Salve Regina Oral History Project

Date of Interview: July 11, 2018

Interviewee: Mr. Thomas “Ty” Brennan, Assistant Professor and CIO of the Information Technology Office

Interviewer: Kathleen Christ

Kathleen Christ: Okay, this is Kathleen Christ. Today is July 11, 2018. As a part of the Salve Regina University Project, I will be interviewing Mr. Ty Brennan. He was a math professor at Salve from 1992-1996 and [directed] the… Information Technology Office from 1996-2015, and now he is a math teacher at Bishop Feehan High School[[1]](#footnote-1) in North Attleboro, Massachusetts. Is that correct?

Ty Brennan: Attleboro, Massachusetts.

Kathleen Christ: Oh, okay. I’ll cross out the “North.” [*laughter*]… The other things… what exactly was your…position in the IT Office?

Ty Brennan: Well, I started in 1996. As you mentioned, I was a teacher here first. I transferred over here from the academic side in January of 1996 and I was named Director of Information Systems by Sister Therese[[2]](#footnote-2) and… Dom Varisco.[[3]](#footnote-3) Dom Varisco at the time was the Executive Vice President. So, that’s how I started. I started out by being named by Sister Therese and Dom Varisco, and then from there I stayed for the next 19 years in administrative capacity, either as the director of IT [or Information Systems], and eventually as the Chief Information Officer. They call that the CIO, and also the title was given Associate Vice President.

Kathleen Christ: Oh, wow!

Ty Brennan: That’s how it happened. [*laughter*]

Kathleen Christ: That’s cool!

Ty Brennan: Yup!

Kathleen Christ: [*laughter*] Okay, so as… an introductory question… when you were younger, what exactly did you want to be when you grew up?

Ty Brennan: Well, I was always interested in both sports and academics. I’d have to say…my early love was sports, particularly baseball, basketball, and along with that…being a student in Sister of Mercy schools all the way through, I had very good study habits, so I was also a good student. So, I was able to combine those in a nice college career up at Holy Cross[[4]](#footnote-4) as both an athlete and a student. And then from there, I decided that I was not going to be a baseball player, so that I should try something else. [*laughter*] So, that’s when I said, “Well, it would make sense to either try business or education,” because I liked them both, and… so over the next span of my life I was kind of in both fields… both business, either part-time or full-time, or education, either part-time or full-time.

Kathleen Christ: Ah… so how exactly did you end up at Salve?

Ty Brennan: I had been working for ITT, which is a big conglomerate… There were two companies that I worked for. One was a wiring and cabling company, a manufacturing company. I worked there for four years, and then I worked for another ITT company called Sheraton Hotels. I worked… at the corporate headquarters there in Boston for six years, and I became the MIS Manager of Corporate Financial Systems at Sheraton, ITT Sheraton. Then, in 1992, ITT [Sheraton] had a dramatic [change], what they call downsizing, or rightsizing, however you want to phrase it. So, I got caught in that, so I was without a job, so I decided to reevaluate what I really wanted to do at that point, and I again looked in both education and in business. And, I was fortunate enough to make good contacts here at Salve Regina through Sister Therese, and I was able to… get a job here as a… Math/Statistics teacher here in 1992. So, I was a member of [the] full-time faculty here [since] 1992, and I stayed in that capacity… through the fall semester of 1995, and then from the point of taking on the IT administrative job, I was always able to teach as an adjunct instructor. So, I was able to… again keep my fingers in say both [the] “business world” as well as [the] “academic world.”

Kathleen Christ: That’s so cool!

Ty Brennan: Yes, it worked out fine!

Kathleen Christ: So… you taught all throughout until 2015, or…?

Ty Brennan: Right. I had a brief respite in which I was taking courses. I was taking some courses in the Humanities… some courses in furthering statistics, but other than that, I was teaching as an adjunct as well. So, my day-job was Director of IT, or eventually CIO, but a second job was also as an adjunct instructor.

Kathleen Christ: Wow! Cool! So, you mentioned you knew Sister Therese as your contact?

Ty Brennan: Yes.

Kathleen Christ: So… you had a relationship with her before that…?

Ty Brennan: I went to high school at Bishop Feehan, where I am now teaching, and Sister Therese was my Math teacher.

Kathleen Christ: Oh!

Ty Brennan: She was a Sister of Mercy, and this was a Sister of Mercy school, in that Sisters of Mercy taught there, and she was my Math teacher. So, we had stayed in touch through the years and… when you are looking for… possible career changes and that kind of stuff, it is always good to look… [and] see who… you know, [*laughter*]… who might give you advice or give you some information, and it worked out really well with Sister Therese.

Kathleen Christ: Wow! I didn’t realize she was a Math teacher!

Ty Brennan: You bet!

Kathleen Christ: So, how did you feel about your experience here as a Math professor?

Ty Brennan: I really…like teaching, so although it was at the college level and I had a Masters in Mathematical Statistics… at the college level, it’s so much different from the high school level, because I had been a high school teacher earlier in my career… in Math. So, I had a lot to learn, but I had, again, some good colleagues: Sister Mary Maurice Boyle, she was the Chair of the department, and…just by watching her I could get a good sense of how to improve my teaching skills, whether it be how I conducted the class or how I related to the students and how I could better serve the students. She was a great model teacher, Sister Mary Maurice Boyle. So, I really enjoyed that, but I also had that side of me that enjoyed working with people to develop systems that would make their jobs easier– more… productive, more efficient– so, I had that side of me as well, that might be the math side. So, I was able to bridge both: both the teaching side and the math side, [and] the business side.

Kathleen Christ: That’s cool… so did you solely teach statistics?

Ty Brennan: I taught…let’s see, I taught Math. I taught Calculus, and Math Probability and Statistics. Then I also taught Applied Statistics and Business Statistics. But later on, when I was an adjunct, I had gotten certified as a Professional Project Manager, so I was able to offer a course in Project Management, and that course ran for several years. In fact, once we started it– in the mid-2000s­– it ran until I left in 2015.

Kathleen Christ: Wow! So you were also a bit of a Business professor then…

Ty Brennan: Correct, yes.

Kathleen Christ: Ah… which did you enjoy more?

Ty Brennan: …In some cases Katie, it almost didn’t matter. I enjoyed learning the material and then working with the students. I think that’s what makes teaching so appealing to me, being able to share the knowledge and feel as though the student gained something from it. And when the student showed appreciation for it, whether it was thanks, or a nice note or whatever, that… was the reward for teaching.

Kathleen Christ: It didn’t matter what subject it was, I see… so, what was it like to be the head of the Information Technology Office then?

Ty Brennan: Well at Salve Regina, it was really a tremendous opportunity, because you got to touch base [with so many different people]. It was small enough so that you could get to know a lot of people in their various capacities, and yet it was large enough in that you had to offer a very valid, and very meaningful Information Technology structure so that whether you were faculty, staff, or student, you could do your job better because the technology was available and was working. That’s what I kind of mentioned about the tape recorder… we want to make sure these things work for you, and so you can work with them and do your job a little more easily or efficiently, or whatever. That’s where we’re coming from. So technology wasn’t… meant to be something that was meant to be burdensome or complicated. It was supposed to be something that made the… life of the beneficiary, whether that be faculty, staff or student, a little easier, a little more meaningful, and a little more efficient in what tasks they had to do.

Kathleen Christ: So how did it compare to being a teacher then?

Ty Brennan: In a way, it was very similar. When I looked at how I prepared for a class, and what would be my objective, and what would be the content of what I would be teaching, and how [I] would… evaluate and assess how well it went, you use those same skills over into working in IT systems, because in IT systems you have to understand the requirement that the particular person wants, whether it’s a faculty member or someone working in the Business Office, or in Residence Life, what [it is] that you really need. So, making sure that you have a plan that’s going to help address that problem, following through with all the steps, and then assessing it afterwards to see if it was a success or not. [There are] a lot of parallels in preparing for teaching, and for preparing… for a job in IT systems, so there… wasn’t much of a change, I found. You had to prepare, you had to conduct a class or a meeting, you had to follow-up, evaluate and assess, and go on to the next one, very similar skills.

Kathleen Christ: Ahh…

Ty Brennan: What’s the basis of [IT] too is, if you’re working with good people, you yourself can be a good person, and so…those skills of working with another person are so important whether you’re working in a classroom or whether you’re working on a system implementation to better understand what are the real needs of that person and how I can better satisfy those needs. If you think in a classroom, if you’re introducing a concept, and you want to say, “How can I best teach this concept so… Katie has a good understanding of it and can appreciate what I am trying to do?”… The same thought goes into, “Okay, Jane wants to have this application that’s going to help her… analyze different amounts of data and come up with a report that would be meaningful,” same type of skills. You’re trying to satisfy the needs of the particular user, whether it be the student or whether it be a member of the staff or the faculty. [They’re] like transcendental skills that just carry over.

Kathleen Christ: So who were the people who you worked with then… most?

Ty Brennan: As an IT person or a faculty member?

Kathleen Christ: Both, but we can talk about IT first.

Ty Brennan: Okay, well with IT I reported to Bill Hall.[[5]](#footnote-5) He’s the Vice President for Finance and Administrative Services. So with him, I was able to work with his team, and that would be Mike Grandchamp, and Diane Blanchette used to be here, and now it’s Cindy Donnelly, and Francine Monfette… she was in Purchasing and Eric Milner, and before him Bob Snell in Facilities. That was in Bill [Hall’s] staff, and then I would go to other departments. Say academic, we’d… go to the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and there were several Vice Presidents that were here during my time as the IT Director. Each of them brought a different perspective and different… insights as far as what he/she would like to do and they [were] all very nice to work with. I found as long as you were upfront and organized in what you were trying to do, that they were very good to work with, that they would give you some of their thoughts on how things should be done, and so we’d be able to work hard to make sure that worked. And then of course, you got the other areas. You have the Advancement/Development area. That would be Mike Semenza’s area, and Kristine Hendrickson, and Jason Black; working on the website, making sure the website is up and running at all times. Then you have the Student Life/Student Affairs area. There are a number of people that were working in that capacity, so whether it’s dealing with the Security Office or whether it’s dealing with the card system, whether it’s dealing with Residence Life and the different needs they have, we’re able to touch base with a number of different departments and a number of different people in those departments to make sure that we could help them do their job better. That was our approach, to try to make it so that we could provide a tool, or a system, or a procedure, that would help them be able to do their job better.

Kathleen Christ: So as an educator then… I don’t want to say that you were involved in less, but you probably had less people that you had to contact because it seems that IT was pretty much involved in everything.

Ty Brennan: Right. Yes, usually… on the academic side I would be very close with the department faculty, and then there would be opportunities where we could cross over to other departments, particularly when it came to statistics, because statistics you find in business, psychology, education… on and on and on. So, the teaching of statistics enabled me to really touch base with a number of different departments, and students in those departments, and try to apply the use of statistics [in] a particular discipline. I had really a nice time with the

Nursing Department because the nurses were all great students, very serious students, and there’s so much statistics that plays a role in their life to check out a patient in what’s normal and what’s not normal, and [if] we should react to something. A lot of it’s all statistics. For example, you take blood pressure. What’s an average blood pressure? What should it be? What’s the variation in the blood pressure? How do you know if it’s really something like an outlier [that] you should really settle if it’s a serious problem? There’s a lot of statistics behind all of that to determine what’s normal and what’s… not. And so, what they can say is “Yeah, you’ll be okay,” or, “ Oh gee, we’ve got to do something quickly!” So, [it was] a lot of fun to be able to apply statistics to different fields, [which] enabled me to cross... over to different departments. I’ve got to tell you a funny story if I can.

Kathleen Christ: Oh, completely!

Ty Brennan: It’s kind of out of line... [*laughter*] When I first went over to IT, this is 1996-97. There was not a… campus-wide network. It was if I was in a certain dormitory in a room, I didn’t necessarily have any connection that I could put my laptop, connect in, or TV or cable and all that. I think there was only a phone system; that was all we had. So, the story was we were trying to stay, if not abreast of the needs– if we could, a little ahead of the needs– [of the students]. So, when Admissions would have their tours of the campus, they would always try to take the opportunity to say [to visitors], “Well, what are you expecting would be here, in place, so when you came, you’d be able to connect right in, or your expectations would be met?” That’s what we were trying to… get at. And the funny story was, there was a time around 1997, around that time that we from IT were saying, “You know, you really should look into having networks in all your residence halls,” and such, and there was almost a slight pushback from the parents to say, “We don’t want… the rooms networked! We want our son or daughter out there talking to people!”

Kathleen Christ: Wow!

Ty Brennan: And so, no… strong interest in having the cabling and networking in the… residence halls at all. What was funny– well that was a reaction that was kind of surprising so we kind of had to step back a little bit– but it didn’t take long before all of a sudden that was an expectation, that if you came to college and you were living in a residence hall, of course you’d be able to connect your laptop in, get on a network, get out on the internet and do things like that. So, that changed very quickly, but it was just interesting [that] the first reaction was, “Oh no, no, we want more face-to-face, personal interaction,” but that all evolved quickly into, “We want more internet connections.”

Kathleen Christ: Ah… so… when was that switch?”

Ty Brennan: It was ’97-’98. So, the summer of ’98 we had a massive project in IT in which we cabled all the residence halls, the main classrooms, and a lot of the administrative offices. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these drops, and you see them… in the wall. See those drops?

Kathleen Christ: Yes.

Ty Brennan: Those had to be in every room, any place where a person had to be and wanted to connect. This predated wireless. You had to cable-connect, so you had to have something to plug into. So, that summer we really transformed the college itself from a more dial-up modem type connection to a more of a cabled, network connection. Then when the students came in the fall of 1998, they had, in their rooms, connections for every student. Every student, if you had two or three or four, however many students in a room, you had a connection that you could make to the internet. So, that transformed everything. And at the same time, we did cable TV. We brought that right into the rooms, and then we upgraded the telephone connections. So, excuse me, 1998 was a more…transformative year in terms of using technology on campus. The other thing that happened in ‘98 was we introduced a fully integrated card system: the Salve ID Card. Now, today it’s just assumed you’re going to take your card and you’re going to swipe it to get into a room, swipe it over at Miley[[6]](#footnote-6) to get your lunch, swipe it to get into the fitness center, or whatever. But all that had to be built up, and with the… network infrastructure in place because all the different areas on campus were cabled, we could now layer on top of that a card system. So, the card enabled you to go to the bookstore to buy books, or go to the dormitory, swipe and get in, or go to Miley and swipe and… get into… the cafeteria for your meals. All that happened in 1998/1999.

Kathleen Christ: Wow…

Ty Brennan: Yeah, so… to me 1998-1999, was a transformative year, one of the eras in I think the use of technology here at Salve Regina. Plus, we got a couple of great people to join the IT department. I don’t want to give names, but they were just great, multi-skilled and very good… people persons. So, you have to have the people in order to make the technology work, and we had that that year.

Kathleen Christ: So, what was there before the card system? Was it just keys?

Ty Brennan: Yeah, they gave everyone a key, and also, you had an ID card which was a card with a picture cut out that was kind of stuck… on the card, so they could say, “Okay, that’s Katie,” [by] looking at that card, but it wasn’t something that you could swipe to enter, or swipe to buy, or swipe to go in to get a meal. All that had to be built up. All the vending machines on campus, you could swipe and say, “I don’t have any money, but I’ve got my card,” or if I’m doing printing, “I don’t have any money but I’ve got so much credit on my card.” All that, before then, was done manually. So I’d have to pay you twenty-five cents for that copy, or I’d have to pay you five quarters to get my Coca-Cola, or something out of the vending machine. Everything was manual, so very much a transformative time. So, we went from that to card-swipe; [it] takes care of it for you…Want to hear another one?

Kathleen Christ: What is it?...

Ty Brennan: Another transformative year–era– was 2005-2006, and that was because Dr. Theresa Madonna,[[7]](#footnote-7) and this was with the support of Sister Therese, who was the President. Theresa Madonna was the Academic Vice President, and Sister Therese was the President. We started the Required Laptop Program here on campus. Now, the reason… that was another transformative year was now students came to Salve with laptops, and the laptops were using a wireless network which had to be put into place, and the teachers were trying their best to incorporate the use of the laptop with their curriculum. It was a big, big year; big time because unless a professor really had a kind of a strong interest in using a laptop or a computer, it didn’t have to happen. But because the students now had a laptop, they were almost expecting, “Well, what are you going to ask us to do with it?” So, it was kind of a growing year for the university, for both the academic side and the technology side, that here we had students coming in with laptops and we had to have our academic faculty ready to be able to say, “Okay, here’s what I want you to do with that laptop.” Whether it’s go out to the internet and do some research, write up a paper, give presentations with it… they had to really do some serious thinking of how… would this new tool help us augment the education experience. Very challenging, but it was a great era for the school… It was also around that time– and you’ll see them now probably in every classroom… we had a real good footprint of what they call “Teacher Stations” in the classrooms. I mean, there was a time where there was one or two, I think at one time we had five… teacher stations and that was it.

Kathleen Christ: Throughout the entire university?

Ty Brennan: Correct. And those rooms were used by faculty who were willing to use the technology to complement their classroom activities, but we went from that… now I don’t think you could find a room that doesn’t have some type of connection or projector or whatever, but all that came from faculty being willing to try it, and working with IT to be able to implement and support it and go through all those growing pains. For instance, if you’re in a classroom and you’re going to give a presentation, and this is in the early days, and all of the sudden… it’s not working, and you’ve got thirty students in front of you, and that’s your plan, to show what’s on these slides, the room for error isn’t too high. So, first of all faculty have to be willing to… take a risk, and also have Plan B in their back pocket if technology fails. IT, on the other hand, has to be very responsive. So, if there is a problem within, say, a certain amount of time, we would… try to set the target [to] about five minutes, that we could be in that classroom and try to resolve the problem. So, the technology was good but you had to have the support, and you had to have those faculty members willing to use it to make us grow, because we were having students who would come to us and say, “Why aren’t we using our technology?” And now, it was something that we would have to work closely with the academics so they would feel comfortable. I mean, they’re not about to try something if it doesn’t work half the time, or they can’t get on the network or the wireless keeps spinning. I’m sure you’ve seen those experiences. So, we had to be able to ensure that it worked much better, and if it didn’t work, we could [snap] resolve it that much… more quickly. So, it was… a growing time for the university to do that. So, that was 2005-2006, that’s when that kind of… hit us as far as, “Wow, the university is really involved with [IT],” and then it just grew from there. None of these… periods ended there, but they were more or less transformative and that lifted us to another level of using technology here at the

University. And as I mentioned, in ’98-’99, that was with the cabling of the campus and then the card system, and then 2005-2006, that was the wireless network and the launching of the laptop program, two major events to boost the use of technology here on campus, but you had to have good partners with the faculty and with the staff, and you had to have good support that [was] service-oriented.

Kathleen Christ: I see, when did the campus become wireless then?

Ty Brennan: We experimented with wireless starting in 2004-2005, and then in line with the implementation of the laptop program, we had to make sure that every classroom had a wireless access point. What they do now is they put them up above the tile, so you can’t see the access point, but every room or meeting room or whatever had to have a connection to the network. So that was done in that era of getting ready for the Required Laptop Program, so let’s say 2004-2005. And then from them it just kept expanding, expanding, expanding, to more and more… administrative buildings as well as the athletic facilities. I’d say it was around that time as well. Another big era was, I’d say, around 2008… That’s when we went to a full, campus-wide administrative information system. This was called DATATEL, DATATEL’s the vendor. That was an implementation of a new system that was campus-wide, starting around 2008. And guess how long it took us to implement the whole system? What would you even guess?

Kathleen Christ: …Maybe a few months?

Ty Brennan: Five years. Five years, and the reason is we had to go to each department. Whether it was Admissions, Business Office, Student Life, Residence, Student Affairs… Human Resources, we had to make sure that their particular module could work effectively in their department. So, what we’d do, is we’d say, “Okay, next semester let’s work with the Business Office,” so we’d take the whole semester to work with that, and the next one, “Okay, let’s make sure we can do the Registrar’s Office, okay, let’s do that, okay!” So, this was a fully, campus-wide integrated system so all the major offices are tied into this. It took that long to get the whole system in. That was… another major milestone for the university in that now they were really using I’d say a Tier 1-type administrative system. So, in other words we were… saying, “Okay, we’re one of the players now, we’re… in with the rest of the universities, okay? We’re using a system that’s a real, recognized system,” but it brought a lot of challenges, a lot of heartaches, because of timing, a lot of joys and sorrows as we went through those… years. But that was transformative, because that again lifted the whole level of how we’re using technology here on campus.

Kathleen Christ: You mentioned how there were joys and sorrows… in what way?

Ty Brennan: Well joys in the sense of, okay, if I’m someone who’s working in, let’s say, in the…Payroll Office, and I want to make sure that I can tie in with, let’s say, the Work Study Program, that there’s a way that I can connect Work Study activity in with the payroll system, and try to make it flow more efficiently, so it’s not a lot of redundant, human manual-type work. So, we looked for opportunities like that and when we found those that would be great, because all of a sudden we’ve eliminated four hours of work you have to do a month, excuse me, because this system can accept from this system with a file transfer. So, a lot of joy, I’ve now saved myself four hours a month. It might not seem like a lot, but okay? Now, it’s not that I’m… sitting back with my feet on the desk, but at least I can now free up to do something else, maybe of some more interest, or maybe more importance or whatever, so that was the joy. The sorrow was, any new system… I’d say, requires changing the way you do things, and, by human nature, we’re not people– I’d say in general– who like to change the way we do things, particularly if we have it down pretty well. The sorrow is, okay, new system, new way to do things. Sometimes that required a lot of angst. Sometimes they had to do a little more than what they were used to do[ing]. Sometimes they had to do it in a different way, had to do this before that, or I used to do this and then this, so the way you did your work had to change. So, that can… cause some pain and sorrow, but I wish there was a way to–

Kathleen Christ: There was an easier way–

Ty Brennan: It all comes down to good leadership at the top, so we had Sister Jane,[[8]](#footnote-8) who was here then, and saying, “Okay, we’re with you, we’re going to work on this, we’re going to do it together!” So, you had good leadership and people who can get along with each other. Even if it’s tough times, you can get along with them, and somehow you make it through, you get to that next level.

Kathleen Christ: So what exactly were some of your responsibilities then… as an administrator?

Ty Brennan: Well, as an administrator I would be responsible for– now this is all done in collaboration, I… wouldn’t just sit up at my desk and look out the window [*laughter*] but what I have to do, is I have to get input from different major constituencies, so I would talk to the Academic…Vice President. I would talk to the Vice President for Finance, the Vice President for Student Affairs, and I’d get from them what they saw as their particular needs and priorities in the coming year, or the coming next couple years. So, I would take all that input and I’d have to say, “Okay, I suggest that we do this system, and this system in the coming year,” and try to prioritize, or at least suggest, “Here’s what could make sense as far as what we’ll do first.” So, [I would] try to work through all that, so that’s a lot of people-type work, you know, getting people to, you know, kind of discuss and come to some kind of consensus. And the challenge there was naturally, the Vice President for Academics is going to say, “Well, my needs are the most important,” and someone for Advancement would say, “We’ve got to have this, this is very, *very* important!” So, the challenge was everyone thought his/her own particular areas/projects were the most important. We’d have to make a choice, and that was always a challenge, so that was part of it. The other part was budgeting, not only planning for what’s coming but also tracking what you’ve spent. Budgeting takes a lot of… detail work, tracking how you’re spending every dollar, and being able to report on it, and see if you can see a problem arising, and giving us time to avert it, or soften it, or even avoid it if we can, so kind of staying on top of that. And then because I was a Project Manager, I got to be closely involved with a lot of project implementations, so that was also part of my job as an administrator in IT, was working on system implementations.

Kathleen Christ: So, can you tell me a little bit more about some of those projects and programs that you were involved in?

Ty Brennan: Sure! Let’s try one that has a use in the academic world, and that’s the Learning Management System. So, our first learning management system– these are the systems that run on the internet and you can upload assignments or upload work that you do and the teacher can review it and send a message back. Right now I think they use Canvas?

Kathleen Christ: Yes.

Ty Brennan: Yeah, okay. So when we first started, Sister Leona Misto[[9]](#footnote-9)– she was the one that first started with a program out of Virginia Commonwealth. That was our first learning management system. The thing was though it wasn’t a… commercial-level type system, so we knew we had to get something a little more…robust. So, we got the faculty together, and there used to be a group of faculty, and we would call ourselves… the FACTS group, F-A-C-T-S… and what it stood for was, let’s see… Faculty Advisory Committee on Technology Services…F-A-C-T-S, Faculty Advisory Committee on Technology Services…so we had faculty in there, and you actually had some IT people in there. So, we said, “Let’s see if we can find a more commercial-level learning management system.” Now, at the time, there were two major systems. One was called WebCT, and the second one was called Blackboard; those were the two. So, what we did was we had a…faculty member who tried out using WebCT in his particular class and we had another faculty member use Blackboard in her particular class, and at the end of the semester we would kind of assess what their experiences were. So it came down to a tally of, okay, so this one’s–[I’ll] give it a five, a four, a three, a one, and a two, add it up, and it came up to something like 85-82. [*laughter*] You know, it was really close. So, the one that won was WebCT, so we became a WebCT learning management school for many years. Well, ironically enough– over time these things happen– Blackboard, over time decides to buy out WebCT, so now… we become a Blackboard school because WebCT is part of Blackboard. Well, there was around…– maybe 2012 or 2013– there was a new player that emerged, and that player was called Canvas. So Canvas came in, and we were going to evaluate Canvas vs. Blackboard, against a few other learning management systems, so again faculty and IT, and others– library… students– we’d get together and would look at the demonstrations from each of the vendors and would actually have people try it out, maybe for a semester, give us some feedback, and the one who ended up winning was Canvas. So, that’s how we now have Canvas on campus; but it started off with… I laugh because that first [comparison] of WebCT vs. Blackboard was so close–like 85-82 points– so we said, “Okay! Well, I guess WebCT wins!” So, that’s what started us off, and we stayed with them for several, several years, and then with the Blackboard then we finally went to Canvas, and that’s where we are now. So that… was one of the systems we were involved with. The other one was the card system; the card system was a big one. What was interesting about the card system was, you could imagine having a system that was totally manual, and now you have to automate many of the functions that the student would do. So, the student, “Okay, I want to go into my dorm room– or, in my dorm building­, so, swipe the… card at the door and then it’ll open up for me. I also want to take that card and go over to the library and check out a book, okay, so I did it. Then I want to go over to the bookstore and I’m going to get some notebooks, so I’m going to pick the notebooks up, swipe the card, and it’s going to pay for it. And now I was kind of hungry, so let’s go up to Miley and get some food, so swipe the card…” and having all those activities integrated in one system was major. And in order to try it out, Chris Dumont– Christine Dumont[[10]](#footnote-10)– she came up with a script, and it was kind of fun. We recruited five students, and we gave each about twenty dollars, and we said, “Okay, we want you to do this. We want you to take your card, and go over… at O’Hare[[11]](#footnote-11) and– [the building] had a little dining area café type thing– and we want you to use your card and buy something and eat it. Then we want you to go over to the bookstore, and buy a notebook or something, [and] pay for it with the card. And then we want you to go over to Miley and swipe the card and be able to get in and eat.” So, we had them simulate through a script what we thought a student would then be using a card for, and what that did was that revealed some… errors that we were making, so we ran a couple scripted session with the students. Of course, the students loved it because they had free money and they could, you know, go buy something to eat and what not [*laughter*]… but we’d love it because we’d get feedback for how was this system going to work. So we decide[d], against a lot of wiser people, we decide we’re going to implement this system right after [the] January intersession, so we’re not going to wait for a new year, like fall. We’re going to implement it right smack in the middle of the academic year. A lot of people thought that was a bit risky. Well son of a gun, I remember this like it was yesterday. The first… students who had use of the system­– because we were passing out the cards­– were students that had come back early because they were on a sports team or something, and they were going in to Miley, to the cafeteria. So, I remember [that]… we were there, we were watching the students come in, you know they’ve got their card, and we wanted them to… give it to the person, let them swipe it, and then go in and get their meal. Well, there was some…update that had not occurred yet, and so they went to swipe the card and it didn’t work. [*table smack*] Oh my God! [*laughter*] Now, the rest of… the student body is going to be coming soon after. We had the early arrivals with us, the athletes say, but then the rest of the students are coming so we kind of were, “Oh my God!” [*laughter*] But what it turned out to be was just a minor little setting; I had not allowed an update to occur, and so once that was identified and corrected, you know, it worked and it was smooth. So, that was a…lot of holding your breath for that one, you know what I mean? But it turned out… to work out fine, and then we just expanded, expanded, expanded, expanded. So, now… I’d say students expect it, but if you can appreciate what it took to get us to where we are now, each step had to be dealt with and tested and modified, and corrected, and so forth and so on. So, that’s… what takes place behind the scenes, and… it’s rewarding when it all comes together.

Kathleen Christ: Oh… what time frame were the learning management system[s]– you mentioned Sister Leona Misto was involved– what year would that have been?

Ty Brennan: Right, so that would’ve been… around [19]96-99. I mean, I’m just doing ballpark, and then around ‘99-2000, that’s when we chose WebCT. Then we stayed with that for the greater part of the 2000s, and… so I’d say maybe around 2007/8 we went over to Blackboard, because Blackboard bought WebCT and then it was around 2012 we finally were able to start the implementation of Canvas. Now, it takes a lot… of work and a lot of cooperation, excuse me, by faculty, by academic administration, students, because they’re using it. I mean we’re– IT is trying to help implement it, but you’re using it, your teachers are using it, or… the department chair is using it. We’ve got to make sure everything is as tight as possible, so it takes a lot of– I guess what I’m trying to say is it takes a lot of collaboration, and thankfully we had people who were willing to work with each other. Collaboration was the key.

Kathleen Christ: So, switching gears a little bit, since you were here for quite a long time, you worked under many different administrations, starting with… you would’ve been here when you were a teacher–a professor– with Sister Lucille [McKillop],[[12]](#footnote-12) right?

Ty Brennan: Right, right.

Kathleen Christ: Can you tell me a little bit more about having her as a leader?

Ty Brennan: Well, I had just come to Salve Regina and I can remember it like it was yesterday,

Sister McKillop­– Sister Lucille McKillop– coming down to– I had an office in O’Hare– coming right up and shaking my hand with a big shake, you know, “Welcome to the university!” You know? It just, to me it’s the [charisma] of the Sisters of Mercy, to just being welcoming-type people, and so I’ll never forget that. And, so she was very supportive [with] anything we wanted to do, because we were always trying to– … particularly with Statistics– trying to see, okay, how can we reach out to different people. We actually started a Statistics Institute. We worked with not only people who were working on their dissertation here at Salve, but I remember we worked with the Portsmouth Housing Authority to try to do a study for them, and Sister Lucille was very supportive with activities like that, that were really intended to further the… reach of the university, so that was really nice. And then Sister Therese came, I think it was around ’95 or so, ’95, ’96 around there–

Kathleen Christ: ’94.

Ty Brennan: ’94, I’m sorry. So, she brought in a… different approach. I’d say it still had that Mercy [charisma] but it was business-like as well. That’s not any slight on Sister Lucille, excuse me, but Sister Therese just seemed very business-like in what she was planning to do, and had to do, and [if] she had to make changes she was very decisive, okay, here’s what we’ve got to do… So that worked really well, so he had a wonderful tenure as the President of the school. And then Sister Jane came I think around 2009… and she was very supportive… We met with her on a monthly basis, so she wanted to very much keep abreast of what was happening from an IT perspective. IT is one of those departments that can work with every department on campus; just the outreach is… pervasive. So, she naturally wanted to hear from our perspective how were things going since we had one department but [were] really supporting several other departments on campus, so she was… very good and supportive as well. So, that’s at the President level. Then we had…from my own particular situation, I really only worked with Dom Varisco, and Bill Hall. Bill Hall was my boss for most of my time as an IT person, so he was very good, very supportive in what we were trying to do with technology here on campus. On the academic side, it was very interesting, because there were a number of Academic Vice Presidents that were here when I served as the IT Director. I think I went back to… let’s see… I can remember when Dr. Burrell[[13]](#footnote-13)… was in the Academic Administrative area, and then I also remember when Sister Pat Combies[[14]](#footnote-14) and Dr. Art Frankel,[[15]](#footnote-15) they were…in the Academic Administrative area. Then we had Dr. Judith Mills.[[16]](#footnote-16) She served as the Academic Vice President for a number of years. Then, Dr. Barbara Kathe:[[17]](#footnote-17) she was very good to work with. I remember I worked with her on the committee that dealt with NEASC, the NEASC review– that’s the accreditation review they do every ten years or so, so she was really, really great with that. And then when she left Dr. Theresa Madonna, she… was very good…of all the [Academic] Vice Presidents…I think she… was the most inclined to use– and see the potential of using– technology. So she really gave it a shot. She was really supportive of the wireless system, of the laptop program; so she was a strong proponent of using technology, and then after Theresa Madonna [was] Dean de la Motte.[[18]](#footnote-18) Dean de la Motte had a different perspective on using technology. [He was] very supportive on good programs– he wanted to make sure the faculty was supported and that we could do everything we could to make sure that the student and the faculty member were using the technology to enhance their learning experience, so that was very good. And then, right before I left, that was then Dr. Scott Zeman.[[19]](#footnote-19) He was the last one, and he was a very good guy, very supportive guy, very open to using technology, particularly in new applications, particularly applications that would allow mobility, mobility in the classroom, mobility in connecting anywhere to do your work. [Dr. Zeman was a] very strong proponent of that. So, I think those were the Academic Vice Presidents, so the President, my own boss, Bill Hall, and then the Academic Vice President, those were, I’d say, the people I would be touching base with more regularly. The other vice presidents I would… visit them on occasion just to make sure I was able to hear what they had to say and try to put their particular requests in perspective with the rest of the university.

Kathleen Christ: How do you feel your time here at Salve impacted your life then?

Ty Brennan: Well, I can’t think of a place where I could come to work each day, I could work with great people, people who wanted to help others, be able to go to Mass at lunch time, be able to be myself, whether it was in an IT administrative capacity or it was in the classroom, and have that all wrapped up in one job. To me, it was… kind of a gift from God, just to have that opportunity. [I am] so very, very thankful, very, very grateful.

Kathleen Christ: Are there any lessons you learned while working here at the University?

Ty Brennan: Let’s see… lessons that I learned… I’d say… more of a reinforcement of things that I may… have known before, but just were reinforced, and that is to always respect other people, always be compassionate for the needs of other people and always be upfront and honest with everyone as best you can… If you come from that perspective, then you can really move mountains. It’s once you can build a relationship, have trust come into that relationship, then through collaboration you can move mountains, so I guess that would be a lesson.

Kathleen Christ: Wow, very wise. [*laughter*]

Ty Brennan: [*laughter*] Yeah.

Kathleen Christ: Do you have anything that you would like to share?

Ty Brennan: Well, I’ve met some wonderful people here at Salve Regina. In fact, I can remember, again like it was yesterday, one of my first sessions was going to a faculty meeting when I’d just arrived on campus and I was introduced along with Dr. John Quinn,[[20]](#footnote-20) we were both new faculty members, and that was our first meeting, and thankfully we have been able to maintain a nice friendship after all of these years, so that was… really neat. I think he’s a great guy.

Kathleen Christ: I would agree [*laughter*] Do you have a favorite memory from being here?

Ty Brennan: Oh boy! [*laughter*] There have been a lot so I don’t want to leave them out. [*laughter*]Oh, let me see…

Kathleen Christ: Well you can share more than one…

Ty Brennan: Okay. I think… some memories are attributed to having a project end successfully in the sense that all those who had to participate and make it work, at the end of the project, all felt good about the whole experience. Those are wonderful memories, whether that’s with the card system, or whether it’s with, say the support of the laptop program… those are just great memories, when you feel as though everyone worked hard and we were achieving something that we all knew would benefit the school, and that when we can see those students come in and start to use things, or faculty come in and start to use things, and feel as though this is a real enhancement from what they were used to. Those are the rewards that you… get. Those make nice memories.

Kathleen Christ: What do you believe was your greatest accomplishment while you were here?

Ty Brennan: Well, what I tried to do, and it wasn’t always successful, but what I tried to do is to make every person I came in contact with feel appreciated and feel respected… Also to, and this is going to sound funny, but not to lose your own personal characteristics of being say, I quote, a “nice guy” and yet still being able to serve in a major administrative capacity here at the University. And I say that in all humility because sometimes you might hear the phrase, “Nice guys finish last,” or things like that, and I think that I may be an example of someone who was “nice guy” but still finished *okay*. [*laughter*]

Kathleen Christ: Yes. [*laughter*]

Ty Brennan: [*laughter*] Okay, so I guess that’s an accomplishment. [*laughter*]…

Kathleen Christ: Is there anything else you would like to add? Last chance!

Ty Brennan: Okay, so I think other than that I think we’re okay…

1. Bishop Feehan High School is a private, Catholic secondary institution run by the Sisters of Mercy in Attleboro, Massachusetts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sister Therese Antone, current Chancellor of Salve Regina University, graduated from here in 1962 and worked as a tenured professor, Director of Development, Vice President for Corporate Affairs and Advancement, Secretary of the Board of Trustees, and served as President from 1994-2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dominic Varisco, (1933-2010), served as Executive Vice President for Salve Regina University from 1995-1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The College of the Holy Cross is a private, Roman Catholic, liberal arts college run by the Jesuits located in Worcester, Massachusetts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William Hall is the current Vice President for Administration/Chief Financial Officer in the Business Office. He’s served the Salve Regina community since 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Miley Hall, originally built in 1964, is currently a Freshman residence hall and contains the main dining hall on campus. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dr. Theresa I. Madonna was Vice President for Academic Affairs/ Dean of Faculty at Salve Regina University from 2002-2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sister Jane Gerety is the President of Salve Regina University since 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sister Leona Misto, (d. 2016), graduated from Salve in 1962, but also worked at the institution for thirty-six years as a professor, department chair, Dean of Campus Ministry, Director of Graduate Extension Studies and lastly Vice President for Mission Integration and Planning. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Christine Dumont is the Director of Administrative Systems at Salve Regina University. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. O’Hare Academic Center, built in 1968, has served as an academic building for Salve Regina University since that time. It houses all of the science/nursing labs and business practice facilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sister Lucille McKillop was President of Salve Regina University from 1973-1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dr. William Burrell served on the faculty of Salve Regina from 1965-1995 as a professor and Dean of Faculty and Graduate Studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dr. Pat Combies, RSM is an English professor at Salve Regina and has worked in different administrative roles as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dr. Arthur Frankel has been a professor of Psychology at Salve Regina since 1978, and worked in different administrative capacities at the university in the past as well, such as Graduation Dean of Studies from 1998-2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dr. Judith Mills was the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Salve Regina University from 1995-1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dr. Barbara Kathe was the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty from 1998-2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dr. Dean de la Motte was Vice President for Academic Affairs from 2006-2014, as well as the Provost and Dean of Faculty from 2011-2014 at Salve Regina University. He is now a professor of French and Comparative Literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dr. Scott Zeman was the Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs of Salve Regina University from 2014-2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dr. John Quinn has been a History professor at Salve Regina University since 1992. In the past, he has also served as Department Chair of the History Department. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)