**Conversation 1 (Email):**

**Question:**

Hi Pratik,

I am a prospective student for IST program in PSU, from Chennai, India. I have received an offer letter for this program and i have some basic questions.   I got your email from the program website and would be great if you can help me with some basic questions. I would like to know the approximate fees per year and also would like to know if there is a chance for me to get a TA opportunity during the later semesters/years. I am happy to give you a call and discuss if that is easier.

**Response:**

Hi,

Congratulations on your offer.

IST has stopped providing funding/tuition waiver to it's Master's students. However, we do have wage pay roll opportunities that you can take up right from the first semester. They pay you 15$/hr and it's enough to cover your living expenses. You can try to get a Graduate Assistantship from other departments which do cover tuition. It is hard to get but even if you get it in one semester you can save a lot (as PSU gives 100% tuition waver to its assistants (GA/TA/RA) along with a stipend).  You can check the fees at the bursar's website; but I reckon this year it is approximately $14000 for 9 credits. And you have to take 30 credits. Calculate and plan your fees based on the number of credits you'll take up each semester (you have to take a minimum of 9) rather than yearly.

Best,

Pratik Agarwal

**Conversation 2 (LinkedIn):**

Hi,

First of all I want to specialize in data science so wanted to know how different the IST course is from CS. Second, how hard is it to get an internship or assistantship or at least a job to cover day to day expenses. Third, I had opted for the University park campus on my application and I am not sure if I should stick with that or opt for the Harrisburg campus. I am not even sure if I can change it. So any input on that will be great. Thanks a lot for your help.

**Response:**

Hi,

1. Penn State is extremely research oriented. So IST and CS both is pretty much the same when it boils down to research. CS courses are hard though while IST courses are not very hard. Also, IST coursework are more applied in nature.

2. It is a little tricky to get an assistantship but not at all difficult to get daily jobs. I got a TA wage job/Grader in first semester and have an assistantship this semester. Graders are always required in IST and they pay you pretty decently. However, IST has stopped funding it's master's students but CS still does. I got an assistantship from another department.

3. It's not very hard but excruciating to get an internship. But that's pretty much in every college. You have to be good with your data structures and algorithms (if you're looking for SE roles) or your data science fundamentals. Data science is in huge demand and SE has always been in demand. I landed interviews at Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook, Citrix and Epic from Penn. So don't worry about the exposure.

4. I would highly recommend to not apply to any campus apart from University Park. Please let me know if you need any further details.

**Question:**

Hey,

Thank you so much for the information. It went a long way in giving me clarity about Penn State and help helping me accept the offer. Now I have a few more questions about the courses and the department. When should I be selecting the course? I have access to LionPath, but I am not sure about prerequisite or mandatory courses. Also I have not been assigned an adviser yet so should I look for one first and then select the courses?

**Response:**

Hi,

I'm glad I could help. You have time to select courses until classes begin; which is 21st August I guess this year. IST 504 will be mandatory for you during Fall. You can choose any other two courses. Generally advisers are not very concerned about the course you're taking but they do want students to take their own course. So I recommend you shortlisting a couple of professors. What's your area of interest?

**Question:**

I am interested in machine learning and data mining, although I don't really have a lot of experience in the field.

**Response:**

That's fine. You'll have time to do research in whatever field you like. There are a lot of options for ML/DM. David Reitter and James Wang have some really interesting work going on. There are tons of other professors too. Do you want to do a phd or go for a job ?

**Question:**

Okay. Thanks. I'll check them out and send them a mail. I would like to go for a job.

**Response:**

Ohkay. TBH, it's very hard to get a job in ML or related area unless you're doing a pHd or exceptionally good in the field. It's not impossible however. If you want to go for a software developer job, IST isn't the best place to warn you. We don't have basic CS courses but all are heavily research oriented. So keep that in mind. For SE roles you'll have to do DS/Algo in your own time (you'll get time). And am assuming you're undergrad major was CS so it won't really be an issue.

But under ML professors if you do a thesis, you will definitely be immensely challenged and learn tons of stuff.

**Question:**

Hmmm. Okay. Okay. One question about accomodation. Lots of places have apartments open from August mid. Is it a good idea to take up the temporary accommodation provided by college?

**Response:**

The temporary accommodation is provided by IGSA also. That's the Indian association. You will be provided accomodation with existing seniors. I suggest you sign up for that rather than paying the college. But if you take college housing, you’ll be able to network/hang-out with other new grads.

**Conversation 3 (Facebook):**

**Question:**

What is a better option between Penn state's IST program and Maryland College Park's HCI program?? What are the pros and cons?

**Response:**

I was in the same position last year and I chose Penn State because a) My interests were more aligned with a professor at Penn and I wanted to work for her b) Even though I was interested in HCI, I wanted to keep my options open for more areas and IST allows you to do that as it has multitude of research areas. HCIM program is inclined towards HCI research as the name suggests.  
  
Few take aways: both universities are research oriented, so you are on your own when it comes to internships/jobs.   
  
Penn State IST program has stopped giving funding/full-time assistantships to Master's students; however, wage payroll jobs are available. I did receive funding from another department although. Mayland HCIM still funds it Master's students and going by their mailing lists (in which I'm still there), they have plenty of assistantship opportunities coming up every now and then. You may ask one of their seniors more about it.   
  
Penn's location isn't great for placements but this year we saw a lot of companies visiting. It is challenging to get an internship but as long as you make/have connections and are persistent enough, you will get one. I managed to land interviews at Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook and Epic systems so it's not impossible.   
  
Having said all of that, both universities have some great HCI research going on (Data Science is also booming at Penn) and if you're interested in research or plan to do a PhD, both are awesome to consider. Good luck!

**Question:**

I actually am still confused regarding which one to choose. i wanted to know more about the course

**Response:**

Hey! So the courses at Penn State IST varies. We have ML, NLP, AI as well as courses like HCI, Design thinking, etc. It depends a lot on your end goals. IST also allows you to choose courses from any department you like. We have 6 credits of core courses too which are honestly not much of a use and the dept is also planning to club them. We do not have exams and only presentations and projects. Generally IST courses are not hard and professors are good with grading. Also, the courses are very much research oriented and not much industry oriented

**Question:**

UMD is okay location wise what about Penn?

**Response:**

It's a town which is nice and cheap to live. However, from job perspective, you will be at a disadvantage as it is not very near to any big city. UMD is better that wise.

**Question:**

I wanted to go for design oriented course in Indiana but that didnt work. Does Penn have good Interaction design courses

**Response:**

Well IST doesn't have interaction design courses per se, but industrial engineering has golf courses which you can always take up. Also you have to select an advisor. And mostly they respect your interests and give you freedom to do whatever you like. HCIM and IST both are more inclined towards research so you have to find out ways in your projects which can help you gain the right exposure to land a UX design job. UX researcher or Interaction design researcher jobs are mostly for PhDs and hard for MS students. But the courses will give you a lot of different perspectives when it comes to UX design which is highly sought after by employers. In your personal time you have to work on your portfolio and learn necessarily skill sets

**Question:**

How is the current job scenario?

**Response:**

It's good. Don't go by what media is saying. I would also suggest you to talk to a senior in UMD to know more about their courses and then compare. If you're sure about UX, you can definitely go with UMD. But if you want to consider other areas like software engineering, etc. Penn State will give you a good exposure as well

**Question:**

I am sure about UX. But the thing is I got to know from seniors that the job opportunities are not that great in UMD and as it will be more specialized I was confused. I am really not interested in Computer Engg. there are no GA?

**Response:**

IST has stopped offering GAs to Masters. But you can apply in other depts which is honestly not very easy to get. UMD still has a lot of GA opportunities as far as I know. When it comes to placements, it all boils down to referrals and career fairs. Referrals are highly important so it's good if you've friends here or you make connections. Both UMD and IST will have a lot of companies visiting the career fairs so that won't be an issue.

**Question:**

yaaa.. For UMD career fairs are a good thing for CS students. is it same in penn? So are there any other means to like earn?

**Response:**

We have engineering career fairs, IST has it's own career fair and there are others too. You can attend all of them but am not sure if they've UX design openings. I apply for SE roles so every company has that. Yes, IST provides TA roles where you can earn ~1400$ per month if you get a 20 hour one. Generally people get around 10-20 hours depending on what the dean assigns. The typical living expense here is 600-700$

**Question:**

achha and what are the other job profile? Like what jobs people opt for or get ?

**Response:**

IST has only 12-13 people. I have friends who have got interns as ML engineer, software engineer, etc. If you're applying online and have referrals it generally doesn't matter! I do remember a handful of companies having UX design banners. But I never asked the companies where I went. Don't take a lot of tension about jobs. Internships are hard, actually. Also, I would recommend to start working on your portfolio immediately. It's a must to have a brilliant portfolio to get good UX roles

**Question:**

what is the class strength? 11-12?

**Response:**

Yeah generally PSU has a very low intake for most of the depts.

**Question:**

What electives have you taken?

**Response:**

I mix up my courses as I'm interested in almost everything. But industrial engineering has Human Factors which have really cool courses and projects within them. I have taken their Interaction Design course and loving it. But to warn you, when you say "UX design" it doesn't always mean just interface design; it has a lot of ramifications like usability, psychology, etc. You will gain all thoseknowledge here in a comprehensive way. But skills like Javascript or Photoshop/Illustrator is something you need to learn on your own and apply them to your projects

**Question:**

So, Like first sem there is 1 core and 2 electives?

**Response:**

Yep! so i had take a course on NLP (which I regret) and one on design thinking by my advisor. There's an awesome course in Fall which is called design for human variability in IE dept. and also one called Cognitive work design which generally will be filled by the time you will select courses