Appendix 14: Messaging Ideas to Minimize Harm While Reopening Cornell University During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Summary

Cornell students, faculty, and staff will need to hear and see consistent and repeated messages that raise awareness of our campus and the broader Tompkins County community’s limited readiness to handle an outbreak (a moderate and factual fear appeal), motivates them to engage in behaviors to prevent such an outbreak, and teaches the behavioral skills to enact those behaviors in effective ways.

These messages will need to come from/be endorsed by a variety of sources—central administration, faculty, influential students (e.g., leaders of Greek organizations, student body leadership, captains of popular sports teams, etc.) to convey community unity around these messages.

The messages in this outline are synergistic with the COVID-19 Behavioral Influence Strategies outlined by the Skorton Center for Health Initiatives (see Appendix 15).

Preliminary Message Outline

Cornell University has a long history of building and protecting strong communities during moments of crisis.

At a time when the United States was fighting over whether our national divisions were too strong for us to be one country, Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White founded a university where any person could find instruction in any study.

The university that they created and that we now claim as our own has made it through two world wars, another global pandemic (1918), a great depression (1929-1939), a great recession (2007-2009), the H1N1 disease outbreak (2009), and many other tragedies in between, and each time we learned important lessons that allowed us to emerge as a stronger community than we were before.

Our ability to succeed during these difficult moments has depended on one thing: our commitment to caring for each other. The only way for any person to find instruction in any study is for each of us to look out for, and help, each other—for each and every Cornellian to do our part to protect our larger community. That is what has allowed us to thrive in the past and what we need to survive right now during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

A hallmark of Cornell is that, as a world-class research institution, we have some of the best minds in epidemiology, public health, and infectious disease. Indeed, the leading national voice in the COVID-19 response, Dr. Anthony Fauci, is a Cornellian. Weill Cornell Medicine and the College of Veterinary Medicine are applying the best scientific tools available in viral modeling and are monitoring public health and working in concert with Cayuga Medical Center, Cornell Health, and the
Tompkins County Dept. of Public Health. Cornell’s approach is evidence-based and rooted in the latest medical and behavioral scientific developments.

As we all know by now, the coronavirus is a deadly disease that can spread rapidly between people who come into close contact with each other, even if those people don’t know it at the time because they are asymptomatic. All it takes is one person to set off a chain of infections that can easily infect the entire community. That is not something we can allow to happen. Because, frankly, we do not have the capacity to handle it if it did. There are over 20,000 students on our campus alone. 20,000 students on one of the three campuses that call Tompkins County home…but only 8 Intensive Care Unit beds in our local medical center.

Ethically, having so few ICU beds in a county with so many students means that the university has a strong duty to both our own community and Tompkins County to prevent an outbreak; otherwise, people will almost surely die, as they have around the globe. A local outbreak would be devastating for people of all ages. Although mass-media coverage of COVID-19 has focused on the elderly as the primary at-risk group, it is noteworthy that in Tompkins County the age group with the highest rate of infections to date has been 20-29-year olds. We all need to be vigilant. Practically, the need to prevent an outbreak means that the university must monitor cases assiduously, and in the event that an outbreak becomes too likely, take drastic pre-emptive action, including a strict shelter-in-place order or even sending everyone home again as occurred in March. No one wants this to happen.

This information is not meant to scare us but to underscore the gravity of the situation we are in. We are Cornell, and so we can get through this. But the only way that we will succeed is if every single Cornellian does our part. Every student. Every faculty member. Every staff member. We must all work together.