

Ms. Barbara Fossum
Program Coordinator, High Performance Computational Science
Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)
302 East John Street, Suite 1705
Champaign, Illinois 61820-5698

January 31, 2001

Dear Ms. Fossum,

It gives me great pleasure to write in support of your nomination of Dr. Robert S. Dixon for the 2001 EDUCAUSE Leadership in Information Technologies award. In the few years that I have known him, Dr. Dixon has done more than any individual I know of to identify and advance one of the most promising new technology directions on the higher education landscape: H.323 Internet video-conferencing in particular and high performance standards compliant networked video in general. In the small but rapidly growing global community of early adopters of these technologies, he stands out for having single-mindedly shown us their promise to higher education and for generously and tirelessly helping all of the rest of us as we struggled to get started with practical deployments and support.

Dr. Dixon's now annual Megaconference event, the largest public high quality internet video conference ever seen, has become the single most important inspiring and driving event for the several hundred global higher education institutions now starting to develop educational applications for high quality Internet video technologies. As little as three years ago, high quality Internet video was a hopeless oxymoron to all but a handful of people. Even at that time, however, Dr. Dixon had become broadly known as the best contact to have for global early adopters among higher education and academic research institutions. Always available to directly help out, ever encouraging, and seemingly aware of every known pocket of relevant developmental activity, he personally came to represent the global "hub" in the early adopter network.

In early 1999, just as the first standards compliant H.323 videoconferencing technology was becoming available, Dr. Dixon conceived and started to publicize the first Megaconference, planned for the fall of that year. It was to be a global demonstration event on a scale never before seen and simply being able to participate required overcoming formidable obstacles on several technology fronts. Dr. Dixon offered far more than compelling visions and personal assistance, however; he provided and managed what, to my knowledge, was the first publicly available videoconference bridge that allowed all of us to freely meet on-line in real-time to exchange ideas and possible solutions to problems.

I personally think that freely offering this valuable asset to the global early adopter community was one of the most brilliant methods I have ever seen to encourage the cross-institutional collaborative work that would clearly be necessary to capitalize on the educational promise of this technology. I have often had occasion to comment that in over thirty years that I have been professionally involved with information technology development and support, this is the first time that I have re-experienced the completely open collaborative sharing that characterized so much of IT development in the late sixties and early seventies. Imitation being the highest form or compliment, I note that my own regional public service project to support local early adopters, the Western New York High Performance Networked Video Initiative, is based on Dr. Dixon's approaches and is centered on a similarly available bridging facility.

On October 11, 1999, the first Megaconference completed a six-hour global roll-call with activity reports from approximately 55 higher education and research institutions that were capable of achieving connections. The conference was supported on the largest cascade of bridges and endpoints ever before

seen and, at the heart of it all, figuratively and literally, was Dr. Robert S. Dixon and his publicly available bridge. That event gave all of us a view of what was possible and provided an intense worldwide snapshot of all of our derivative visions for the use of these technologies to support our individual and collective missions.

In the months that followed the first Megaconference, my own institution, the University at Buffalo, went on to support its first scheduled class using Internet videoconferencing technologies that we had developed with heavy assistance from members of the early adopter network that Dr. Dixon had created. It was a graduate course in Comparative Literature jointly taught by faculty at Stanford University and UB. Another multi-institutional class on Turbulent Flow, also using Internet videoconferencing, followed shortly thereafter. That first Megaconference and our first uses of the technology to support scheduled classes finally gave our visions the credibility to attract both public and institutional attention. Now, thanks to the pioneering and open work of Dr. Dixon, those visions are also shared not only by our own senior academic officers and rapidly growing numbers of our faculty, but also by our colleagues at numerous education, healthcare and government service institutions throughout Western New York and the world beyond.

He did not stop there, however. The Megaconference this last year included over 150 academic and research endpoints scattered around the world. It supported live interactive conference presentations on successful applications of Internet videoconferencing at the Internet2 Conference in Atlanta Georgia and both UB and Western New York were proud to have participated in three of those presentations and to have had a dozen regional sites on-line for the event. I've attached a copy of our regional conference announcement and an editorial I wrote shortly after the conference on why we all bother with it. The central theme is that it pushes us all forward with some of the most promising public benefit technologies ever known. The real push, however, has been from Dr. Dixon, his informed and enthusiastic visions, and the refreshingly open and supportive context that he has single-handedly crafted.

In the years to come I have absolutely no doubt that these new technologies will be seen as having been as equally enabling and transformative to higher education, let alone to healthcare and government service, as the Internet itself. I can think of no person more deserving of the EDUCAUSE award for Leadership in Information technologies than Dr. Robert S. Dixon and heartily support your nomination.

Sincerely,

Jim

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Attachments (2): WNY Megaconference-II Announcement, "Why Bother" Editorial