TOPcast Episode 62: DL Course Fees and the Funding of Online Education

Narrator: What will your future look like? The job you do today could be different than the jobs of tomorrow. Some see this as a challenge. At UCF, we see opportunity, a chance for you to grow your knowledge, and strengthen your skills from anywhere life might take you. With in-demand degree programs and resources for your success, UCF Online can help you prepare for the future and all the possibilities that come with it.

(musical transition)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I’m Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you’re listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: Woohoo! I love that show!

Tom: Yeah, we should probably have some sort of audience applause track. “The crowd goes wild!” Or maybe a one lone snore. (laughing)

Kelvin: (slowly clapping)

Tom: Yeah, one hand clapping or a slow clap.

(Both laughing)

Kelvin: We can do better than that. Wherever you are, would you just give us a little applause right now? We’ll feel it in our spirit.

Tom: Well, if you’re driving, keep your hands on the wheel.

Kelvin: Oh yeah, that’s right! Clap with your mouth.

Tom: People are driving by, “Why is that person imitating a fish?”

Kelvin: (laughing) But this does transition into—I’ve been thinking, you know our little small talk is all weather related. I was thinking, “What other topics are there?” Traffic and driving, I did think about as a viable alternative.

Tom: Yeah. Well, I do my share of podcast listening in the car. I’m always multitasking for something when I’m listening.

Kelvin: With hands on the wheel, always.
Tom: Always.

Kelvin: That’s good. So, we can think about that as like future small talk, you know?

Tom: Yeah! I was listening—actually, this week I was driving back and forth to the Florida Virtual Campus Summit that they had in Daytona Beach. Man, I used to do that drive every day, and I can’t believe I used to do that drive every day. So, god bless you—

Kelvin: Seemed a lot longer this time than it did before?

Tom: Well, not even so much longer. That wasn’t the problem. It was just—Whoo! Central Florida drivers, god bless ’em.

Kelvin: Yeah. Listeners, where you are, everybody is probably an intelligent and considerate driver. But here in the greater Central Florida area, there’s a subset of people—not Tom or me, I’m sure—but there’s a subset of drivers that are just dang crazy behind a wheel!

Tom: Crazy. Crazy.

Kelvin: And rude! And selfish!

Tom: We’ve got the competition between the people who are not good because they’re driving way too fast and recklessly, with the tourists that are not good—

Kelvin: *(Laughing)* “Where am I?”

Tom: —because they’re so slow—

Kelvin: “Is this Universal?”

Tom: —and don’t know where they’re going.

Kelvin: “Oh my gosh, that’s my exit! Let me execute a 360.”

Tom: Yeah. Go across five lanes of traffic because—

Kelvin: I saw that the other day!

Tom: Yeah, I’ve seen it before, too. So, anyway, we love our visitors here in Florida.

Kelvin: Yeah, thanks. Come. Spend some money.

Tom: Alright. Enough mindless banter for one episode.

Kelvin: *(Laughing)* That was mindful banter!

Tom: “Mindful banter,” yeah. Well, you’ve poured me my coffee.
Kelvin: Yes. In the color-changing mug. Do you see what that is?

Tom: Yeah, that’s really cool. It was a black mug that you put some hot beverage into, and it has revealed the USS Arizona monument at Pearl Harbor. That is really cool!

Kelvin: I love that mug.

Tom: That is now a completely colorful mug.

Kelvin: It’s really cool. And then I’ve got my Doctor Who. “Beware the weeping angels.” Where you’ve got the weeping angels far away—don’t blink—and then it’s, “Oh!” There she is! She’s going to get you. So, that’s as scary as I get.

Tom: That is really cool.

Kelvin: Yeah, I like that one a lot.

Tom: That mug. Too bad it doesn’t translate into a podcast/audio medium.

(Both laughing)

Kelvin: You’ve described it so well, though!

Tom: Maybe we’ll take a picture or something.

Kelvin: As Joel Hartman, our friend and CIO here at UCF likes to say, “The thing I liked about radio is the pictures were better!”

Tom: (Laughing) Yeah, absolutely. Alright. So, I’ve got this lovely beverage inside this color-changing cup. What am I drinking? What’s in the thermos?

Kelvin: Well, Tom, today’s coffee—and it is coffee—comes to us from our colleague and TOPcast listener, Dr. Luke Dowden, Chief Online Learning Officer and Associate Vice Chancellor for Alamo Colleges Online. We know Luke.

Tom: Yes!


Tom: “Ya, mon!”

Kelvin: And brought back for us—hand delivered—a sample of the legendary “Blue Mountain Coffee.” So that’s what this is. 100% Blue Mountain Coffee. So, now we’ve talked before—you and our listeners might remember—on TOPcast about Blue Mountain Coffee, and as tasty as it usually is, I’m of the mind, personally—no offense to anyone else—that Jamaica Blue Mountain Coffee, like Hawaii Kona Coffee, is generally overpriced relative to its value. This coffee come to us free, but generally speaking. Since I find it overpriced, I seldom purchase Blue
Mountain or Kona myself. There are far too many other excellent quality, single-origin coffees at more reasonable price-points. Any, hey, I’m willing to spend money on great coffee. I believe you get what you pay for. So, thanks, Luke, for the coffee. I’ll ask you, Tom, how is it, and do you find a connection in there somewhere in the murky depths of your cup to today’s topic?

Tom: I actually think the coffee’s very good. I like it. Thank you, Luke. That’s very generous of you. I will say that you, Kelvin Thompson, have brought me back Kona Coffee from Hawaii, so despite your protestations, you have been very generous with me.

Kelvin: (laughing) That’s right! I have, on occasion, purchased some. I just don’t do it a lot.

Tom: Yeah! And, I actually get the connection! (laughing)

Kelvin: (mock angel singing) That’s right. The angels—weeping angels though they may be—are now singing. (laughing)

Tom: That’s right. Maybe we need another kind of applause track. “Tom gets the connection!”

(Both laughing)

Kelvin: Yes! As opposed to…what does a “swing and a miss” sound like?

Tom: Yeah, alright. So, you pay a little extra to get a little extra. Things that are of high value, high quality, cost.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: All of that seems to relate to today’s topic.

Kelvin: Oh, thank you, god!

Tom: (laughing) So, today we actually have one of our guest interviews, and we’re going to be talking about the funding and occasional de-funding of online education at institutions through a mechanism that we know very well here: the “distance learning course fee.” This goes back to an interview you did in the 2018 OLC Accelerate Conference.

Kelvin: Yeah…

Tom: Yeah. This is another one of those examples about why we’re doing two a month, now.

Kelvin: (laughing) Trying to catch up!
Tom: Yeah. Poor Tammy Powell, who is the subject of the interview, from Kennesaw State University. She was interviewed all the way back in 2018, and our apologies to her for waiting this long to finally get it into the schedule. But when you spoke to her, you talked broadly about the role of distance learning course fees, how that funds online education operations, and how the actual removal of that fee impacted her and Kennesaw State.

Kelvin: That’s right.

Tom: So, anything you want to say about that? You want to tell us her position, her title?

Kelvin: Yeah, sure. So, Dr. Tammy, or Tamera, Powell is Director of Digital Education for Kennesaw State University’s College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and formerly, at the time of this interview, she was serving as interim Executive Director for Technology Enhanced Learning at Kennesaw State University, broadly. I thought it was interesting, though, as I mention in here, that they’re an interesting case study because they operated without a distance learning course fee of any sort in their early years, and as far as I can tell, everything was very ad-hoc. Faculty motivation only, ad-hoc. Then they decided they were going to start formally into online learning and started with this course fee idea in around 2007-2008 and moved forward. And then, they’re currently, as she’ll talk about, working on pulling back from that. The other thing is, we keep saying—as you and I have already said here in our little intro remarks—we talk about distance learning course fees, as does Tammy in the interview. But technically you’ll also hear use this other term: “e-tuition.” Technically, the university system of Georgia uses the term “e-tuition” to refer to a special tuition add-on rate per credit hour, rather than a fee, per se, right? People are sensitive to “fees.”

(laughing)

Tom: Yeah. I guess a lot is in the framing.

Kelvin: Yes. They’ve been on a trajectory in Georgia—just like a lot of our systems and institutions—a trajectory of reducing students fees and reducing special tuitions. We’re going to be linking to a number of background documents in the show notes page about that. But other than that, I’ll just say that we focus in a lot at the technical level, but I would encourage everybody to listen for holistic takeaways, and we’ll try to offer some of that on the backside of the interview.

Tom: Alright. With no further ado, through the magic of podcast time-travel, is your conversation with Dr. Tammy Powell.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Hi, Tammy. Thanks for joining us on TOPcast, glad to have you here.

Tammy Powell: Thanks for having me.

Kelvin: So, we talked before we hit record about your unique insights into distance learning course fees at your institution, because you’ve had a bit of a history with
them and evolution. Could you maybe just address the pros and cons of distance learning course fees, and a little bit of the history of having/not-having at your institution? And then we can talk about the recent developments. Does that sound okay?

Tammy: Yeah. And the words “history” and “evolution” sound so nice. *(laughing)* So positive. So, I think it was 2007, maybe 2008, when Kennesaw State University started charging the course fees. They were $100 a credit hour, which we talked about, and other institutions do charge less. There were others in Georgia that charged more. We went from a “build your own course online and hope it’s good,” and so on to—as many institutions have done—to a very structured support system with instructional designers assigned to colleges, faculty who were assigned to support colleagues, an internal Quality Matters review system, and a very robust faculty development system. The rules of the course fees for KSU were that every penny had to be spent to benefit students. Now, that was broadly defined. It was, for example, the internal Quality Matters review system, the robust faculty development system, along with, of course, technology for students. Things that students would probably say, “Yeah, that benefitted me directly,” and others that students may not agree with our definition on, but we were not spending it on football stadiums or faculty lounges and stuff like that.

So, our Board of Regents declared that our e-tuition had to be reduced to $0 in three years. That came last May—so May 2018. So, it’ll be $0 in 2020. That’s been a huge hit because we were funding online learning—about 30% of our credit hours are offered online. So, it’s a big chunk of our credit hours. What that means, actually, is that in three years, face-to-face students will actually pay more than online students because our online students get a cut in the tech fees and stuff that the face-to-face students pay. So, even though one of the rationales was equity, I’m not sure that was completely thought through. KSU is actually not that expensive, as well… I don’t know if that’s here or there. In any case, one of the things we were doing with the money was helping to create large enrollment sections so that students could get their courses in a more timely fashion and increase RPG. So, of course, that’s been halted. The impact on that has been devastating. Students are now saying, “Oh, I’m back to waiting for my classes and an extra couple of years to graduate so I can get these classes,” and so on. So, it has not benefitted the students. But it certainly has fostered many opportunities for creative thinking, and we can no longer sustain a peer-review system for the online courses. There’s no way without funding. We are now in the midst of great change. We are creating a new rubric. It’ll be an internal rubric. One thing that we did get from the years of having a course fee was a very tight culture of excellence for online courses. With the internal KSU QM review system, our faculty have really given themselves very high standards for online courses. Even they were like, “The Quality Matters bar is low. We do so much better,” which we were very proud of what we created, which, I think, is an amazing gift. We hope to carry that momentum into the new KSU-centered rubric that we’re creating. And, of course, we can’t do peer-reviews, so the faculty have to take on a lot more responsibility for ADA compliance, for meeting SACS guidelines, meeting financial aid guidelines. So, we’re going to train the faculty and support them as best we can. We do still have instructional designers who—and the system, now, is instead of us coming to them and saying, “You’ll do this peer-review, you’ll meet these standards,” they’ll come to us and say, “I need help with an ADA component,” or “I want help building this,” and
so on. Hopefully, we’ll keep that culture of expectations of excellence, but it
certainly will be a change in the way the faculty approach getting the assistance
they need.

Kelvin: Maybe just stepping back for a second, I’m going to imagine some of our
listeners, their institutions, have a distance learning course fee. Probably some
don’t. So, summarizing, it sounds like pre-2006, you had online courses, you
didn’t have distance learning course fee. 2006, you started having a distance
learning course fee. You had one for 12 years—

Tammy: Somewhere around in there. I wasn’t there at the time.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, like 12 years and then, “OK, we’ve got to transition out now by 2020.”
So, the institution didn’t have, has, and won’t have again. We’ve talked a little bit
about some of the changes of going from depending on having one, to not. I
know you said you weren’t there at the time, but what did having a course fee
enable? You mentioned that it was very “faculty on their own,” but…staffing
levels? What kind of staffing was there pre-course fee versus I assume that the
course fee allowed for additional staffing? Can you maybe comment about that
first? Going from no fee to a fee?

Tammy: Yeah, I was one of the staff hired with that fee. So, it did. It allowed us to hire—
at the time I was hired as the Online Coordinator for the College of Humanities
and Social Sciences, and my job was to get courses online and have them be high
quality. We won the 2010 Online Learning Consortium Faculty Development
Award that year.

Kelvin: I think I remember that.

Tammy: Yeah. We’ve trained 250 faculty over the years. We were able to hire
instructional designers. We were able to hire the people who ran the QM system.
We were able to pay the faculty to do the peer-reviews, which was nice.
Kennesaw State now has 35,000 students, we are so blessed, but we need
teachers. We didn’t have enough faculty, so we did hire quite a few faculty,
finally. We waited a long time because we were afraid, but finally about three
years ago, we were given the go-ahead to use it to hire faculty.

Kelvin: So, the DL fee paid for some faculty.

Tammy: It paid salaries. And they were online lecturers, so that was a huge panic when
the fee was going away because not only are people losing their jobs, but we
needed the faculty. We can’t serve the students if we can’t offer the classes. So,
through some really great efforts on the part of administration—and I was part of
these conversations and it was a lot of hard work—we were able to save
everybody.

Kelvin: So, you’ve lost no employees in this process?

Tammy: No. We’ve lost a lot, but no people.
Kelvin: That’s pretty remarkable.

Tammy: It’s very impressive, yeah. I could say a lot about the hard work that went into that. I am appreciative—obviously, since I was one of the people who was hired on the money—but I’m a tenured full professor, so they would just have to find some money for me. I just had to be moved somewhere. We spent the money on the faculty and that was a huge challenge.

Kelvin: It’s clear that pre-DL fee, there was less staffing. DL fee period, more staffing. Post-DL fee, maintaining staffing through some creative choices. But, is it also true—I’m just trying to interpret this—is it true that, pre-DL fee, very decentralized? DL fee, more centralization to some extent through things like instructional design services and QM reviews and so forth? Now, post-DL fee, less centralized again? Is that true or is that not?

Tammy: No. And KSU’s interesting, because we were a junior college. We’re very young.

Kelvin: Back in the day?

Tammy: Back in the day. We’re about 50 or so years old, so it’s very common at KSU to just have an idea and people go, “Yeah, why don’t you do that?” Which, as I understand it, at other institutions is not common. I was hired first as the Online Coordinator for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. I was the only online director at the time. The college just needed somebody. They used the money to hire somebody. So, it was very decentralized then. Every college was kind of fending for him or herself—or itself, I guess. Is there a college gender? I don’t know. I was trying to make the pronoun antecedent agree—English professor.

Kelvin: (laughing) I noticed.

Tammy: So, anyway. They then had a centralized unit, the Distance Learning Center, which was set up separately. Then it just became clear that the load from some of the colleges with high online was too much for a centralized office. So, Coles College of Business, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, every college had an online coordinator, but some were given more responsibilities because they had more that needed to be done. Coles, Bagwell, the College of Education, and the College of the Arts for a while, and then the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. So, there was a decentralized system that way, but we all worked together. We met together. We had good relationships. I’m presenting here with my colleagues from University College in Bagwell, College of Education. However, several things happened. One is, because we were able to fund a build-out of classes, some colleges that had x degree programs, when they build all their classes, they’re kind of done and they don’t need the level of support that they used to. Whereas, for other colleges, like the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, we offer most of the gen. eds.—I say “we” as an English professor—so those courses get built constantly. They always require a high level of support. So, now with the funding gone, some of the colleges that did decentralize are now saying, “Well, we’re not so interested in doing that anymore.” It’s really the college’s decision. Other colleges are saying, “Oh no,
we still need our own instructional designer, and we need it in-house” and so on. But I would say, for the most part, it’s getting more centralized because of the financial crunch, but also because now the colleges are looking at what they need and they’re saying, “Well, we’re kind of built-out and we don’t really need the support we thought we did or that we needed in the past.” Those are things the colleges decide.

Kelvin: As we get close to wrapping up—

Tammy: I guess I should add that I’m now the director of the Distance Learning Center, so I’m now the director of the “centralized unit,” or the Executive Director of Technology-Enhanced Learning. Interim. So, things have changed.

Kelvin: As we get close to wrapping up, I think maybe some takeaways for our listeners—it might be useful for them to hear—what are some cautions, or concerns, or principles that come to mind for our listeners who have a DL fee, and what are some takeaways for folks who don’t have a DL fee? Having gone through this transition, any words of wisdom?

Tammy: Drive it like you stole it. (laughing)

Kelvin: Drive it like you stole it. So, use it while you’ve got it?

Tammy: Right! I mean, I would never say don’t have one because of this experience, because, like I said, if nothing else, we got this gift of this real faculty culture of excellence and expectations. I don’t think we could have had that if we hadn’t had some money to spend on faculty development and here’s the research and best practices and so on. I would say, again, if we hadn’t hired the faculty and the people that we hired on the soft money and the instructional designers, we could not have grown. But I think that was the scariest part. Definitely be mindful if you do hire people on soft money, that you have a plan for them should the money be taken away. Because that was the worst part, was the fear that people would lose jobs.

Kelvin: Is there anything else you would say about—because I’m fascinated by the fact and so in awe of the statement that you haven’t lost anybody. That you’ve done these creative solutions. Is there any guiding principle there? I mean, was it a university commitment of, “We’re going to prioritize people. We’re not going to let anybody go, and then we’re going to move heaven and earth to do it?” How does that work?

Tammy: Yes, absolutely. I think I’m going to credit Mike Rothlisberger in Academic Affairs who worked tirelessly to make sure that we didn’t lose any people. Now, not everybody got to stay in their same position. I will say that people did leave voluntarily because the money was drying up and they saw the writing on the wall. Other people have left for other reasons, but yes, the people who stayed have positions. Again, a lot of people have lost a lot of money because many of us had overload payments and so on because we did extra work for online staff. So, it wasn’t perfect, but yeah, we were able to retain everyone.
Kelvin: Hey, thanks so much for giving up your time, sharing some of your story from Kennesaw State, and I hope it’s a great rest of the conference for you.

Tammy: Thanks. Go Owls! Thanks.

[musical transition]

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Tammy Powell.

Kelvin: Yes, and again, thanks to Tammy in your patience in waiting for this to see the light of day.

Tom: (laughing) Yeah.

Kelvin: We ought to follow-up and find out more, now, a year and a half into it, how all that’s going.

Tom: Yeah, who knows. We could do a whole new podcast about it now.

Kelvin: (laughing) That’s right. I think it’s an interesting case study.

Tom: It is, and as I alluded to on the front side, the idea of a “distance learning fee” is one we know very well here in the state of Florida. Maybe it would be helpful to just give a quick summary of how it works here. There is a statute in Florida law that describes a variety of fees—including the distance learning fee—that universities and colleges are permitted to charge. Then, within the State University System of Florida, there are some regulations that define how that gets implemented, including what the maximum amount you can charge per credit hour is. Most of the state universities here do charge some version of the fee. I would say at least half of them charge the maximum. That’s how we’ve been able to fund online learning.

Kelvin: To pay homage to Russ Poulin when he was here in Episode 58 about policy, alongside Cheryl Dowd, policies and legislation exist, sometimes, because people do dumb stuff, and I want to just tell you, without naming any names, there was a “wild west” period in Florida’s online learning, where—

Tom: Yeah. It wasn’t always capped. (laughing)

Kelvin: It was not always capped. It is today. Capped.

Tom: It is today, yeah. There was a period where the cap was in-statute, and then that statute expired and it went into regs because people had been justifying all kinds of things as eligible expenses—and there was a vast spectrum of amounts being charged, to the point where the legislature kind of said, “Well, if you’re all doing the same thing and you’re all charging these crazy, varying amounts, what’s up?” Then they got involved. You mentioned Russ Poulin. A couple of years ago, WCET did a survey where they talked about both the cost and price of distance learning, and the idea of fees was part of that. That might be worth looking up at
WCET if you want to know more about this subject. I was part of a little bit of the drafting of that survey, and I will say it’s really complicated because everybody’s contexts are so different. Some of the questions were, “Is your tuition the same, but you have fees?” or, “Do you have a different e-tuition for out-of-state but no fees?” We get asked questions sometimes like, “Why does it cost more for online learning?” We kind of have to say, well it actually doesn’t because the tuition is the same. What we add the fee for is because we had this existing university, it’s been around for a while, and we added online learning capacity to it. It was an additive cost to build that infrastructure. If you just wanted a virtual university, that would have a different cost model. So, the fully online universities probably don’t have a distance learning fee, I would imagine. That’s probably something I should have looked up before I spoke. (laughing)

Kelvin: That’s logical. I guess—just to say this—DL course fees are kind of a good news/bad news proposition, right? Good news: you can get some resources. Bad news: you could be dependent on them. What if they went away? I would say, broadly—as we’ve talked about before—I think we and others in our field are all in favor of reducing the functional cost of education for students. That’s laudable, but let’s not mistake anything: online operations do require funding of some sort. They’re not magic. Just because stuff is online doesn’t make it free.

Tom: Yeah, exactly. You still have to pay faculty. You still have infrastructure. You may not have walls, but you still have a learning space, right? There’s a whole human and technological infrastructure behind quality online programs.

Kelvin: The elves don’t come at night and build your online courses.

Tom: (laughing) Right. Or talk to your students and help them through things. And as we’ve talked about in past podcasts, online learners—particularly non-traditional, adult online learners that have been away from college for a long time or maybe always—sometimes need extra support. That has a cost associated with it, also.

Kelvin: If you’re going to do things differently—which, again, we’ve broadly talked about as a theme in order to achieve social mobility goals of reaching folks who don’t normally come to college—that’s not free either.

Tom: That’s right. Alright, so, the coffee’s dwindling. You want to give us the “bottom line?”

Kelvin: I will attempt to “bottom line” the bottom of the cup here. As online educators, we must be responsible and efficient with our operational funding—duh. However, excellent online education does require resources, so we all need to help clarify, for policy makers and senior leaders, the return on investment of funding our work.

Tom: Amen. ROI. Alright, so, maybe on the way out the door here, I’ll do a quick plug.

Kelvin: Please.
Tom: So, TOPcast listener, who we’ve mentioned before and who has provided us with coffee, Dr. Jorge Silva Puras, who’s Head of Global Learning for Universidad Sagrado Corazon in Puerto Rico, posted the following recommendation on the Apple Podcast platform regarding TOPcast. He said, “It is a true pleasure to listen to your podcast episodes and thanks for increasing the frequency to twice monthly.”

Kelvin: First feedback we’ve gotten!

Tom: First feedback! Thank you, Jorge. “We are reapplying many of your suggestions, particularly as we develop the online skills of our faculty. Thanks again.” No, thank you, Jorge. Gracias muchisimo.

Kelvin: Thank you.

Tom: So, if you have comments about TOPcast that potential listeners would find helpful, please consider leaving a one or two sentence review on Apple Podcasts or whatever platform you use to listen to these various and sundry episodes. It is a great help, and we might just read your review on a future episode. Do let us know if you think this “twice a month” format is working for you, or if it’s too much Tom and Kelvin.

Kelvin: Yeah, and if you just want to reach out: topcast@ucf.edu. We’d be happy to hear from you that way, as well.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. So, thank you to Luke for the coffee and to Tammy for the interview—

Kelvin: And to Jorge for the kind words.

Tom: —And to Jorge for the kind words. So, this has been a group effort this podcast episode. (laughing)

Kelvin: They all are. We’re better together.

Tom: Alright. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I’m Tom.

Kelvin: And I’m Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.