MEMORANDUM

TO: Deans, Directors, and Department Heads

FROM: Don M. Randel, Provost

SUBJECT: Computing and Information Sciences

In the summer of 1996, the Research Futures Task Force identified three strategic, enabling disciplines in science and engineering: advanced materials, genomics, and computing and information science. In the two years following, significant steps were taken in, and significant resources committed to, the first two of these. Early in 1999 a task force, established in collaboration with the Faculty Senate, was charged with making recommendations for advancing computing and information science. The first report of this task force was issued at the end of the spring term, and a final report is to be issued at the end of the fall term of this year. The administration has taken several steps designed to inform discussions that are scheduled in the fall as part of the final report’s preparation.

First, it is my intent that these discussions benefit from the vigorous intellectual leadership of someone committed to advancing computing and information sciences throughout the University, whatever form that should take. The faculty member appointed to this task should be a leader with the intellectual gifts and vision to bring about a broadly collaborative effort. To this end, I have appointed Professor Robert L. Constable, lately chair of the Department of Computer Science, to the position of Dean for Computing and Information Sciences. What emerges should result from his leadership of faculty interests across the University in relation to our existing strength in the Department of Computer Science. I am very grateful to him for his willingness to undertake this effort in the context of an urgent need for change and our traditional reluctance to engage in it. The charge to him and the task force is to identify how computing and information sciences can best be advanced throughout the University; it is not to invent, on whatever pretext, the way to do nothing.

Secondly, I have asked Dean Constable to work with Vice President Carolyn Ainslie and Vice Provost Cutberto Garza to develop pilot management procedures for the new Office of the Dean for Computing and Information Sciences. I have asked that these pilot procedures encompass administrative responsibilities for the present Department of Computer Science, reflect the anticipated University-wide roles for the new dean’s office, operate in close collaboration with all relevant colleges, and be consistent with the essential features of the various structures put forth by the task force report (see http://www.cs.cornell.edu/cucs/news/june-report.html): authority for budget and human resource functions (faculty and non-faculty), authority to conduct development activities in coordination with the University Division of Alumni Affairs and Development, and authority to expand external relations with industry in partnership with the College of Engineering, the Theory Center, and the Program of
Computer Graphics, and other relevant University activities.

It is anticipated that experiences gained through the implementation of pilot administrative procedures through the fall term will assist the Offices of the Provost and the Dean for Computing and Information Sciences in responding to goals and recommendations of the CIS Task Force’s final report and the University discussions leading up to it.

Thus, what has been done so far? A University-role for computing and information sciences has been accepted, a Dean for Computing and Information Sciences has been appointed, and the limited administrative responsibilities outlined above have been transferred tentatively from the Colleges of Engineering and Arts and Sciences to the new Dean’s office. No new department, college, school, center, faculty, etc., has been predetermined, much less put in place. Any such new organization will require approvals on campus and by the Board of Trustees. Thus no structure has been created that includes the privilege of granting degrees, admitting students, etc.

Dean Constable and the task force will make recommendations on these and other matters in November. In the meantime, the Department of Computer Science remains a department of the College of Engineering and the College of Arts and Sciences, as it has long been, and will continue to fulfill its responsibilities to both as well as to other colleges through its instructional programs. In order to ensure that, as new resources are committed, these resources constitute neither a drag on the College of Engineering nor an indirect subsidy for others of its programs, the Office of the Provost has assumed responsibility for the oversight of the Department’s finances. But the ultimate form of any new organization, if any, whether college, school, division, faculty, center, or other, must await the discussions on which we are now embarked.

The importance of this area has only grown since the report of the Research Futures Task Force, as evidenced by the attention and resources being devoted to it by a number of federal agencies. More important than federal attention is that almost every discipline at the University is being affected in one way or another. The future health of all of these disciplines will depend in some degree on our ability to bring to bear on them Cornell’s great strength in computer science and closely related disciplines. Clearly, then, the task force must produce a final report on which we must act. And given the rate of change in these disciplines, we must act speedily. Additional resources will be required, and administrative arrangements that can best serve the interests of the entire University must be put in place. At a minimum, the College of Engineering cannot be expected to provide all of the resources for an initiative that is of such broad applicability to the University, a matter that has already occasioned some tension within that College.

It is important that the final report of the task force on these matters be informed by considerable campus discussion so that it can be acted upon as more than a trial balloon. To that end, the task force has held and will continue to hold discussions with a broad range of interested parties, and the Faculty Senate has scheduled a forum on the subject for September 15.

Cornell can, and it must, seize an opportunity to lead as a university in bringing to bear on the broadest range of disciplines the remarkable advances in computing and information science now taking place. I look forward to working with everyone in this transforming collaboration, which is but the next in the series that has made Cornell unique among universities in its accomplishments and in its service to humankind.