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Invitations for Pew Symposium in Roanoke

Improving Learning & Reducing Costs:
Redesigning Large-Enrollment Courses (1999)

1999

Invite Letter for Pew Symposium in Learning and Technology in Roanoke

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National Center for Academic Transformation

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STARS Citation

Twigg, Carol, "Invite Letter for Pew Symposium in Learning and Technology in Roanoke" (1999).
Invitations for Pew Symposium in Roanoke. 2.
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Dear :

I am writing to ask you to participate in an invitational symposium at the Hotel Roanoke in Roanoke, Virginia on July 15-16, 1999, on the topic of "Redesigning More Productive Learning Environments." This symposium is the first event in an exciting new program, The Pew Symposia in Learning and Technology.

The purpose of the Pew Symposia in Learning and Technology is to conduct an ongoing national conversation about issues related to the intersection of learning and technology. It will marshal the thinking of acknowledged experts and frame the issues in ways that are useful to the higher education community as it incorporates uses of technology into the academic program. The program will convene two symposia per year from 1999 through 2002 and produce monographs based on those discussions from a public-interest perspective.

The Pew Symposia series is one part of a new three-part program, the Pew Learning and Technology Program. The goal of this \$8.8-million, four-year effort is to place the national discussion about the impact that new technologies are having on the nation's campuses in the context of student learning and ways to achieve this learning cost-effectively.

In addition to the symposia series and a series of communications activities, the program will coordinate a \$6 million institutional grant program described in the enclosed booklet. This program will support efforts of colleges and universities to redesign their instructional approaches using technology to achieve cost savings as well as quality enhancements. Redesign projects will focus on large-enrollment, introductory courses, which have the potential of impacting significant numbers of students and generating substantial cost savings. The program expects to award 30 - 35 grants over three years (approximately 10 awards per year) with an average award of \$200,000.

Because the institutional grant program will be a major focus of our effort, we believe that the topic of redesigning learning environments to enhance quality and reduce costs is most appropriate for our first symposium. Our goal will be to develop a conceptual framework that will undergird the practices implemented in the grant program. We are not starting from scratch: the symposium will build on prior conceptual work in this area as well as on the successful practice of several leading-edge institutions. By iterating between theory and practice, we intend to expand our thinking about this most important issue.

We begin with the premise that a major problem that continues to confront higher education is that of rising costs. With the average cost of attendance consuming a substantial portion of the median family income, for many Americans what is at stake is nothing less than the continued viability of the American dream. The stakes are high for higher education as well. Caught in a closing vise between new demands for enrollment and declining rates of revenue growth, colleges and universities must figure out a way to do more with less.

At the same time, colleges and universities are discovering exciting new ways of using technology to enhance the process of teaching and learning and to extend access to higher education to new populations of students. For most institutions, however, new technologies represent a black hole of additional expense as students, parents, and faculty alike demand access to each new generation of equipment and software. Most campuses have bolted on new technologies to a fixed plant, a fixed faculty, and a fixed notion of classroom instruction. Under these circumstances, technology becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution of cost containment. By and large, colleges and universities have not yet begun to grab hold of technology's promise to reduce the costs of instruction.

Our second premise is that containing costs--and making use of new technologies to help contain costs--requires a fundamental shift in thinking. It requires one to challenge the fundamental assumption of the current instructional model: that faculty members meeting with groups of students at regularly scheduled times and places is the only way to achieve effective student learning. Rather than focus on how to provide more effective and efficient teaching, colleges and universities must focus on how to produce more effective and efficient student learning. Faculty are only one of many resources that are important to student learning. Once learning becomes the central focus, the important question is how best to use all available resources--including faculty time and technology--to achieve certain learning objectives. Rather than asking faculty to work harder, we need to enable them to work smarter.

Finally, we believe that redesign using technology based on learner-centered principles offers a way out of higher education's historical trade-off between cost and quality. We have traditionally assumed that high quality means low student-faculty ratios and that large lecture/presentation techniques are the only low-cost alternatives available to us. New models are emerging, however, that show us that we can indeed have our cake and eat it too. How are these new learning paradigms organized? How can they be improved? What is the best approach for helping faculty adapt to a different style of educational delivery? Are there best practices that we can draw upon to serve as models for other disciplines and institutions? How can we best disseminate what we know? What else do we need to know?

We intend to elaborate the ideas described above into a short concept document. This document, supplemented with other materials as applicable, will form the basis of a facilitated discussion at the Hotel Roanoke of about twenty invited participants. We will begin with a dinner and brief evening program on July 15 with discussion continuing through the next full day, July 16. A monograph, based on the discussion, will be published in the September 1999.

I have attached a list of invited participants for your information. I would be very pleased to have you join us. Would you please contact Pat Bartscherer (518-276-532 or barp@rpi.edu) by June 1 to confirm your attendance? Please feel free to contact me directly if you have questions.

Cordially,

Carol A. Twigg
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