TOPcast Episode 36: Finding Online Learning Leaders: "Fredericksen's List"

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(musical transition)

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 are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom.

TOM   Hey Kelvin!

KELVIN   What is up?

TOM   Not much. We've got interesting weather out there today. I know we often talk about the weather.

KELVIN   That seems like that's become a thing!

TOM   A strange thing to do considering these things air, you know…

KELVIN   Way after that.

TOM   Yeah, and sometimes out of sequence and not even close to the time when we actually record it, but we've got like tornado warnings and it just looks so ominous out there.

KELVIN   It's true. It is true.

TOM   Our TOPcast may be punctuated with the occasional thunder clap.

KELVIN   Let's hope not. Or lightning strike.

TOM   Not that.

KELVIN   No. Let's not have that. There's something I was going to tell you but I don't know what is was now. Oh yeah! We're doing a show right here!

TOM   Oh! Are we? *(laughter)*

KELVIN   Yeah! That's what we're doing.

TOM   *(laughter)*

KELVIN   You probably want to know what you're drinking in that coffee cup.

TOM   Yeah, let's just jump right to the coffee, shall we? Let's not just mess around.

KELVIN   Dillydally?

TOM   No dillydallying. No lollygagging.

KELVIN   We've got stuff to do here.

TOM   That's right!

KELVIN   Along with worrying about the weather.

TOM   The line from *Bull Durham*. "You lollygagging from the infield. You lollygagging from the dugout. You know what that makes ya?"

KELVIN   A lollygagger?

TOM   "Buncha lollygaggers!"

KELVIN   And there it is. *(laughter)* It's been a long time since I saw that movie.

TOM   That movie's awesome.

KELVIN   I gotcha.

TOM   Alright, so, what is in my Thermos?

KELVIN   It's coffee.

TOM   It's a good thing you caught me sipping.

KELVIN   *(laughter)* One day I'm going to wear this coffee because you're going to spit-take all over me.

TOM   Yeah, either that or I might have had a comment.

KELVIN   Either way.

TOM   Either way.

KELVIN   But today's coffee comes to us by way of our colleague and lead video producer Aaron Hosé who brought home some coffee from a recent trip to Nashville.

TOM   That guy!

KELVIN   He travels. He brings coffee.

TOM	Aaron! Thank you, Aaron.
KELVIN	You know what this is? This is Road Rage coffee.
TOM	Sounds like it's from Nashville.
KELVIN	It's a blend from Garage Coffee Company which is a Nashville startup from an entrepreneur named Rob Carmado who already set up a business making custom leather saddlebags for Harley Davidson bikers. He calls it Garage Leathers. So, a Garage Coffee Company.
TOM	Cool.
KELVIN	And this guy also trades equity stock. So, drinking the output of an entrepreneurial leader's business venture seemed to me like a good choice for today's topic since we're going to be talking about leadership today. Makes sense?
TOM	Makes sense!
KELVIN	How's the coffee?
TOM	It's really good.
KELVIN	Yeah. Thanks, Aaron.
TOM	Thank you, Aaron. Man, again, I will comment on this shtick you and now I have going where—
KELVIN	I know! People send us coffee!
TOM	We've actually got coffee waiting to be drunk on a TOPcast episode.
KELVIN	And if you have some coffee that you'd like to send us—
TOM	You too will get a shout out!
KELVIN	That's right!
TOM	It's very much appreciated.
KELVIN	It is.
TOM	It really is, and we're not the only ones who drink it. We will share.

KELVIN	We share around. Yeah, that's right. Mostly us. *(laughter)*
TOM	*(laughter)* Mostly us.
KELVIN	But we share some. It's true. So, at any rate, on with the show. So, Tom, you interviewed Dr. Eric Fredericksen, Associate VP of Online Learning and Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Rochester during the 2017 OLC Accelerate Conference.
TOM	I did.
KELVIN	Eric has been a respected leader in the field of online education for a long time, and as of this recording, he is recently the president of the OLC Board of Directors. You spoke with Eric about a research project he's conducted related to online learning leadership.
TOM	I did. Yeah. That was a really great conversation. Eric is a great guy. Really smart and really engaged in this space.
KELVIN	Anything else you want to say about the interview before we cut to it?
TOM	Maybe the one thing I will say—and maybe keep this in mind while you're listening to it—I think this research that Eric has done is important. It's important for us in the field, because you can't really do additional research until you have some foundational stuff done, and I think a lot of the work that Eric's been doing is just super foundational, that has real value, that others could potentially—or he himself as he continues this research agenda—build upon. So, I'm really appreciative, and as you'll hear, this was a non-trivial amount of work he invested in this.
KELVIN	Yeah, yeah, yeah. Listen for that, you would-be researchers who were thinking about doing something. You'll be like, "Oh, but you did what now?"
TOM	Yeah. It's amazing and it's awesome and I think all of us in the online learning world should be grateful. So, maybe with that as a setup, through the magic of *(laughter)* podcasting, we will go back in time now to the OLC Accelerate 2017 Conference.
KELVIN	Then we'll be back to wrap things up. So, stick around.
	(musical transition)
TOM	So, Eric, thank you for taking time to talk to us on TOPcast.
ERIC	It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks, Tom.
TOM	So, we are here at the Online Learning Consortium Accelerate Conference, and congratulations are in order because you are the incoming Board Chair, correct?

ERIC   Correct. I was elected to be the new president earlier this week, and it's a pleasure to serve. It's an organization I have cared about for twenty-two or twenty-three years now, so it means a lot to me, and so, it's a real honor.

TOM   One of the things I did want to talk to you about is some research that you have done that is relevant to the OLC community about leadership in online learning, and you've published a study about trends in titles, and I wonder if maybe you could just kind of give us a quick summary and then we can kind of dive into some of it.

ERIC   Sure! Happy to. I have done now two studies. So, the journal article that was published references the first study, so I'll talk about that to begin with, and that was a study of online learning leadership at U.S. universities and colleges in the summer of '16 and the fall of '16 that I did, and I was able to take a look at the R1 institutions, R2, R3, M1, M2, and M3 institutions, and what I was able to do is go through and reach out to all of the leaders in those institutions, but you might be asking me, "How did you do that?"

TOM   Right.

ERIC   And so, my response to that would be that [it] was a bit of a hurdle and also maybe even an explanation in my mind about why this kind of study has not been done before.

TOM   I think I filled it out originally.

ERIC   *(laughter)* And thank you for that.

TOM   You're welcome. *(laughter)*

ERIC   So, if you want to do a study of these individuals, what you really need to do in order to reach out to them is have the list of these people.

TOM   Right.

ERIC   But guess what? That list actually doesn't exist. So, if you want to do a study of presidents, you can get that list. If you want to do a study of provosts or deans—

TOM   CIOS.

ERIC   —or CIOs, you can get that list, but this list doesn't exist. And so, what that meant is that I had just so much fun going through the institutions I just referenced, those six Carnegie classifications. There was 1,088 of those institutions, and I actually reviewed the institutional websites of every one of those in order to seek out these individuals. Now, there is a challenge here in finding those in there. Some of these—and I'll probably get into this in a moment—are new, and that was part of the findings of this study. If I back up for a second, you know, we—everyone who might listen to this, as well as you—

would probably agree that online education has been growing in terms of just sheer numbers. I would argue and suggest that it's also been growing in strategic importance, and with those two combined, I would even suggest that it has been growing in visibility to our Boards of Trustees, to our presidents, to our provosts and other executives and so, when I think about all of that, it's probably not surprising that many presidents and provosts have actually decided to put someone at their institution on point.

TOM   But your research had to discern who that person was, because there's no uniform title, right?

ERIC   Not exactly, no. There's not a specific title, and I think it probably was helpful to me after sort of working this space for the last twenty-three years to have a sense of, "Well, it could be this or this or this or might fit in this part of the organization," and so that helped me go through those almost 1,100 institutional websites. I would tell you that I'm very grateful to all those institutions that made that really easy, because in some cases, it meant that I could identify that person. Well, in many cases, I knew who it was. In many cases, I was able to find that in five minutes or something like that.

TOM   1,100's a big number.

ERIC   But I would tell you in some cases it took a little bit longer, and I would admit to being always a bit of an optimist and I always felt like, "I'm only one more click away from uncovering who this individual is," and then I would do it again and again and be like, "I'm going to get it the next time."

TOM   Well, we were chatting before we hit record, and you commented how it's difficult to assign a grad student or somebody without that history or institutional context to actual do that research because they just wouldn't know that that title is sort of the person that I'm looking for.

ERIC   Yeah, and I like our grad students and our doc. students way too much to give them that kind of job to do, and again, it probably would have only amplified how much time this was going to take, but it did mean that it was quite a bit of an investment of time to go through and figure out who these people were. So, out of the 1,100 in that first study, I was able to identify 820 individuals with contact information, titles, and all that kind of stuff in order to have the foundation and then the ability to actually think about conducting this study.

TOM   So, you now have the list that you were looking for when you started this.

ERIC   I do have the list! Again, this is in the context of the first study which were the universities and colleges. Over this past summer, I actually had wanted to do our community colleges—our two-year schools—and so, I have now done something similar to the two-year schools. There are 1,024 of those. I went through the same idea—all of those—and ended up identifying 752 individuals from that. So, combined, I've got more

than 1,500 individuals identified which is a good dataset to have. In my opinion, I think it's a valuable dataset for higher education to have because of such the important role that these individuals play in helping their institutions to support, guide, lead this really important academic innovation.

TOM   So, anything that you learned? Any themes? Commonalities? Was it a certain title or a certain kind of person? I know you've done some looking at demographics and other kinds of things.

ERIC   Sure, I would put the exploration in many a couple different chunks. I wanted to consider institutional information because that context, I think, is important and helps us think about this. I wanted to take a look at some information about the position itself, like where does it report to and how long has it been in place? Those sorts of things, and then I also wanted to take a look at information relative to the individual themselves, and so, some of the personal demographics or characteristics, and so, that's the latter part to respond to. Ask me whatever questions about any of those chunks in terms of if I thought about maybe….I might start with the first one about institutional context. I think for my mind it sort of goes sequentially like this that I thinkit was important to capture certain information. The first thing I was really interested in is scope. So, how did the individual—this leader in this institution—define—when we say online learning, what did the institutions or individuals mean by that? Historically, some might have interpreted that as, well, this is in that category of complete online courses, distance education, and so that's what this was about at this institution and for this individual. But that's not exactly what I found. I mean, there were some institutions that responded with that, but the vast majority of institutions defined the scope for this individual as all courses. So, the idea of yes it includes complete online courses, it includes hybrid online courses, but it includes the notion about using online resources and tools and capabilities and activities to complement even face-to-face traditional classroom courses, too, and this individual and that institution are saying that was part of what this individual is helping with.

TOM   That's interesting. I remember when I was looking at the first report about colleges and universities that one question that stood out to me was about who they report to, and how many report to provosts or presidents versus some other like senior VP or CIO or somebody like that, because I think that communicates something internally and externally about the value and strategic importance they place on this particular initiative. I don't know if any insights came from who you report to?

ERIC   I appreciate that, Tom, and I would agree with you that that was a really important question that I was really interested which was whom do these people report to? What we found with the universities and colleges in that first study is the vast majority report directly to the provost. More than 50%, actually.

TOM   Yup, I found that encouraging, actually.

ERIC   I think you're right to think that that might suggest certain meaning, along with thinking about the other sorts of options. So, if it wasn't to the provost—and again, that was more than half of the people—the next one was some other senior academic leader at the institution.

TOM   Right.

ERIC   So, you combine those, that is the lion's share of those options.

TOM   That could be like a dean or somebody like that.

ERIC   Or it might be like a senior vice provost or something that like that. Some did go to the president. A few others. But, the one that also stood out to me was—

TOM   Almost 5% went to the president. That actually surprised me that there was that many.

ERIC   Yeah, I think that was true. I think the one to note is actually the notion of how many go to the CIO of the institution, and there were some but it was a very, very small percentage, and my interpretation of this point is that it says something about online learning, and sometimes there might be a tendency to think about online learning as sort of a technology thing. I would suggest otherwise. I would argue that online learning is an academic initiative, and that is not to say that there is not tremendous importance on counting on and depending upon our great IT organizations at our universities to provide that solid, robust platform, but the idea about alignment as an academic activity not as an IT thing is meaningful and an important finding in the study.

TOM   Yeah, I totally agree. And so, that was the colleges and universities. Did you find anything different at the community college level?

ERIC   This is an example of where there is [a difference]. After doing the second study of the community college leaders, I was interested in where both going through the same sorts of questions and developing an understanding for all of those, it was also to do some comparison about where did the university leaders and community college leaders. What do they have in common and then in what areas do they differ? And so, this is an example of what they have in common. The community college leaders also—vast majority of them—report up to the chief academic officer of their institution, and I would interpret it in the same way. That it's really reinforcing the idea about the importance of us thinking about this as an academic initiative.

TOM   Yeah. So how do you plan to disseminate the list? Fredericksen's List.

ERIC   It's a good question. I have spent more time actually doing the studies than I have thinking about how to distribute this, but I would say that all of this is an IRB-approved study through the University of Rochester, my home institution, and so, I have some constraints. So, what I've tried to do to try to be respectful and compliant with that

approval but still sort of build on the work—because it was a lot of work to get there *(laughter)*—is to be able to take it upon myself to in certain cases reach out to that audience to let them know about certain [things]. So, here at OLC, we have this leadership network that we've been building, this opportunity for these peer—many of them new at their institutions—to realize that there's friends. There's friends across the country that they can connect to and that's really a lot of value and that's why we're trying to sort of encourage this leadership network. So, it's reaching out to them as an example.

TOM   Yeah, I can see that, and sometimes you can always go to the most cynical interpretation that as much as we love and rely upon our commercial partners, a list like that would be of a lot of value to certain vendors. "Who do I reach out to as buying authority or decision-making authority?"

ERIC   I would admit to being a little bit sensitive about being really thoughtful about the list, the people on it, the personal information—not personal information but contact information—and so I want to be really thoughtful and respectful of those individuals.

TOM   Sure, but I mean I presume everything you found was open and on the public web, so, somebody else could—

ERIC   So, if someone wants to go through and do what I did, God bless them. *(laughter)*

TOM   *(laughter)* Good luck. So, what's next? Do you have kind of a part two for this research agenda?

ERIC   The part two is what I have just very recently conducted is this study of the community colleges, and again, and then, as I said a moment ago, the idea of finding out what people have in common and where people differ. I'd like to maybe come back to even a couple other findings that might be of interest to your audience.

TOM   Yeah, well there is one I was going to ask you about—

ERIC   Okay!

TOM   —and if there are others if you think are really relevant. One that I found interesting was the amount of time somebody had served in the position and if that says anything about kind of the newness of or not-newness of this particular enterprise and people in these leadership positions. Online learning's not going away, and as we've said, particularly having people report to provosts is becoming more strategic. It's a career path potentially for people. How long have they been in these positions? Does that say anything to us?

ERIC   I think it might. I think there are sort of other variables that potentially contribute to this, too. So, one relates to how long the institution has had the position in place. So, for our universities, more than half, those are sort of relatively newer positions, and my

definition there might be in the last five years or so, and so, I think that was a really interesting one to uncover in the first study. We might have differing opinions about why that was the case, but I'll only share a personal sort of view which is if I went back five or six years, what was happening in our field at that point? I think it was sort of the introduction of the MOOCs. And so, I think—I'm not saying that that's the only reason— I think that could have influenced because the MOOCs drove a lot of attention with the media. So, there were stories about MOOCs in the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle* and lots of media outlets, and I think our presidents and our trustees and our provosts—

TOM   It got their attention.

ERIC   It got their attention if they didn't already have it. So, I think that might have contributed. So, this is an example. In our community college leaders, I didn't find that. I actually found that the majority had already been in place much longer.

TOM   Interesting.

ERIC   And so that was an interesting difference between the two. So, that's one. The other that I sort of examined in both related to a variety of skills and experiences of these individuals, and this is sort of a biased potentially personal view. As I think about what types of experiences have I found really helpful to me in doing these kinds of roles? And I've done these roles at three major universities in the country. The idea of asking if people have face-to-face teaching experience. If people have online teaching experience. If they have experience with instructional design. Do they have experience with educational research? Do they have leadership and management experience? Do they have IT experience? I even went as far as asking if they had the experience of being an online student, and so, as I take a look at those, I have sort of been able to build a sort of a composite of these individuals, and if you asked me how would you sort of give a—

TOM   Who's the prototype?

ERIC   Yeah, or not the prototype. I maybe wouldn't say it like that, but I would say, how would you describe it and I think I would describe it as what these people represent are very seasoned leaders. So, people with a lot of higher ed. experience, experience in most of those things, so I think it suggests that it's really valuable to have this blend of experience. So, if people are looking to do something in this field, it might suggest, "Hey I need to build up some experience in these other ways." If presidents or provosts are thinking that they need to put someone in place, this might help them understand the types of experiences that I would consider valuable, but again, people being effective in these positions can't just come from sort of one domain because of the work. You cross so many parts of the institution, and it's really valuable to have some of this background.

TOM   Well, that makes sense, and I think that Kelvin and I can attest to that. What we're called to do every day, it sort of draws on a lot of different areas. Anything that we haven't covered about your research that you think would be important for folks listening to hear?

ERIC   I think maybe the last thing to add that I asked in both of these which related to interest in connecting to their peers/other people, and so, 90+ percent of the respondents to both of these studies expressed that they felt it would be really beneficial to be part of a network, be part of a community of these leaders, and I would tend to agree with that. It resonated with me because I have found it so valuable to be able to connect with, you know, colleagues and very dear friends across the country for the last twenty years where you can just imagine them sitting at their home institution saying, "I'm facing this issue." I'm the person on point for this institution, but you know what? I really need to call one of my best friends, Peter Shea at University of Albany and say, "I'm facing this issue. Are you facing this issue? How are you responding to this?" I singled one person out, but there's so many across the country that it's so helpful and so, I think maybe that's the last point to maybe raise about. There's value in this network, in my opinion, and so that sort of came out of my study, too.

TOM   I think that's really important, because I think for…I mean, we're fortunate at UCF. We've got a pretty big team, but I know at other places, it can be kind of isolating where you're the person—the man or the woman—responsible for this. To have a network of people that you can draw upon who are experiencing the same thing, and then we'll kind of circle back to where we started, I think it's the value of convenings like OLC Accelerate or Innovate conferences and the leadership stuff that you've been doing within those conferences that's so important to bring that network together. So, I applaud you for your work and your research.

ERIC   Thank you. That's very kind.

TOM   Thank you for sharing it with us and for being on TOPcast.

ERIC   It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

        (musical transition)

KELVIN So, that was your interview with Eric Fredericksen, Tom.

TOM   It was. I really enjoyed talking to Eric. He's, like I said, a smart guy and is doing really, really interesting research.

KELVIN Groundbreaking, one might say.

TOM   Yeah! You know, a few things—and not to kind of reiterate the whole interview—the fact that he is now the keeper of the list, right?

KELVIN Right?

TOM	I think that's pretty interesting, and I imagine…I mean, I definitely respect his sensitivity to publicizing that, but I can see at some point that going to some sort of a database that you could reach out to colleagues who are dealing with similar kinds of issues, and, "Oh, hey! You're doing competency-based? I'd like to talk to you," and you could find them through some sort of a query tool. Maybe people could opt-in and be listed voluntarily. There's probably a way to thread that.
KELVIN	It is fascinating though, right? I mean, there's probably lots of examples, but we know what a president is, and in our university context, we know what a provost is and various vice presidents and directors and whatever and then it's just the organization that's different, but just the sheer variety of titles and where in the organization and mining for these people. That's a daunting task. I mean, kudos to him.
TOM	It is! Yeah! And listening to that again, I have a couple of friends at other institutions who have been in the job market. I'll think of two people in particular. They both landed recently very different titles. Very similar roles. I've seen just having gone through this with them and serving as a reference for them, seeing the titles of the positions they're applying for. I've seen executive director. I've seen dean. I've seen assistant or associate vice president of something or other.
KELVIN	Vice provost or associate or whatever.
TOM	Right. Vice provost. Associate provost. Chief online learning officer.
KELVIN	That's a thing.
TOM	That's a title. You name it. They're out there. And so, Eric had to sort through and say, "Uh, yeah, that woman or man? That's the person that I'm looking for." I think that's pretty cool.
KELVIN	Yeah, for sure.
TOM	So, maybe I'll make one personal reflection before we kind of wrap up which is that the reporting structure piece of the conversation that we had struck me—
KELVIN	I'm sure it did.
TOM	—because until recently, I reported to a CIO.
KELVIN	Yup.
TOM	And that meant that online learning reported to the CIO, and that's the way it's always been for 20+ years, and it has served us well. We've had phenomenal leadership here.
KELVIN	And as good a CIO as Dr. Joel Hartman is, he's maybe not your typical CIO either.

TOM	No, that's true. Joel, I think, is somewhat unique in his ability to be far beyond what the maybe stereotypical CIO might be.
KELVIN	I think that's right.
TOM	And like I said, that served us so well over the years, and we've grown, but last year, our provost made a change and created this new Division of Digital Learning, which includes online learning, includes classroom-based multimedia technology and some other things that are part of the division, and so, now I report to the provost, and that's a switch for me that seems to be consistent with the overwhelming structure that Eric uncovered in his survey.
KELVIN	Wasn't lost on me either, listening to him talk about that and reading through his study that now we're like all the cool people!
TOM	*(laughter)* Yeah, not that I was complaining before, you know. It was good for us, but I think it's just interesting. I think it says more about the state of online learning across all of higher ed. than so much UCF, because it's a trend, and I think it's a trend that points to the strategic importance of the work that we do to the university's mission. That provosts are creating these kinds of organizations and feel that the work is so important that the person in charge of it reports to the provost.
KELVIN	Yeah. I think that's right. That's exactly right. Well, let me take a shot at landing us here and we'll see—
TOM	Landing gears down. We're in our final.
KELVIN	See if you agree with this. So, you know, and before I do, maybe I should just say this. Do you know, Tom, that this episode wraps up our third season?
TOM	I did not know!
KELVIN	How about that?
TOM	I ought to know that. *(laughter)*
KELVIN	That's alright.
TOM	Yay for us!
KELVIN	I'm just glad you show up and drink the coffee.
TOM	Three years of this nonsense, huh? Wow!

KELVIN	It's true!
TOM	That's a lot of caffeine. I'm a little energized from all that caffeine, right?
KELVIN	Buzzed!
TOM	That is pretty cool.
KELVIN	So, I thought I might say that if you, dear listener, have just started listening within the last year, well, first, thanks. Appreciate that, but you might want to go back through the TOPcast catalog—extensive though it may be—and give a listen to some of our still relevant earlier episodes. We try to do these as evergreen as possible and not make a whole lot of reference to dated stuff. We have our exceptions.
TOM	Except the weather.
KELVIN	That is true. That's transitory, but the complete inventory of episodes all the way back to episode one—which you can't find on Apple Podcasts. It's drifted away, but it's still on the website.
TOM	Really?
KELVIN	TOPcast.ucf.edu. So, that's just a little plug. So, go check it all out.
TOM	With three years' worth, it's definitely got enough critical mass to be binge-worthy now.
KELVIN	Yeah! And you could just drink as much coffee as you want to along with us. Wouldn't that be kind of cool?
TOM	That's right. That's hours of TOPcast.
KELVIN	Yeah, but anyway, I digress. Here's my shot at wrapping it up, Tom. See if you agree. So, online education—whatever you want to call it. It's maybe itself a field in a search of a name, but online education is a maturing prize being in existence well over twenty years now, and it's time for online education leadership to emerge as a distinct field, as well, and research helps.
TOM	Yeah. Definitely the kind of research that Eric has done. I think that all of us are grateful for [that]. I want to give him a personal thank you for being on the show and taking time out of a very busy conference as president of the OLC Board to sit down with us. It was great.
KELVIN	And this probably goes without saying, but so it doesn't, go check out the Show Notes where you will find a direct link to the first of the two published studies that Eric

references. First one is published. Second one I don't believe has been released yet. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

TOM   And I'm Tom!

KELVIN   See ya!