given its status and history as a private university with a land grant mission. An integration of fundamental science with application of that knowledge and its use for the public good should be a distinguishing feature of Cornell programs.

Actions:

1. Explore and assess whether or how engaging the world can become a more integral component of educational programs across campus.
2. Strengthen the participation and leadership of faculty in public engagement programs available to students.
3. Find new ways to work with Cornell alumni to expand the opportunities of students to engage the world (e.g., through internships, having alumni speak in classes, etc.).
4. Ensure that it is easy and efficient for students to become aware of and access information about public engagement opportunities (e.g., service learning, internships) that serve their educational goals.
5. Develop better institutional mechanisms for coordinating off-campus, non-classroom teaching and field-based or service learning opportunities for faculty and students.
6. Evaluate the organizational structures through which Cornell makes available internships, educational work opportunities, and other off-campus learning to determine how they can be improved.

Objective 2: Construct a unified concept and vision for the university's public engagement mission.

Rationale: The educational and research activities of the university's outreach efforts are highly fragmented. For example, public engagement includes formal extension programs; translational

research; clinical programs; technology transfer; education programs such as service learning; international engagements; and faculty involvement in public policy or as public intellectuals. This plan calls for greater connectivity among many of these disparate programs and activities, without introducing new central administrative structures or constraining academic entrepreneurialism. The administration of public engagement should be as lean as possible in order to enable a "bottom-up" entrepreneurial spirit to blossom.

Actions:

1. Embrace a broad and inclusive definition of the land grant mission of the university that is directed at local, state, national, and global communities.
2. Recognize and highlight the public engagement of faculty across endowed, contract, and medical colleges.
3. Develop university-wide mechanisms to promote interconnections across forms or types of public engagement (e.g., extension, technology transfer, translational research, clinical programs, international programs, and service learning) without introducing new centralized structures.
4. Develop an integrated and more user-friendly web portal for delivery of public engagement programs and activities, including extension.
5. Make better use of electronic and other media to foster greater public recognition and appreciation of Cornell's public engagement accomplishments.
6. Engage stakeholder groups and appropriate partner agencies in assessing and planning for the future of publicly supported extension activities.

Objective 3: Develop rigorous, systematic evaluations of all outreach and extension programs.

Rationale: Given objectives 1 and 2, there is need for an inventory and assessment of public engagement activities across campus. This should inform the development of a unified concept for Cornell's public engagement mission and help to identify new opportunities for public engagement to become a part of Cornell students' experience. An institution-wide approach to this assessment and common set of criteria would be important as would ongoing methods of gathering information on quality and impact.

Actions:

1. Develop explicit criteria for evaluating programs that emphasize quality, importance to the university, and impact on society.
2. Include an external-review component in regular evaluations of outreach programs.
3. Establish an institutional mechanism for collecting data and information on the quality and impact of extension and outreach programs and for conducting evaluations.

Objective 4: Strongly connect public engagement to on-campus research and educational strengths.

Rationale: The strengths of the outreach mission derive from the research and educational strengths of the university and the capacity of the institution and its faculty to build and sustain

enduring collaborations with stakeholders. Emphasizing the ties to on-campus research and education is an important way to establish boundaries for outreach, enhance its quality, and bring more focus and coherence to the university's public engagement programs. This should be a guiding principle and key criterion in the assessment proposed by Objective 3.

Actions:

1. Emphasize evidence-based or scientifically based extension and outreach efforts that meet the educational or informational needs of stakeholders (ranging from local communities to New York State to international arenas).
2. Make research an overarching theme for interconnecting community-based extension programs with on-campus research as well as with basic and applied science in the life sciences, agriculture, engineering, and medicine.
3. Invest in and build on public engagement programs with strong, mutually beneficial ties to research and educational programs on campus, particularly those that can be funded by external grants, and reduce focus and resources directed at programs without such ties or the potential for external grants.
4. Develop enhanced strategic partnerships between on-campus education programs and community-based extension and outreach.

Objective 5: Promote stronger collaborations and partnerships between the university and stakeholders that can make use of and strengthen Cornell's research (e.g., business, K-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, government).

Rationale: Partnerships with stakeholders are an important way for the university to identify policy-related problems and effectively bring the research expertise of faculty to bear on them. Strong outreach and extension programs tend to require productive two-way interactions between researchers and stakeholders.

Actions:

1. Establish a clearly enunciated philosophy and policy concerning intellectual property and technology transfer.
2. Improve university mechanisms for making technologies and knowledge that can be defined as public goods readily available to those who can benefit from them (e.g., business, industry, government).
3. Encourage the development (e.g., in licensing agreements) of ongoing relationships between Cornell researchers and those who use Cornell research innovations for commercial purposes.
4. Promote and support collaborations between faculty and local schools that contribute to the quality of K-12 education in New York State.
5. Strengthen collaborations with Cornell alumni in order to promote and enhance the public impact of faculty research on the world.
6. Explore new partnerships with state, regional, and national industries in order to promote economic development.

7. Build a stronger footprint or base for Cornell's education, research, and outreach programs in New York City.

Conclusion: Public Engagement Priorities

Public engagement subsumes a complex and wide array of disparate programs and activities, formal and informal, with varied ties to academic strengths on campus. In the absence of an assessment, it is difficult to make firm judgments about which types of programs are most important and which are least important for the future. The most immediate and fundamental issue, therefore, is expressed by Objective 3. More specifically: (1) *Implement a rigorous assessment of the quality and impact of all public engagement programs with the purpose of deciding where to invest and where to disinvest in the future.* This assessment should be framed by a broad, inclusive concept and definition of public engagement (see Objective 2) that gives particular weight to how well public engagement connects to the research and educational strengths of the university (see Objective 4).

The quality of public engagement is founded on Cornell's academic strengths, yet excellence in public engagement can facilitate and enhance research and education in important ways, i.e., there can be reciprocal effects on quality. With this in mind, the second priority is (2) *Make public engagement a more integral component of Cornell education and research across campus.* This may not apply equally to all programs, but it should be pursued where feasible and, again, with a broad, inclusive definition of public engagement. This should enhance the distinctiveness of education and research at Cornell by taking better advantage of the fact that Cornell interweaves a private, Ivy League research university with a substantial public service mission, stemming from its history as a land grant institution.