

April 15, 2020

Campus Health Executive Committee
Attn: Ryan Lombardi, Vice President for Student and Campus Life
311 Day Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853

Dear Dr. Lombardi:

In September 2018, President Pollack announced a comprehensive review of mental health at Cornell. We are honored to have participated in this effort and are pleased to submit our report for your consideration and action.

Mental health concerns have been emerging as a major issue for colleges and universities. And these trends will be more acute given the global pandemic and its impact on every facet of university life, and the stress and uncertainty that will continue into the next academic year and beyond. Surveys find more students reporting feelings of depression and anxiety that affect their participation in classes and campus life. More young people with prior histories of mental health treatment are matriculating. Despite increased staffing, university counseling centers have been overwhelmed by the rising demand for care.

On these dimensions, Cornell is similar to other universities. But there are differences. While Cornell has been a leader in developing innovative programs and recognizing that mental health concerns reflect broader issues including societal stresses; there is also a culture at Cornell that can inadvertently exacerbate these stresses, and require responses beyond treatment. The "Cornell Mental Health Framework," which guided this review, reflects this understanding that mental health is affected by academic concerns and stresses, as well as by social environments. Through the work of the Skorton Center for Health Initiatives in partnership with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Cornell has been a leader in designing solutions to improve student mental health, which required not just more professional staff but attention to wellbeing and support across the campus and beyond.

The Cornell mental health review has been appropriately broader in scope than most. The effort included an active on-campus Mental Health Review Committee (MHRC) made up of students, staff, and faculty. During the 2019-2020 year, the MHRC conducted dozens of listening sessions, solicited feedback across the campus, and facilitated planning sessions with a wide range of campus stakeholders. Hundreds of people across the Cornell community participated in this effort. However, unlike many other institutions, Cornell's review also included an External Review Team (ERT), on which we served. Our review was coordinated with the MHRC's work but was independent, and involved reviewing mental health care at Cornell Health in both the primary care and CAPS programs, as well as various campus wide mental health initiatives. The report we present here reflects our findings but also incorporates concerns and suggestions advanced by the MHRC.

This comprehensive review finds much to appreciate in Cornell's approach to mental health, and also numerous opportunities for improvement. We are also mindful of the context. Other activities and efforts on campus, including a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion and shaping campus climate are closely related to mental health; you will see that our recommendations complement these efforts. And as we note above, the global coronavirus pandemic has not only profoundly disrupted this academic year, but will affect how classes are conducted, how academic progress is measured, and, unfortunately, how university

funding is allocated. This crisis will require attending to mental health even more broadly and explicitly, and efforts to improve mental health at Cornell must consider these developments.

We highlight several issues uncovered by this review that will require particular attention. First, Cornell's unique commitment to "any person, any study" has led to a university that is exceptional and remarkably diverse but also highly decentralized. We believe an issue like mental health, which touches so many and is affected by every aspect of university life, requires consistent attention and a centralized effort across the university. Thus, our first recommendation is the appointment of a widely representative permanent committee on mental health to act as steward of this cause.

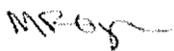
A second theme that emerged with particular salience is recognizing and responding to the ways in which academic policies and practices affect the undergraduate and graduate populations in distinct ways. Undergraduates identified aspects of the academic environment that negatively affect student mental health, and these require examination and oversight at an institutional level. The particular roles of and stresses for graduate students also require attention. Many Teaching Assistants are on the front line of attention to undergraduate student mental health, and need support for this work. Additionally, many graduate students face challenges given their roles, more limited opportunities to find community, and career stresses. The University has begun to examine these issues, and this should continue.

Third, we find there is great potential to better engage and support student organizations to support mental health of their members, and others. In particular, organizations that have exclusive, application-based membership have a distinctive obligation and responsibility to be both representative and welcoming when a culture of excess competition at Cornell is detrimental. As was noted by the Presidential Task Force on Campus Climate, transparent standards for these organizations are required.

A final theme recognizes the distinctive role of the University's leadership in launching this review and carrying the results forward. A personal issue like mental health must be championed at the highest levels of leadership in order for students, faculty, and staff to have the confidence to act. We have seen the impact of this leadership in the way that diverse stakeholders embraced the review, and are confident that this will continue.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve Cornell.

Sincerely,



Michael Hogan '69, PhD



Karen Singleton, PhD



Henry Chung '84, MD

cc: Co-Chairs, Mental Health Review Committee

Marla Love, Senior Associate Dean of Students, Office of the Dean of Students, Student and Campus Life

Miranda Swanson, Associate Dean for Student Services, College of Engineering