

TOPcast Episode 18: Expanding Access to College through Online Education

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From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

TOM And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

KELVIN And you're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hi Tom.

TOM Hi Kelvin.

KELVIN How's it going today?

TOM It's going excellently. It is starting to cool off outside here in lovely Orlando. We're down to 91°.

KELVIN It's brisk, right? Brisk. Yeah, I had to put on a jacket this morning. I was so chilly.

TOM Yeah. Soon it will be nice here.

KELVIN The jacket's helpful because it absorbs the sweat. *(laughter)*

TOM I tell people that the summer—like August and I guess we can include September here in Orlando—is our winter. When we don't go outside.

KELVIN It's like three, four, five months a year we just sort of stay inside.

TOM That's right.

KELVIN In the cool air conditioning.

TOM Well, there's nothing better on a hot day...

KELVIN *(laughter)*

TOM ...than a hot cup of coffee.

KELVIN That's what I've always found.

TOM Yeah, so, what did you bring today in the thermos, Kelvin?

KELVIN That's a good question. Let me pour this. You got—what do you say—you frouf it up over there, right? You got some froufy coffee. That's it. There we go. This is an organic Guatemala—ooh, I'm spilling a little bit there—Trapichitos, I believe is what we call this.

TOM Trapichitos?

KELVIN I think so. In Guatemala. See what you think. This is from my go-to local roaster, Blessed Bean Coffee, which kind of goes with the coffee prayer we talked about in another episode. Thank you God for the coffee. And the company seems to mainly provide coffee service, you know, like...

TOM Like corporate?

KELVIN Yeah, yeah, that kind of stuff. Wholesale, whatever...but I ran into them—they have a warehouse, not a storefront. I ran into them—the two co-owners, Rovi and Todd—at a local farmer’s market (several of them). I kept seeing them. They’d brew some coffee but they’d also sell you the beans, and I don’t know, we struck up an arrangement. I’d go and pick up beans from the warehouse sometime, so I would never know that they even existed, and I would have missed out and, you know, by extension, you would have missed out on a lot of great single-origin, locally roasted coffee. So I was thinking about this with their coffee service but then going through the farmer’s market, and I get access to the folks I wouldn’t normally get access to. In light of today’s episode theme, I thought it was significant because we’re talking about access.

TOM Access. I get it.

KELVIN Yeah, so what do you think of the coffee?

TOM It’s a fine cup of Trapichitos, Kelvin. Thank you.

KELVIN *(laughter)* You’re going to say that all day now, aren’t you?

TOM Mhmmmm!

KELVIN Trapichitos.

TOM Trapichitos!

KELVIN That’s right.

TOM Yeah, it’s good, and I get the connection, because we are going to talk about access, and just as a reminder for the home-listening audience that a couple months ago we did talk about the Iron Triangle of quality, cost, and access as being a kind of recurring theme, a framework that we would use to revisit various topics around online and blended learning and technology-based learning, and so we’ve talked about different aspects of all of those, but we’re back to quality today—I’m sorry—access today.

KELVIN But, you know, we could be on quality every episode.

TOM See, that just proves I always have quality on the brain. Always thinking about the quality.

KELVIN That's good.

TOM No, access. It's a really important topic, especially here at UCF which we kind of pride ourselves as an access-oriented institution.

KELVIN Yeah I think that's right and I think it's—I don't know if there's a zeitgeist thing with access right now. I mean, maybe it's my imagination, but we've talked about this a little bit. Malcolm Gladwell. He of *Tipping Point* and other fame has this little—I think what he's calling—a miniseries podcast which is brilliant. The Revisionist History podcast. It's right up there with ours, Tom.

TOM It's almost as good as TOPcast.

KELVIN That's right. You know, he finds it—He has to, you know, edit, add music, have a big budget to fly all around the world and talk to people and a lot of local color and...

TOM That's how he makes up for the... That's the quality.

KELVIN He doesn't have coffee. If he had coffee, he'd be a lot better, but within the ten-episode miniseries Revisionist History, he has three of those ten—I think is significant—three of the ten are on access to higher education in the U.S.

TOM Yeah.

KELVIN That's pretty cool.

TOM Yeah. You and I were sort of talking before the recording started that a lot of what he seems to focus on is sort of the very elite colleges and providing access to those colleges. Which is good and noble in its own way, but I think you and I are kind of in agreement that it's perhaps somewhat limiting in looking at the vast landscape of opportunity for students who are looking for a higher education.

KELVIN Yeah, I think that's true. That's especially true that his first two episodes, "Carlos Doesn't Remember" and "Food Fight". He branches out a little in the third one ("My Little 100 Million") with strategic investment in needier schools, but still it's this whole thing about a bunch of money donated to something to solve a problem versus changing the way you do things from an internal...you know, something like that? Which I think is more of what the world that we live in, we focus a lot on.

TOM Right. And he uses access to Ivy League and sort of elite liberal arts northeast schools as something of a proxy for overall access to higher education, and in that regard, I think it's useful and it works, but I mean, if you didn't look at it through that lens, you might say,

“Well, gee, if a kid doesn’t make it to Princeton then maybe we’re not doing a good job with access.” But there are an awful lot of institutions that try hard and try to do a good job providing access to socioeconomically disadvantaged kids who have the ability and desire to go to college that aren’t Princeton and Vassar and all of these other schools.

KELVIN Well, here’s a thing—and I will admit in front of you and everybody else—that I was not familiar with this access list that Gladwell references in his little miniseries.

TOM That was news to me, too, when I heard that.

KELVIN I thought it was interesting. So New York Times kind of runs this thing, I guess. I thought to your point in the most recent one—this 2015 at the time that we’re recording this. The 2014 list had fewer institutions and the top ten of these—these are the institutions in the U.S. that are doing the most to increase access to what Gladwell would refer to as smart poor kids, let’s say.

TOM Pell-eligible kids.

KELVIN Yeah, and the earlier list—the 2014—no public institutions in the top ten, and I think only maybe one or two in the whole list, but they were looking at a four-year undergraduate completion rate, and when they extended it in 2015 to a five-year undergraduate completion rate, the list got longer and suddenly there’s public institutions that showed up. In fact, here’s a shout out to the UC system. The University of California kind of dominates the top ten in the 2015 list, which is fascinating.

TOM Well I know here at UCF, obviously we’re always trying to—

KELVIN No relation to UC anything else. *(laughter)*

TOM *(laughter)* Different “C”.

KELVIN “Here at UCF…” I totally threw you off.

TOM Yeah, well we do track that, obviously. We’re measured on that by the state and others, and we have our four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rates that we report, but it’s interesting that if you just looked at four-and-a-half years, it’s dramatically better than four.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM You know, our students probably have a different profile than the students at Vassar or at Princeton. You know, maybe they have more challenges in getting to school or working or whatever. So it kind of makes sense that maybe they might be graduating at equal rates but just maybe taking them a little bit longer.

KELVIN Well, is that a fair thing? I mean, because I think there's probably plenty of folks who'd say, "Well, yeah, you're sort of playing a game with that." Right? You're just sort of saying, "You didn't make the cut. You didn't make the standard, so, yeah, if you extend it a little bit longer, then now you can be listed or something." Is that a fair criticism or is there something in the demographics that is important from that extending the college completion?

TOM I personally don't think that's a fair criticism. I think that we need to look at what's the goal? The goal is to educate somebody, have them graduate with knowledge and skills and critical thinking and a credential that has currency to help them get a job or to become a valuable citizen, and who cares if it takes four years versus five years? You know, as long as it's an economically efficient kind of model (there's not money being wasted there), but every student's circumstances are unique, and to judge them all against the same ruler I think isn't necessarily fair.

KELVIN Well, and I guess to that point—and I'll confess I didn't look this stuff up—you and I've talked before about this, about from the White House (as we're recording this in the past), there's been goals put up there in terms of college degree attainment, and I think we've talked about this. To reach those kind of goals, you can't just still deal with the same subpopulation. You've got to—It won't work. You've got to do things differently, and you've got to reach out to people who you wouldn't normally be reaching out to in higher education, right?

TOM Right. So, depending upon when you're listening to this, who knows who is president? The time we're recording this Obama is president, and he had said in the past that he was set kind of a moonshot goal of I think it was 60% of the population having a college degree by whatever date.

KELVIN Some year.

TOM And if you just did the math on the current progress, it was actually mathematically impossible to get there, because you just don't have enough colleges, seats, faculty, whatever. So yes, you have to reach new populations that are underserved right now and reach them in new ways.

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM Different models of teaching them that leverage, frankly, technology to increase that kind of access. Otherwise, if you just keep doing everything the way you've been doing it, you're not going to make that number or anything close to it.

KELVIN No, I think that's fair, and I think it was you that mentioned to me, Michael Crow's concept of the fifth wave universities. You brought that up. As you talk about doing things differently and technologies and stuff, can you summarize his thing a little bit?

TOM Yeah, and I won't claim to be an expert on it. I had the good fortune of participating in UCF's most recent strategic planning process and President Crow spoke to our group, and this was one of the things he mentioned that really resonated with me. He thinks that in addition to the prior four waves of higher education—and again, I may not get these all exactly right because I'm not an expert on it, but it's something along the lines of the American Greek academies is phase one (which is sort of like Harvard), followed by public colleges—and I think many of those early ones like Harvard were faith-based or you know religiously affiliated—public colleges, land grant universities, and then research universities as the fourth wave, and what President Crow is talking about was kind of a fifth wave of the American university, and at the heart of that is this idea of innovation and leveraging technology and technology-enhanced learning experiences so that you can have large institutions that provide access but do not sacrifice quality in order to do so. [It's] kind of what he and others have kind of labeled the new American university, and he puts ASU and UCF and some others in that category of institution. He encouraged us to think about that as we were doing our strategic planning and help that to kind of guide some of our thinking, and frankly, it did. It certainly resonated with what our president has certainly done to position UCF over his tenure, and I think it helped to crystalize some of the results that ended up in that strategic plan.

KELVIN Yeah, after you mentioned it to me, I looked up some of Crow's stuff, and I found this phrase that I love. See if it resonates with you as much as it does with me in light of our UCF experience and then just in general. Crow refers to “digitally immersive technology-enhanced learning experiences that expand our capacity to reach the millions of people around the world who are at risk of being permanently left behind from higher education.”

TOM Yeah! I mean, that's definitely what we were talking about as far as you can't keep doing things the same way if you want different results, and another thing he talked to is kind of central to this whole idea of the fifth wave new American university is being measured on who you let in, not how selective you are in keeping people out.

KELVIN That's profound. Say that again. I like that.

TOM Well, yeah, I didn't make it up, but I like it. It's about who you let in to your institution and how successful you make them as opposed to how selective you are, and it actually runs a little bit counter to some of the things that schools are measured on like U.S. News and World Report rankings that include selectivity as one of the criteria, and it's about being differently selective, letting in as many students who are qualified or you think can make it into your institution who desire an education and serving them as best as you possibly can through high quality educational, intentional student services, and to help them graduate successfully. If you look at—I mean, ASU and UCF are one and two in the size of the student population, and we've all bought into that idea.

KELVIN I don't know if this is fair to ask you to do, but as an example of that (as sort of a mini case study in just a couple minutes), we're starting a new initiative here within the UCF

context we're framing as UCF Online. I wonder if you could maybe summarize a little bit of that in terms of how that initiative seeks to carry out some of the principles that we're talking about.

TOM Yeah, and maybe it helps if I kind of give a little background. Apologies to everybody; this is probably going to be a little bit of a UCF-centric remainder of our podcast.

KELVIN But it'll be brief.

TOM It'll be brief, and hopefully people find it somewhat interesting.

KELVIN And we'll put some information on all this stuff in the show notes, and if you haven't gone to our show notes, there's all kinds of information there.

TOM Yeah, in fact, I've gotten compliments on the show notes. I think some people like the show notes better than the show.

KELVIN What's up with that?

TOM *(laughter)* Anyway, so UCF Online. UCF has been doing online learning...in fact, as we record this, we are in our twentieth year anniversary of online learning at UCF, so we were among the first institutions to do it, and student success has always been really important to us. We have really high success by modality. We have low withdrawal rates, and there's reasons for that. Well, let's just talk about the volume for a second. Over 80% of our students take one or more online or blended course every year. With a student population of about 64,000 this year, that's a lot of students who are taking online and blended courses, and most of those who take one, take more than one. So that's one thing, and then, every year our institutional research office puts together this Venn diagram every fall, and it's a fascinating illustration of what's happened over the past few years. So, picture of a series of overlapping circles, and one large one is the headcount here at the main campus here in Orlando, another one represents our Rosen campus which is our hospitality school down by the attractions. Another one is our regional campuses that are spread throughout Central Florida, mostly co-located with partner colleges (community and state colleges), and then we've got the online circle which grows every year. They all overlap each other, and blended learning, in fact, isn't even represented in the circles, because it's in the big circle of face-to-face headcount because we haven't mastered 3D Venn diagrams yet that are easily emailed.

KELVIN Although I guess arguably the fact that they're all overlapping is a blend of sorts.

TOM It is, and that's kind of the point. What happens is that students swirl from circle to circle to overlapping point to crescent out to the side that doesn't overlap from semester to semester, and that sort of flexibility, I contend, increases their access to the education, because they can choose the right mixture of modalities and locations that fits their particular circumstances in any given semester. So one semester they might be 100%

online, and the next semester they might be two online and one face-to-face. The semester after that, they might be all face-to-face or they might be taking a class out in one of the regions (out in Cocoa Beach or something which is about an hour from our main campus). It all depends on what they need at that particular moment by location, by modality, and I think if we didn't offer that kind of flexibility for students to have some agency in putting together their own educational pathway, then we would not be living up to our access mission because they'd have much fewer choices and we'd have much smaller access.

KELVIN So we've been doing that for twenty years, and I know that you've coined the phrase of a post-modality era, you know, to kind of represent some of that—we'll put that article in the show notes, too—the swirl of modalities and all that, but then there's UCF Online.

TOM Yeah, so UCF Online is a rebranding of our existing seventy plus fully online programs to be more intentional in its outreach, and it has at its core an access mission. In fact, I'm doing presentations this afternoon to our partner colleges in that Central Florida regional campus partnership region to talk about UCF Online because it has to do with access for their students, and in addition to the traditional graduate programs that you might offer online, there's a very intentional undergraduate strategy associated with UCF Online, and it has to do with building partnerships with state and community colleges around Florida for students who achieve an associate's degree who might be place-bound (geographically distant from Central Florida) who still want a UCF education, or maybe we have a degree that they're particularly interested in. They can still do that by kind of intentionally declaring their desire to come to UCF very early in their college process, and then we're in the process of establishing formal partnerships with these colleges so that we can provide some enhanced coaching and student support assistance to these students with our staff while they're still a student at the partner college. So we're trying to increase their likelihood of getting the associate's degree by working in collaboration with the college staff and then give them the kind of advising and coaching that would be most beneficial for them to try to transfer to UCF, because who better to advise them on what's required to be a successful transfer than somebody who's actually at UCF? And that's the idea. And we're leveraging some of the skills that our regional campuses have become so expert at through our DirectConnect to UCF program—I guess we can probably put a link to that in there as well—and so far, so good. We've signed our first MOU with a partner college. In fact, I will be there tomorrow to meet with their president and kind of do the “Here's the pen, and we'll sign the papers,” and hopefully that's the first of many more to come that we've been in discussions with. One thing that everybody loves is the fact that it is about access. Access for transfer students who might just stop at the associate's degree because they are place-bound or because there's not a state university nearby or they just kind of have work and other kinds of responsibilities that they couldn't continue their education any other way except online.

KELVIN Yeah, I love that. I love access and not just access, but there's a success—Did we mention that? A student success focus that runs through it. I love the fact that we're building on a successful transfer focus in our immediate service area but extending that

outside the service area like you've mentioned—this first MOU to that concentric circle of other state colleges in the Florida area—but then you're planning to continue to ramp that up broader, outside of Florida and beyond.

TOM Yeah, potentially. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, who knows? If people want to work with us, we'll be happy to work with them, and the idea—at the undergraduate level—is at the moment, exclusively transfer students, and that's sort of by design because we know a lot about that population from being a very intentional transfer-serving institution over the years. and the hope is that maybe we can help students outside of Florida eventually, but we're starting here in our own backyard first.

KELVIN Well, and you don't want to compete with yourself, either, right? So, is this working? I mean, do you think so far students like this kind of thing?

TOM So far. Like I said, we're signing our first MOU tomorrow, but since we opened the doors, this is really our first semester this fall, and it's exceeded our expectations so far. There's a long way to go, but you know, we're trying to do our part for baccalaureate production in the state of Florida and provide access, and even part of that is what does it cost?

KELVIN Yeah.

TOM So, the tuition is the same, and this isn't unique. A lot of schools around the state and elsewhere have done this, but we've eliminated the fees associated with campus-based services that fully online students are not going to be accessing.

KELVIN Which turns out to be no small thing.

TOM No! For us, it's like \$51 per credit hour at the undergraduate level, so, you know, \$153 per three-credit course that a student doesn't have to pay because they're in Pensacola and they're not going to be driving to Orlando. It saves a lot of money over the long haul of a complete degree program.

KELVIN Yeah. That's good. So, I think everybody will be watching the UCF Online initiative as well as other initiatives like UCF Online at other institutions around the country because it is a way to carry out that digitally immersive technology-enhanced learning experience that President Crow calls for in order to expand our capacity to reach folks who wouldn't otherwise be pursuing higher education, right?

TOM Yeah. Absolutely. We're not quite doing what ASU's doing with, like, their Starbucks partnership, but who knows? Maybe...

KELVIN And if Starbucks wanted to donate coffee to TOPcast, we'd be happy to explore that topic.

TOM *(laughter)* That's right! We'd be happy to cut a partnership with—I don't know—Seattle's Best! Whoever!

KELVIN *(laughter)* Or whoever! Any kind of the higher end coffee places...no, no, no. *(laughter)* We jest.

TOM We jest.

KELVIN We jest. So, take us home, Tom. How would you wrap up this whole theme?

TOM So, access, I think, really is still a large challenge for higher education across the board; however, I think that through the creative application of online education, we can increase access to people who might not have become students otherwise. Things like UCF Online or what other institutions are doing across the board. I do think online education is required in order to hit that kind of moonshot goal of enrolling—or graduating, I should say—more and more students. Even if we don't hit 60%, getting close to that, we're still going to need to leverage online education and creative use of technology to do so, and I think schools like UCF and others—we're certainly not alone—are in a great position to help with that goal.

KELVIN That's right. So, let us know you think. If you agree that this is how online education is best positioned or if you don't, let us know. Lots of communication venues at the TOPcast website: topcast.online.ucf.edu. And hey, while you're there, feel free to link over to iTunes, leave us a rating or an iTunes review or jot down a comment on one of the episode pages. But, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

TOM And I'm Tom.

KELVIN See ya!