

February 20, 1992

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Dear Ron:

You have asked for my reflections on how NCAIR might focus its philanthropy over the next decade, taking account of the dramatically increased resources it will have at its disposal. I am excited by the possibilities and delighted to respond.

My ideas are both informed by and limited by my institutional situation and by personal long-term plans that could be assisted by NCAIR support. That should come as no surprise; but the observation does lead me to state what I trust is obvious: You are welcome to share this letter with your colleagues on the NCAIR Executive Committee or link these ideas to me in any other way you judge appropriate so they can be filtered for parochialism or self-interest. Because my experience is in law, others will have to transpose these views into the field of accounting.

NCAIR's goal of exploring and promoting the use of information technologies to improve the professions of law and accounting aligns with the commercial and professional ambitions of numerous other entities. The scale of NCAIR's resources allow it to support precedent-setting activity that might not otherwise occur -- activities or models of activities that will, in all likelihood, then be spread through commercial and professional channels. With annual grant-making of over half a million, NCAIR should be able to engage in institutional innovation not simply individual project encouragement. Indeed, it could, if it chose, set an agenda and solicit proposals rather than simply inviting proposals for review in the light of a diversity of factors.

You and your colleagues on the NCAIR board know I am convinced the technology is ripe for development of dramatically new means of distributing professional information. Last May's NCAIR conference on electronic publishing provided strong evidence that most publishers serving the legal and accounting professions and communicating the work of academic professionals in those fields are too hesitant to lead, but quite ready to follow on this front.

CALI continues to exist because the commercial publishers who do more traditional educational materials have not ventured into

electronically based lessons.

Put in most general terms, I see the greatest opportunity for NCAIR leadership in the institutional vacuum that currently fills far too much space between the institutions and individuals engaged in professional education, the professions they serve, and the information and educational material providers.

A slightly different but related point has to do with the importance of filling institutional vacuum with institutional rather than product models. I believe that NCAIR encouragement that is focused directly on products and product features will have far less leveraging effect than NCAIR support of the creation of new institutional arrangements aimed at developing new educational and professional materials on the one hand and distributing novel and effective educational and professional materials on the other.

Creating educational or professional materials that fully exploit and therefore demonstrate the power of the new technology requires more than the standard author-publisher match up. The publishers currently putting money into the development of computer-based information products are bringing the creative work in-house, an approach that carries an implicit assumption that the author or domain expert is a relatively unimportant part of the creation team -- in my view a fundamental mistake. But that approach reflects an important reality which is that creation requires far more than a domain author. Professionals and academics who are interested in producing computer-based materials, whether they are based in professional firms or universities, find it very difficult to break out of the assumption that professional scholarship can be done on an individual basis. The necessary collaborations with information and computer professionals and those involved in similar ventures in other disciplines are not fostered in either firm or university setting. They are, at present, inhibited by those settings.

I would urge NCAIR to support the creation of several institutes or centers that would bring together the critical mass of talent to produce and, where necessary distribute, computer-based professional and educational materials. Such support should provide essential start-up funds and support for initial projects with the expectation that the centers would become self-supporting after 5 or more years. Their focus would be as much on process as on product, with the expectation that a measure of self-sufficiency might be obtained through successful product development.

A second and not inconsistent approach NCAIR might take would be to identify a few critical infrastructure developments that would facilitate the spread of computer-based professional information and professional education materials and invite competing proposals. Such an approach by NCAIR could, I believe, bring a large number of academics and professionals in law and accounting into communication with one another on the internet -- speeding and smoothing the inevitable.

Conspicuously absent from my list of suggested NCAIR priorities are individual project grants and prizes. That is because I don't believe that NCAIR pursues its distinctive mission or comparative advantage when it supports basic work on a.i. and law or provides recognition to an innovative and effective educational or information product. It is not that I think such activities are undeserving of support and recognition. Quite the contrary, I believe most emphatically that they should be encouraged but am convinced that support for innovations in the institutional context for such creativity will have far greater long term effect than individual grants or prizes.

Let me conclude with an even clearer declaration of self-interest than I began. As soon as NCAIR is ready to receive proposals, Cornell Law School will submit one, framed by Tom Bruce and myself. If NCAIR's guidelines permit, we will propose support at a level of \$100,000 a year for five years of an Institute at Cornell that will bring law faculty (including those teaching in a practice or clinical setting), technical staff, information specialists, and those with relevant experience in other disciplines together around a series of projects and conferences. The self-conscious aim will be to explore the forms of collaboration and the combinations of talent necessary to produce effective materials harnessing this new technology.

Sincerely,

Peter W. Martin
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