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10/13/06

Re: Proposal for classroom embedded web conferencing

Dear President Christ and the Strategic Planning Committee,

Recently I presented a teaching arts luncheon on the use of web conferencing in the classroom and it was met with great enthusiasm. The presentation was titled, *Enlarging contexts: Enhancing learning using video conferencing (April 2006)*. Pedagogy does not have to be confined to the walls of a classroom. In today's digital, web based environment the world should be our classroom. I truly believe the pedagogical use of web conferencing can be beneficial for all courses taught in any division of the college. The college should be committed to breaking down the walls of the classroom and embracing the resources worldwide to provide students with the most practical experience as possible in order to prepare them for the world outside our campus.

I joined the college as an assistant professor in the Biology department in January of 2005. Since that time I have been very interested in trying to breakdown the barriers between the typically abstract classroom lesson and the practical work environment of a particular field. Too often do students leave college with a false or incomplete perception of how things are actually completed and no concept of the real people working behind the names on a given paper. For instance, my Developmental Biology course is one in which students read primary research articles. There is a list of names on the title page of the article. Who are they? What challenges did they face in completing the work for that particular paper? If I don't agree with their conclusions, what might their commentary be? There are so many questions that could be raised from one article that it is impossible for the course instructor to know or even provide the proper perspective to address all those questions. For this reason I have employed a relatively new technology known as web conferencing using simple digital cameras and a chatting software program to literally bring in the lead investigators from some of these articles for a quick Q and A with my students. This has been an amazingly successful endeavor from many aspects. Students get engaged and committed to learning the material. Simply due the pressure of being in the midst of the lead investigators students are forced to critically think about the material and generate challenging and forward moving questions. Other benefits have also arisen. We now learn what the scientist looks like, what they sound like, and that they actually have a sense of humor (albeit, quirky). Before you know it, students learn that these scientists are real people who are very enthusiastic about their work. Students begin to gain a truer perception of the work and individuals who generated the concepts we teach. Abstract lessons now become real life experiences.

The technology is easy to use; however, the fear of the unknown and lack of confidence with video and technology presents a real barrier for

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many professors to even imagine organizing such an endeavor. **I am proposing that the college to invest in embedding web conferencing technology into every classroom.** This would require a Macintosh Computer, an iSight Camera, Conference recorder software, and a Digital Projector. Given the hectic environments in which instructors work, if the technology is not present in the classroom, an instructor will not take the initiative. On the other hand if we breakdown the walls to foster more practical learning experiences, the connection with experts in a given field would be priceless for the students. This approach will assuredly present Smith College and its students to the experts around the world in a very positive and forward thinking way. If we take advantage of this technology on a large scale now, then Smith College will be viewed as pioneers in this pedagogical practice.

Sincerely,

Michael J.F. Barresi, Ph.D.