

Cornell's Commitment to New York City

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

EDITORS' NOTE In July 2006, David Skorton became Cornell University's 12th president. 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. 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 & Sciences. He is also past chair of the Business-Higher Education Forum. During 2009, he chaired a gubernatorial Task Force on Diversifying the New York State Economy through Industry-Higher Education Partnerships and, at the request of Governor Andrew Cuomo, he currently co-chairs the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council. 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 a Co-Founder and was a 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.



David J. Skorton

INSTITUTION BRIEF Cornell University (www.cornell.edu) is a private, Ivy League university with a formal public mission. Founded in 1865, 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 its College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca.

What is the history of Cornell's commitment to New York City and how entrenched is it in the market?

We're the land grant university for the whole state – all 57 upstate counties and the five boroughs of New York City. The Cornell Cooperative Extension is active in the city and our medical college was established in New York City some

100 years ago; add to that our financial engineering program on Broad Street and our industrial and labor relations program on 34th street. Our undergraduate architecture program, which is number one in the United States, is taught in three places: Ithaca, New York; Rome, Italy; and in Chelsea on 17th Street in Manhattan. Our latest footprint is at 15th and 8th; we are in the former Port Authority building that Google acquired a few years ago. Google very generously donated space in that building for us to use until our Cornell

NYC Tech campus is built out on Roosevelt Island. We recently put out our announcement opening applications for the first matriculants in January 2013.

What is your vision for the new applied sciences and engineering campus being developed on Roosevelt Island in New York City?

Inherent in Cornell's DNA is that we're here to serve all the people in the state, including New York City, and we have been oriented toward public engagement and outreach since the beginning of the university's history nearly 150 years ago.

Mayor Bloomberg's vision focuses on the need to increase the talent pool in the tech disciplines. We're among the top universities in the world in those disciplines – computer science, electrical and computer engineering, nanotechnology, materials science, and information science – so that was a good fit.

Personally, it was the realization of a dream for me to bring together three sectors that will have to put their shoulders to the wheel to grow the economy – government, business, and higher education.

In terms of vision, this is a graduate-only campus for students pursuing master's degrees and doctorates, and the approach is aimed at using the cutting-edge world-class academics of Cornell University and the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology and combining that with a serious focus on entrepreneurship and turning good ideas into jobs.

This is a unique partnership among Technion, a top international university; Cornell University; and the City of New York to set up a campus specifically oriented for increasing the talent pool and diversifying the economy of New York City.

We're going to grant degrees for the campus starting in 2013. And the goal is to eventually have about 2,000 full-time students and 250 to 300 faculty, and each one of those graduate students is going to have an academic advisor



Cornell Organizational Behavior Professor Samuel Bacharach walking with students in New York City

from day one as well as an industry mentor so he or she will not only receive the highest quality graduate education in the tech disciplines but will also be rubbing shoulders with the forward-thinking business community in New York City.

What more can be done to encourage business, government, and higher education to collaborate?

The partnership between industry and higher education is long-standing around the country. But in New York, including New York City, we could be doing even better.

In 2009, I chaired a task force for then New York Governor Patterson on diversifying the New York State economy through industry/higher education partnerships. We did not measure up well to other states.

We have a lot of terrific research going on in New York colleges and universities, but we have not been as successful as we could at moving that research into jobs and a sustainable growth in the economy.

Governor Cuomo has established economic development regions around the state – of which New York City is one – and in general, he has a business leader and a higher education leader co-chair those councils with the lieutenant governor. This is a broad foundation for the effort.

What efforts have you undertaken to make Cornell more accessible to a broader group?

We have to do a better job in higher education of attenuating the rate of rise of tuition. In order to do that, the state has to support higher education at state schools to an appropriate degree.

Cornell is unique because, although we are a private university with a variety of revenue streams, we also get generous support from the state of New York as a land grant. When the recession first hit, we reached out for help in cutting down on the cost of running the university.

We have done a lot to reduce the cost of administering Cornell University and we're redistributing the money to the academic aspect of the university. We have, for example, reduced the non-faculty employees by 10 percent through a retirement incentive program, attrition, and layoffs.

Additionally, we decided to significantly increase the amount of financial aid we were offering. Even though the tuition at Cornell since 2008 has gone up an average of 4.6 percent annually, during the same period, financial aid for students went up 20 percent annually. ●