To Whom It May Concern:

I whole-heartedly support Asaf Beasley joining me at Stevens Institute of Technology for an internship to work on a project that connects group identity and social influence using a mixture of traditional psychological methods with newer data-mining methods.

This internship would have many positive outcomes. First and foremost, the project Asaf is proposing has the potential to make a significant scientific contribution to two fields of research, social psychology and computer science. In social psychology, the literature has focused on the role group identity has on the individual processing information such as persuasive messages (Hogg & Abrams, 1989), but has overlooked the consequence this has when the process is situated in a real context such as a social network. In computer science there has been extensive work on the diffusion of information in social networks (Leskovec et al, 2009; Bakshy et al, 2010), and some work on classifying individuals (Wu et al, 2010), but no work studying the impact of group identity on the flow of information. By combining these lines of research, we hope to have a positive impact on both fields by bridging the scientific communities using a combination of methodologies.

Second, in order to complete this research, Asaf will have to learn techniques from computer science, such as managing very large data sets using distributed computing, traditional data mining techniques including large-scale social network analysis, natural language processing methods including sentiment analysis, and advanced machine learning techniques for classification such as support vector machines. There are very few subject matter experts, and essentially no other social psychologists, that have working knowledge of these techniques. By learning them, Asaf will have many more opportunities than he would otherwise.

Third, several researchers have privately indicated that the field of social psychology (or psychology in general) is missing an enormous opportunity presented in the form of the massive new data sets of online behavior, and this opportunity is largely being missed because there is no training in the appropriate methodologies. Through his experience with this project, Asaf will be able to apply the techniques to other problems and hopefully down the road will ultimately train future psychologists in these methods, something that will greatly benefit the field as a whole.

I also have experience with summer internships from my time at Yahoo! Research. Over two summers I mentored two graduate students, Eytan Bakshy, who is currently a Research Scientist at Facebook, and Shaomei Wu, who is finishing her Ph.D. at Cornell University. Both of those internships resulted in a publication. I am also highly qualified to train Asaf in the methods described above; I am teaching a Master’s level course in the fall on Web Analytics specifically focused on those methods.

While Asaf is at Stevens, he will be provided with office space in close proximity to my own, as well as access to other resources at Stevens. For example, he will have access to a computer and will be able to utilize the computational resources currently being employed for collecting and managing Twitter data. We will also, of course, do our best to accommodate any other needs that may arise in the course of the project that are not covered by the funding provided by the IGERT funding.

This internship would have a large, broad impact scientifically and could make a very big difference in Asaf’s career. I strongly support and welcome him to come to Stevens Institute for this research project.

Sincerely,

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