TOPcast Episode 52: Higher Ed’s “Third Wave of Digital Leaders”

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(upbeat music)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I’m Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast: The Teaching Online Podcast. Hello once again, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Dr. Cavanagh. So good to see you. I was thinking earlier today that, you know, what a great strategy, you know? Twelve times a year, I get to sit down in a small, sweaty room with you and have meaningful conversations over a hot beverage.

Tom: Yeah. What a treat for us both.

Kelvin: The coffee’s good anyway.

Tom: It is very good. And in fact, you have done me the honor of pre-pouring today.

Kelvin: Pre-pouring.

Tom: So, we don’t hear the dulcet gurgles, but I must assure the audience that this is fresh. We’ve never faked our coffee.

Kelvin: That’s true.

Tom: In the many years, lo the many years that we’ve been doing this podcast.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: The coffee is all legitimate.

Kelvin: Even if we record two episodes back to back, which we do occasionally.

Tom: Occasionally.

Kelvin: The coffee is different.
Tom: The coffee is different! And if we do it in the afternoon, I drive home with my head buzzing from caffeine because we’re not faking it, folks.

Kelvin: Sorry about that.

Tom: Yeah. So, what is in this “coffee is my fossil fuel” mug that you’ve provided to me today?

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Yeah, that came from—

Tom: That’s cute. It’s a dinosaur drinking coffee.

Kelvin: Yeah, it’s kind of like an homage to the ubiquitous coffee chain on every corner that shall remain nameless. Franchise. I think that comes from like the T-rex restaurant. *(laughing)* You know, they sold all these dinosaur-themed things. Well, Tom, today’s coffee connection is what we might call a bit of a “good news, bad news” proposition or maybe a “good news, good news, bad news” proposition.

Tom: *(laughing)* Ok.

Kelvin: So, the good news is we have coffee.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: It’s not bad, right?

Tom: No, it’s not bad. I like it.

Kelvin: The other good news is that we actually have two connections between this coffee and today’s episode.

Tom: Two?

Kelvin: Two. That’s right! We don’t get all…You know, you’re usually lucky to get one.

Tom: Sometimes not even that. *(laughing)*

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Thanks! Appreciate that. Which leads me to the bad news. This is probably the weakest set of coffee connections I’ve ever provided.

Tom: Oh, I’ll be the judge of that!

Kelvin: *(laughing)* I know you will! But this is rough. I’m gonna just tell you honestly. So, buckle up. So, today’s coffee comes to us from southern California. Specifically, this Ethiopia Tafachi light roast is from The West Bean Coffee Roastery in San Diego, California. I was there not too long ago, loved it, got some coffee. Today’s episode, as you know, features a guest, and the name of this roastery rhymes with the name of the guest. The West Bean.
Tom:  

(laughing) Ok.

Kelvin:  

So, the two connections are: Southern California and rhymes with The West Bean.

Tom:  

Gotcha. Alright. Well, I get the connection.

Kelvin:  

(laughing) Well, that’s better than I do sometimes!

Tom:  

Yeah. Even for me that’s on the nose. (laughing)

Kelvin:  

(laughing)

Tom:  

Usually we have some roundabout story about the growers on this mountainside, but no, this one is made for Tom. I get it. So, no complaints.

Kelvin:  

And here I was thinking it was the worst thing I’ve ever made. I guess we have different standards when it comes to these coffee connections. (laughing)

Tom:  

(laughing) Yeah. No, that’s cool. So, the connection for today’s episode. Yes. So, we are visited today virtually by our friend Casey Green, which rhymes with “bean.”

Kelvin:  

Indeed.

Tom:  

I wonder if he’s ever thought of that before. And who does hail from southern California, though not San Diego.

Kelvin:  

Not San Diego.

Tom:  

But just up the I-5 from there.

Kelvin:  

Yeah.

Tom:  

So, Casey, are you on the line?

Casey Green:  

I’m here, and I’ve been listening attentively. Thank you for that generous introduction.

Kelvin:  

Better than most.

Casey:  

Admittedly, as you noted, it’s been… That’s a reach. No one to the best of my recollection has ever in an introduction rhymed Green with bean, and I thank you both for that.

Tom:  

Well you’re on TOPcast now, baby.

Kelvin:  

(laughing) It only gets lower from here.
Tom: *(laughing)* It’s nothing but firsts. So, Kelvin, why don’t we do a slightly better introduction of Casey?

Kelvin: Alright, that’s fair. *(laughing)* Well, here we go. We’re joined today by Dr. Kenneth C. (“Casey”) Green, founding director of the Campus Computing Project and author of the highly regarded *Digital Tweed* blog, currently hosted at Inside Higher Ed. This is Casey’s second appearance on TOPcast. Back in episode 32—you might remember this, Tom—“Provosts, Pedagogy, and Digital Learning.”

Tom: Oh my.

Kelvin: You interviewed Casey about some of the work he was doing with chief academic officers in digital learning, and today we are hoping to extend this topic into some actionable insights for digital learning leaders. Our invitation to our regular TOPcast listeners is: “invite your boss and/or your provosts to listen to this episode with you.”

Tom: Or send them a link.

Kelvin: Or send them a link. Although, wouldn’t that be entertaining? Bring them a thermos of coffee and press play on your thing and don’t let them leave the office.

Tom: *(laughing)* Until they listen to it with you.

Kelvin: Something.

Tom: Yeah. So, Casey, we hope that you have some beverage of choice. You can elect to tell us what that is or not.

Kelvin: And welcome!

Tom: And welcome. Yeah. Thank you for being on TOPcast again.

Casey: Well great. So, thank you. My day began about 6 AM California time with a large mug of drip French roast.

Kelvin: Quite nice.

Casey: And I am currently doing ice water.

Kelvin: Ice water. We call that coffee clear. Deconstructed coffee.

Casey: Ok. So, noted. Thank you for that. I will add that to the vocabulary.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Something like that.
Tom: So, Casey, in our various conversations since your last appearance on TOPcast, I mean you and I have had the opportunity to interact a number of times through the Digital Fellow Project which I was fortunate enough to participate in. [It was] something of a battlefield appointment when our provost, who was our Digital Fellow, became president, I was sort of asked to step in, and I found it a great experience personally. But, you know, one of the themes that came up as part of that process that you were helping to facilitate is about lasting change in digital learning. Real change. So, we’ve kind of been struck by this idea of sustainability and how do you keep digital learning initiatives going beyond just some sort of a pilot project or some sort of a beta? It’s really...Everybody can do a beta or pilot, but how do you make it transformative? So, you know, kind of with your work with chief academic officers and your discussions with CIOs over the years, I wonder if you have any thoughts on what you think is necessary for this kind of real lasting change so it’s not just a one-off in digital learning.

Casey: Yeah, no, first let me begin by saying my thanks to you both for this opportunity to return. I have an aspiration like on Saturday Night Live, maybe I’ll get that five-appearance smoking jacket or coffee jacket.

Tom: Ooh, yeah.

Kelvin: Smoking jacket.

Tom: Yeah. You and Steve Martin, yeah.

Casey: A non-smoking smoking jacket.

Kelvin: Yeah, there you go.

Casey: Let’s put some of this in context, if I may. So, we’re in what I would characterize as sort of well into the fourth decade of the so-called technology revolution in higher ed. that began with the arrival of Macs and PCs in the mid-1980s. And if you think about that time, it was a time of great interest, great excitement, uncertainty, and technology at many campuses was both an opportunity and it was a problem. It was viewed as a technical problem. So, consequently, the campus strategy was, “Let’s go to the techies.” So, the early leadership, at least at the highest level of the institution became vice provosts, vice presidents for computing, later information technology, later CIOs. And yet, technology is an operational issue and learning is a programmatic issue. And then there was a second wave of IT leadership that began to emerge about a decade later of folks who were academics that migrated over into the technology silo that their final, you know, their academic training and degrees was not in computer science or IT or engineering but in fact in other disciplines—even though it might have been a science discipline—and a slow but growing recognition that technology is the easy part of some of the conversation about technology in instruction in higher ed. We went through those religious wars of Mac vs PC and all the other stuff for a while. Those, fortunately, have dissipated, and we are now in what I would characterize as sort of the third wave of digital leadership, and I think that that third wave of digital leadership has migrated or is slowly migrating campus by campus, context by context, to provosts, to CAOs (chief academic officers), and
if not to them explicitly, to the office of the CAO. I think part of that is also the emergence of the rapid growth of online learning. I mean, interestingly in the campus computing survey, over the last two decades as we saw the emergence of online ed., often and unexplainedly, we would see CIOs as the sort of operating officer for that, which didn’t make any sense because they are operating officers, not programmatic officers. I think, finally we’re at this point that many CAOs—in terms of institutional issues, their personal portfolios—they have come of age personally, professorially, pedagogically with this technology now as many of them are in their mid-late fifties and beyond. There is a new level of comfort with these issues. I think the other part of that context is the linkage between the emergence, slowly, of evidence that some of this stuff makes a difference in terms of student learning and student outcomes and digital technology, particularly but not exclusively adaptive learning. We’re still early. It’s early days. We still have too much epiphany and too much opinion and not enough evidence in some of our efforts and our investments and some of our strategies, but a lot of that increasing, I think, is now getting reoriented where the leadership is coming symbolically and in many ways substantially from the office of the CAO and often directly from the CAO him or herself.

Tom: Do you think that the—well, maybe I’ll load the question because I kind of think this. I wonder if you would agree—that the chief academic officer is kind of uniquely positioned in the academy to make that difference? More so than kind of individual faculty adoptions of digital tools or maybe even kind of external pressures being pushed in by like vendors with a lot of venture money or something but the ones who can really move the needle, I think, are the chief academic officers. Maybe even more so than the president who is sort of somewhat removed and maybe considered not one of us in some ways by the faculty? I don’t know. What do you think about that?

Casey: I think that’s true. I go back to a 2015 Chronicle of Higher Ed. article about provosts as sort of the gateway to change, and that wasn’t necessarily about IT but it was certainly instrumental, for example, as being a catalyst for the Gates Foundation to go forward with the Digital Fellows Project that launched in 2017 and ended earlier this year. It was an opportunity to provide a fellowship for 32 provosts from a variety of institutions, and it was a different kind of fellowship program—Tom, you know this directly—but this was not the usual fellowship program about my portfolio going someplace and writing something, but this was an opportunity for provosts to take a journey of discovery—many of whom had very little familiarity with digital technology—about what that could mean in terms of their institutions.

And for many it was. I mean, for many who thought they had a good handle of what was going on, when we asked them to go look at what was going on at their institutions in terms of particularly gateway courses, where there may be the greatest opportunity to have the biggest impact. They found stuff that they just were floored by in terms of the activities of their faculty members, in terms of that journey of discovery and then how they could then help fuel that, be a catalyst for that, and, let’s acknowledge, also provide some protection for the faculty members who were doing that. I mean one of the things that I’ve argued for a long period of time is the issue of protection as part of the review and promotion process for the faculty members who say, “This is part of my
scholarly portfolio.” Very much an Ernie Boyer on scholarship model that he articulated in his last book around 1980 that was an encompassing, expansive version of scholarship that goes well beyond journal publications. And I’m not suggesting you get points for just posting a syllabus on an LMS or on a website. But for those who say, “This is a significant part of my academic commitment and scholarship in terms of the way I structure my course and my efforts to evaluate,” learning is part of this, and with that, an emerging conversation that’s intellectual, that’s research-based about the impact of our investments in IT and what difference do they make about in student learning and institutional outcomes. I think that becomes critical. But again, I think still, at the risk of redundancy, we’ve had four decades plus of opinion and epiphany. We’re only just beginning to get to the sort of well-documented evidence to help fuel that and guide our investments, and I think there’s a lot of frustration on the part of provosts. At the risk of shameless self-promotion, we did a survey of some 350 provosts in fall 2017. They’re very enthusiastic about the potential of digital technology. They’re very concerned that efforts at analytics have fallen short of expectation, that there’s not much evidence in terms of guiding their institutional investments, and again in terms of the leadership issue, it’s not just the…it’s important that provosts step in and step up and go beyond just perform[ing] dictates about “ACME college is going digital.” We saw that at the turn of the last, you know, going into the millennium all these strategic plans that said ACME College 2020 and that talked about going digital, and there was a lot of language and not much of a plan about how do you connect the dots.

Tom: Yeah, everybody gets an iPad. That’ll change everyone.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* Or an iPod.

Casey: Everybody gets an iPad. Everybody gets a computer. You know, whatever it might be.

Kelvin: Something.

Casey: Yeah.

Kelvin: Can I ask, Casey, what do you think from your vantage point, what should be the goal of digital learning?

Casey: The goal of digital learning is no different than the larger goal of learning. How do we enhance the learning opportunities for our students, and what can we help them do better? So, let me make this in a very personal sense. I think about my own days as an undergraduate long ago and the kind of resources that I had at a small college compared to the kind of resources that are available on the other side of the screen to students at that same college today. Whether that’s the daily *New York Times* if I’m in political science, whether it’s government databases that I could do analytics in terms of education, epidemiology, voting patterns, income patterns, other kinds of things. Opportunities to reach out and connect with scholars beyond my own campus if I have a question about an article that either of you might have written and I see your email address and I can contact you directly and maybe you write back. I mean, this is an incredibly rich
resource, let alone what we’re learning about learning science and particularly in gateway courses. My friend, colleague, and occasional co-conspirator and someone I have great respect for, John Gardner. He is best known for *The Freshmen Year Experience* and now the work of the Gardner Institute. John talks about gateway courses as the equivalent of higher education’s Bermuda Triangle, where thousands enter and many never emerge, you know? And the old definition of insanity, you know, often but erroneously attributed to Albert Einstein—which the Einstein Institute says isn’t his—is insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. Well, what do we do with students in gateway courses? If you don’t pass, we tell you to take it again. We don’t restructure the course. We just tell the students, you know, go into the vortex one more time. What does that do in terms of expectations, learning experience, self-esteem for many of these students? It’s just easier to kind of fall off on that, and that’s the difference. So, we’re beginning again at the risk of redundancy, to get some evidence about how we can use some of these tools, particularly in instructor discipline, which means primarily STEM courses. Often but not always, mathematics is a grade killer, and it’s not just calculus. I mean, John’s got some incredible data about accounting that has fail rates for first-time students that are on par with calculus and chemistry. And yet, you know, given that accounting is #1 undergraduate major, it’s the #1 career interest of entering full-time college freshmen, you have failure rates in accounting the way you have them in calculus and even in algebra. You know, what does that say about the options and opportunities and the trajectory of first year students?

**Tom:**

Well, when we think about sustainability, when we think about trying to take some of these digital learning strategies and tools that we’ve seen have been successful at least kind of in pilot projects and in smaller scale initiatives and kind of make them bigger and scale them so they actually have the impact that we want on our campuses. And I saw some of the provosts in the Digital Fellows Program doing some of that work and thinking about how do we take something small and make it transformative? There must be a set of challenges and speedbumps that must be kind of overcome in order to kind of do that kind of scaling work, and I imagine that you’ve probably given some thought to some of those challenges that are in front of institutions that are trying to be transformative in that way.

**Casey:**

Yeah. So, I think a couple of things emerge, and not just from the Digital Fellows Project, but from what we’ve all seen over the years. One, I mean a lot of the efforts are kind of one-offs. You know, that faculty members who get a grant release time to do something in their classes, and it’s...There’s kind of an ad-hocery about that. You know, can I do something in my class by creating a digital widget or doing curriculum redesign? As opposed to looking beyond the initial static event and what does this mean in terms of the curriculum design in this area, in this sequence? How do we think long, and beginning that process not by looking at the ad-hocery of the short-term but the opportunity of the long-term?

Second, infrastructure recognition and reward, in other words, what are the resources available for faculty members who would like to do this? How do we provide recognition and reward for the faculty members who are committed to do this? One of the most successful strategies that I saw as part of the Digital
Fellows Project was at Austin Community College and a number of the other 30 institutions that were part of this project, and that was when they announced release time and grants for faculty members who wanted to take this digital journey in their curriculum. It wasn’t a matter of “Ok, congratulations. We’re going to give you some release time and resources. Good luck and god speed to you.” They immediately pair that faculty member up with an instructional designer at day one. “We want to introduce you to your partner in the journey.” So that began early, and it began thoughtfully, and it began meticulously about where and how that worked as opposed to “Ok, good luck and god speed. Come back and do show and tell for us in six months when you’ve got this project done.”

Third, there was an effort again to think long. What do we learn from this as we go into other areas within individual curricular streams, whether it’s a three-course sequence into other parts of the program into other parts of the curriculum, particularly lower division? Fourth, a recognition that you can’t do it everywhere. Not everything is digital. Not everything necessarily lends itself to digital. Fifth, I think the importance of looking at student resources. There’s a consistent message that emerges from some of the survey work I’ve done over the last several years: the Provosts, Pedagogy, and Digital Learning survey in 2017, a separate survey of bookstore personnel about going digital, the going digital survey and also the CIO survey I’ve done, the campus computing survey. A fair number of campuses—well-informed folks at these campuses—consistently report our efforts to go all digital are impeded by the fact that large numbers of our students don’t have the right tools. That doesn’t mean a phone. That doesn’t even necessarily mean a tablet. It means a notebook. You know, it doesn’t mean that the campus lab is open for late night hours. If you’re a part-time student, you’re not gonna come back if you’ve got a 30-minute drive. And particularly as this begins to ramp up in terms of the resources, whether OER—where they’re almost always, you know…Primarily, part of the cost savings is the OER efforts are primarily digital platforms and that students can print them out—digital content, some of the initiatives on the part of the publishers—whether it’s Cengage’s all you can consume program. Pearson has just announced one as well—some of the other efforts. Those are for digital products, not for print products. If you don’t have the platform, you’re lost. You begin effectively in the hole. And how do we provide that for students?

I think it’s very interesting, for example, that if you look at the CSS (the College Scholarship Service) calculation of financial aid, every campus in the country—and if you look at the aggregated stuff—yeah you get money for books. But there’s nothing in there about buying a laptop. And yet I think we would agree by consensus, by acclamation, yeah, you need a laptop if you’re gonna be a successful college student these days! And yet that’s kind of an off-the-books cost as opposed to a recognized cost of attendance as much as tuition, books, and other things.

Kelvin: Those are great insights, Casey. Thanks very much for that. As we start to…Tom and I always talk about landing the plane. (laughing) We’re always coming in for a landing and putting coffee in the tank or something. I want to throw out maybe a little bit of a summary touch-point and just see if each of you would agree or what elaborations you might make with this. So, we might say that digital
learning is potentially, at least, a vehicle for meaningful transformation of higher education in ways that benefit students practically for the reasons that you’ve enumerated, and leadership is crucial for this potential to be realized. And I guess realized in sustainable and scalable ways. I’m curious. Would each of you agree with that? What would you add to that?

Tom: I’ll give our guest the last word, so I’ll go first. I would definitely agree with it, and I think about, you know, sort of transformatively digital leaders. Somebody like a Michael Crow at Arizona State. Now he’s not a provost. He was a provost, but he’s a president at Arizona State, but one of the things that I think has led to success at places like ASU—besides having a very visionary leader, which is important—is the tenure of the leader. The fact that the length of time for a provost to be in the position is getting shorter and shorter. It’s harder to move the needle when you don’t have that consistency of leadership, somebody to sort of follow through to make sure that they stay consistent with pushing forward that agenda, and if you don’t have somebody who’s willing to do that or is in that seat long enough, projects just disappear as the new administration comes in and some new thing is on the top of their list. So, I think having some longevity is actually a real benefit to being transformative. So, I’ll add that.

Kelvin: Yeah, that’s great. Casey, what about you? What do you think about that summary?

Casey: I wholeheartedly agree with the issue of tenure and longevity. Case in point, if we look at the Digital Fellows Program. We began…Our first meeting was in July 2017 with 32 provosts. At our last meeting, only 21 of those folks had the same job. Some of them—and that’s just in less than two years—some of them migrated to new positions and new opportunities. Some of them made lateral moves to similar positions at other institutions. A couple of them lost what we might euphemistically say the mandate from heaven and were released from their provost appointments by their presidents and went elsewhere. So that longevity, that consistency, that commitment, and that presence—somebody who is there—I think is absolutely important. The second part of this I want to emphasize also. I mentioned infrastructure briefly, and that infrastructure to me is not just about going digital. Look, UCF, take kudos as understandably an appropriately earned, great kudos for the work that’s going on for the digital transformation at Central Florida similarly in terms of some of the stuff at Arizona State and a number of other institutions. But it would be inappropriate, it would be wrong, it would be a misrepresentation to say that the success of those projects is because they’re digital. The success of those projects is because there’s also an infrastructure of support for students and faculty members and others as part of that digital process. In terms of the faculty members who would like to do it, the students who are going to do it, you know, who’s available at two o’clock in the morning or ten o’clock in the evening with the online and the digital programs. It’s not just about the digital stuff. And even when it comes to assessment—if I can run for a few seconds longer—Georgia State, as you both know and many in the audience know, has done an incredible job in effectively an academic light speed closing the gaps in retention and degree completion rates between different parts of its student population where there used to be huge gaps on the basis of income, ethnicity, other kinds of things. And the top story there is, “Oh, they did it with
analytics” meaning technology. Big data. But if you talk with the folks at Georgia State, they’ll tell you, “Yeah, that was just one part of it. The other part was that they hired almost 200 academic counselors to work with students.” That, too, is part of a support infrastructure that makes this essential. So, it’s not just the fact that you’ve got digital technology, that you’ve got an infrastructure that supports. There’s a gestalt. It’s the sum of the parts that has to be, that makes this work. Coupled with leadership as part of the sustainability effort.

Tom: And I think that’s a great way to sort of, as we say, put a bow on this because we’re talking about sustainability, right? We’re talking about how do you make a digital project sustainable? And kind of what you said, Casey, is that it needs to be about more than just a digital project.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah, it needs to be sort of baked in, and I agree. I think that’s been sort of the secret of success here at UCF. It’s been sort of baked in. and I’ll add that we had a president that was here for 26 years that saw this as part of his vision and legacy, and that really helped.

Kelvin: Yeah, for sure.

Tom: Well, I guess we have nothing else to say except thank you so much, Casey, for being on the show.

Kelvin: Thanks, Casey, for joining us.

Casey: No, my thanks to the two of you, Tom and Kelvin, for the opportunity to just sort of have this conversation and just kind of listen in as you talked amongst yourselves for a few minutes before we launched.

Tom: (laughing) Yeah, you and everybody else. You and my mom, right, who are listening in?

Casey: It always comes down to the moms, doesn’t it?

Tom: That’s right. Believe me, she’s not even listening.

Kelvin: No, probably not.

Tom: Well, cool. Well, thank you again, Casey. We do appreciate it. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I’m Tom.

Kelvin: I’m Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.