REPORT OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCE IDEAS PANELS COMMITTEE
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Social Science Ideas Panels Committee was charged with organizing faculty panels designed to identify areas for radical collaboration within and across the social sciences and between the social sciences and other disciplines at Cornell University. The committee recommends confronting inequality as a fruitful area for strategic investment in radical collaboration across Cornell University. Investment in basic and applied social science research on the pressing social issue of addressing economic, legal, political, and social inequality builds on Cornell’s historical commitments to social justice and its unique strengths across both disciplinary and multidisciplinary units. Confronting the challenges of inequality in its diverse forms also provides a venue for engagement in the public policy arena. There is strong potential for innovative collaborations between Cornell’s social sciences and its physical, natural, and health sciences as well.

An initial panel solicited broad input from Cornell University’s social science community. That was followed by three substantive panels that brought together Cornell social scientists conducting research on the social science dimensions of health, justice, and public policy, broadly defined. We observed a crosscutting and central theme in all of the panels: Many Cornell social scientists are deeply engaged in identifying, measuring, analyzing, and remedying inequality in these domains. Investment in research on confronting inequality through radical collaboration takes advantage of Cornell’s twin identities as an Ivy League university and Land Grant institution, and offers the promise of both scientific breakthroughs and public service. It is a thematic area of research that builds on past and current faculty and departmental strengths, and provides a locus of excellence for additional faculty recruitment and student training. It is consistent with Cornell’s Land Grant mission of outreach and engagement, and has the potential to attract external funding from public and private sources. It is also a topical area that builds bridges and a network of research and training across Cornell’s highly fragmented social science departments, centers and institutes, and support units.

This document provides a starting point for broad university faculty discussion about how best to build new strengths in research and training around methods for addressing the challenges of inequality. We recommend investments in tenure track hires, including cluster hires that build capacity and visibility in the university’s social science community and that reflect a shared vision. We propose new intra-campus faculty fellowships that support innovative cross-disciplinary research initiatives with potential for external funding. We also propose additional funding for post-graduate associates and graduate students, along with support for undergraduates participating in research on the topic of inequality, broadly conceived. The Committee recognizes that funding priorities and new initiatives should be consistent with the university’s major restructuring goals, including any nascent plans to consolidate existing social science centers, develop “super departments,” build a new School of Public Policy, or create new administrative and research linkages between the Ithaca and New York City campuses.
INTRODUCTION

In an 1868 letter to Cornell’s first president, Andrew Dickson White, founder Ezra Cornell famously penned the words that would become our university’s motto: “I would found an Institution where any person could find instruction in any study.”1 Appearing on the university seal and on every diploma, the words are emblematic of Cornell University’s mission and reflect its long-standing dedication to social justice. From the start, in contrast to some other educational institutions that catered exclusively to the wealthy or that limited their curriculum to religious training, Cornell University embraced a broader commitment to equal opportunity education in the liberal and applied arts. The animating vision of Cornell was one “of great public prosperity and universal fairness, envisioning America as a place where technology, wealth, and altruism could coalesce to benefit all.”2 Ezra Cornell emphatically supported the admission of women in 1867, just a year after the institution was founded, a highly unusual decision given that other elite institutions were creating separate schools for their women students at the time. Equally impressive were the convictions of Andrew Dickson White, who confirmed in 1874 that we would admit individuals of color, “even if all our 500 white students were to ask for dismissal on that account.”3 Cornell University’s historical endorsement of equal access to education is remarkable, as it followed the end of the Civil War and the emergence of the Jim Crow era.

Cornell University’s spirit of deep commitment to equality even in the face of some societal trends in the opposite direction continues to be palpable on our campuses to the present day. Investing in an initiative of radical collaboration of social science research around the issue of inequality reinforces the values voiced at Cornell’s founding, and further cements Cornell’s identity as an institution deeply committed to “any person” and “any study.” Cornell also has several other unique strengths that clearly distinguish it from our peer institutions, including its historical commitment to public engagement, the depth and excellence across several disciplinary and interdisciplinary departments and centers/institutes, its location in rural upstate New York, its proximity New York City, and its many social, economic, and political ties and opportunities for collaboration.

Our recommendations for a focus on confronting inequality in its varied dimensions also places Cornell in a position to make critical interventions in inequality scholarship and intervention. The broad topic of inequality stands at the core of social science inquiry in a variety of disciplines on themes ranging from poverty and social stratification, global and rural

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development, health disparities and global health, the biological bases of social behavior, human dimensions of climate change and environmental justice, empirical legal studies on issues of immigration, family and gender, and racial justice, and technological and social change (e.g., the internet, social media, and fake news). In other words, it provides opportunities for radical collaboration across the social sciences and, importantly, new avenues for engagement among the social, physical, natural, and health sciences.

OVERVIEW

CHARGE OF THE COMMITTEE AND APPROACH

The Social Science Ideas Panels Committee was formed as part of the Provost’s initiative to strengthen the social sciences at Cornell University. After both an internal report and an external report evaluating the social sciences at Cornell, the Provost formed a set of committees to take up different aspects of the reports’ recommendations about strengthening the social sciences. Other committees were formed to consider organizational and administrative changes that could enhance the social sciences. In contrast, our committee’s charge was focused on the substantive content of research; that is, on identifying promising research areas for radical collaboration for the social sciences.

To that end, our committee was charged with organizing a series of panels over the course of the academic year designed to identify possible areas for radical collaborations within the social sciences as well as radical collaborations that would connect the social sciences with other broad disciplines. Following the Provost’s guidance, and input from college deans and committee members, we formed panels with outstanding social scientists and other faculty at Cornell University who described their ideas for promising radical collaborations within and across disciplines. Panelists were also invited to comment on the most important global and national problems for which the social sciences might provide solutions and to estimate where the social sciences are headed over the next one to two decades.

We organized four panels over the course of the year. After an initial session inviting the broad social science community at Cornell for their input and suggestions for the committee’s work, we put together three substantive panels. With the impetus to focus on radical collaborations, our committee and the participants and attendees at the four panels developed many creative and exciting ideas for radical collaboration worth exploring. The Appendix lists the participants in the substantive forums.

Many participants expressed the strong view that in order to enhance the social sciences at Cornell University, it is critically important to strengthen funding of core social

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science departments as well as to generate radical collaboration projects that cross departments, colleges, and campuses. Indeed, a number of individuals voiced the view that investing in our social science departments would be even more significant in terms of the reputation of Cornell’s social sciences. National rankings in the disciplines are done at the departmental level. Scholarly publication in highly ranked disciplinary journals contributes significantly to a department’s reputation. Furthermore, junior scholars sometimes face difficult decisions about investing heavily in cross-disciplinary work when their tenure and promotion is often evaluated in terms of scholarly contributions to their home departments and disciplines.

The goals of this report are to summarize what we learned from our colleagues over the course of our work, and to identify opportunities, challenges, and areas for strategic investment in the social sciences that will promote faculty and programmatic excellence.

After much reflection, our committee’s recommendation is that the social science topic of “confronting inequality”—broadly conceived—constitutes an area of strategic strength and investment at Cornell University. It is a topic that is timely, that builds on Cornell’s past and current strengths across many departments and programs, and that is closely tied to important national and international policy issues.

Cornell University and the future of the social sciences

How might Cornell University best build upon its distinguished tradition of excellence in the social sciences? Our colleagues’ presentations and comments demonstrated that, in addition to a deep well of excellence in the foundational social sciences such as anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, Cornell social scientists have been founding scholars in multidisciplinary fields such as decision sciences (e.g., behavioral economics and psychology), development studies, health behaviors and health care utilization and administration (e.g., the Sloan program), human development and aging, demography, and communications, among others. At Cornell, research in agriculture, natural resources, and sustainability also have a significant and growing social science component. Cornell’s status as an elite research university in the Ivy League with traditional strengths in basic research and training in the core social sciences is complemented by far-reaching multidisciplinary departments and programs that make it one of the premier Land Grant Institutions in the nation. This is Cornell’s comparative advantage that should be heralded by university leadership, alumni, and donors, and embraced and championed by the faculty.

These dual strengths give Cornell untapped potential to foster multidisciplinary mixed methods research collaborations with far reaching domestic and global import. Traditional strengths in humanities and physical, natural, and health sciences at Cornell serve as complements that could further enhance our 21st century social science community. The hybrid structure of the university’s ambit combining a land grant institution with a liberal arts college position Cornell’s distinguished faculty in the social sciences to become founding scholars in emergent fields addressing urgent questions about the status of society, democracy, and the planet.
The Provost’s call for radical collaboration acknowledges the possibilities for new collaborations across the university on topics that call for multidisciplinary social scientific research. The pace of social change has accelerated with technological advances, economic globalization, and unprecedented threats to sustainability. Trends in climate change, environmental degradation, erosion of democratic institutions, transnational migration, and global conflict call for new kinds of research intervention. Technical fixes alone will not solve the human dimensions of social change. Accelerations in economic inequality, health disparities, and intergroup conflict can only be adequately understood through multidisciplinary inquiry and collaboration. For instance, the spread of HIV requires new medical treatments, but also requires nuanced understanding of human behavior and institutional realities, such as sexual practices, stigma and prejudice, access to information and treatment, and legal regimes governing sexual personhood.

The external review of the social sciences, conducted in Spring 2017, identified several challenges facing Cornell’s social science community. These included problems of organizational fragmentation and a comparatively modest record of external funding in the social sciences, when compared with peer institutions. These structural or organizational considerations are addressed in the University committee report that was released in 2018 and that is now being actively discussed by senior administrators and university faculty. Of course, organizational structure and new ideas about shifting substantive investment priorities must be properly aligned to produce desired results. Although our committee focused on substantive research topics for hiring and collaboration, participants in the faculty panels we organized repeatedly testified to the structural challenges they faced in launching, funding, or sustaining collaborative projects. These included the standards for tenure and promotion that privilege within-discipline over interdisciplinary research and that sometimes fail to support or to value engaged research conceived and executed with community partners. Many of our colleagues described how they encountered onerous administrative obstacles when they attempted to collaborate with colleagues across colleges.

The committee acknowledged the pressing need to elevate the external funding portfolio of the social sciences. A stable and sustainable funding environment is essential for building faculty and programmatic strengths across the social sciences. Collaborative multidisciplinary research should be encouraged with administrative support. An administrative and physical research infrastructure that supports this effort is vital to any success in hiring faculty and recruiting talented students. At a minimum, this requires some coordination among faculty across programs, departments, and colleges. It also requires a collective vision about hiring faculty in targeted substantive areas that enhance the visibility across the social sciences at Cornell.

\[\text{\footnotesize Report from the Committee on Organizational Structures in the Social Sciences, Feb. 28, 2018.}\]
Process used to develop committee recommendation for areas of radical collaboration

The committee met multiple times over the course of the year to discuss the charge and the best approach. We concluded that our first task should be to reach out to the broad social science community at Cornell for its input before organizing specific ideas panels. Hence, the first public event was a general faculty forum that provided an opportunity for faculty to engage with the committee, to identify key areas of possible university investment and collaboration, and to alert us to other issues that are critically important to the future of social sciences at Cornell (e.g., hiring, diversity, resources, research initiatives, training, etc.). During December 2017, this forum, “The Future of the Social Sciences at Cornell University: Investing in Innovation and Collaboration,” took place. Based on feedback from that forum and other conversations, the committee organized a series of three thematic faculty panels designed to identify areas of strength and potential radical collaboration in the social sciences at Cornell. With this broad faculty input, and more focused panel discussions, we aimed to identify promising areas that would, with additional resources and support, significantly enhance the quality, strength and prominence of the social sciences at Cornell University.

Thematic Faculty Forums

Health and the Social Sciences. The Cornell University has a cadre of faculty working at the interface between traditional social science disciplines and the health sciences. Health-related research, including research on health disparities, provides an unusually strong basis for radical collaboration, including opportunities for multidisciplinary, externally-funded “big science” with medical researchers at the Weill campus as well as critical initiatives in qualitative research. Perhaps more than ever before, the medical sciences have new appreciation of the social determinants of health and preventative medicine, which speaks to social science research focused on social determinants, health care access, health care utilization, and health behaviors including diet, smoking, exercise, stress, and other aspects of lifestyle and deleterious exposures. Cornell has unusually talented faculty and new programmatic strengths in global health (in the Division of Nutritional Science), in health economics (as part of Policy Analysis and Management), in Anthropology, Science and Technology Studies, and in demography and epidemiology. In addition, a number of psychologists (in Human Development) and sociologists (in PAM, Sociology, and Development Sociology) are pursuing work—both quantitative and qualitative—on mental health. This provides opportunities for new collaborations with Cornell’s biological sciences. Biosocial research on health outcomes has shown links to stress, as measured by cortisol and other hormones, to drug and alcohol abuse, and to cognitive function, measured using new imagining technology, such as fMRI. Cornell’s social scientists would benefit from additional investments that build on existing university strengths in the neurosciences and biological sciences. In addition, planetary health, an emerging transdisciplinary field devoted to understanding and measuring public health effects of environmental change, draws on Cornell faculty research strengths, is a cross-cutting theme of the new Cornell Master of Public Health program, and is a focus of the Atkinson Center.
Justice, Law, Inequality, Democracy, and Related Themes. Cornell University’s social science faculty possess major strengths in justice-related topics. Cornell’s internal social science report identified a cluster of justice-related issues as one of the clear strengths of Cornell’s social science faculty. Social scientists in diverse departments, colleges, and centers are undertaking theoretical and applied research on race, ethnicity, gender, immigration, and social and economic and spatial inequality (including rural and urban disparities). Cornell faculty conduct research to understand patterns, causes, and consequences of social and economic inequality, to assess the development of concepts of justice and fair treatment, and to explore environmental justice. Judgment and decision-making research by social science faculty across multiple departments and colleges analyzes judgments about justice and fairness. Faculty in a number of departments examine issues critical to democracy. Finally, Cornell University is a leader in empirical legal studies, which uses empirical research to understand the functioning and impact of law. Radical collaboration across departments and colleges around issues of justice and related issues has the potential to generate important cutting-edge research and raise the national and international profile of the social sciences at Cornell.

Policy, Planning, Translational Research, and Related Themes. As an elite Land Grant university, Cornell has embraced public engagement and state and community outreach as fundamental missions. Cornell is home to New York State’s Cooperative Extension Service, which extends basic research to its state-wide constituency, and to Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, which supports applied public policy research in service to the public, both within the state and across the United States. The public policy faculty—broadly conceived—provide a bridge between Cornell’s traditional academically-oriented departments and faculty and the public. Indeed, translational research is on the ascendency at the National Institutes of Health (i.e., Bench to Bedside). In this regard, Cornell’s social science faculty from City and Regional Planning, Policy Analysis and Management, Industrial and Labor Relations, Government, and the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research provide new possibilities for synergistic research and training—radical collaboration—across the various social science disciplines.

Public policy and engagement is not limited to interconnections among social science faculty and programs, but also involves programs outside the traditional social science disciplines. As an example, Cornell is known for its strengths in the environmental sciences, natural resources, and sustainability, which is reflected in the work of many Cornell departments as well as the Atkinson Center. Social scientists are actively involved in research on the behavioral and economic consequences of climate change (e.g., populations displaced by drought, or changes in the suitability or productivity of hybrid seed crops, such as coffee or grapes). Changes in the digital environment and social media also call for a better understanding of ethics, regulatory policy, and social and political impacts of new forms of communication and social influence (e.g., fake news and propaganda). For example, linkages between the Department of Communication and Computer and Information Sciences represent a real strength and opportunity in the social sciences at Cornell. Other ongoing research involves new collaborations between transportation engineering and the decision-making sciences, including psychology, marketing, and regulatory economics. Social scientists are also
well-suited to address questions about the adoption and diffusion of new technologies (e.g., driverless cars).

**PRINCIPLES FOR DECISION MAKING**

As we reviewed the contributions of our colleagues and reflected on what areas would most benefit from strategic investment, our committee followed these principles for decision making:

**Building on strengths.** There was substantial agreement that the university should build on existing areas of strength, focusing on specific areas that complement or extend areas of research in which Cornell’s social science faculty has substantive research strengths. The advantages seem most obvious for achieving success in faculty and student recruitment, for mentoring young scholars, and for building collaborative teams that can successfully compete for external funding at NSF, NIH, and elsewhere.

**Bold and forward-looking.** Committee members and panel participants were encouraged to think “outside the box,” to consider the future direction of disciplinary-based and multidisciplinary social sciences in the coming decades. University initiatives such as the radical collaboration in Data Science offer opportunities for Cornell social scientists to leverage strengths in cutting-edge research. How can investments now in the social sciences best position Cornell University faculty to undertake research and training in emerging areas that may require new theoretical or methodological approaches that can respond to societal or global problems or new basic concerns about the etiology or expression of human behavior or social organization and change?

**Emphasizing university and collective interests.** Throughout the process, faculty were encouraged to put collective interests before personal interests. What is best for Cornell University in the long run? This was often a challenging goal, especially at a time of stagnant or zero-sum budgets, concerns about impeding reorganization or consolidation, and some divergence in priorities between the private and public sides of the university.

**Strengthening core social science departments.** At Cornell, perhaps more than in other elite universities, there is a continuing tension between the core disciplinary departments and the social scientists on campus who are located in interdisciplinary colleges and departments. Because core disciplines are often the basis of departmental and university rankings, how can the visibility and scholarly impact of core disciplines and departments be elevated at the University?

**Building bridges between public and private sides.** Relatedly, how can strategic investments build on disciplinary strengths in core departments but also embrace or build new linkages to the applied and multidisciplinary strengths of a growing Cornell social science faculty outside the College of Arts & Sciences? Areas of strategic investments should appeal
broadly to both basic and applied research, and build new synergies that promote greater visibility and impact.

Building bridges between US and global interests. The geographical or cultural reach of specific strategic initiatives or investments can vary from the local to the global. What kinds of investments can make a difference at many different scales of geography and that connect or bridge faculty research and training focused on both domestic and global issues?

Methodological diversity: Quantitative approaches (e.g., big data, AI and machine learning, computational social science) and interpretive approaches (e.g., qualitative approaches, mixed-methods, or ethnography). Committee members and the panel participants reflected a range of different methodological approaches, with some embracing more quantitative and others more qualitative/interpretive approaches. We recognize the value of diverse methodological approaches to studying social phenomena. Anticipating the future is difficult, especially if new questions and problems require new technologies or unconventional approaches.

Metrics: Academic returns on investments. How should we measure the impact of investments in the social sciences? The committee recognizes that any short- or long-term “returns on investment” can be measured in many different ways that appeal differently to social science faculty across the university. These returns can be measured in scholarly output and impact and in external funding, but also by other metrics that sometimes go unappreciated such as breakthroughs in teaching methods and effective and impactful public engagement.

Identifying areas likely to attract faculty and external funding sources. Success in external grant writing both reflects and reinforces professional visibility. It creates important multiplier effects that are revealed in innovative research, in attracting students, and in benefits to departmental budgets through the allocation of indirect costs. Committee members are mindful that some research topics for strategic investment are better suited for external funding than others.

Privileging the interests of early-career scholars. The university benefits from its many established “stars” in the social sciences. The committee was also sensitive to areas that serve early- and mid-career faculty who have a long-term stake in the future of the social sciences at Cornell. What kinds of initiatives or investments make recruitment and retention easier, and that provide upward mobility for faculty in their prime? This is important to Cornell’s future.

Commitment to diversity. Cornell University’s student body is a diverse one, including undergraduate and graduate students from underrepresented and other minorities in the US and from multiple countries around the world. We considered Cornell’s strong commitment to diversity as we evaluated promising areas for research.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Our committee recommends that the issue of “confronting inequality” serve as an area of strategic strength and investment in the social sciences at Cornell University.

Our focus on inequality came directly out of the faculty forums we hosted on Health and the Social Sciences; Justice, Law, Inequality, Democracy and Related Themes; and Policy, Planning, Translational Research and Related Themes. In each forum, scholars discussed the importance of testing existing and creating new theories that help us understand the nature of inequality, and the factors that have ensured its durability, despite earlier predictions about the corrective forces of the market. This emerged across a number of topic areas, such as health disparities, uneven educational outcomes, inequities in criminal sentencing, housing precarity, workers’ rights, immigration, and political disenfranchisement.

Questions of inequality are central to the work of core disciplines in the social sciences and interdisciplinary approaches, which seek to understand how these outcomes vary across key population characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, disability status, and stages across the life course. Some of this work is focused on identifying key trends through quantitative methodologies, and here there is a potential for coordination in hiring, research and outreach with the Data Science initiative. There is also a need for qualitative work that helps identify the mechanisms that create and sustain inequality across a range of domains. As such, a comprehensive investment in inequality research must focus on individual, meso-level, and macro-forces. This requires an interrogation of the structures that create and sustain inequality, but also the opportunities for individual and collective agency.

While not all Cornell faculty are engaged in applied or interdisciplinary work, there was a consensus that translational work that informs public policy is important to strengthening the tradition and fulfilling the mandate of our land grant mission. The panel discussions made clear that, with its strength in the social sciences, Cornell is well poised to address these topics in new and exciting ways. In New York City, Cornell Weill and Cornell Tech campuses can be sites for important partnerships. In upstate New York, our extension presence, the Prison Education Program, and the Farmworker Program have created valuable connections with rural and underserved communities. Indeed, our presence in a small town makes us ideally located to better understand the rural dynamics of inequality. At the same time, our many international research and education activities can facilitate understanding global trends in inequality between and within countries beyond the U.S.

Finally, Cornell would be able to build on already existing and very successful efforts to examine different elements of inequality by a number of centers. The Center for the Study of Inequality (CSI) connects faculty and students (at Cornell and elsewhere) who conduct research

7 http://socialsciences.cornell.edu/idea-panels/.
on social inequality, administers the inequality studies minor, and provides space and funding related to supporting Cornell’s social inequality research. The Cornell Population Center (CPC) is the intellectual hub for demographic research and training in poverty and inequality and linkages to health behaviors and disparities, immigration and racial inequality, and the well-being of families and children. The Cornell Center for Health Equity (CCHEq) brings together research experts at Weill Cornell Medicine and at Cornell University’s Ithaca campus to collaborate on work designed to attain health equity. CCHEq also includes members of the public in its research initiatives around health concerns. The Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research (BCTR) is also an important part of the inequality studies picture at Cornell, as its focus is expanding, strengthening, and speeding the connections between research, policy, and practice to enhance human development and well-being. The Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) is also an important actor in the work of translation/outreach as well as ameliorating the spatial disparities promoting local and regional economic development in New York State and the nation. Cornell University is also privileged to have the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, which has the world’s largest archive of survey data, including survey data on inequality topics.

We are in a fortunate position to build on the exciting and important work on inequality already being done in these centers. Our proposal is to expand considerably Cornell’s institutional commitment to confronting inequality beyond the capacities of any one unit or initiative. Allocation of resources may very well involve these and other specific units, but we envision a broader initiative, which will include resources dedicated to confronting a wide range of inequalities at the national and global levels. We also envision a strong commitment to both basic and applied research on the best approaches to confronting inequality.

The critical importance of new research approaches to confronting inequality

Inequality is a multidimensional concept that is expressed in myriad forms, and our recommendations envision addressing these multiple aspects of inequality. A commonplace understanding is that inequality reflects unequal access to society’s economic rewards—to income, earnings, and wealth. To be sure, this focus is important at a time of rapidly changing income inequality in the United States and other advanced industrial societies, as we explain further below. Understanding the myriad causes and policy solutions to poverty and economic inequality has been a major preoccupation of social scientists at Cornell.\(^8\) As a Land Grant Institution, Cornell University and its social scientists are motivated to address such social issues and to find equitable and sustainable solutions that contribute to the public good.

But economic inequality also has consequences that are reflected in many other kinds of disparate experiences and outcomes. The National Institute of Health, for example, has invested heavily in better understanding the etiology of persistent health disparities—unequal access to health care among historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities and other underserved populations. Health outcomes have large social and behavioral components. Inequality is also reflected in institutional access to social justice—in access to political power (e.g., basic democratic institutions and access to the vote), in policing practices (e.g., racial profiling), sentencing and incarceration, and in everyday biases that can reinforce social hierarchy and injustice. The study of inequality also encompasses how inequalities are addressed in politics and public policy, in tax policy and public investments, and in social welfare and legal systems. We envision radical collaboration on these multiple dimensions of inequality.

Inequality is a complex and perennial social problem. Despite persistent scientific research efforts and policy initiatives aimed at various forms of inequality — such as income inequality and race-based disparities in educational attainment — they persist, and in some cases continue to worsen. For example, the top 1% of income earners in the United States claimed 11% of the national income in 1980, and their share nearly doubled to 20% by 2016.9

Furthermore, as old forms of inequality continue, new forms — like the “digital divide” — emerge and engender uncharted dimensions of social disadvantage. For example, according to recent survey data, 97% of U.S. adults who earn $100,000 or more per year own a desktop or laptop computer, while only 56% of those who earn less than $30,000 per year do.10

These social and economic processes call for the vigorous attention of the entire social-scientific community — with the goal of identifying the causes of and potential solutions to both old and new forms of inequality. This will require the application of cutting-edge research methods in an institutional environment that encourages and supports a sustained collective response.

Recommendations for specific lines of inquiry

Considering the existing strengths of Cornell’s social science faculty and the potential for breakthroughs as a result of radical collaboration, we suggest a focus on four lines of research collaboration.

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**Health disparities.** Significant scientific and technical advances in biomedicine over the last several decades have not mitigated health disparities across and within populations in the US or globally. This uneven distribution of disease, morbidity, and mortality as well as unequal access to nutrition, potable water, and safe housing among other conditions underlying the possibilities of human biological thriving opens up many avenues for important research within the broad field of inequality studies. For instance, racial and ethnic minority groups in the US experience twice the risk of death from heart disease than their white counterparts.  

Within the global context of growing income disparities between the rich and the poor, health disparities are currently driven by factors such as discrimination and violence, the rapid emergence of infectious diseases, precarious employment, environmental degradation, and lack of access to health care facilities, treatment, and insurance. Research in the social determinants of health, defined by the World Health Organization as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life . . . including economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems,” provides the basis for innovations in policy and implementation towards the possibilities of greater human thriving around the world. A major determinant of health disparities is low health literacy. Yet comprehensive data even on US health literacy are dated. The potential for radical collaborations among faculty across the university as well as for research funding in remedying health disparities is substantial.

**Economic disparities.** Martin Ford, in his book *Rise of the Robots*, argues that smart machines will change how we live and how we produce, and that humans will be replaced in a variety of occupations including not just factory work and simple tasks, but increasingly white collar jobs too. If this claim is true, the increase in productivity would be great, but it may lead

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13 The knowledge gaps about which behaviors lead to poor health outcomes are breathtaking, and are present in both the US and elsewhere around the world. Magnani, Jared W. Health Literacy and Cardiovascular Disease. *Circulation* July 10, 2018. Vol. 138. Issue 2. [http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/early/2018/06/01/CIR.0000000000000579.short?rss=1](http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/early/2018/06/01/CIR.0000000000000579.short?rss=1).


to massive inequality as many jobs disappear and we become even more of a “winner take all” society. This is a common view in the popular press. However, there are economists such as Robert Gordon, who argues in *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* that growth, which is already slow and has been slow for a remarkably long time, will be hampered by rising income and wealth inequality and by our aging population.\(^{16}\) In the 1950s, the prevailing view was that economic inequality would be self-correcting as standards of living generally improved within and between countries. However, Gordon raises the possibility that the standard of living will decline across generations in the near future for the first time in American history. Whatever the mechanism, increasing economic inequality is a fact and its implications for society are deeply troubling.

Statistical analyses of poverty and inequality rates offer important evidence. Despite the fact that worldwide poverty rates have been declining for some time,\(^ {17}\) economic inequality has been growing substantially.\(^ {18}\) Research is needed into the causes of rising economic inequality, its consequences, and how to design policies to mitigate it. This research will require radical collaboration between social scientists, including economists and sociologists, and computer and information scientists. If Cornell constructs the Center for Engaged Data Science proposed by the Data Science Task Force, it would serve as a natural locus for this collaboration.

*Justice disparities.* One of the most robust findings across the behavioral sciences is that humans (and even some animals) appear to have a basic sense of fairness. From an early age we are capable of recognizing what is fair, and we are motivated to punish those who act unfairly, a motivation often referred to as “inequity aversion.” These basic intuitions are thought to be at the heart of our more complex notions regarding justice, inequality, blame, and punishment. Yet for all the motivation to avoid unfairness, humans seem to have an equally strong tendency to divide the world into groups, drawing sharp boundaries between those who belong to our in-group (one of “us”) and those who do not (one of “them”). A large body of research has shown that this tendency often leads to unjust treatment of others, and can lead to the justification of inequality, hostility, and aggression.

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\(^{18}\) A Census Bureau graph ([https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2015/demo/real-hh-inc.pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2015/demo/real-hh-inc.pdf)) shows real household income in the U.S. at various percentiles from 1967 to 2014. The striking fact is the differential growth rates of lower and higher income groups. The income at the 10th percentile and at the median increased by 22% and 21%, respectively, while the income at the 95th and 90th percentiles increased by 75% and 69%, respectively. See also NBER working paper, "The Fall of the Labor Share and the Rise of Superstar Firms," showing the dramatic decline in the share going to labor in the U.S. from 1982 to 2012.
For many behavioral scientists, understanding how these and other basic psychological and social mechanisms give rise to injustice and inequality at the individual and societal level is seen as central to the task of changing and improving the status quo. Accordingly, researchers across many disciplines and departments at Cornell are actively investigating questions such as how humans think about the concepts of justice and fairness, what leads to disagreement about matters of inequality, and how these can, in turn, influence behavior. Among these are researchers looking at the developmental, neural, and social psychological mechanisms that influence how people think about justice and fairness with the belief that their research has implications for questions such as how to raise one’s children to treat others equally, how to develop the most effective social policies to address inequality and injustice, and how to persuade others to endorse such policies. There is, we believe, tremendous potential to bring these researchers together in order to make Cornell a visible leader in research on the psychology of justice and equality.

In turn, this foundational work on social beliefs can help us understand and begin to ameliorate the dogged persistence of social, legal, and political inequality documented by Cornell scholars in decision making, behavioral economics, political science, and law. Cornell social scientists and legal scholars could fruitfully collaborate around issues of inequality in the justice system, such as divergent experiences at trial, disparities in sentencing, mass incarceration, and uneven application of the death penalty. They could build on work already underway as part of the joint Law, Psychology, and Human Development Program, including the role of mistaken eyewitnesses in wrongful convictions, biases against those with intellectual disability, and ways to strengthen judge and jury decision making.

Technology and inequality. The interaction between technology (both information- and otherwise) and inequality is complex, with a number of our panelists stressing the need for informed interaction between experts across technical, social science, and law and policy domains in order for us to make progress towards both improved systems and greater equality. Technology can help us investigate and uncover inequality. One panelist identified the Cornell Mobile Research Lab as an example of technology infrastructure that is needed for researchers to "get out of the office" and get to where inequalities are greatest.

Technology untethered to a consideration of social impact can also create or contribute to inequality. For an example at the scale of individuals, standard computer-security advice can worsen the situation for people in domestic-abuse situations: blocking an abuser's digital access to a victim's information raises the possibility that the abuser will escalate the situation. On a larger scale, many social scientists have debated and researched what constitutes fair and equitable treatment. Yet some of those working on the technical design of automated decision-making tools, such as determining the level at which bond is set for someone charged with a crime, have been reproducing questions and debates around fairness that have already been hashed out. Collaboration between technology developers and social scientists would clearly be valuable.
Recommended strategies for investment

Forum participants offered many suggestions for enhancing social science scholarship at Cornell University. We recognize the critical value of investing in core social science departments, as emphasized by many social scientists who participated in our panels. Given our mandate to focus on radical collaboration, we drew on participants’ ideas and our own to generate a set of strategies to promote radical collaboration around confronting inequality.

Our committee considered a range of recommendations about how to launch an effective collaborative initiative around research on inequality. Collaborations in the social sciences, if they are to be truly radical, require deep rooting and immersion into the perspectives and cultures of other fields. Too often, collaborations done in joint lectures or collaborative research proposals take the form of ad-hoc and short-term ventures involving the joining together and juxtaposition of complementary skills. We see value in the kind of transformative cross-pollination that generates truly new perspectives and rounded scholarship to boost the quality of social science instruction and research at Cornell.

Some of the structural constraints to radical collaborations are found in the organization of academic lives around departments and disciplines and the resulting incentive systems. Therefore, as we considered the challenges to mounting radical collaboration around an inequality initiative, we agreed that to succeed, it would be necessary to modify some of the existing incentive structures for faculty and for departments. We also concluded that deeper engagement across disciplines and departments would foster more effective collaboration.

To accomplish these goals, we identify specific investments that in our view would promote significant collaboration around research on inequality.

First and foremost, we recommend investing in new tenure-track lines for faculty whose work addresses these core themes of inequality and who show promise for advancing radical collaboration across campus. The goal would be to build a collective vision across the social sciences—to identify and build on shared research interests and create new synergies across departments and programs. These appointments could be at any level, but high-profile associate or full professor hires (while more expensive) would especially help elevate the profile of inequality studies, and assist in long-term institution building. We anticipate that senior scholars hired under this initiative would take leadership roles in generating university-wide collaboration efforts and in seeking external funding. New tenure track hiring could be done through individual departments, strengthening core social science units. Alternatively, or in addition, the university could consider cluster hires across units and departments. There is one such hiring initiative currently underway organized by the Center for the Study of Inequality and the departments of Economics, Government, and Sociology.¹⁹

¹⁹ http://inequality.cornell.edu/people/csi-faculty-search/.
For current Cornell University faculty, we suggest introducing a **Provost’s Faculty Fellowship for Social Science Research on Inequality.** We recommend creating this competitive internal fellowship for faculty engaged in radical collaboration research on confronting inequality. A prestigious fellowship award by the Provost would address some of the incentive issues facing faculty members and would reflect positively on their home departments. Such fellowships might follow existing models such as the Institute for the Social Sciences faculty fellowship, which provides course relief and a research funding package. A report to the Cornell social science community about research progress made during the fellowship would allow fellowship recipients to share their work with our community.

We also propose a novel variation of the provost’s fellowship for existing Cornell faculty. Cornell University could lower barriers to collaboration through a **Provost’s program of internal “sabbaticals” or Cornell “visiting professorships” related to social science research on inequality.** This program would involve a semester or year-long appointment in a relevant Cornell department of the faculty member’s choice. Thus, a medical anthropologist could be posted in the medical school, or a Law School professor could spend a sabbatical semester in the Psychology Department. Indeed, the appointment need not be in an obviously cognate field. A demographer seeking to redirect his or her research to study global epidemiological transitions may benefit from spending a sabbatical in a department of nutrition, exercise science, or genetics, for instance.

The benefits to the participant would include: 1) enhanced competitiveness in external grants, as the major social problems targeted for funding are often multidimensional; 2) infusion of new insights into one’s own discipline, based on theories and methods from other fields; and 3) improved connection with our diverse undergraduate student body. There are spillover benefits for home and host departments as well.

The internal sabbaticals could be designed in a number of different ways. One approach might include offering the visiting professor grantee a semester at full pay with no teaching obligations in the home department. Instead, the grantee would be expected to work as an integral member of the host department, meeting with individual faculty and attending key functions, seminars and meetings. Depending on the goals of the visit, the visitor might offer to teach or to co-teach a course in the host department. In the end, the faculty member would produce a report, to be shared with the social science community, detailing the new bridges they see between the two fields. We would expect that home departments who share their faculty with other units would also receive funds to enable them to replace the teaching contributions that were shifted to another department as a result of the internal sabbatical.

As important as it is to foster radical collaboration on inequality research for new and current social science faculty, it is also crucial to help develop the next generation of researchers. Our final set of initiatives has this aim.

We recommend a **Cornell University Postdoctoral Fellowship in Social Science Research on Confronting Inequality.** The inaugural Cornell Presidential Postdoctoral Fellowship
initiative in 2017-2018 generated nearly 500 applications across engineering, the physical and biological sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. This is a small and highly competitive program. The finalists included only a small number of social scientists. A postdoctoral program devoted to emerging social science scholars working on thematic issues in inequality would have multiple benefits. In addition to promoting the professional growth of the postdoctoral fellow, a targeted postdoctoral fellowship program would elevate the academic profile of the social sciences at Cornell, build on the research productivity of current faculty, and create new research synergies that cultivate a new generation of inequality scholars with the Cornell imprimatur.

**Graduate fellowships for Cornell graduate students** conducting research on inequality, and **summer research scholarships for Cornell University undergraduates** working on inequality research underway at Cornell, would have multiple benefits. They would facilitate training and development of new scholars, support existing faculty research, and help to create a distinctive Cornell legacy in this research domain.

These areas of possible strategic investment serve as an initial starting point. Other potential areas for investment will surely emerge from ongoing faculty discussions. For example, these could include pilot funding for “flagship” data collection projects on inequality (in its various dimensions) that build connections among faculty and students from a variety of disciplines, both in and outside the social sciences. It is worth discussing whether the entire university would benefit from university-sponsored funding opportunities that seek research collaborations between social scientists and their colleagues outside the social sciences. Consider, for example, research on cognitive neuroscience or on the human dimensions of climate change, such as refugee population displacements. Building administrative and research ties with emerging new technologies in the data sciences (e.g., Artificial Intelligence and machine learning) also would enhance some of Cornell strengths outside the traditional social sciences (e.g., in computing and information sciences). For example, some observers are concerned that hiring decisions made by computer algorithms may reinforce racial and class disparities in the labor market and institutionalize economic inequality.  

**CONCLUSION**

The social sciences at Cornell University are at a crossroads. It is a time to rethink areas of strategic investments in ways that bring our fragmented social science community together around common or intersecting themes and a shared vision that can define the future. It is a time of new challenges and opportunities. Over the next decade, a large fraction of Cornell’s faculty will be replaced with faculty with different backgrounds and research interests. The next decade will usher in a new period of intellectual ferment and realignment as new

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20 A new multidisciplinary collaborative project titled “Algorithms, Big Data, and Inequality,” funded by the Institute for the Social Sciences, addresses such issues. For details, see [http://socialsciences.cornell.edu/algorithms/](http://socialsciences.cornell.edu/algorithms/)
substantive interests, new faculty and students, and new technologies (e.g., big data and data sciences) redefine the University’s social science community. The current strength of the social sciences at Cornell, the impressive research we heard about in the faculty forums, and the potential benefits of the proposed strategic investments, gives us much reason to be optimistic about the future of the social sciences at Cornell University.
Appendix: 2018-2019 Social Science Faculty Forums

Forum video

Health and the Social Sciences Forum (April 20, 2018)
Panelists’ Written Statements and forum video

Panelists:
Susanne Bruyere, Director, K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability
John Cawley, Professor, Policy Analysis and Management, and Economics
Erin York Cornwell, Assistant Professor, Sociology
Deborah Estrin, Professor, Computer Science, Cornell Tech and Public Health, Weill Cornell Medical College
John Hoddinott, H.E. Babcock Professor of Food and Nutrition Economics and Policy
Lori Leonard, Professor, Development Sociology
Vida Maralani, Associate Professor, Sociology
Gen Meredith, Lecturer, Department of Population Medicine and Diagnostic Services
Sean Nicholson, Professor, Policy Analysis and Management; Director of the Sloan Program in Health Administration
Jeff Niederdeppe, Associate Professor, Department of Communication
Anthony Ong, Professor, Human Development; Professor of Gerontology in Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College
Steve Osofsky, Jay Hyman Professor of Wildlife Health and Health Policy, Population Medicine and Diagnostic Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine
Valerie Reyna, Lois and Melvin Tukman Professor of Human Development
Monika Safford, John J. Kuiper Professor of Medicine and Chief of the Division of General Internal Medicine, Weill Cornell Medical College

Justice, Law, Inequality, Democracy and Related Themes Forum (May 1, 2018)
Panelists’ Written Statements and forum video

Panelists:
Ed Baptist, Professor, History
Solon Barocas, Assistant Professor, Information Science, Arts and Sciences
Filiz Garip, Professor, Sociology
Shannon Gleeson, Associate Professor, Labor Relations, Law and History, ILR School
Anna Haskins, Assistant Professor, Sociology
Karen Levy, Assistant Professor, Information Science
Neil A. Lewis, Jr., Assistant Professor, Communication
Jamila Michener, Assistant Professor, Government
Annelise Riles, Professor, Anthropology; and Jack G. Clarke Professor of Law in Far East Legal Studies
Policy, Planning, Translational Research, and Related Themes Forum (May 9, 2018)
Panelists’ Written Statements and forum video

Panelists:
Natalie Bazarova, Associate Professor, Communication
Parfait Eloundou-Enyegue, Professor, Development Sociology
Thomas D. Gilovich, Irene Blecker Rosenfeld Professor, Psychology
Miguel Gómez, Associate Professor, Dyson School of Applied Economics & Management
James Grimmelmann, Professor of Law, Cornell Law School and Cornell Tech
Jon Kleinberg, Tisch University Professor, Computer Science and Information Science
Bruce Lewenstein, Professor of Science Communication, Communication and Science & Technology Studies
Michael Lovenheim, Associate Professor, Policy Analysis & Management
Hirokazu Miyazaki, Professor, Anthropology; John S. Knight Professor of International Studies
Suzanne Mettler, Clinton Rossiter Professor of American Institutions, Government
Kelly Musick, Professor, Policy Analysis & Management and Sociology
Jed Stiglitz, Associate Professor, Cornell Law School
Laura Tach, Associate Professor, Policy Analysis & Management and Sociology
Mildred Warner, Professor, City & Regional Planning