TOPcast Episode 11: Getting to the Goal of Going Textbook Free

KELVIN	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. That's my favorite podcast.
KELVIN	Is it? Mine too! That's amazing!
TOM	What are the odds?
KELVIN	At least two and two? I don't know. I was a music major. I don't really know how that works.
TOM	All right. So it's great to be back for yet another scintillating conversation about the latest events in online and higher education.
KELVIN	It is. Truly.
TOM	And almost as scintillating as whatever's brewing in the pot.
KELVIN	That's good.
TOM	So, why don't you tell us what's in the thermos today?
KELVIN	No thermos today, Tom.
TOM	What?!
KELVIN	I know. I know. Well, as you say, thematically-selected coffee, so dig this, right? So I went to my neighborhood grocery store and literally purchased the least expensive of the—you know, I've got to have standards—better coffee they had on the shelf. There was a sale on, so it happened to be Seattle's Best Level 4. So after the sale, [it was] forty cents an ounce—I never calculated this before—compared to the 75 cents to a dollar per ounce that I typically pay for higher end coffees. So then I just used one of the office coffeemakers to brew up this pot of coffee.
TOM	I'm looking at the pot right now. I can vouch for the pot. It is a lovely carafe—ten-cup carafe, glass—I think you might see in your average coffeemaker.
KELVIN	So take a look. And true disclosure, I don't really use drip coffeemakers. I hope I made the coffee right. So, what do you think of this stuff?
TOM	You know what? After drinking coffee with you for a few months, it's fine.

KELVIN		Uh huh.
TOM		It doesn't have quite the panache of some of your other coffees.
KELVIN		It's panache-less coffee.
TOM		Yeah, I mean, I'm not criticizing it.
KELVIN		And so, there you go, right? Cost is indeed one of the elements that's important to people—not just with coffee, but in higher education as well. We've discussed before some use the concept of the iron triangle to talk about the relationship between cost and quality and access. And while today's coffee was less expensive than usual, and it was much more accessible at the local grocery store than getting a pound of fresh roasted, single-origin coffee straight from the roaster, some might argue that the quality has suffered at least a little bit. No offense to Seattle's Best. Just, you know.
TOM		Which I'm a fan of. I will drink.
KELVIN		Yeah. Me, too. So maybe there's a connection to today's episode in there. Somewhere.
TOM		Having to do with cost, you say?
KELVIN		Yeah.
TOM		Well, if I recall from a previous podcast, we did say that the iron triangle of quality, cost, and access would be a recurring theme—
KELVIN		It is.
TOM		—over the coming months—
KELVIN		It has been.
TOM		—and look—
KELVIN		It will be.
TOM		—it seems to have recurred.
KELVIN		*(laughter)* That's right.
TOM		Here it is.
KELVIN		Right here.

TOM		So cost. Today we're going to talk about cost through the framework, through the lens of the iron triangle.
KELVIN		Are we in favor it increasing or decreasing?
TOM		I am in favor of decreasing costs for students.
KELVIN		I'll vote for you, Tom. I'll vote for you.
TOM		How could you not?
KELVIN		That's true.
TOM		Apple pie and…
KELVIN		*(laughter)* Something.
TOM		And something. Chicken in every pot.
KELVIN		So, in today's episode, we're going to explore one way of breaking the iron triangle—or at least bending it a little bit—through taking on textbook costs. Right, so I think that's kind of cool. So you interviewed Dr. Karen Vignare from University of Maryland University College back during the 2015 Online Learning Consortium International Conference.
TOM		I did.
KELVIN		Karen serves as a vise provost for the Center for Innovation and Learning and Student Success, and some of her listeners might be aware that UMUC has been in the news some because they've been going textbook-free as an institution. To a large extent, Karen is responsible for advancing innovation in online education at UMUC, and one area, again, is through this whole textbook-free thing. Although she's not directly leading that initiative; she leads other initiatives. So she can speak to all this. I thought this was good. So, we're going to cut to the recording of that interview and then we'll be back in just a little bit to wrap things up afterwards.
		(music transition)
TOM		So Karen, I'd like to talk about one of the innovations that I know UMUC is really involved with, which has to do with open educational resources. I was really impressed when I read about UMUC's initiative to essentially eliminate all textbooks to help student costs—student affordability issues—and I imagine that's one aspect of it, but another aspect is probably effectiveness, as well, as opposed to maybe some of the data that

		comes out of students' use of textbook materials. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the impetus behind this project and some of the goals you're hoping to accomplish by basically eliminating textbooks in favor of open educational resources.
KAREN		Yes. So in 2013, President Miyares basically challenged the university that he wanted to have no-cost materials. He wasn't that, you know, definitive about whether they were open access, whether we were buying materials and therefore we would own them, or whether we were creating them. But he challenged us to have it completed in two years for the undergraduate school and in three years for the graduate school. We met the challenge in less than two years' time, so by August of this year, 2015, all of our undergraduate schools have no cost for students.
TOM		So, that doesn't mean though, if I can jump in, that it's no cost to the university.
KAREN		Correct. And most of the cost to the university was getting there, right? At this point, we found enough or we have enough of our own created materials that replaced textbooks. We still consider this version one, and when we talk about version one, basically we replace the textbook. Now the opportunity is really around laying the groundwork so that the resources we have are much more tied to the assessments. That's version two. This is not over for us even though we met the initial deadline, and I should share, like, the biggest news of all is the total cost savings to our students in the undergraduate school was five million dollars last year alone.
TOM		Wow. Yeah. I totally believe that.
KAREN		Yeah, and I know that Creative Commons is asking for a forecast for next year. I would assume it'll be similar, but you know, we have decreased our course inventory as well during this time. Being a large-scale university, what we did is we noticed that, you know, certain courses under 150 students-per-year probably were not needed by our students, so we did eliminate some course inventory, too.
TOM		Sure. Could you share some of the strategies you used to get to that goal? OER, licensed materials, purchased materials on behalf of the students? What were some of the different arrows in the quiver to get to that goal?
KAREN		So, and I do have to give a lot of credit to the vice provost of the Faculty and Learner Experience. Her team includes the course design—that's Dr. Kara Van Dam—and they were really the project managers for this. They worked directly with the undergraduate school and—[at] our university, we call our department chairs "program directors"—they worked with our program directors. And they created a committee which included project management. So that committee—which also included the library—went out and the SMEs identified what we have already because we've been in the online business for fifteen years. Thus we have some in-house materials already which we own. Then we went to survey pretty much the open repositories of the world. In most cases, those are fully Creative Commons licensed materials, but we were also willing—because of no

		cost—to actually use open access materials as well. We actually did not buy that many licensed materials. So, we are using primarily open access and OER materials.
TOM		You said something that was interesting, because it resonates with something we're working on at UCF, which is trying to identify materials that students are buying that the library already owns, so that they could potentially be accessing it at no cost because the university's already borne that cost. But we haven't done a good job of tracking it. Did you find those kinds of overlaps in your initial implementation?
KAREN		So, when we were trying to really get this off the ground, that's the first place we went running to: the library. Our library had a license for e-textbooks, and we actually found that the e-textbooks were an okay immediate choice, but as we continued to develop those courses, what we found is the e-text often limited our ability to do a better job at aligning materials to outcomes. And in other words, we replaced one textbook with another one, instead of having resources that are really targeted to the outcomes of the course. So the library is a really good place because it does start [the research]. And then your faculty will be incredibly talented, and they'll be able to find additional materials to build around that, but for us, while we did go to e-textbooks first, we sort of jumped out of them immediately.
TOM		I see. And I can see how that evolution would occur. So, I'm going to ask a question you probably can't answer—so be prepared for an unfair question—but I have heard some statistics that students who are required to purchase textbooks actually don't succeed as at high a level as students who might use open access materials, and it's primarily because many students just don't buy them, whether it's for financial reasons or they don't see the value in it or they think they can get away without it, but in many situations it's financial. They just don't buy the books, and it's going to be awfully hard to succeed in the course if you don't buy the books, so if it's open access materials, they have all the resources they're supposed to have. You know, the question is: have you seen that kind of improvement in student success? And if it's too early for that, is that one of the motivators? Is that something that is driving some of this?
KAREN		It was one of the motivators. We also had the hypothesis that a good 40% of our students were not buying or could not get the textbook in time. Remember, UMUC is 50% military, so getting, you know, any number of students who are down-range their textbooks in time was always a challenge. And so having open materials for them means they get them right away. We are in the midst of doing our evaluation work. I can tell you that our first analysis of 92 courses—we did 92 sample courses—there was no significant difference. However, we're looking at that in a time series way. We're also going to be looking at statistics for different populations like the military population. We're actually seeing some potential positives. I don't want to say that I can publish that information yet, but it actually looks like it's going to be pretty promising for populations. They are doing better in both course completion as well as those that might have been Pell-eligible. So we're pretty excited about the evaluation work that we're doing. I mean, UCF is the leader in statistical analysis of learning and analytics, and as we looked at our initial

		results of no statistically difference that means we did no harm and we saved five million dollars.
TOM		Yeah. You saved a bunch of money for students. Right.
KAREN		There's still a concern—and here's one of the reasons that the analysis is taking us more time and that those people that understand statistics also understand—that if you have ends of 90,000 people, you lose some of your statistically significant actual data because of the large populations, right? Like, we can get statistical significance in smaller populations that you can't actually see in larger populations, right? So, what we're trying to do is really cover the bases and we're working with some outside experts before we release that. but I'd like to say that we'll have our first…We've already released the no significant difference total, but we'll have our next segmented analysis available by the end of November.
TOM		So you've alluded to some challenges already, but I wonder if you could kind of point to maybe one or two of the biggest obstacles you had to overcome to implement something like this. I'm thinking about our environment and granted, we're two different kinds of schools—although we do similar things—and I don't think we could get away with just imposing on faculty, "No more textbooks." Because that's something that the faculty have complete autonomy of choosing within some restrictions obviously. So, that would be a challenge we would face, but maybe that wasn't one of yours. I wonder if you could kind of share what were the biggest hurdles you had to overcome to implement a textbook-free, OER initiative.
KAREN		We also had, and rightly so, our program directors were very concerned about quality and student success. I mean, and I think in that way, our faculty and the people that work at our institutions are the same. They're always concerned about student success, but the challenge for them was sort of seeing the path forward. That is, we had to get, as we all do, we work with those people who were most willing or where we had the most open resources. As they began to see that faculty actually felt pretty positive about being freed from the "book". That that was a way of helping them overcome that barrier. I also believe the other barrier, which we haven't fully [solved, is that] we have no cost for textbooks but our students still have to pay for software and other things, right? And in many cases, software was coupled with books, so that's a real challenge. I mean, more than 60% of our programs are business and information and cyber technology. They require software. So there was a huge challenge there, and we're trying to now go back to the drawing board to see if we can't even expand this so that there is absolutely no cost for students in any materials, whether that's software, whether that's, you know, use of [software] and making sure that actual software is the useful one as we move forward. So phase one and version one for us.
TOM		Well, maybe the last question I'll ask is perhaps some advice. If somebody's listening to this and they're thinking about doing something similar at their institution, what would be the top one or two or whatever—however much you can think of here on the spot—

		pieces of advice you would give to them? Start with this, or don't do that, or what would guide them on their way?
KAREN		So, I'm really hopeful that our research, to be quite frank, will be pretty powerful to people. And I know people are anxious to see it, but we just want to make sure we do it right, and the reason I'm saying start with the research: quite frankly, there is no research that tells us textbooks help student success. It just doesn't exist, and we have to challenge ourselves to actually believe that, and if we can show in our research that our students have performed with or without the textbooks, I think that's going to be a big hurdle that we have to [overcome], but while that's not what institutions should think about, I think the point that they should definitely think about is particularly depending upon the institution. The students you serve should be the most important part of adopting this kind of strategy, right? So, I would hope that community colleges, public universities, those that are serving, you know, lower-socioeconomic populations are thinking about this first. We need to lower the barriers for them. And then, I think as an internal strategy—even if everyone agrees on the surface level of that—an internal strategy still defines the biggest champions. And we've done this in online learning forever is work with those people who totally get [it.] This frees them up. They don't have to design a syllabus that meets a book anymore.
TOM		[A book] that changes in a year that you have to totally redesign, right?
KAREN		Exactly. So look for those champions, but I do hope you know what we're able to share, and I think the open community is now sort of heading in this direction and that's called, you know, it's really open education versus open resources, right? The philosophy is now that we don't want to think about this as a textbook replacement but the opportunity to redesign a class. You have outcomes that you want them to achieve. Stop starting with the textbook as the way to achieve those outcomes.
TOM		I think that's a perfect place to stop. So, on behalf of Kelvin, I want to thank you for being on the TOPcast, and have fun at the rest of the conference.
KAREN		Thanks, Tom!
		(music transition)
KELVIN		I thought that was a good interview, Tom.
TOM		Yeah. I really enjoyed talking to Karen. She's a friend and a colleague, and I think they're doing some really interesting things at UMUC around OER and digital materials to intentionally reduce student costs without impacting quality. Or maybe even improving quality.
KELVIN		Right. Without negatively impacting quality. I think a lot of people are going to be

		watching to see how that textbook-free program goes. They're trailblazers in this area, and if that sets a precedent, things go well, I have a feeling folks will jump on that bandwagon [and] try to emulate.
TOM		Yeah, and I think that there's a lot that many of us can learn from what UMUC is doing right now, and Karen and most of the folks that we know at UMUC are really great about sharing what they've done—what's worked and what's not worked—so I expect to see a lot more at future conferences and in the journals about what's worked and what's not worked and what we can apply at our own institutions going forward.
KELVIN		So, do you have thoughts—can I ask you this? Can I put you on the spot? Having talked to her, what do you think will it take for other colleges and other universities to follow suit with textbook-free initiatives?
TOM		Well, you know, it's a good question because every school's different. UMUC's a little different from we are, and we've got some constraints perhaps that they don't have, and maybe they have some that we don't have, so everybody has their own unique context, but here, for example, I think it would be…It would require senior leadership to step in and say, "We are doing this," which is in fact, I believe, what happened at UMUC. The president stepped in and said, "This is what we're going to do. This is important to us." So I think you need to have very intentional senior leadership willing to make it happen and not just by fiat but by investing in the resources and support materials and ensuring that it's successful. It's not just saying, "We're going to do it," without putting in place the infrastructure to ensure its success.
KELVIN		Yeah.
TOM		But it has to be intentional. Waiting for it to happen organically, I think, is probably a really long term kind of a deal.
KELVIN		And I think that's excellent, right? Because—not to put too fine of a point on it—but like with the whole OER conversation, right? I suppose one could have a bit of a naïve take on this and just think, "Well, if we just sort of encourage faculty to use OER, this will all spontaneously result in being textbook-free," but I'm sorry. I don't think that would ever happen, right?
TOM		Right, and I think faculty in general care about their students' costs.
KELVIN		Yeah I agree with that.
TOM		And they know that students sometimes have to really scrape, and sometimes the reason they're not buying the textbook is because they simply can't afford it, and that impacts their performance in the course, as Karen alluded to. So, you know, faculty get it. It's just we're dealing with, you know, a thousand years of certain kinds of models built into higher education practice and an ecosystem of publishers that make it very easy to just

		simply sort of adopt commercial materials so how do you break that tradition a little bit to think outside the box? It's hard.
KELVIN		And it would need some facilitation, right? I mean, even if you got an extremely engaged and knowledgeable faculty member—I mean knowledgeable about, say, the OER space and all that—some courses there's not going to be OER content immediately, off-the-shelf available and then that can be exhausting to try to create or customize, and then you've got to go search for that stuff and then, you know. Okay, well, those two courses you're able to find stuff, that one you couldn't. Oh, is there still a textbook? So, as you said policies, procedures…
TOM		And there have been experiments—interesting things. In fact, one of our sister institutions at the University of Florida—they, for a brief period, experimented with actually paying faculty to write textbooks that would be openly available to students, and I think it's a noble endeavor, but the problem with those kinds of initiatives is that the sustaining ecosystem of revisions and incentives and compensation for people's hard labor to write a textbook, you know, it's hard to do everything out of the goodness of your heart when you have limited time, so I'm not sure that that is the answer either, you know, to just have institutions pay faculty to write open books.
KELVIN		But I think all of this sort of really underscores kind of the coolness of what Karen and her colleagues are doing at UMUC. The fact that they're actually moving the needle on this or actually making progress on this initiative is, you know…hat's off to them. So I guess maybe—see if this resonates with you—so with this whole theme today, cost isn't everything, but it's not nothing.
TOM		It sure matters to students.
KELVIN		That's right. There are many variables we can't control, but maybe, maybe with some creative thinking and some good leadership at the top, there are options.
TOM		Absolutely, and so I'm feeling inspired by what Karen and UMUC are doing, and hopefully you are in the listening audience as well.
KELVIN		Absolutely.
TOM		So as we kind of wrap up this week's TOPcast or this month's TOPcast…
KELVIN		This year's TOPcast?
TOM		This year's TOPcast. This decade's TOPcast! We would probably just be remise if we didn't ask you to go to iTunes and if you like what you hear, give us a rating and a review. It helps improve the rankings, and it helps people find the TOPcast podcast if that's the kind of content that they're looking for.

KELVIN		Yeah that's helpful.
TOM		And our website.
KELVIN		It's topcast.online.ucf.edu. or if you're really old school, just mail a $50 to Tom and Kelvin at UCF in Orlando, Florida, and we'll get it.
TOM		We'll get it.
KELVIN		*(laughter)* No, don't do that. The mail will never reach us.
TOM		No, we'll have to fill out 42 forms from the state of Florida.
KELVIN		*(laughter)* Leave some blood behind. That would not be good.
TOM		Yeah. So, thank you for listening. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.
KELVIN		I'm Kelvin.
TOM		See ya!