

We Need to Reframe the IT Issue

Much has been written and discussed about the importance of getting presidents' and chancellors' support, buy-in, and commitment regarding investment in information technology and the accompanying faculty assistance. I too have contributed to this literature over the years. Clearly, however, the message is not being broadcast widely enough. We still hear of senior academic administrators who fail to see the need to invest wisely in IT.

The fact that the focus remains 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 not "get it," despite overwhelming evidence that the academy is under siege from external change forces, 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 that is actually quite complex: We have not properly framed the issue for many of our academic administrators.

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 things such as computers, labs, projectors, servers, connected classrooms, and ports-per-pillow. In this approach, senior management has the tendency to ask "when is enough enough?" and to point to large expenditures that have generated seemingly little return. This approach does have merit if only quantitative indicators are needed, but it puts the emphasis on the wrong side of the equation. It forces the person to adapt to the computer, and it limits what the person can do. In this approach, for example, learning is only as good and as flexible as the current version of a course management system permits.

We need to reframe the IT issue to emphasize what people *do* with the tangible stuff, thereby focusing the issue on knowledge creation and knowledge management. This view 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 it then adapts the technology to enhance the person's capabilities. One nonacademic example is fighter-plane cockpit design. The latest version adapts the computer readouts to the way that fighter pilots actually process information cognitively, making it much easier for them to understand the

status of the plane 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 to design a Web site based on a cognitive map of how people search for information. I believe that starting from the question of what people will be doing (tangible use) rather than what resources people may have available (tangible stuff) will result in dramatically different processes and outcomes regarding IT decisions. Three institutional examples illustrate the point.

When the University of Delaware was redesigning its Web site in the late 1990s, we wanted to make it far easier for faculty to find information regarding support for teaching and technology. Rather than organizing the information around preexisting taxonomic categories, we approached the Web design from the perspective of a faculty member who has questions about key faculty activities. 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 found specific information—a direct solution or an appropriate workshop or a campus resource. This approach has subsequently been revised, but the basic design mindset has prevailed.

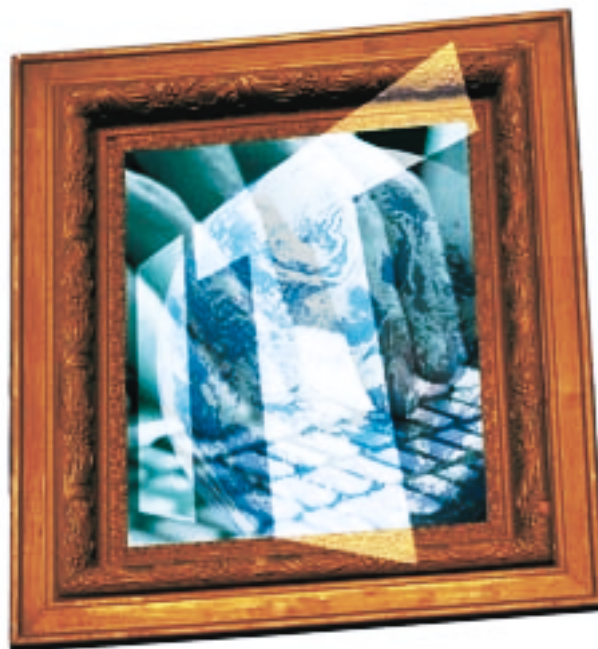
As provost and vice-chancellor for academic affairs at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, I worked with Dr. Robert Tyndall, the vice-chancellor for information technology systems, to

create what we called the “Blended Mode University.”¹ The premise was that faculty would not be forced to adopt a particular mode of instruction, nor would faculty have to hassle with determining where to get financial support for technology. The Blended Mode University made funding between the two divisions—Academic Affairs and IT Systems—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 (in terms of both people and dollars) be raised high enough 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, enhanced and supplemented with focused meetings during the year. To accomplish this, we conducted several surveys, held an IT-focused retreat with key stakeholders, arranged for an external evaluation, and organized special campus-wide 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. The plan 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 rather than on what kinds of

new hardware could be purchased. In support of this effort, the planning and budgeting processes were aligned, and the budget process was 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. Rather, each began from the perspective that knowledge creation and management is the goal and that the creators and users must be engaged in the design. Getting to this point required people to be disruptive, to question the typical



approach, and to take a risk. Senior leaders—including presidents, provosts, CFOs, and CIOs—must be willing to be the disruptive force when necessary.

Taking the risky road of redefining the IT issue means that only when we have a good sense of the “tangible use,” 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 focused on the value-added side of investment in IT, not on 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 a 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 a senior leader is told: “These are things we need in order for the core business of the institution—that is, learning—to continue at a high-quality level.” I believe that when faced with the choice between allowing quality to decline or finding a way to fund IT for the right reason, most senior administrators would “get it” and would do what is necessary. Perhaps this reframing might lead to a new focus at IT conferences—a focus on which issues should be addressed when all senior academic leaders have “gotten it” and are pushing the envelope. Wouldn’t that be a great problem to have?

Note

1. See John C. Cavanaugh, “Living near the Edge: Improving the Quality of Strategic Decision-Making Regarding Academic Programs and Information Technology,” in Steven M. Janosik, Don G. Creamer, and M. David Alexander, eds., *International Perspectives on Quality in Higher Education* (Blacksburg: Educational Policy Institute, Virginia Tech, 2001), <<http://filebox.vt.edu/chre/elps/EPI/Quality/01.pdf>> (accessed November 24, 2003).



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