

Cornell University Employee Assembly

Farewell to Mary Opperman: A Moderated Conversation

Monday, July 18, 2022 from 12:00 PM-1:00 PM (EST).

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JESSICA WITHERS: Hi, everyone. On behalf of the Employee Assembly, I would like to welcome you to the Employee Assembly for Mary Opperman. With me is Andrea Haenlin-Mott. Together we gathered six former chairs of the Employee Assembly to help us glean wisdom from Mary one final time. Here in the auditorium, we have former chairs, Adam Howell and Craig Wiggers. On Zoom we have Meg, Greg and Ulysses. We are here to honor Mary for her 26 years at Cornell. Mary oversees approximately 18,000 staff and faculty, spanning Geneva, New York City, Ithaca, and Qatar. You might know that Mary oversees Human Resources, Department of inclusion and belonging, institution and Title IX, and Economic Advancement. You may have seen Mary at employee celebrations, staff graduation reception, and service awards.

But I would like to tell you a little bit about how important Mary is to the Employee Assembly. As Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer, she is liaison to members of the Employee Assembly and administration liaison to assembly and staff community. I'm in my fourth year on the assembly and can whole-heartedly say, Mary is a mentor, guide, sounding board, bellwether, and advocate for employee assembly. As we seek to be the voice of Cornell staff, Mary is our partner. Partners don't always agree but they are aimed at the same goals and they make each other stronger. Thank you for being our partner, Mary. So, to begin our conversations --

[Applause]

So, to begin our conversations, let's hear from the star of the show, Mary.

MARY OPPERMAN: Oh, thank you, Jessica. I don't feel like the star of the show, but I appreciate that very much. I will make some remarks and then we will take some

questions. Let me start with the most important thing, which is to thank all of you. It's been incredible for 26 years. I never expected to stay here that long. I don't think most people think that the majority of their career will be in one place. And people have asked me why that is. And some of it, of course, is personal. It worked for my family to be here.

But it's much, much more than that. This is an incredible place, Cornell does so many things. You can be here your whole life and never really understand all of it. And that, in and of itself, is challenging and exciting.

But the other is all of you and the work on behalf of the staff and faculty of Cornell. Because I firmly believe, and I think any of you who know me, hopefully you have seen me act in this way, while we can't meet every need of every employee, I think we need to do all that we can to try to get there because Cornell isn't Cornell without all of you.

Our purpose is to educate our students and to advance research and innovation, it happens because of the people, staff and faculty that make that happen. Our role in the larger community, our role in New York state and beyond, that's all human-based. So as beautiful as this campus is and as grateful as I am to facilities and campus, services for all that they do to keep it beautiful, Cornell is its people. Its faculty. Its staff. Its retirees and alumni and of course our amazing students.

So, with that as a backdrop, I also wanted to say thank you to the Employee Assembly. And I can't tell you how important it is to me that six previous chairs agreed to come and lob some softballs meat so we can all pretend this is really, you know, really hard-hitting. Because the Employee Assembly is fully voluntary. No one needs to sign up for it. And yet they do. And it takes a leadership role in the Employee Assembly takes even more time. And all of your peers who have been chairs, and assembly members do have a problem. They are able to support you and to make sure that the issues and the institution of leadership and –

[Indiscernible]

I just wanted to say –

[Indiscernible]

The last few years have been difficult years. It's difficult to be in these roles. As I look at the future, and what the future holds, it is a very uncertain time in the world. And we don't know what is going to be. So, we are dealing with this strange economy where we are dealing with inflation, worried about recession, and what do we do about things. And I would say certainly we find challenging experiences and now for all of you and it is important, of course, --

[Indiscernible]

We need each other.

People are still rolling off of what the pandemic has done with their families. We are dealing with unprecedented issues of mental health. We have the incredible opportunity to advance a socially just diverse and inclusive environment, including workplaces.

But that means really putting our shoulder to making that happen.

So now more than ever, how you interact, how you grow together, learn and in the very best way explore your differences to create even better outcomes. These are all incredibly important and exciting opportunities for all of you.

But underlying is how you relate to one another.
And no one role has --

[Indiscernible]

So, to think about how you take in the next experience or challenge, I would challenge you right back to do so in a way that keeps ears and eyes open. That allows you to be a part of the solution. And that above all, above all, retain the humanity that I hope we have learned from the pandemic.

We are all in some way interdependent on up with another. That connectedness is one thing after a pandemic that we all don't want to go away. The interconnectedness of that was caused through the pandemic. The reminder of how much we need one another. I hope, I hope, I hope that that continues far into the future. Cornell is an incredible place. I wouldn't have stayed here this long if it wasn't. Full of challenges and frustrations and occasionally disappointments.
But that doesn't make --

[Indiscernible]

I thank you for everything you have done for me. You have done more for me, probably, than I've done for you. And I look forward to seeing what you all do after I'm gone.

HEI HEI DEPEW: Hi, everyone. I'm former chair of the Employee Assembly. I don't know how I will follow that up, Mary. That was pretty good.

But I will try. When I was asked to be part of this panel, I could only think of one question to ask you and it is a question I have asked you before, and I will ask it again. How dare you leave us? I'm not prepared. I don't know how the rest of the university is. I have worked with you in this capacity on the Employee assembly for over five years and in it time you have shown yourself to be somebody who advocates for staff in spaces of senior leadership. You speak of the staff so, so well. So thoughtfully. So kindly. And I think that you know, that that championship I will miss the most about you and your time here in this role. So, I want to thank you for your mentorship, for your guidance, for your partnership. Not just on behalf of the employee assembly but the staff community broadly, I think you have done so much, so thank you.

Let's move on to the question portion. I will ask the first question, first softball for you, and two-part question and here it is. **What has Cornell done in the past 20 years that we have not seen peer institutions do that sets us apart and what can we do to help us grow?**

MARY OPPERMAN: Hei, first of all, thank you for the kind comments. I just want to say that working, getting to know each of you and working with you and has been the privilege of my life. There is nothing more important than really connecting with another human being. It makes everything worthwhile. It makes all of the challenges worthwhile. So, I have watched each of you find your pathways, growing your personal lives, growing your professional lives, and it really is a privilege to be permitted to do that. So, thank you.

So, what has Cornell done the last 20 years that sets us apart? So, I thought about it, I thought about this, you know, people ask that legacy question, and it is such a funny question. I like it much better this way. I would say in the area of human resources, and keep this to the spaces that I know the best, and we led in the area

of wild care support. We put together our child care grant way before others were thinking about doing it. With the good help of Mildred Warner and Architecture Art and Planning and others, we decided early on that we wanted to do everything that we could to provide employee the ability to come to work knowing their children were in safe day care. And this grant was not easy to put together and it was competing with many other priorities.

But that may be one of my prouder moments. Because we really did it without many companies or universities in the forefront. So, we really led the way. The other is our broad approach to leadership and in the leadership academy. We began with programs that have been enduring here, things like turning point and what is now called the Harold D craft leadership program.

But it has expanded under Kathy Burkeman's leadership to be a good academy. As we think about leaders and a reminder that we lead from the seat we're in. We may lead projects. We may lead people. So, whether you are a people manager or project manager, you are a leader. And the students are watching how we interact together. So, the leadership academy and the new cap stone, relatively new cap stone of leading Cornell, that's another area where I think we have really sort of led the way or at least distinguished ourselves.

The network groups. Our employee resource groups. They are six, self-sufficient, self-directed groups of leaders around the campus who take an active role in creating a welcoming environment for the individuals they serve. It has been in place for some time but they continue to grow and evolve and I that I they create a great partnership opportunity along with the employee assembly to really democratize many of the important elements of being part of the employee experience.

Then I would say our efforts in the space of diversity and inclusion, there is so, so much more to do in this space.

But I think some of our work, the inclusive excellence podcasts, inclusive excellence academy, training programs that people are working their way through, community conversations that we've had belonging at Cornell, these are all incredible foundations to a future where people truly belong and bring and celebrate the differences that create the best outcomes.

And so, I would say those are a few of the things that I think we have done well and can be really, really proud of.

In terms of elsewhere, where I never think anyone is as good as we are, so that's a hard one. I think in a few communities there's been a strong and interesting tie with the local communities that they live in. And we do a lot of that. Gary Stewart is incredible. And but because we are geographically dispersed in where we live, I think there is always room to continue our roles as community citizens on the campus and off the campus.

And I do think that we can learn from others in terms of their DEI activities. There is some pretty incredible stuff happening in companies and organizations elsewhere. And we should be open enough to learn from them and take their good advice. Those are just two things.

ADAM HOWELL: My name is Adam Howell. I was chair of the Employee Assembly, how many years ago? Several.

But I just wanted to say first of all, congratulations and I know you said that you are excited to see what happens at Cornell after your departure.

But we are excited to see what happens with you after the next stage of your amazing journey. I came here as not someone just new to Cornell but new to the area being on the Employee Assembly gave me a sense of community and how Cornell is a community. And your leadership, guidance, your friendship, really was one of the things that brought home to me the heart of this institution and it was such a privilege and honor working with you and I can't thank you enough for all that you did. Not just for Cornell but for me. I will be selfish and say thank you for everything.

And for my question, I just want to ask, **what is one thing that you wish all staff would know about the role of Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer?**

MARY OPPERMAN: Oh, I had an answer, but I decided it was not appropriate so I won't give it.

But it popped into my head. So, Adam was chair of the assembly during the pandemic. He and I connected when we all went home and we thought, well,

hopefully this will be done in a couple of weeks. Remember when we said this will be done in a couple of weeks? And when we realized it wouldn't be done in a couple of weeks, and when the community didn't know much and the partnership with me created open forums and the open forums through the pandemic.

I want to thank you for that. That wouldn't have happened without you and we have gotten a lot of positive feedback about those. And actually, they are one of the enduring lessons I hope that we have all learned. And they don't need to have answers. You just need to give people a place to ask questions and express concerns. I think people are appreciative of knowing what you are knowing, including saying, I don't know. Can I tell you now that I know at least 15 different ways to say I have no idea.

And I wanted to thank you for that.

The way I have the role today, one of the things I would say is that most times I think people, I certainly, lead with my role as CHR aspect.

But it is a people operations job. Much more than just HR in it. So, the staff diversity and inclusion space now led by Sanya Rucker and the equity in Title IX office now led by Laura, those areas are critically important to the way in which we traverse this organization as staff and faculty and in some cases students.

So, and at least now in my role we also have the Center for Regional Economic advancement which is a terrific partner with the research division and with Joel Malina's division in how we can support new economic opportunities for our local and expanded to New York communities.

So, it is a little bit more than sometimes we think about it. It is a bit of a complex organization.

Because there are much more centralized functions like the equity in Title IX office but HR and div, inclusion and belonging, those are matrix organizations. So, there are roles in each of the colleges in HR and then there are belonging at Cornell and so you have central functions as well as colleges and university functions. And that means that we spend a lot of time on the how. Which sometimes frustrates people. Especially if they have come from a more top-down place.

But I'm a huge proponent of that because you learn so much when you listen to how ideas are coming across inside colleges and units. There is no way for any one person or any one central function to know. So, I would say it is a little more complex than sometimes it appears. It is really the best of the work that comes out of the division doesn't come from me. It comes from the teams that do this work. And so, I think of the way I feel about coaches. A team plays their heart out and the coach gets credit. Now the good news is that when the team loses, the coach always gets a fair amount of blame.

But I do think it is a reminder that what happens in our university does not get done by one person even if that person has the privilege of the microphone. It gets handled by the professionals and experts and teams that make things happen. And I guess the last thing I would say is a bit personal. There are times when this is a really fun job. Things that you know you get to meet so many people that you would never ever have gotten to meet if you didn't have the job. And learn about the different things that people do in their professional lives and personal lives and it is such an honor. What I found is that the openness with which people share their concerns and hopes and dreams, I just feel very privileged by them. I find it very fun to learn about people and maybe help them a bit in their journey. And honestly, it can be a little lonely.

It isn't a job that is easy to have a ready-made peer set because you do need to stand apart a bit in order to do the job well.

And so sometimes it can feel a little lonely and you all have done a great job in helping me not feel that way.

CRAIG WIGGERS: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Craig Wiggers. I came here to Cornell in 2012 with the United States Marine Corps to teach ROTC in Barton Hall. And following my retirement from the Marine Corps was fortunate again to find a staff home here at Cornell to have my wife, who also works at Cornell, and our daughter who graduated from Cornell. And throughout the time of being a part of this community and having had the opportunities to work closely with Mary and with the Employee Assembly, one thing that has resonated for me in seeing Mary's leadership and her dedication to all of us as a staff community, is the Marine Corps motto of "semper fidelis", which means always faithful. Mary you are always faithful and we are so thankful to have you as part of our team.

MARY OPPERMAN: Thank you. That's really nice, thank you. That means a lot.

CRAIG WIGGERS: As the others have said, it is such a privilege to be able to be here and throw some softballs and be part of this event. And my question for you is, **what advice would you have for all of us as staff in preparing for the transition of Christine Lovely to join our community?**

MARY OPPERMAN: Yeah, that's great. First of all, thank you. For those of you that don't know, Craig was head of EA when Martha came. He said, you know what, I will take you on a tour of Cornell. He walked the President and I through departments all over the University and introduced her to people. And it was such a way to ground her in the variety of things that employees do on this campus. It was really helpful. So, thank you for that.

And he knew everybody. So, you know what? With an incredible back ground, you will be delighted to get to know her and she will bring new ideas to the role and to Cornell which is only a good thing.

But so, my advice is probably pretty simple. Support her.

Give her time to learn Cornell and support her. Certainly, ask her questions and let her know who you are and what you do. Invite her around it meet other people. She will not only be new to Cornell. She is new to the area. Be there for her and help her, our orientation program is called the big red welcome. Give her a big red welcome. Let her know she made an incredibly great choice by being part of your community.

She will bring new ideas, which may seem different. Be open to her ideas. She comes with the level, a set of experiences that you will benefit from. And so, I would say, welcome her. Support her. Stay open to her ideas. And this one may not be as obvious. If she is heading towards a cliff, for heaven sakes, stop her from heading over a cliff. The cliffs here are different from the cliffs where she has come from. If you want to be a good colleague it a good person, don't let them fall, if you can help them not fall. Give her context. Give her information.

And support her as she tries to make her way.

JESSICA WITHERS: I think we are moving to our Zoom chairs now. I believe Ulysses is up.

MARY OPPERMAN: Oh, I have to see that face. I have to turn.

ULYSSES SMITH: Well, I'm sure I show up reversed and my face is lopsided.

MARY OPPERMAN: Enormous. Ulysses, you're enormous.

ULYSSES SMITH: Well hopefully I'm as big as your presence and legacy will be and has been at Cornell, queen Mary. Always my queen, who for folks who don't know, I spent a ton of time. I did my undergraduate at Cornell. And you know, I will let you know in a few years of doing two degrees at once was the best decision ever.

But I spent probably way too much time involved with the assemblies, as Gina knows. Student Assembly and undergraduate and it spent so much time doing that, that I never lined up a job after college. And was fortunate enough to be walking through the halls of day hall one day and had a former AP who worked for Mary, had a conversation with me, and about what I wanted to do. And ended up creating a role for me that Mary okayed.

Mary subsequently created a couple of roles for me. Reported to her, and allowed me to kind of, in the name of positive change, and causing a lot of consternation across, and she supported me through all of that. When I took on my two terms of EA chair from 2016 to 2018, I believe. It is hard to imagine. Allowed me to work remotely in California. Encouraged me to spread my wings, leave Ithaca, and pursue what I wanted to do. I'm so thankful. If it weren't for you, I would not have found a passion, career and calling. I think that's work that often goes unsung, the things that are attributed to you.

You make such a big difference in the lives of people, especially when we are at our own personal crossroads and figuring out our value and purpose. I can't say enough to you. Now you said softball questions, but I want a disclaimer, I think I was given the controversial question, but I think by design. So, it's not me. Not me asking.

But the question is, if you had a magic wand, which we all know you do, you have it hidden somewhere, just bippitiy boppitiy Bo boo. **What is one thing you would change about the Cornell workplace?**

MARY OPPERMAN: Yeah, you're right, that's a softball. So, I will turn back, because I think you see me this way and I'm looking at you behind me. So, I will turn back this way. So, before I answer that, not softball question, thank you very much,

Ulysses, I wanted to say a couple words about Ulysses. So, first of all, the comment that Ulysses made about student leaders who often find themselves at the end of their time here without their next job, that's true. To be a student leader at this university is a lot of time and attention and my experience is these are the future leaders of this country.

And so, they are all in on their work in the essay or the trustee role or whatever they are doing. And so be attentive to that as a community. These are incredible people that may not have their next step fully formed and it is a great win for the University to get future leader, current and future leader to do some of the challenging work that we have. We were just really lucky that when you were found in the hallway because we were the beneficiaries of your time.

So, I'll be honest, because what the heck, what are they going to do to me. So, Ulysses and I have become fast friends and I turn to him regularly for advice because he has a very different way of approaching things than I do. And it challenges me to reframe my thinking. And I'm just very appreciative, Ulysses. You have been there sometimes when you're the only person I have turned to, and have you made a difference in my life. Thank you for that. What is your really hard question, again? I'm sorry. I meandered along and lost my way.

ULYSSES SMITH: If you had a magic wand, what one thing would you change about the Cornell workplace?

MARY OPPERMAN: Are you sure that was on my list? I don't think that was on my list.

ULYSSES SMITH: I promise.

MARY OPPERMAN: You asked a question not on my list. No, can I do this.

So, I would make it easier to traverse.

It is a very confusing place. It is pretty bureaucratic sometimes. And I think when you are new here, that feels like, it can feel like a bridge, a really long bridge to get to the point where you feel like you are a part of the organization. So, if I could wave a magic wand, I would make the operating procedures more standard so people can get through them and get to the fun stuff.

I would eliminate the divide between faculty and staff.

I think it is a long standing, and we say that, we say faculty and staff, right? And everyone who is here is furthering the University priorities. In different ways. And if you are working in a college department, that difference doesn't seem the same as it does at the Uber level. People are people. And our contributions may be different. And there are different ways in which the university values, remunerates for that.

But every person does something that advances the future of the university's priorities. So, I think we are happiest when we focus on a sense of community and we're the most challenged when we get into circumstances where we feel like there are inside circles and outside circles and I don't think advantages anybody in the long run. I would like it more diverse.

I think we have challenges.

But diversity is, there are two ways I look at diversity- one of them is, it is the right thing to do.

Everyone should have a fair and democratized opportunity and doing so is a basic, it should be a basic, in our country.

That everyone has a fair and democratized opportunity.

But it is also a business imperative.

Excellence comes through the people we employ and by definition, the world is diversifying and the talent pool is diversifying. And if we want the best outcomes, we need the best talent. And that talent comes in with lots of different lived experiences.

And if you have ever been in a truly diverse team that reaches, the solution, you can't imagine ever have gotten there on your own. So, it is a great chance for us to create teams and circles that bring new and different ideas. And I guess the last thing I would say about diversity is, everyone is part of an inclusive environment, everyone. And when you hear the word diversity or the word inclusion, hear yourselves in that. It is not intended to be an exclusionary term.

Different lived experiences come from all over. And so, we certainly have areas of focus, raise ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, but there are -- you each bring something to the table and when you come celebrating not just what you bring but what others bring, that's where excellence actually occurs. So, I hope under Christine's leadership, we continue to push forward in that and celebrate the inclusivity of that concept.

So, I guess that was a big magic wand, Ulysses.

GREG MEZEY: Hi, Mary. It's Greg. I think I'm up next.

Sorry I couldn't be there in person as much as I wanted to be.

You know, the governance system played such a role in both my experience at Cornell as a student and as a person on the staff. While it has been a while since 2015 that I worked at Cornell, I still pay attention to the Employee Assembly and it is still something that I love to see the great work they are doing.

So first I want to say thank you to the EA for putting this together and providing you know, the rest of the staff community and the access to Mary and to Mary, the one thing that one of my most sort of formative and incredible moments that I think back of at my time on Cornell, is leadership conversations in your office where you know you sort of get a little bit of a Mary unplugged. And you definitely brought down those barriers and challenge us to think differently and be part of the solution. And a lot of those conversations have stuck with me throughout my career and I know will stick with many that have the opportunity to sit in those seats for their lives to come. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

This is an incredible privilege and honor to be part of your farewell. And I'm also excited to let you know, too, that in my role as Tompkins County Legislator at our next Legislature meeting, I'm excited to read a proclamation that recognizes your contribution to Cornell and better Tompkins community at large. Very excited about that because you are one-of-a-kind. I look forward to the next chapter of Cornell.

But they are very big shoes to fill. **The question that I have for you is what are you most proud of from your time at Cornell?**

MARY OPPERMAN: Greg, first of all, thank you. I never had a proclamation before. That's very exciting.

I also want to take a minute to talk about Greg. Greg was a student and then he did, hotel school, right, Greg? Hotel?

GREG MEZEY: Yes, hotel. Yes.

MARY OPPERMAN: Hotel. And then, left to be part of a startup company in the hotel development space. Is that right, Greg?

GREG MEZEY: That's what I left Cornell for. I came back to Cornell after working for restaurant group.

MARY OPPERMAN: Oh, okay, got it. And now, tell us, tell us what you are doing right now.

GREG MEZEY: So small business owner. We own and operate a marina in Lansing. And also, Tompkins County Legislator.

MARY OPPERMAN: So, I knew about the marina. That was totally a pitch. So, I'm in Lansing and I would love to meet with you and learn more about the marina. I'm thrilled.

So, if you are in the local area, we also need to support Greg, and he is a new business owner, and so more to come. Right? We will make sure we all know about it.

So, what I'm most proud of. I think I said one of them which is child care grant. It was really pivotal for people, I think a game-changer, we heard, not only in an anecdotal way, but also, we had a student take a look at recipients and talk with them. And what we heard is with that additional financial support, people were able to take their children out of unlicensed care and get them into group care, family care, and day care with providers that were supportive by New York state. So, I think that may be one of them. I think the way we handled the economic downturn and pandemic, which probably sounds weird.

But I felt like it was both of those instances were times when you saw Cornell lead from their priorities. While will economic downturn was, oh, a real downturn, and

we weren't able to do fully protect everybody in those two cases, you saw right from the President down a real emphasis on protecting jobs as best we could and protecting choice as best we could. And so, probably two of the hardest times in my own life personally but too where I felt the proudest, I think, of all of you and leadership.

The Best award, we don't do them in the way we used to, but I love those. I mean, I love winning those, that was really fun.

But what was even better is applying for them and losing. And because when we lost, we got a benchmark. We were able to see where we were not the best and what other places were doing that made them the best. So, it was exhilarating to get these roadmaps into how we could be even better.

And support all of you in an even better way. And I guess, not surprising, to all of you, but on a more personal note, I never would have been able to meet so many people. I've had thousands and thousands of individual visits with individuals. Sometimes they were having challenges or just wanted to have a conversation and it is the most rewarding thing I have ever done and probably ever will do.

I feel so grateful that people trusted me enough to come in and have a conversation and we were able to have them so openly so they weren't, Greg, they were unplugged. They were meant for two people to have a conversation and find a pathway forward that felt good and I just feel so blessed by that. It is the thing I think I will take away most.

Thanks, Greg. And I will be in touch about the marina.

MEG KEILBACH: Hi, Mary. From hot Texas. This is Meg Keilbach

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MARY OPPERMAN: Hey, Meg. Good to see you.

MEG KEILBACH: Good to see you, too. I feel so honored to be part of this celebration. Mary arrived just as I had become an employee as chair of the Employee Assembly. Just as the alumni development division finished off a big campaign. And I got to know Mary very well because unfortunately, staff had to, in the division, actually had to reapply for their positions. As you can imagine there were a lot of disgruntled anxious employees not knowing what to do. And Mary just opened up her doors and said, let's figure this out together.

It was so heartwarming and she helped employees understand that we all had rights and she explained what we had to do.

But more importantly what I feel what happened with the Employee Assembly at that time was that a lot of leadership realized how important the group was to the staff and how we were the voice of the staff. And you know, we regularly had different leaders including the Presidents at our table and talked to us at meetings and shared their experiences. And I feel like it opened up so much to the staff. To the general staff.

And, similar to what Craig did, we did a tour with Mary and going around and just listening to people. I think that just, it really provided the basis of people understanding who Mary Opperman was. She was great at listening.

But one piece of advice to mention early on to was that you whole-heartedly believe, don't just come to the table with a problem, come to the table with also a solution. Maybe it is not the right one but least you are talking about it. I felt like that was so important to people. And I want to also thank you, Mary, I know I have come to you a couple different times with my own personal issues and you have dropped everything to help me and provided advice and some of it I took and some I didn't.

But again, I just feel so honored to be here. So anyways, I have two questions. I'm sure you can combine them. **What will you miss most and what are you looking forward to when you leave Cornell in August?**

MARY OPPERMAN: So, first of all, Meg is underselling herself a great deal. The reorganization and development happened right before I came. So, I was in that weird spot where that wasn't, I hadn't constructed that process but needed to take it to the next step. And it was an interesting way to get to know Cornell. Meg was the Employee Assembly chair when I came in. And because of her, I'm pretty sure, Meg, that you might have been the one that started the annual address to staff, if I remember correctly. Because I can remember doing it not long of that with Hunter Rawlings and discussion groups that Meg is talking about was actually a long time ago now but still one of the best things I have ever done. Called front line feedback. And we actually saw 750 people that way.

And so, we went around to different parts of the university and we asked them what makes a great place and what should we keep doing and what should we do differently? And we got some incredibly rich data from front line feedback that we used for the first quite a number of years to guide what we did in the HR function. So, I really owe Meg a debt of gratitude because she did know, I was new to the job and new to the community. And she knew both. So, she was one of those people that, you know, saw me heading to a cliff and very kindly grabbed the collar and pulled me back this way.

So, what will I miss most? I already said I will miss all of you and our conversations. It just isn't going to be the same for me. And without them. It is very sustaining. So that will be difficult.

And I will miss my team. It is a great group of people that do really hard work and maybe sometimes don't get the credit that they deserve but they are incredible to work with and I learn from each and every one of them every day.

And I will miss big events.

If you have been around any length of time, you know I'm a junky about commencement. I just love commencement. And I think everybody should work commencement. It is a time that reminds you of why we are here in the first place. It is chaotic and busy and there are a million things going on and you are like a duck when you're there, but it is such a cool thing.

But also, inaugurations. Charter Day celebration. Big stuff. And I thought about why those matter so much to me because they are really not part of my job. And it is because when you pull a team together, commencement is lucky to have Connie who keeps trains running and I don't know quite how she does all that but we are lucky to have her.

In many of the inaugurations it was literally a team of people that came together, volunteered their time and tried to make something out of nothing. And it was the camaraderie of those teams, that feeling that you were doing something remarkable and you were kind of doing it on your own together, making it up, if you will, as you went along. It is such an exhilarating opportunity to be with other people in a space that nobody really knows a whole heck of a lot about. And I loved all of that.

I will not miss, will not miss, worrying about the weather.

I just have to tell you, it is like the one thing -- so you do this, you have this intricate plan for this outside event and the one thing you can't control, sort of defines whether people see it as a good thing or a great thing.

And so, I will not miss that.

And I will miss all of you. Thanks, Meg.

Was there another part to that?

MEG KEILBACH: No. I just want to say, thank you, Mary. We will definitely miss you, too.

JESSICA WITHERS: We have one other event, that is sort of a surprise.

MARY OPPERMAN: I did wonder why Joel was here. I thought he was just keeping an eye on me.

JOEL MALINA: I was here for two reasons. The most important which I will start with is to thank the EA past and present. I'm really fortunate that the Office of the Assemblies under Gina and Erik's stewardship is under my division. This is like a family union. Meg, you and I did not have a chance to overlap but every single one of you I have wonderful memories. Thank you for your contribution to shared governance. And for the current EA for making time for me today.

I was not able to be a part of last Thursday's events. Both the arts quad big party and then a smaller HR family event where I understand there were spontaneous expressions of creativity and love for Mary. So, I'm hijacking the end of this to do what I would have done there. And I think is a good way of kind of wrapping all of this together, is through a demonstration, not surprisingly, in song, to thank Mary for all she's done.

And I will note that I have chosen a song from what my daughter reminds me is now considered the golden age of musical theater. Which makes me feel very old having gone to many golden age musical theater productions.

But I think that is appropriate because I am confident, Mary, that your legacy, and when we think back to your time here, this has been the golden age of Cornell. And you have had such a large, large role in that.

So, without further ado, and there is opportunity for those in the room, it is very simple at the end of some lines, and I will queue you, I just need to you sing Mary. That would probably work.

And by the way, it is Mary, not merry or marry. That is something I continue to harp some of my team about. Merry Christmas and marry. Let's continue.

♪ It's time to raise a glass to our star, Mary ♪♪

♪ A quarter century running HR, Mary ♪♪

♪ Since the day she came to Ithaca, leaving the confines of Harvard Yard, she graced our campus with the commitment to our staff and working hard.

New employees she's eager to meet. Mary.
At functions she finds little to eat, Mary.

When COVID hit, her council ensured that staff were always top of mind. Her dress and style are so well kept she never ever gets verklempt. She acts when others won't attempt, Mary.

She served five Cornell Presidents well. Mary.
She knows where many skeletons dwell, Mary.

When issues rise involving concerns of staff, she has a golden touch. She helps to navigate a path forward. She's awesome in the clutch.

Who is the dame that we're going to miss. Bringing it home, Mary.
We're blowing you a huge big red kiss. Mary.

We wish you well, you've been such a trusted friend and who we can confide. Enjoy this next exciting ride. Keep your grandkids by your side. Our love is more than justified, Mary.
Mwah.

MARY OPPERMAN: Well, that was just amazing.

I don't know if you all know this, but Joel sang on Broadway. Not that that surprises you after hearing that. I was a little disappointed he wasn't able to come to this show.

But Andrew, in the back, and on my team, did some really great skits. It was really fun. Thank you, Joel. That was incredible. Appreciate it. You've been a confidant and close friend. That will continue.

ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: So here is the end of our show. I'm Andrea, current chair of the EA, and the one thing that I've known you, because I came just after you, to the university, and we talked a lot about the difference that you've made in the lives of so many of us as well as the space of Cornell and presence of Cornell.

But thank you for the disability aspect of this. Where our colleagues and other institutions were not necessarily including disability in the DEI space. You were in the forefront for that. So, in working as part of our ADA coordinator team and executive steering committee, I don't know what we will do without you with the disability space. So, we will have to figure out and I'm sure we will continue to call on you for perspectives.

As we proceed, with the Employee Assembly as we go through, thank you for guidance and thank you for helping us set up for Christine and your perspectives as to what success looks like in the future. So, we greatly appreciate it. And want to make sure that everybody understands the structure of the EA is with your presence. So, we appreciate that so much.

MARY OPPERMAN: Thank you.

ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Thank you.

MARY OPPERMAN: Okay, can I just say, it was a great reminder to that when we talk about inclusivity it includes people with disabilities or varying definitions of abilities. And it is an opportunity again to remind ourselves that the broader we open our arms, the more talent will come to Cornell and the more talent that comes to Cornell, the better the outcomes for the students that we support and for the world that's looking to us for the next innovation that we will maybe address climate change or poverty or any number of things that our faculty and staff are working on. So, enjoy the ride. You are really lucky to be here. And I'm just really, really lucky to have had my time with all of you.