

Fall 2025 Referendum

Question 1: Prior to 2021, conduct was overseen by the Judicial Administrator, an office independent of Cornell University's central administration. It is now overseen by the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards (OSCCS). Should Cornell's judicial system be independent of the University's administration?

Pro Statements

1. Cornell's judicial system should 100% be independent from the university's administration. The past few years of student activism on campus have shown that alumni and foreign influence on administration is beyond the scope of judicial fairness. Alumni and external organizations have pressurized administration constantly to capitulate to their demands regarding pro-Palestinian advocacy and has cracked down brutally on student protestors. An administration that worries more about their salary and Cornell's reputation is not an equitable nor trustworthy admin. The administration's handling of student code of conduct cases in regards to student activism is unfair and unrepeatable. Therefore an independent office is required.
2. The concentration of judicial power in the hands of a few administrators has both allowed for politically motivated disciplinary actions and in competent enforcement of the code of conduct. Many students were suspended for long periods despite clearly not violating the code of conduct. Such a thing can only happen due to the lack of democratic oversight on the use of interim suspensions. Likewise, such heavy handed treatment of protestors stems from OSCCS's conflict of interest. As a creature of central administration, OSCCS cannot fairly judge a case between a student and administration. Less politically, the OSCCS has shown itself to be too heavy handed when a soft touch is necessary, and impotent when there is a popular demand for decisive action. Despite OSCCS's tendency to suspend first and ask questions later when dealing with protestors and artists, Chi Phi still goes virtually unpunished for insanely violent and criminal behavior. An admin controlled OSCCS has demonstrated by its actions that it considers students engaging in the political process to be a greater threat to the campus community than drug smuggling gang rapists.
3. At Cornell, it has become painfully obvious that the administration under Kotlikoff is drawing its own arbitrary line about what counts as "dangerous," and it's student protestors who end up on the receiving end of fast punishment. Everyone on campus knows the names of students who were suspended for political protests, yet a reported gang rape from last semester still sits in limbo, "under investigation," with no visible urgency. That disconnect says everything. Instead of prioritizing the safety of students, the university seems more focused on controlling dissent and protecting its own image. The result is a culture where students fear speaking out even when it's about defending themselves. Made worse by the administration aligning itself with the Trump Administration that puts women, students of color, and queer students at greater risk. Cornell should be confronting the real dangers on campus, not punishing the people trying to call them out. It's clear that the right to mold the student code of conduct should have student say.
4. The administration has repeatedly demonstrated an inability to treat students with fairness. We see a lack of accountability for fraternity members who have committed acts of sexual violence, contrasted with intense scrutiny toward students exercising their freedom of speech. I support this referendum because we need a fair and equitable process that truly reflects Ezra Cornell's vision of "any person, any study."
5. Cornell's judicial system should be independent of the University's administration. The current structure creates an unavoidable and deeply problematic conflict of interest. When the administration is effectively the victim, the prosecutor, and the appeals authority in the same case, the process cannot be considered impartial or protective of student rights. Currently, the dean is often the petitioner who initiates charges while also overseeing the appeal process, and the individual responsible for investigating, charging, and adjudicating cases is a direct subordinate of that same dean. Concentrating this much authority in one administrative chain undermines the legitimacy of the system and erodes trust. A fair judicial process demands structural separation between those who bring allegations and those who evaluate them. When that separation collapses, even the appearance of neutrality disappears. Students cannot reasonably expect justice from a system where the administration has both institutional incentives and hierarchical power over

the very people making the decisions. The risk of administrative overreach becomes even more troubling considering that students—those most affected by these decisions—have almost no meaningful role in the process. Cornell should instead adopt a truly independent body, one that includes a balanced panel of students, faculty, and administrators, ensuring diverse perspectives and reducing the possibility that any single authority can dominate the outcome.

6. Before 2020, Cornell's judicial system was a crucial part of shared governance. Authority was under the University Assembly, and conduct cases went through the OJA, independent of the administration. Cornell took advantage of the COVID shutdown to advance their own version of the Code. Instead of working with the UA after they rejected admin's drafted Code, admin took it to the Student Assembly instead, and convinced them to pass it as their own. They claimed it was a shift towards a less punitive system. It wasn't. The University used the Assembly as a shield to completely dismantle shared governance. They ignored near-unanimous pushback from faculty, alumni, and students, and took advantage of the campus being shut down to create a worse Code than the Assembly had passed. Their new Code gave unilateral control to a single administrator -- VP Lombardi and his employee, Christina Liang -- to impose immediate temporary suspensions on a student the minute they're reported, with no real avenue for appeal. Liang has the power to suspend, decides when investigation begins, and controls the Alternative Resolution process, which she endlessly uses to coerce students into signing a plea deal. If they don't, she takes an average of 246 days to allow them to proceed to a hearing, costing them 2 semesters. To date, no student has ever been found guilty by a hearing panel for the misconduct that merited their temporary suspension. Often, VP Lombardi is the person who reported these students -- something he does not disclose when he denies their appeal. This has had worse impacts on Cornell than I have the room to write. I was a student before and after these policies, and I no longer recognize my campus. It's made students unwilling to speak, afraid to express what they believe is right, and unwilling to trust our University -- all for good reason. The real question this referendum poses to admin is this: Is this the legacy Cornell's leadership intends to leave behind?
7. I believe there is an obvious conflict of interest present if University administration also operates as the judicial system. In the interest of fairness, I believe those functions should be separated.
8. As a student of Cornell for the past several years, I find it very concerning that the investigations for breaches of the student code of conduct are investigated by the SAME administration that often accuses people of breaching the conduct. In recent years Cornell Admin has seemingly decided to abuse this power to investigate themselves for only certain student. Why are students being kicked off campus, forced to give back aid, and lose months of progress for simply protesting, but students alleged of far worse crimes, such as sexual assault, given grace? From their actions, the stance by Cornell Admin has seemed to be that a student protester is more threatening to the community than alleged rapist. How is it possible that an administration can investigate itself? Why is Lombardi allowed to report students and then have a underling "investigate"? Why are the people affected the most by the Trump Administration not allowed to protest Cornell's deal with them without fear of being severely punished without an investigation by Cornell Admin? Cornell must return to an independent student code of conduct, as it was historically.
9. It makes no sense for there to be no separation of power between the institution and the legal system it undertakes as a participant. There must be a separate office that does not retain the same conflict of interest that works in the interest of no party that is involved. It is clear that the very same admin that run the code like dictators are the same that edit it, enforce it, and interpret it as they please. How this is at all more understandable or better for students is a null point. I do not think its fair that some random like Kotlikoff can just edit the code whenever he wants like he runs all parts of governance as the sole leader of an institution that claims to work for its students that it serves. I will not adhere to a set of rules only 3 old people decided was best for an entire student body. There needs to be a seperation of power if there will ever be equality and a fair justice system returned to Cornell University.
10. One of the key demands of the 1969 Willard Straight Hall Takeover was the creation of an independent judicial system because "a party in a dispute cannot be impartial." Just as in the Vietnam and Civil Rights Eras, we are seeing our University administration crack down on students' civil liberties and free discussion on campus. Former President Martha Pollack's "Freedom of Expression Theme Year" ironically marked a turning point towards repression on our campus, a shift that has noticeably impacted campus culture. Whereas college campuses are meant to be spaces for young adults to develop their minds and characters, the Cornell administration's unrestrained wielding of OSCCS and temporary suspension has stalled both. Most significantly impacted is undoubtedly the Class of 2029 and will continue to be future generations of Cornell students. When I came to Cornell three years ago, I was given the opportunity to participate in a rich tradition of campus activism. From the '69 WSH Takeover to the '93 Day Hall occupation, this tradition is memorialized by Cornell historians and happily mentioned in recruiting materials. But our University has

grown hypocritical and, perhaps more sinister, our administration has learned from its mistakes and does not intend to listen to students ever again. Our campus does not exist in an vacuum, it's a betrayal of our values to say that Cornell is a place where students should keep their heads down, study for their classes, and graduate as quickly as possible. Since it's inception, Cornell was imagined by its founders as a University where any person could, as we all know, gain instruction in any study. What is lesser known is that AD White intended Cornell to be a place where students were morally and civically developed to their fullest potential. President Kotlikoff, do not be the president that betrays these founding principles. Cornell students, do not be the generation that forgets how to fight.

11. As one of many students who have been disciplined by the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards, I firmly support a judicial system independent of the University's administrators. I was referred to OSCCS by CUPD over my participation in a protest at a career fair against weapons manufacturers who actively facilitate the genocide of the Palestinian people. The listed complainant on all of my paperwork is Cornell University itself, through its police department. There is no way that anyone in Cornell's administration truly believes that administrators like Christina Liang can be impartial in their judgement of students. Administrators know that if they needed to make their case of a student's wrongdoing to an impartial body, the vast majority of students would not have received punishments to the extent that they did. Every pro-Palestine protestor who has been arrested by CUPD in the past two years has faced far better outcomes through the court system than through OSCCS. In my case, all charges against me were dropped. Despite this, the coercive system of alternative resolution "plea deals" meant that I was heavily incentivized to not go to the hearing judged by an independent panel I should have had the right to go to. An entirely independent judicial system would mean that administrators no longer have the authority to impose arbitrary punishments for months at a time while students wait for a hearing; instead, an independent judicial system would handle those interim measures.
12. The Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards (OSCCS) has been failing students in its ability to address hearings and provide them with a fair and speedy trial. The way that conduct is currently being overseen by the university administration is not efficient for students; it would be better for the judicial system to operate independently of the administration for a more streamlined and specialized system. Currently the system for addressing student conduct is too bogged down and centralized within university administration. This makes it difficult for students to live their lives fully, does not center student wellbeing, and is unfair to students who are caught up in a system that does not prioritize serving them properly. Crucially, Cornell's judicial system should also be separate from the university administration in order to reduce bias and uphold standards of impartiality in the decisions that affect students and their livelihoods, in these conduct cases.
13. Cornell faculty teaches about climate change, climate justice, and building a better world. Yet the Cornell administration continues to fight against climate solutions, asking for exceptions to Ithaca rules, increasing their carbon output in spite of their proposed goals of decarbonization, and investing in oil and fossil fuel companies. Cornell faculty teaches about democracy and social justice, yet the administration has seized power from its students, given in to attacks on academic freedom, invested in weapons manufacturing, and promoted ICE jobs through Cornell's career services portal. The administration has made it clear that they do not recognize student autonomy in decision making (through their rejections of recent student referendums) and has wrongfully suspended students to further their own agendas. If we were admitted to this school because of our potential to be leaders, let us be leaders. Let us govern and contribute to the school we all love. "Doing the greatest good" won't happen until students gain back democratic rights. Let students be assessed fairly and democratically. **CORNELL'S JUDICIAL SYSTEM NEEDS TO BE INDEPENDENT OF ADMINISTRATION!**
14. Independence of student expression is crucial in the training for the realization of truth and the common good. Only when there is true freedom of inquiry can there be true knowledge. The University administration should understand this. A need for restraint on student behaviour is understood, but not providing an independent judicial system to govern what is right conduct and what isn't, fundamentally prohibits this freedom. The right decision here will be beneficial to both the students and the university in the long term. I hope the responsible people find out whatever is wise.
15. Cornell administration in recent years through its actions has lost the confidence and faith of the student body required to carry out legitimate judicial action. Since 2021 administration has confused its purpose of managing the university to best fulfill its mission of disseminating knowledge and benefiting the world with policing its undergraduate population in misguided attempts to foster a specific political environment in line with the changing currents of the national situation; the undergraduate population without additional interference from university administration is fully capable of creating a vibrant political and social

environment. The administration's power over the judicial system has drawn it into a new task of policing its student population, which is not its purpose.

16. I believe independent review is necessary to keep student disputes impartial and fair. Students shouldn't be made to feel as if everything depends on the thoughts of administration. Bringing in jurors with some distance from disputes allows equal consideration of both sides.
17. University bias should not affect the judicial system when an independent source of student conduct oversight has proven itself to be capable of enforcing campus rules.
18. Cornell's judicial system must be independent of the University's central administration in order to preserve fairness, protect student rights, and uphold the principles of shared governance that Cornell has built over more than a century. As the resolution notes, student conduct was originally assigned to the faculty rather than the President in Andrew Dickson White's 1866 Plan of Organization, establishing from the University's founding that disciplinary authority should not rest with central administrators. This principle was reaffirmed during the 1969 Willard Straight Hall Takeover, when students demanded a campus judicial system independent from the administration—an event that directly shaped the creation of Cornell's elected Assemblies. The resolution further cites the Barton Hall assemblies' assertion that "the University is not competent to judge acts committed against itself," a core due-process concern that remains relevant today. Prior to 2021, the Judicial Administrator embodied this independence. But with the creation of the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards (OSCCS), oversight has shifted into the administrative hierarchy. According to the resolution, this shift has led to excessive delays in cases of temporary suspension and repeated infringements on freedom of expression and student rights. Moreover, the resolution demonstrates that administrators have dominated the Standing Code and Procedures Review Committee—55% appointed without Assembly input—contradicting the Code's requirement of collaborative consultation with elected Assemblies. A judicial system controlled by the administration cannot credibly adjudicate disputes involving the administration itself. Restoring independence is therefore essential to fairness and democratic governance at Cornell.
19. Yes, the judicial system should be independent of administration. The administration should not be able to put in place interim measures (barring the student from campus, disenrolling them from courses etc.) before the actual investigation of the infraction occurs! With the threat of these measures that could go on for months, students often feel pressured to take an "alternative resolution" (AR) that the administration gives rather than wait for a hearing. These ARs mean that your case will immediately conclude if you agree to Admin's terms in the AR. It is not right that so many students feel like they have to agree to Admin's terms because of the threat of interim measures being taken against them. I urge you to vote in favor of this referendum if you believe in fair, independent judging of conduct cases and due process.
20. We must return to the independent student judicial system that we once had! The administration should not be allowed to be judge, jury and executioner
21. Cornell's judicial system be independent of the University's administration.
22. Having the judicial system separate from admin prevents them from fully picking on anyone they want.
23. The system of how decisions are made at Cornell seem random to me. Some crimes are ignored, others prosecuted. Some topics are accepted under freedom of speech, some are not. If even your professors are speaking out against a system that is unfair to your customers then something must be going really wrong. This change would probably not improve the situation significantly and would not make campus safer since wealthy students can still bribe the relevant officials but it's at least a step towards seeming more impartial.
24. Offenses against Cornell shouldn't be judged BY Cornell, a victim isn't the judge of a "crime" against them to avoid bias. There should be an independent and fair judiciary, a jury of peers. This is an American right.
25. When I came to Cornell three years ago, our campus had a vibrant culture of protest and political engagement. Now, there is a culture of fear and repression which can be attributed entirely to OSCCS's control of the disciplinary process. Regardless of how you may feel about the many causes students have organized around on campus during your time here, participating in and engaging with political protest is a core part of college life and an important tradition at Cornell, an institution shaped by the 1969 occupation of Willard Straight. Allowing one administrator to unilaterally and arbitrarily suspend students for any act of protest raises the stakes and makes it impossible for students to freely express themselves on campus. As

the Cornell administration becomes closer to the Trump administration and the federal government increasingly targets the most vulnerable members of communities across the country, it has never been more important that the University disciplinary policy be controlled by our community — not unaccountable administrators. Voting yes on this item means demanding that the administration ensure students, faculty, staff, and graduate student workers are the ones deciding what acceptable expression looks like on our campus — the structure students fought for and won in 1969. Vote yes, then join the fight across campus for an accountable disciplinary system.

26. To have an organization be the judge jury and executioner for a group of people they rely on for financial support seems like a conflict of interest at best and a money-printing incentive to keep students who object to university — and in recent times, federal — philosophy. I do not see why Ryan Lombardi can simultaneously be the man who can report me for wrongdoing and be the one to have the final say on the outcome of my punishment.
27. All individuals are owed due process as distanced from personal or administrative bias as possible.
28. The administration's decision to act as judge, jury, and executioner in deciding the outcomes of students and professors alike at Cornell endangers the judicial process of our school such that our liberties are threatened by the decision making of an arbitrary and capricious institution. Cornell should not emulate the activity of our government as it devolves into a muddled drear of opaque decision making. Rather, this referendum would support a transparent, accountable administration.
29. Everyone deserves a fair, unbiased trial.
30. The judicial system should be separate from Cornell central administration to prevent power consolidation and potential corruption. Even in the US government, the judicial branch is separate from the executive branch to prevent dictatorial situations. Therefore, it is quite obvious that the judicial system should be separate from the central administration at Cornell.
31. It should remain independent.
32. I have been a member of Cornell Greek life for 2 semesters now, and my fraternity has been investigated twice for hazing, both of which “Found no evidence”. While I understand the need to investigate hazing in order to protect students, these investigations have both consisted of initial interviews within the first two weeks and no updates for the remainder of the investigation. These 2 investigations have now taken up over 3 months of my short 2 semesters in Greek life. In my opinion as a member of the executive board of my fraternity, the OSCCS has treated these “investigations” both unprofessionally, in failing to respond to emails regarding the investigation’s timeline, and as if they are at liberty to suspend all events with no recourse from the fraternity regardless of the baselessness of the accusations. These investigations seem to have arisen from unsubstantiated claims not once but twice. Both times, thanks to the OSCCS’s lack of motivation for completing their investigations in a timely manner, they ultimately left my fraternity unable to hold events which serve as meaningful ways to connect with my fellow brethren and the Cornell community for numerous months beyond when they reasonably could have been completed. I have felt personally disadvantaged by their lack of urgency in completing their investigation within a reasonable time frame. This ultimately has left me to conclude that they are utilizing temporary suspension as a punitive measure in order to maximize suspension time, rather than to support the safety of Cornell students. Furthermore, this was an issue that has been discussed and criticized by Cornell students and professors alike in its relation to temporary suspensions for Pro-Palestinian protesters without due process. I see striking parallels with the temporary suspensions my fraternity has been subjected to. Thus, the removal of their independence in my opinion would force them to be responsible for their actions, or lack thereof.
33. Students should have a say in what behavior is tolerated on campus, especially in the case of free speech issues. By allowing the administration to run the judicial system, they have free rein to make decisions that benefit themselves and the school's image without regard for what is actually in the student's best interest.
34. I believe that the judicial system should be independent of the University's administration. This reflects my belief in checks and balances of power. The Judicial Administrator offers a less biased viewpoint from which to objectively enforce the code of conduct. I think the person should have insight into campus life, but be well enough removed from an administrative position at Cornell. The rules and code enforcement should come from different people.

35. A centralized disciplinary system places all power solely in the hands of a few administrators — who are often reporting students themselves. Cornell's disciplinary process should be independent so that it is not impacted by concerns about University image, or showing strength or certain values to stakeholders — instead, impacted solely by the actual events which take place and the direct evidence surrounding code violations. Moves to ensure administrative oversight over the disciplinary process are less efficient because they take administrators away from the work they should be doing, and are more prone to bias. An independent process ensures decisions are always made fairly, both providing students added security and administrators comfort in knowing that policy will be followed without undue blame or pressure being placed on them.
36. I don't think judicial independence itself is as important as the question of student power and influence on Cornell administration, but as long as the administration is not influenced by the students, the judicial body should be independent of the administration so that students have a fair chance at defending their rights.
37. Cornell's judicial system should be independent of the University's administration.
38. Yes. Cornell's conduct system works best when it is trusted, and that trust depends on independence. Before 2021, the Judicial Administrator operated separately from central administration, which meant decisions could be made without real or perceived administrative pressure. Restoring that independence would help ensure that conduct cases are handled fairly, consistently, and transparently—especially in situations where administrative interests and student interests may not perfectly align. An independent system strengthens due process, protects community confidence, and reinforces Cornell's long-standing commitment to impartial decision-making. Re-establishing that structure would not disrupt student accountability; it would simply ensure that accountability is handled by a neutral body whose priority is fairness, not institutional risk management. A university that values justice should also value independence.