Why Cornell?

Young Innovators Explain
Very early, almost from the beginning, Cornell recognized and emphasized the importance of genomics. Cornell, therefore, has the infrastructure for doing genomics. The facilities I need to dig deeper into my research are right here.

Cornell also has a large and diverse group of young, vibrant, and talented plant scientists, who are juxtaposed well. What’s particularly exciting for me is Cornell’s extremely active corn research group that conducts very diverse research. Although I work on other organisms, corn is my “home” model organism, and it’s stimulating to have great scientists with whom to talk.

There are people across campus in various departments and colleges who can contribute to the research in my lab, for example, in different ways—not just computer scientists, but also physicists and chemists, and not just to generate new tools, but also to generate new ways of interpreting the data. The initiatives that have emerged at Cornell over the last 15 years came about to exploit this kind of interaction.

Both Cornell faculty and administration realize the importance of diverse groups of scientists interacting. I would like to see even more interactions among Cornell scientists. So much new data is coming in that it is difficult for a single scientist to do everything needed to answer even his or her own specific questions. With Cornell’s eminent science community, think of what we could accomplish.
The Cornell Mystique

Cornell has a spaciousness—two kinds: geographical, the large campus with wonderful wide-open spaces; and scope and inclusiveness, its breadth of higher learning. I was a student here, class of 1997. I can remember the first time I walked around campus. In addition to buildings with names like mathematics and music, there were others like poultry and plant science. I thought, “You can really learn anything here!”

My family has had connections to Cornell since the 1930s, when my grandfather and one of his brothers attended. Since then, we have sent several generations of Kleinbergs to Cornell. Throughout my childhood, we visited my uncle, a Cornell statistics professor, here. I remember when we dropped my brother off here to start his undergraduate education.

Even if I had no personal history with it, I would have chosen Cornell. My research area is theoretical computer science. This is an area that is undergoing a revolution, because our definition of what a computer is and what it can do for us changes so radically every five years. When I was a student here, networking was something you could do with your computer, but it was still a relatively minor feature. Now we hardly ever use our computers without using the network.

The mathematical theory of what computers are capable of has to change profoundly in order to match the change taking place in how people use their computers. Cornell is one of the places that understands just how deep this transformation runs. It is one of the places that the entire world looks to for leadership on defining the foundation of this new kind of computer science.
Masha Raskolnikov
English

Invested in a Challenge
For a nontraditional humanist, Cornell is an exceptional place to work; there’s a lot of intellectual space to do interdisciplinary research, lots of exciting dialogue going on, and many—sometimes, too many—speakers and colloquia to engage with.

Many medieval studies programs at universities across the country are more Chaucer-oriented. One of the great things about Cornell is that it’s an extraordinary center for scholarship on Piers Plowman, a beautiful and frustratingly complex work by an anonymous author whose name might have been William Langland, written around the time that Chaucer was writing his Canterbury Tales. These two masters of English poetry could not have been more different. Where Chaucer is all-welcoming, jokey, and fun, with the steel of his intellect hidden underneath, Langland can be very challenging, but incredibly rich with multiple layers of political and philosophical ideas. I love teaching both and enjoy having colleagues who are so invested in Langland that we have to negotiate who “gets” to teach this difficult author.
A Milieu for the Unconventional

Using evolution to design things is not your standard mechanical engineering. It’s unconventional. I have a joint appointment—50 percent Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering and 50 percent Computing and Information Science. I believe that Cornell has the capacity to accommodate unusual research. Many universities say that they support interdisciplinary research—it’s the thing to say these days. But the bottom line is whether a department will accept a faculty member who does this kind of work. Will they grant tenure for work that is outside the traditional boundaries?

I now realize how much freedom I have had to pursue my type of research and how great this place is for me. To be able to do research unencumbered by traditional disciplinary lines is what excites me. Many new areas of research come from the merging of different ideas and disciplines.
Dynamic Cornell

Cornell is one of the big campuses with a huge investment in the life sciences. I see the potential for the future: the connection with Weill Cornell Medical College, Weill Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology, Weill Hall, the Nanobiotechnology Center, and the expansions in physics—all of these, plus the linear accelerator Cornell is building. These are positive future perspectives. At Cornell, there is no feeling of coming to a place that is all set or coming into a set structure with no development. Instead, we are surrounded by many dynamic possibilities that are moving forward. I want to be in this kind of environment.
Cornell’s historical legacy is the strength of its people with unique talents, experience, and skills continuing throughout time. I have been able to train with and to develop my own interests with outstanding colleagues. I have accumulated a base of collaboration—shared knowledge, ideals, and work—that I continue to build.

It is rare to be in a place where one can be a physician and walk from a hospital to a laboratory and interact with scientists. Because so much talent is packed into a small area, many of us take advantage of this opportunity, not just in my field but also in many fields at Weill Cornell Medical College, to do bench-to-bedside translational work. We also have many close collaborations in New York City—for example, across the street at Rockefeller or Columbia University. Cornell is a special place to be a physician-scientist.

The type of work we do and have done over the past 15 to 20 years in neurology and neuroscience is possible because of this environment. Cornell is one of the few places in the world (the other places may be Cambridge, England, and Liège, Belgium) where serious scientific interest has been focused on the recovery of consciousness after severe brain injury and ways to diagnose and treat the problem. The ideas have grown up at Cornell, with core contributions from multiple collaborations. We have established a footprint in the very early stage of this new field.
Cheryl Finley  
History of Art

On the Move

I came to Cornell as a visiting professor in the Africana Studies and Research Center in the fall of 2003. The following year I joined Cornell’s history of art department. The department is on the move. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach to teaching visual culture alongside the foundational theories and methodologies of art history, the department has made a commitment to put itself on the cutting edge. Unlike other history of art departments across the country, Cornell has a global as well as Western focus.

Around the same time that I joined the faculty to teach African American and African diaspora art, the department expanded beyond the traditional boundaries, hiring other new faculty specializing in archaeology and photography; contemporary South Asian art, and Native American Art. This signaled a change that recognizes nontraditional areas of study in art history in a way that enhances and complements the classic curriculum for which our department is known.

I was also drawn to Cornell by my esteemed colleagues; the amazing collections of the Johnson Museum of Art; the research and teaching resources of the Kroch Library with the Hip Hop Collection and the Samuel J. May Antislavery Collection; the renowned School of Art, Architecture and Planning; the opportunities for critical engagement at the Society for Humanities; the pioneering Africana Studies and Research Center; and by Cornell’s longstanding commitment to scholarly excellence.
This is home. I grew up, age 2 to 22, in Dryden, New York, just outside of Ithaca. To me, Ithaca was the big city, and Cornell was a special place. Whenever we thought about going to a good college, Cornell was first to come to mind. It still has that resonance.

My background is in labor economics, and I also work on education and health policy topics. Cornell has an amazing group of labor faculty in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations and a large group of health economists in my department. This overlap of health and labor economics is a great fit for my work. I can work simultaneously in labor economics and health policy. Having these kinds of people to talk with is a real asset.

Another unique advantage that is important to me is Cornell’s restricted access census data center. It’s invaluable for applied economists who work with government microdata.
Where the Cutting Edge Is
Cornell builds on the strength of the past, and at the same time, pursues new frontiers. The ways in which Cornell combines the old and new make the institution a truly stimulating and inspiring place to be. Cornell’s Department of Government has been long known across the nation as a place where exciting historical and institutional work is done. Now we draw on other approaches, as well, and bring them together with these older traditions. This is where we get creative and innovative thinking—here at the boundary between strong traditions and new directions.

David Harris, Deputy Provost/Vice Provost for the Social Sciences, has been a tremendous presence in emphasizing the social sciences—coordinating and bringing together our strengths. Cornell is an unusual institution because it’s so decentralized, with faculty across campus in social science departments spanning eight colleges and schools. Without institutional mechanisms for bringing us together, we might not realize our common interests.

The university also benefits from the growing prominence of the Survey Research Institute (SRI) here on campus. I was able to conduct a national survey of 1,400 people during the summer of 2008 through SRI. And for the first time, SRI conducted a national poll in October 2008—right in the heat of election season—to which we could submit questions. This is significant for Cornell. It’s at all of these intersections that cutting-edge work happens. I am thrilled to be part of it.
A Vibrant Vision

The images that Steve Kresovich, former Vice Provost for Life Sciences, painted of the future of Cornell capture the imagination. His enthusiastic stories and maps of the future campus and Cornell’s intriguing growth of diverse people, particularly in the life sciences, exerted an energy that convinces you—this is the place to be. Several multidisciplinary centers across campus, including the Center for Vertebrate Genomics and the more recent Weill Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology, attract new generations of scientists and provide a scientific melting pot for innovation. Kresovich presented an exciting vision, and I want to be part of it.
A Return to Cornell

I left Cornell for a position at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, but returned after a year. I went to Carnegie Mellon because of its strong behavioral research group, particularly in judgment and decision making—the psychology side of behavioral research. I also liked the idea of being in an interdisciplinary department with both economists and psychologists. When I got there, however, I saw lots of behavioral research, but did not see nearly enough economics. The mainstream economists were not especially willing to talk across disciplinary lines.

To get the most out of my intellectual life, I want to work with both the judgment–decision-making crowd and the economics crowd. I found that I missed the Cornell environment with its combination of both. In addition, Cornell made a commitment to reenergize its push to build the behavioral research community, particularly in behavioral economics. It made a lot of sense for me to return.

Cornell works well for me. I get so much joy from walking around and seeing the Cornell campus and the Ithaca landscape. And the behavioral research community is already very good, and it’s getting even better. It’s very exciting right now.