

Excellence in Education

An Interview with David J. Skorton, President, Cornell University

EDITORS' NOTE David Skorton became Cornell University's 12th president in July 2006. He holds faculty appointments as professor in the Departments of Medicine and Pediatrics at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City and in Biomedical Engineering at the College of Engineering on Cornell's Ithaca campus. He is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Medical Colleges. A Master of the American College of Cardiology, he has also been elected to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Before coming to Cornell, Skorton was president of the University of Iowa (UI) for three years and a faculty member for 26 years. He is Co-Founder and Co-Director of the UI Adolescent and Adult Congenital Heart Disease Clinic at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. Skorton earned his bachelor's degree in psychology in 1970 and an M.D. in 1974, both from Northwestern University. He completed his medical residency and fellowship in cardiology at the University of California, Los Angeles.



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INSTITUTION BRIEF Founded in 1865, Cornell University (www.cornell.edu) is a private, Ivy League university with a formal public mission. The university fosters expertise in practical as well as theoretical knowledge and focuses on creating and disseminating knowledge with a public purpose – a legacy of its status as New York's land-grant university, now broadened to the concept of "land grant university to the world." Cornell has a longstanding focus on human health and disease through Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City and animal health through College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca.

Cornell is a leader in research. How critical is this work to its culture?

Cornell has consistently ranked in the top 10 among national research universities in funding from the National Science Foundation. In addition, Cornell research has led to the formation of more than 20 companies in the past two years.

Cornell's faculty are world leaders in their respective fields or on their way to becoming such leaders. Their research not only contributes to the advancement of knowledge across a broad range

of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas, but adds an important dimension to teaching and learning on campus.

In addition, Cornell's research contributes to the economic vitality of the upstate region, New York City, and the nation through patents and licensing of research discoveries and the formation of companies that build on our research. We can and must do more to encourage higher education-industry-government partnerships, however, and I am pleased to be working toward that end as regional Co-Chair of the Southern Tier

Regional Economic Development Council, one of 10 such councils Governor Cuomo launched July 27 to drive local economic development and improve the business climate statewide.

Cornell is very focused on community outreach. Would you describe these efforts?

As the land-grant university, Cornell has a mandate to share knowledge in order to improve the lives of the people of New York State. Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), which is celebrating its centennial this year, is perhaps the best known of Cornell's outreach efforts with offices throughout New York State and in New York City and with funding from state, federal, county, and local sources. CCE programs focus on agriculture and food systems, nutrition and healthy families, environmental and natural resources, community and economic vitality, youth development through 4-H, emergency preparedness, gardening, sustainability, energy, and climate change. Our motto for the CCE centennial is "One Great Idea" – its premise is "everyday people, working together, using science and collective experience in their lives to solve the problems that lie ahead."

We're also very proud of the ever-increasing involvement of our students in the community, perhaps symbolized best by the selection last spring of Cornell's Student United Way Campaign as the "Campus Organization of the Year" by United Way Worldwide. Our Public Service Center connects students, faculty, and alumni with community organizations and fosters "service learning."

Cornell has a major involvement and investment in New York City. What is the range of your work there?

Cornell has a large and growing presence in the New York City area with offices throughout the city and programs ranging from medicine to architecture and the fine arts, financial engineering, and industrial and labor relations, among others. We

sponsor the Food and Finance High School on the West Side and offer various other programs involving Cornell students and faculty. More than 50,000 Cornell alumni currently live and work in the New York metropolitan area.

Our world-class Weill Cornell Medical College, founded in 1898, is a major employer in the city, with nearly 5,000 staff members. The Medical College recently broke ground for a state-of-the-art research building, which will double our research space and which is the centerpiece of a \$1.3 billion "Discoveries that Make a Difference" fundraising campaign that will position us for even greater leadership in medicine and biomedical research.

We hope to take our involvement in New York City to a new level by answering Mayor Bloomberg's call to create a world-class applied science and engineering campus in the city. With our top-ranked programs in engineering, computer science, and interdisciplinary and applied research – and our long history of graduating successful entrepreneurs, many of whom already work in the tech sector in the city – we can help make the city a global hub of tech-sector business and innovation.

What are your key priorities for the future in order to ensure that Cornell maintains its strong leadership position?

Our top priority for the next few years is recruiting and retaining top-notch faculty. With nearly half our faculty over age 55, we are facing a large number of retirements and we have dedicated a special faculty renewal fund to hiring "rising stars" as opportunities occur, even in advance of an actual vacancy.

Another priority is student access – making a Cornell education possible for the most promising students, regardless of their economic background.

We also focus on globalization aiming to enhance Cornell's excellence in both international studies and international relations.

In other parts of the world, we operate our own programs (for example, Weill Cornell Medical College in Doha, Qatar), conduct joint degree programs (in hospitality management with Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and in food science and plant breeding with Tamil Nadu Agricultural University in India); and have dozens of agreements with foreign institutions on research collaboration, student exchange, and other matters.

Another key priority is public engagement – making meaningful contributions to local, societal, and global issues, such as environmental sustainability, alleviation of poverty, and health care. ●