We Need to Reframe the IT Issue
John C. Cavanaugh, Ph.D., President
University of West Florida

Much has been written and discussed about the importance of getting support, buy-in, commitment, and every other variation on this theme from Presidents and Chancellors regarding investment in information technology and the accompanying faculty assistance. I, too, have contributed to this literature over the years. Clearly, no one in this business has all the secrets to success—otherwise, we would not still be hearing of senior academic administrators who fail to see the need to invest wisely in IT.

The fact that we continue to focus on how to get and keep support from the top of the academic organizational chart means that most, if not all, of the early explanations for the difficulty in this area were insufficient. We have been through the generation gap phase, the “it’s only a fad” phase, and the fear factor phase, among others. But at conference after conference, I still hear CIOs and other key IT personnel talk about the barriers they encounter from senior academic management.

So what is the problem? Why do so many senior administrators still seemingly not “get it” despite overwhelming evidence that the academy is under siege from external forces for change, including accrediting agencies, trustees, legislatures, and students and faculty who demand better learning opportunities? Based on my decade-long experience moving up the academic administrative ladder from department chair to president in three very different institutions, I think it is a matter that can be stated simply but is actually quite complex: We have not framed the issue properly for many of our academic administrators.

To this point, the IT issue has been framed largely as an “IT” issue. The problem is that, framed this way, the issue has a natural tendency to drift toward an emphasis on sunk costs in “tangible stuff” rather than on the real issue of “tangible use.” A focus on sunk costs in “tangible stuff” inevitably leads to a discussion (often an argument) about how many __________ are available, where the blank can be filled in by a range of such things as computers, labs, projectors, servers, connected classrooms, ports-per-pillow, and the like. We can even get a bad case of bandwidth envy. In this approach, senior management has the tendency to ask “when is enough enough” and point to large expenditures for seemingly little return. This approach does have merit if quantitative indicators are all you want, but it puts the emphasis on the wrong side of the equation: it forces the human to adapt to the computer, and limits what the human can do. In this
approach, for example, learning is only as good and flexible as the current version of the
course management system permits.

What I’m advocating is reframing the issue to emphasize what people do with the
tangible stuff, thereby focusing on knowledge creation and knowledge management. It is
a view that is 180-degrees from the “tangible stuff” view. The “tangible use” view starts
from the perspective of the person and what the person wants to do. It leads to technology
or organizational change solutions if and when those solutions add value, and then it
adapts the technology to enhance the person’s capabilities. One nonacademic example is
that the latest version of fighter cockpit design adapts the computer readouts to the way
fighter pilots actually process information cognitively, making it much easier for them to
understand the plane’s status while having plenty of cognitive reserve to worry about the
mission and the enemy. An academic example would be to design learning spaces based
on what activities will be going on, or designing a website based on a cognitive map of
how people search for information. I believe that starting from the question of what will
people be doing rather than on what stuff we have (potentially) available will result in
dramatically different processes and outcomes regarding IT decisions. Three institutional
examples will show the point.

When the University of Delaware was redesigning its website in the late 1990s,
we wanted to make it far easier for faculty to find out information regarding support for
teaching and technology. Rather than organizing the information around preexisting
taxonomic categories, we approached it from the perspective of a faculty member who
has questions that need to be answered about the key activities faculty do. For example,
in the teaching support section, we organized the information around typical questions
regarding teaching: Do you want to design a course? Put a syllabus online? Use
electronic content? This approach allowed us to embed quick diagnostics into the site and
ensure that faculty always ended up with specific information, either a direct solution or
an appropriate workshop or campus resource. This approach has subsequently been
revised, but the basic design mindset has prevailed.

As Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of North
Carolina at Wilmington, I worked with Dr. Robert Tyndall, the Vice Chancellor for
Information Technology Systems, to create what we called the Blended Mode University
(see “Living Near the Edge: Improving the Quality of Strategic Decision-Making
Regarding Academic Programs and Information Technology” [pp. 56-64] at
http://filebox.vt.edu/chre/elps/EPI/Quality/01.pdf ). The premise was to focus not on
forcing faculty to adopt a particular mode of instruction, or have to hassle with
determining who to ask for financial support for technology. The Blended Mode
University made funding between the two divisions transparent, and forged a strong
interdivisional partnership for developing online courses and for providing faculty
support. We believed that only through a strong partnership could the level of
cooperation (both in terms of people and dollars) be created in order to move the
institution forward quickly.

In my first year as President of the University of West Florida, we tackled a
complex set of problems resulting from an overly decentralized system that did not allow
smart investment. After I had identified IT as a top priority shortly after my arrival, the
campus community worked diligently to create the university’s first IT strategic plan,
developed through the normal planning process that was enhanced and supplemented
with focused meetings during the year. To accomplish this, we conducted several surveys, held an IT-focused retreat with key stakeholders, had an external evaluation, and held special campuswide meetings to identify the key issues. The goal was to develop a plan that would eliminate needless duplication, inefficiency, wasted effort, and unfulfilled expectations. We overcame mistrust and protection of personal interests. We included the ongoing ERP and new course management system implementations in the overall plan and direction. Ultimately, we created a plan that will result in a transformation of the organizational structure of IT and of the delivery of service and support that received unanimous endorsement from the University Planning Council and the Board of Trustees. Throughout the process, the driving interest was in providing better service based on demonstrated needs, not on what kinds of new hardware could be purchased. In support of this effort, the planning and budgeting process were aligned, and the budget process made transparent through the creation of a Budget Council with faculty representation.

What these three examples have in common is that none began with the premise that “tangible stuff” was the solution in search of a problem, though it would have been easier to do so. Rather, each began from a perspective that knowledge creation and management is the goal, and that we have to engage the creators and users in the design. To get to this point required people to be disruptive, to question the typical approach, and to be willing to take a risk. Senior leaders, including presidents, provosts, CFOs, and CIOs must be willing to be the disruptive force when necessary. Taking the risk of redefining the IT problem in order to keep the focus on the people rather than on the stuff, though, can be exactly what it takes to create the climate for effective and transformative change.

Taking the risky road of redefining the IT issue means that only when we have a good sense of what people need in order to do their jobs better can and should we begin addressing the “tangible stuff” variable. From a senior leadership perspective, this approach keeps the conversation in the cabinet focused on the value added side of investment in IT, not the sunk cost side. This approach will also help market the investments in knowledge creation and management to prospective students, current students (who should also be included in the decision process when appropriate), faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, legislators, and the public. The resulting transformation in decision making will mean that technology solutions become conscious choices, thereby providing the opportunity for smarter allocation of resources and much higher returns on those investments. Most important, though, is the human return—technology investments are far more likely to be perceived as addressing people’s concerns, directly resulting in better learning for students and faculty, and better and more effective work from staff. These assessable outcomes will also pay dividends with external constituents who demand to see the evidence.

A final advantage of the “tangible use” approach is that recalcitrant senior administrators will be put in a difficult position. It is one thing to refuse to fund IT when the request is framed as “tangible stuff.” It is quite another when it is framed as “these are things we need in order for the core business of the institution, that is, learning, to continue at high quality.” Faced with the choice of allowing quality to decline or finding a way to fund IT for the right reason, I believe most senior administrators would “get it” and do what is necessary. Perhaps this reframing might lead to a search for a new focus at
IT conferences: What to do when all senior academic leaders have “gotten it” and are now pushing the envelope. Wouldn’t that be a great problem to have?

John C. Cavanaugh, Ph.D., President
University of West Florida
11000 University Parkway
Pensacola, FL 32514-5750
850.474.2200
850.474.3131 Fax
jcavanaugh@uwf.edu