TOPcast Episode 41: Big & Good: Will the Iron Triangle Allow for Both?

Kelvin Thompson: This episode of TOPcast is brought to you by UCF Online. Twenty-plus years of award-winning online excellence, 75+ online programs, one of the largest and most innovative universities in the U.S. ucf.edu/online.

Tom Cavanagh: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. They are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: I think that is a statement of fact and hopefully they—you, dear listeners—are listening to lots of podcasts. I listen to a lot of podcasts. I've noticed recently that my native podcast app on my phone, I think I've taxed it, because now it takes too long to load. I think I've subscribed to way too many things. It just sits there and spins for a while.

Tom: I've done that, too, and it seems like…Hey, Apple! If you're looking for Tom's feedback, they keep dinking around with the podcast app. I can never figure out how to do things, and every time I figure out how to do things like add my podcasts to "Next Up" or "Later" or whatever—and I've always gotten those confused in my head—then they update the app and I can't figure out how to do that again. I have to go online to Google, *(laughter)* which I'm sure they don't appreciate.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Yeah, but I like listening to podcasts. I think it's time well invested. I won't even say spent.

Tom: I totally agree. So, when we say they are listening to this, let's hope it's a plural, right?

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Let's hope. More than one.

Tom: Yeah. More than one.

Kelvin: More than you. More than me. *(laughter)* More than us.

Tom: Hi mom! *(laughter)* I've said that before but I don't think my mom's a podcast person.

Kelvin: I don't think she is. Probably not.

Tom: Well, cool. I think based on our kind of very, very brief lightly prepped conversation, this is going to be an interesting episode.

Kelvin: It's going to be spectacular, Tom.

Tom: Spectacular. A very special TOPcast.

Kelvin: Because we've never said that before either.

Tom: I know. That's a recurring joke, but we may have new listeners, so it may be new to them.

Kelvin: Don't be getting dizzy with optimism now.

Tom: That's right. Yeah. Well, should we start with our thematically selected coffee?

Kelvin: Sure thing. Let me pour you some and I'll tell you about it. You've got stuff to put in there.

Tom: Yeah, wow. Microphones are good. You can pick that up. It's not even next to the microphone.

Kelvin: How about that? Again, that's just a sound effect, Tom.

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: People occasionally ask, "Do you guys really drink coffee?" Yeah, we really actually do. Tom has spit stuff on me before. That's not true. I keep hoping but it never happens. Spit takes.

Tom: That's true. We really do drink coffee, and for the secret behind-the-scenes, we have on occasion recorded more than one episode in a session.

Kelvin: *(gasp)* No.

Tom: Never done more than two, I don't think.

Kelvin: That's true. It takes it out of ya.

Tom: So, we really do drink different coffees.

Kelvin: We do.

Tom: Sometimes I walk out of here with a caffeine buzz that will keep me up for days.

Kelvin: It's a little bit logistical to have multiple thermos…Thermosi? Thermoses?

Tom: Thermosi?? *(laughter)*

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Of coffee, but we make it work, Tom. So, you want me to tell you about this coffee of which you're partaking?

Tom: Yeah! Okay. I like it.

Kelvin: So, TOPcast listener and Online Learning Consortium colleague Jennifer Rafferty, Director of the OLC Institute, was on an away mission down to Ecuador at a distance education conference—

Tom: Que bueno.

Kelvin: — at a university down there, which I would probably butcher the name of, but the monogram is UTPL, and while she was there, she got a chance to go to a local roaster and she sent us some printouts of some digital photos.

Tom: Oh wow! I'm looking at the actual photos.

Kelvin: Yeah, of some beans being roasted and ground and everything. Said she thought of us and wanted to send it to us. Wasn't that great? So, this is a Malacatos coffee. Arabica superior coffee from Ecuador.

Tom: Wow.

Kelvin: Isn't that great?

Tom: Que bueno.

Kelvin: We'll see if we can get the digital photos up on the website, and then she sent these lovely pens. Right? There we go. It's a llama on top of this cloth-wrapped pen. It's beautiful, isn't it?

Tom: Oh my gosh. Yeah! That is really cool.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's nice.

Tom: So, is it a llama or an alpaca?

Kelvin: Well, what do I know, Tom? Is it alpaci? Alpacas? Are they native to Ecuador? I mean, I don't know.

Tom: Well, that is really cool. Thank you, Jennifer. That was really thoughtful.

Kelvin: The research department's budget for TOPcast is dwindling, Tom, and did not have a chance to verify the origin of this particular animal but you, dear listener, can use Google and…oh! Speaking of Google, look at the little googly eyes on the animal. That's kind of cool. I like that.

Tom: Oh wow. Yeah.

Kelvin: We could entertain ourselves for hours right here.

Tom: Yeah. You all just talk amongst yourselves while I play with this cool pen that has a llama on top of it.

Kelvin: So, thank you very much, Jennifer. That was awesome.

Tom: Yeah, that is super thoughtful.

Kelvin: It really is.

Tom: I think it'll actually help you write in Spanish.

Kelvin: Is that right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I could use all the help I can get. So, what do you think of the coffee?

Tom: I like it. Yeah. It's good. It's got a bold flavor, which I like.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right. It was more fine-ground so I had to experiment a little bit, so no offense to Jennifer if you didn't like it. It was more my brewing technique.

Tom: It's good.

Kelvin: But I thought today's episode would be good for this, at least in the inverse because I thought here's this niche place that Jennifer finds and she's watching them roast the beans and grind them up for her and sends them to us and you get that little boutique personal experience, the little small charm, how could it fail but be exceptional? That's what I was thinking as we get into today's topic, Tom. At least the antithesis of that, anyway.

Tom: Yeah. Interesting.

Kelvin: Get that connection?

Tom: I do. Yeah. So, there is a conventional wisdom in higher ed. that small classes, one-on-one instruction or interaction is the gold standard for education, and by extension, small equals good.

Kelvin: I think that's right. It does seem…Now, people don't really always come out and say that other than small class sizes or that kind of thing.

Tom: Right. There's some dog-whistling about it that goes on where they refer to things like class sizes or student/faculty ratios and other kinds of things, but I mean, that's basically what they're saying. Smaller means that you can focus more on quality. We kind of challenge that premise here at UCF, and there are a couple of other schools that also challenge it. I would think of our partners in the University Innovation Alliance would probably agree with that. They're all large public schools. They kind of have a mission to serve a large population, and so,

our mantra right now is being big. *(laughter)* Big is good. Those two things are not mutually exclusive. So, we thought we would touch on that topic as an extension of our recurring theme of the iron triangle.

Kelvin: What is the iron triangle, Tom?

Tom: Why don't you reset that for us, Kelvin?

Kelvin: Alright, sure. Well back in episode ten—can you remember that far ago, Tom? That was season one, episode ten.

Tom: Wow. That was back when we were baby podcasters.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Yeah, toddled our way in here. Couldn't even drink coffee. It was just water, milk, something. But back in episode ten, we discussed the concept of the iron triangle and its relationship to online education, and we said we would do some occasional follow-up episodes and we have. We've done one, two, three, four, five, six. This'll be like the seventh episode, I suppose. If you're keeping track, [episode] 23 about the elevator pitch, 18 about access, 16 and 14 about online quality, 11 about textbook free, and 6 about competency-based education are all on this iron triangle theme. The iron triangle as a concept in higher ed. originated in this report of these college presidents looking at the state of the industry, and they had this to say: "the three main factors in higher education—cost, quality, and access—exist in what we call an iron triangle. These factors are linked in an unbreakable reciprocal relationship, such that any change in one will inevitably impact the others." And so, looking pessimistically, it's like well, you can't get out of it. You can improve on one, but then you gotta sacrifice. You can have really good, but it's going to be expensive.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: Or you can get cheap, but it ain't going to be good. Or something like that.

Tom: Yeah, the idea is pick two, right?

Kelvin: Right, right, right. Exactly.

Tom: You're going to negatively impact the third, whatever it is. So, if you increase quality and access, it's going to cost a fortune. If you increase quality, it's going to cost more and may reduce access. Whatever. These things are dependent upon each other, and we as an institution along with some others like us—

Kelvin: Thumb our nose at the iron triangle? *(laughter)*

Tom: Yeah. Well, at least say that doing normal things, yeah, you're going to have that result, but that there are ways to come at the iron triangle using non-traditional strategies that mean you can break it and you can positively impact potentially all three things at the same time. We've talked about that in the past. So, we won't belabor it, and maybe we can link like the Ithaka S+R case study that was done

on us that was specifically about this, where half of it had to do with our transfer support strategy—particularly through DirectConnect to UCF—and online learning.

Kelvin: Those researchers happen to have the quote right here, Tom.

Tom: Oh, do they?

Kelvin: Those researchers from Ithaka S+R stated, "UCF has arguably come closer than any institution in the country to breaking the iron triangle of cost, quality, and access. It is the second largest university in the country, and the least expensive and yet one of the most effective in Florida."

Tom: Amen. Yeah. So, it's true, but these things don't live in a tension-free world.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: So, when you want to be big and good—and we always say it takes a big university to solve big problems.

Kelvin: All that stuff.

Tom: I'm totally bought in. I'm drinking the Kool-Aid. I totally agree with that.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: But, having said that, we're under specific kinds of pressures, and I think it's interesting that we don't live in a vacuum. We live in this context of state and federal policy that drive us to do certain kinds of things because of the way we are funded, and then we also have a particular institutional ethos and mission that drives us to want to do other things: complimentary things, but maybe things that aren't always rewarded, either through rankings or financially, but that we just feel are the right things to do for society. It's consistent with our mission. So, maybe I'll give a little bit of an example. So, the state of Florida, where we are, is a performance-funding state, and we are directly funded based upon certain performance measures that have to do with time of graduation and stuff like that. Getting students out on time and at a reasonable cost and at a certain level of quality, and there are like ten or eleven performance measures that we're tracked against. Those are all good. These are all things we should generally be doing anyway. You can quibble about one or two of them and the way they get changed every year and how things are calculated, but I think we would all kind of agree these are all good things. And then there's preeminence funding.

Kelvin: Within the state of Florida.

Tom: Within the state of Florida. For those of you outside of Florida, the idea is that the legislature, I think to their credit, is trying to raise the academic reputation of higher education in Florida, and they have set aside a pool of money for schools

to be preeminent, and that has a lot to do with research and rankings and reputation. Not as much about educating first-generation students.

Kelvin: Nope.

Tom: It's a lot more kind of at the top end than the grassroots bottom end, but there's a bunch of money associated with that. We live in this world where we need the money. *(laughter)* We want to have a good reputation and do all the right things, but in order to serve students that are first gen. or transfer or underrepresented or Pell-eligible or whatever—which we feel is an extremely important thing to do—you need the money from these other things in order to get the funding to serve these other students. So, you kind of have to chase these some of these preeminent kind of metrics in order to get funded to help first gen, transfer students. I'm maybe oversimplifying a little, but I think it's an interesting world of push-pull that we kind of live in and I know the rest of our sister institutions in the state of Florida live in.

Kelvin: Yeah, arguably you've just sort of operationalized the dynamics inherent in the iron triangle, right? There is this tension and working within both, trying to stretch to the two end points is challenging. It's a tight rope to walk. Very good noble goals around success and traditional measures, but then, when you want to do things differently…Like, I love—it's in the UCF strategic plan—like our peer innovators at Arizona State University and other members of the University Innovation Alliance, UCF chooses to be known for whom it includes rather than whom it excludes. That of course is kind of an homage to a Michael Crow statement, President of ASU, being known for who you include rather than exclude. Traditional measures are all about selectivity and what kind of scores the incoming class has, and you know, in my more jaded moments, Tom, I've sometimes quipped to you, I think, that some institutions just let in great people and they walk out as great as they came in, and that's not necessarily the mark of a great educational institution. Show me the improvement. That's a great educational institution.

Tom: Yeah. Amen. Totally agree. When you have great inputs, you just don't mess it up, right? You're going to have great outputs.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Yeah. Do no harm.

Tom: So, Harvard or some of the Ivies or whatever—

Kelvin: As wonderful as there are.

Tom: Yeah, and we have friends there, and they do a great job, but look, they have a different sort of student population than what we're trying to serve.

Kelvin: Yup.

Tom: I would argue that given that UCF, I believe, is the number one transfer school in the country and that we are now a Hispanic-serving institution, we have—I forget what the number is but it's something like 30 or 40% of our students on Pell—we

are serving a public good through education, but yet we're also improving our incoming freshman profile. So, the way these things are measured, it gets sort of technical and you kind of thread the needle. We're measured at the state level and IPEDS and other kinds of things on the fall freshman class.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: And so the fall freshman class…

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Lock that sucker down. It's going to perform really, really well.

Tom: Well, yeah, and the team and the folks who run our undergraduate admissions have to manage this. And it's not easy.

Kelvin: Nope.

Tom: So, this year…I think I just saw it. Fall 2018 freshman class—and yesterday was the start of classes as we're recording this—I think it was a 4.11 GPA average and a 1326 SAT…

Kelvin: I didn't know the SAT even went that high, Tom.

Tom: Something like that. It was 28 or 29 point something ACT. I should have had the numbers right in front of me. I was just looking at them. So, it's close enough. You can see, I mean, this is not a low performing group, and not everybody meets that criteria to get into UCF, but that's the fall freshman class.

Kelvin: Yup. That's right.

Tom: You can admit students into summer or to spring who don't quite meet that profile or as a transfer student who don't meet that profile and still admit them without it counting against you, if you will, for some of these performance preeminence metrics.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: It's really interesting.

Kelvin: Yeah, back to that touching those two end points of those two countervailing forces and walking a tightrope between them, and that's not bad. There's no duplicity in that. That's just operationalizing the tensions inherent in the iron triangle.

Tom: And I might argue that having a really strong fall freshman class—and I think we set records all the time for most National Merit Scholars or something just because our numbers are big—rising tide lifts all boats kind of phenomenon that it helps raise expectations, raise the quality of the interactions that all students are having, I think it helps faculty, I think it kind of helps everybody so that when other students who maybe don't have that academic profile come in and are

sitting in class next to these other students, I think they're helping each other in many ways. So, maybe I'm naïve. I don't have any data on that, but that's sort of my theory that as the quality improves in one area, it's going to help everybody across the board.

Kelvin: Yeah. I would like to think so, and I would like to think that what we're doing with online/blended/digital learning is a piece of that puzzle.

Tom: Yeah, I totally agree, and that's actually what I was going to say next, so, excellent segue, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: You're quite welcome.

Tom: So, I think in a couple of areas. One, obviously in access, because the kinds of numbers of students that we're serving, we just don't have the physical campus to support that number of students, but likewise, when you have asynchronous kinds of test scores, for example, or GPAs sitting next to each other in a classroom, how do you level it so that everybody gets what they need? That's a real big interest of ours when it comes to adaptive learning. So, if you've got a kid sitting in there who had a 1500 SAT and right next to him or her is a student who maybe never took an SAT and went through a community college or state college and got an associate's degree and transferred here and maybe couldn't have gotten in as a freshman based on test scores, but they earned their way in through another pathway, how can we level the playing field for both of them, and I think adaptive learning, which personalizes the experience, is a strategy that has yet to really reach its maturity here.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's true. I do think that's true. I think in general that sits in this broader ecosystem—I don't have to tell you this—that of our 60,000+ students, well over 80% of them took advantage of digital learning options last year as part of their educational experience. As our new president Dr. Dale Whittaker likes to say, at UCF, our students are far more digital than they are distance. We certainly have distance students and those who are exclusively online, but most students here as part of their learning ecosystem are making use of these various modalities and technology innovations like adaptive learning to achieve their educational goals, and I think it provides appropriate kinds of scaffolding. Things that allow "non-traditional" students to succeed better than they would have otherwise, especially given those demographics that you mentioned a while ago, right? The transfer population, Hispanic-serving institution, the average age of our students, and all that. They're going to succeed a little bit better in these technology-enabled and -supported environments.

Tom: Yeah, and I think we may have mentioned on a previous podcast that when we went through the ROI study with the Boston Consulting Group and ASU, we learned about ourselves that our underserved—at least minority—and Pell students had lower achievement gaps in online and blended modalities than they did face-to-face. They weren't huge, but they were there, and that was something that we learned about ourselves. It was interesting. To your point, and to President Whittaker's point, that our students have just integrated digital learning into their academic career paths in a very organic natural way, it's an extension

of the campus and I think is a core element to us addressing the challenge of the iron triangle.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right, and yet, I suppose the yin to that yang is that it wasn't like we sat here with a blank canvas and students just sort of made up digital learning, right? We've cultivated over twenty years a support structure and a faculty preparation program and a modality awareness and design strategies and staffing to support that, but yes, it wouldn't matter a darn bit if students weren't actually taking advantage of those different affordances in their course-taking behaviors.

Tom: Sure. Yeah. Those are subjects of other conversations—how we support it—but just students sort of voting with their registration behaviors, I think it's telling.

Kelvin: That's right. So, not everybody is UCF, Tom. So, I'm an instructional designer or a faculty member or an administrator at a much smaller, more traditional institution. What's this iron triangle stuff and the breaking and stretching of it got to do with me? What hope do you have for me, Tom? Tell me a story.

Tom: Yeah, really. Well, I mean, I do think so much of it is context-specific. It's hard to state something generally, but I would say that—and maybe I'm technological-determinist a little bit here—I do think that educational technology and tools like adaptive learning or pick your disrupter of choice do have the potential if used correctly to break the iron triangle, however that is manifested at your institution. So, if you're a small liberal arts college and your costs are too high, which is maybe a big problem there. Maybe access and quality are good—I'm just making this up—but it costs too much. Well, through online learning, there might be ways to reduce costs. So, pick your leg of the triangle, your bar of the triangle that you're having a problem with and see how you can apply non-traditional, experimental strategies to just make that iron triangle a lot more pliable.

Kelvin: You should do that. You should concentrate on one angle, but you can't ignore the other two, right? It's kind of like plate spinning. You ever seen one of the those old 50s TV variety shows and the person's spinning the one and then you got to lean over and spin the other. Woah! You've got to go around the corner and lean that one. You can't just ignore the spinning plates on the other poles or they're going to fall down and crash.

Tom: No, I think that's true. Yeah. It's like when I was teaching my kid to drive. You look forward, but you always gotta be glancing in those mirrors. You can't lose situational awareness.

Kelvin: Yes. No, I think that's right, and I guess, too, every affordance comes with some constraints, right? We're a big place, but that means we've got some classes with large class sizes and how do we mitigate that as a risk? You know, so, you deal.

Tom: Right. Yeah. There are definitely trade-offs. What's important to you?

Kelvin: Well, I know our topic and our coffee are growing a little low, so you want to try to land this plane for us?

Tom: Yeah, sure. So, maybe a way to kind of sum up is the iron triangle is a helpful construct that helps us organize innovation and strategic planning efforts. It implies three desirable goals for higher education: high quality, low cost education for everyone. Meaningful progress towards each goal, we believe, is possible, but it definitely takes esteemed eclectic effort and new ways of doing things. You can't keep just doing the same old things the same old ways and expect different results.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well said. I think that's excellent. Hey, can I throw in one plug before you sign us off here?

Tom: Please plug!

Kelvin: So, dear TOPcast listeners, believe it or not, an episode of TOPcast will be recorded live.

Tom: Live!

Kelvin: Live in front of a conference audience as part of the Online Learning Consortium's Accelerate 2019 conference—Sorry, 2018 conference.

Tom: 2018. You're way ahead of us.

Kelvin: Man, we're in all kinds of a time warp. 2018 conference in Orlando. So, would you please help us crowdsource the topic of this episode? We promised that we would crowdsource it, which means we have to have a crowd. We're going to give you a URL and maybe go there and pick some of the topics that are there, maybe what you would like. Just take a second or two. You can write in your own. So, the brief form is at the following URL using the Bitly shortening service: http://bit.ly/vote_tcl2018. That's all lowercase, no spaces. bit.ly/vote_tcl2018 and that's case sensitive. So, please share the link with your colleagues. Please fill out the form yourself, but tweet it, email it, something. The link is also posted in the show notes for this episode. The more votes, the better! Vote early and vote often, and if you'll be in attendance at OLC Accelerate 2018, please come and join us.

Tom: Yeah! Please come! We've always enjoyed the live [podcast recordings]. We've done it a couple times. It's going to be on Wednesday of the conference, I believe.

Kelvin: I don't know. Maybe.

Tom: I think so. If that's wrong, sorry. I'm sorry, Jennifer. Thank you for the coffee. Sorry for the incorrect plug, but I think that's correct.

Kelvin: Right. Yeah, we'd love to have you and love to hear what you would like to hear us address, and you know what, Tom? I'm going on a limb and saying I'll plan to bring some coffee, so as long as the coffee lasts, we'll have some small cups and we'll share that around.

Tom:	Cool! I might even have a couple of stickers left over.
Kelvin:	There you go. I might have, too! That's great.
Tom:	So, show up. We'll see you at OLC Accelerate. Alright. Until next time, I'm Tom.
Kelvin:	I'm Kelvin.
Tom:	See ya.