

February 17, 2000

Dear Ben:

In preparation for our conversation tomorrow morning, I thought I would write down a few thoughts. Hopefully you will have had a chance to read this before we speak. In case we somehow miss by phone, this will give you a sense of what I intended to say. Larry asked me and other faculty to talk with you about potential collaborations and to provide whatever information might be helpful to you in making a decision about Northeastern. Here are my frank and informal thoughts.

Your major assets:

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1. You are the top person in the world in your field, HCI.
2. You have a polished presentation style and you are very personable.
3. You have a social conscience and you appeal to diverse groups of people.

These assets give you tremendous leverage in the NU community where it is difficult to find a person with all three. I personally would like to see you come here.

Issues for you in coming to NU

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1. RESPECT -- you are well respected in the College of Computer Science (CCS) and CCS is highly respected within the university. The president and provost were both impressed by you. You will come in with a tremendous amount of prestige. Salary, benefits and resources would be commensurate with that level of respect.
2. Intellectual stimulation -- A number of the faculty in CCS are quite interested in your work. Of course, people are extremely busy and it is hard to make contact sometimes. I will discuss specific work I have proposed related to HCI later in this memo. I think of the Boston area as one large university. NU is in Boston and there really is a large number of collaborations between faculty at different institutions in the Boston area. I currently collaborate with faculty at BU, Tufts, Cambridge College and Lesley College. I have had collaborations with people at MIT, Harvard, and Brandeis as well over the past 15 years. I have had a number of collaborations with people in the Boston Public Schools.
3. NU is not ranked as high as Maryland. NU will probably never be ranked as high as Maryland, but CCS is rising in the CS rankings. NU is undergoing great change right now. It has been transforming (over the last 10 years)

from the largest private institution in the U.S. to a smaller/better institution. Average SAT scores have risen dramatically over the last few years and we are getting stronger graduate students. Although we are still unable to attract the caliber of grad student at Maryland, our top students are comparable to good students at Maryland. Mitch Wand and Will Clinger have particularly strong grad students.

4. NU is a private school and Maryland is a state school. Of course, there are pros and cons to each. For a private institution NU is politically very well connected at the city, state and federal levels. There is a full time staff person on the Boston campus devoted to Federal issues, who talks directly with senators Kennedy and Kerry. This person is EXTREMELY effective at transmitting the NU message. NU employs former MA governor, Michael Dukakis, and former MA attorney general, Scott Harshbarger as faculty. NU is considered a better citizen than the other major schools in Boston. Harvard and MIT are not viewed as particularly good citizens in Cambridge. Our board is very well connected. The Board consists of quite a few self-made men, some of whom are interested in grand ideas.

5. Physical Facilities. I am assuming your office suite and lab space would be located in the reasonably new Egan Research building. The facilities there are quite modern. Larry may have told you that CCS will be moving into a larger renovated building sometime in the next two years as well. So I expect the physical facilities for CCS, in general, to improve dramatically.

6. Boston area culture - The Boston Symphony, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Gardner Museum, The Berklee School of Music, the New England Conservatory of Music, the Huntington Theatre and the Wang Center are within walking distance of NU. For many years I was part of a group of people who met at the Design Center at Harvard to discuss geometry and form. The group, called the Philomorphs, was run by Arthur Loeb and Buckminster Fuller and Cyril Smith used to attend when they were alive.

Other thoughts:

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I know that you are well aware that it takes as much energy to write a proposal for \$50K as it does to write a \$5M proposal. As a trustee professor you would not have to chase the small \$\$\$.

I think the president, provost and Board are approachable with good ideas. Your ideas about usability, access, etc. fit their mantra.

NU has strong industrial relations through its coop program. We have contacts at Sun Microsystems, MITRE, BBN, EMC, TERC, LOTUS, and a number of other Boston/Cambridge area companies.

Your general mission of usability and access fits well with much of my service activity. It has not been a research area for me for some years, since I did the work on programming interfaces for blind programmers. However, I have continued to strongly support the basic principles of good interface design and culture-adapted interfaces is one of the topics in my NSF/ITR pre-proposal.

My cockamamie idea for today:  
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NU hired PeopleSoft to rebuild its information systems (a \$12M, multi-year project). This is the second company that NU has hired. The first was an utter failure and there are some who perceive this project as being in distress. I think one of the goals is for all student services to be accessible from touch-screen kiosks around campus, telephone and the web. It is not clear to me that PeopleSoft has thought through the HCI issues. Wouldn't it be spectacular if you came to NU as a Trustee Professor and, besides having a major intellectual impact, you renovated the interface design for student access to campus information systems based upon the principles of your research. Having that kind of impact could bring new meaning to the word "academic". and a great book could come out of it. Few academics get to see their ideas embedded in useful technology that quickly.

My cockamamie idea of a couple of months ago  
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A couple of months back I submitted a 5-page NSF/ITR pre-proposal. It deals with the issue of the "digital divide", specifically for African Americans. Among the ideas raised in the proposal is the notion of "culture-adapted interfaces" for web-based applications. The proposal contains a broad range of African American researchers (people I have worked with over the years). I have made a copy of the pre-proposal available at my ftp site in case you want to read it. Although it is one of 1800 pre-proposals and has a very slim chance of getting through the first cut, I plan to pursue funding for this proposal through a number of other avenues. If it appeals to you, I would love to have you work on this project with us.

To get the pre-proposal in WORD format.

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ftp ftp.ccs.neu.edu
>login: anonymous
>password: <your email address>
>cd pub/people/york
>get pre-itr4.doc
>bye
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I guess you can tell that I think there are tremendous opportunities for you here at NU. If I can be of further help after our conversation, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Bryant