TOPcast Episode 67: Field Report #3: Carrying Out a "More Online Every Semester" Strategy

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 Thomas Cavanagh.

Kelvin Thompson: And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Greetings, Dr. Thompson.

Kelvin: Dr. Cavanagh! So good to see and hear you today.

Tom: Thank you. Thank you. It is good to be seen and heard.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* More so now that ever before.

Tom: Yeah, that's true. Yeah, that's sort of a very existential statement. It is good to be seen and heard. I podcast, therefore I am.

Kelvin: Ooh. I like that.

Tom: Ergo cogito sum—

Kelvin: Podcast.

Tom: Yes, podcast.

Kelvin: *(laughing)*

Tom: Podcasticum.

Kelvin: Podcasticum. *(laughing)* We're never even going to get to the topic of the day. There are episodes like that. For those who are just joining us, we do bill this show as a "collegial conversation about online or blended or digital teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee." That's why you might hear us talk about coffee now and again. So, Tom, what are you drinking? I see you taking a swig.

Tom: Yeah, or hear the occasional inadvertent slurp, which I try to avoid. So, in my cup is something I have had on this podcast before especially since we've been remote. It is my second cup of the day, because this is late morning that we are recording this. So usually for my second cup I try to go decaf to keep my inbox from making my heart beat any faster than it normally does. So, I've got a French roast decaf from San Francisco Bay Company, and I like it much.

Kelvin: The Fog Chaser.

Tom: Actually, the Fog Chaser is not decaf. That's a different one.

Kelvin: See, I think it makes sense to me because you need the caffeine to do the chasing of the fog.

Tom: Yeah, well my first cup this morning did have some caffeine in it.

Kelvin: Okay. It chased the fog away.

Tom: But I'm okay now. How about you, Kelvin? What's in your thermos? Or cup?

Kelvin: Yeah, in my Pearl Harbor mug today, I will continue on with my one sided coffee connection with a thematically selected coffee and I do feel a little bit bad putting you through the coffee connection, Tom, since I don't actually offer you any of the coffee to make you put up with it.

Tom: That's okay.

Kelvin: But my coffee today comes from PT's Coffee Roasting Company in Topeka, Kansas. It is a light to medium roasted single origin Rwanda. Now, here's a little bit of coffee trivia for you today, Tom. The particular varietal in this Rwanda is Bourbon. Now that's not the alcohol, right? That's like, you know, the French royal family. The Bourbons.

Tom: You got my hopes up there for a second.

Kelvin: I know! That would be a whole new aspect of remote working that we really don't want to get into. Try not to do that. I don't know if you know this, but like wine, coffee has varietals. So, this varietal is called Bourbon. The Bourbon varietal is an import to Rwanda, but it's been there a long time. Some stuff I read said that it's even grown wild. The Bourbon plants have grown wild for over 100 years in Rwanda. And those wild Bourbon plants are—it just makes me think now that people are gonna think that alcohol grows on trees in Rwanda. That's not true! That's not true, but the Bourbon varietal plants are supposed to be quite tasty but they have a lower yield. You know, the berries per plant yield than other coffees. However, with a little cultivation there are cultivars—spin offs—of the Bourbon varietal in Rwanda that are still high in quality but also produce a higher yield. So, a little toffee trivia for you there, and hidden in there somewhere—like berries on a coffee plant—so are the days of our lives. No, there's a coffee connection to be found maybe.

Tom: With today's topic. Alright so I'm going to key in on the particular term of cultivation. I think that there's something there related to our topic. The cultivation of these different varietals and yielding, you know, higher production of something. So, if I took coffee out and plugged online learning in, I think I'm in the neighborhood.

Kelvin: I think you drove across the finish line, Tom.

Tom: *(laughing)* Yay! You took me by the hand and lead me there but thank you.

Kelvin: It's all good. But I think the takeaway is that online learning grows on trees. *(laughing)*

Tom: Thank you for listening. This is TOPcast.

Kelvin: *(laughing)* That worries me. You know that I've been worried constantly throughout this whole remote instruction era, right? Because I do fear that's what the takeaway that some people will have is that online learning grows on trees. "How hard is this? We don't need people to be professional to do this stuff!"

Tom: Yeah. All I need is a Zoom account and now I'm on online learning expert.

Kelvin: But hopefully not. Hopefully nobody believes that that's the case.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I guess we should say that as a reminder for as long as this current reality of remote teaching lasts, we are continuing on with our monthly mini-series of field reports in our first Monday episodes in which we focus upon some aspect of this current unique circumstance, but meanwhile on the third Monday episodes, we'll continue on with our guest interviews because, after all, life goes on. So, you want to remind us Tom where we were in field report #2 and how that gets us to field report #3?

Tom: Yeah, so kind of where we left off in our last field report at the beginning of last month, we were saying that here at UCF we've been pursuing this strategy of relying more on actual online courses as opposed to remote instruction every semester. And so, from spring to summer, summer to fall, and we've begun preparations for increasing the number of new "actual" online courses offered during fall 2020 through a modified faculty preparation program. And we said, perhaps we'd share those details another time. And maybe now is that time.

Kelvin: Yeah, okay. So, setting aside all of the activity surrounding "remote instruction" for a moment, maybe the big question for us in this episode is, what does it look like to pursue a strategy of each semester offering a higher proportion of actual intentionally designed online courses? So we're prepared to talk about that a little bit. We've been trying that.

Tom: Yeah, and you generously put together just a few notes to kind of keep us on topic, and your first one I think relates to what we kind of already alluded to, which is that online learning is not the same as remote instruction. Or online teaching is not the same as remote instruction. They are two different things and at the risk of belaboring that point, online instruction involves faculty preparation. It involves intentional course design. It's typically primarily asynchronous. It typically uses a constructivist pedagogical model, and remote instruction has not necessarily included all of those things. We haven't even necessarily had the luxury of time to put faculty through what we would want to say is an adequate preparation program to teach remotely synchronously. We've done our best and I think everybody else has as well. But it certainly doesn't meet I think the standards that we set for ourselves. So, they're two very different things.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that, and I think very germane to this zoom-in today is that word that you just said: time. Right? Because deliberate, intentional, well-designed online courses require a lot of time and effort.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. I mean we've talked about our kind of faculty development strategy and our flagship program is 10 weeks long, plus a what we call a showcase at the end where people can kind of share what they have developed over the course of the semester in collaboration with their instructional designer, through the face to face and online and consultation components of it. And we don't have 10 weeks to put faculty through that kind of a program and get them ready for what they need to be ready for come this fall. So, we are working on a revised version of that program. I don't know if we want to talk about that now or do we want to wait?

Kelvin: Sure. We can.

Tom: So, rather than having a 10-week program that we call IDL6543: Interactive Distributed Learning.

Kelvin: It stands for technology mediated delivery.

Tom: Right, thank you for the official title. You were there at the at the birth of it so you got to keep me honest. We realized that we could not scale that because of the way it's designed, primarily because of the integral relationship of instructional designers to the faculty member. We frankly just don't have enough instructional designers to spread that thin, to have that kind of an interaction for every single person. And then pedagogically the way it's designed. So, in addition to it just being too long for what we need this summer—10 weeks—the actual curriculum and the pedagogy of the program, while it's highly effective—you know, we've won awards, it works really well—it's not built to scale beyond the current capacity of about 40 faculty members any time we offer it. We offer it a couple times a year. So, we needed something different. So, we're building this three-week faculty preparation program that pulls out the key elements that faculty need to know to be effective teaching online, and a lot of those are correlated with Quality Matters, and at the end of those three weeks, faculty will be given a plan for completing the development of their course prior to fall and

some templates to help get them started and maybe not put as much burden on them with some of the administrative tasks of building the course. And we're hopeful that that will get a lot more faculty prepared for the fall than we could have otherwise done. And while I'm saying this right now, I think we have 170 requests to go through that program. So, we're expecting I think well over 200, which is probably, what, 5x the normal number of faculty we would prepare over a summer, even at full capacity. That's a lot of faculty and new business for us to support going forward, but we'll take it and we're trying to figure all that out right now. So back to your cultivation and increased yield of product, I mean, that's an example of it right there.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's exactly right. Since, you know, we're there kind of talking about kind of what we're doing—specifically pre-fall 2020 as we record this—to increase that yield or throughput of actually well-prepared faculty who can then design and develop actually intentionally designed online courses. A couple of bigger zoom out, bigger picture things in that dynamic just to flesh out a couple of points, it was important to us not to sacrifice quality. Right? So, we had to kind of put front and center the question of what are our quality assurance procedures? And also alongside that, to identify what are the specific inhibitors to our increased capacity? And interestingly, both of those things had to do with the amount of instructional designer involvement on the front end of our existing faculty preparation course IDL6543. There are a minimum of four instructional designer/participating faculty member consultations that are very involved and integral to the process, and what we started talking about early on when we anticipated increasing the yield is…huh. Well, you can't increase the yield if you keep that level of instructional designer involvement the same, not without an influx of instructional designers and even then, you wouldn't be able to onboard them fast enough. Right? So we knew that we were going to have to step back from the amount of instructional designer involvement that we normally have, which is good from the increased capacity perspective but bad from the quality assurance perspective. So, we identified that that's a front-end quality assurance measure that we're pulling back from. We need to bookend that with an inserted counterbalancing quality assurance measure on the back end, which is something we don't do with our flagship faculty preparation program normally. We are now going to require a quality course design review of these participating faculty in order to make a provisional credential permanent, which I think is kind of elegant. Now we'll see if it works. I don't know.

Tom: Yeah, and but it allows us to scale without necessarily sacrificing quality. We've got some, you know, quality assurance measures built in. And we are also intending to stretch the instructional designer capacity—at least for these reviews— by calling upon experienced online faculty to help us conduct some of those reviews. So, that will help. The bigger concern for us is, what do we do with these faculty now afterwards, like, a year from now, because there'll be in our stable of faculty who are credentialed in teaching online, and we will have dramatically increased the number of faculty we support probably by 25% in a matter of a month. That's a large increase that we're just going to have to figure out how to support. But, yeah, drawing upon the expertise of existing faculty—who we call web vets—will be a big help to help conduct some of those reviews for the provisionally credentialed faculty.

Kelvin: So, you want to step back? So, we kind of said, “here's the strategy: more online, every semester,” and we talked about the difference between actual online courses and remote instruction. We talked about what we are concretely shooting at doing pre-fall. You want to talk a little bit about how we have been enacting that strategy? So, in our notes, those are kind of those enumerated two, three, and four points because I think those are…it's a little bit backstage/behind the scenes/sausage-making/whatever you want to call it, but I think it's important not just to say here's the strategy, but how do you carry that out?

Tom: Yeah and it's hard, right? Because we're in this context that we actually don't know yet what fall is going to look like. So, we're making a bunch of assumptions and I'm sending probably more documents than the provost wants to see at him. “We could try this or we could do that. If this happens then maybe this,” and in fact, I think I need to pull back and be a little simpler and say, you know, “here's a strategy that is informed by all discussions we're having internally in consultation with people who teach online that could be deployed in various ways.” But to your point, the overarching strategy needs to be communicated to the community, and that sort of starts with the provost, right? Because here's how we're going to deliver instruction. And one of the key things that I think has helped us—that are our interim provost has done—is send the message that if we're going to be online, the strong preference is to be online in our normally prepared quality way. Alright. Spring? We all know what spring was, and no harm no foul. We understand everybody just did the best they could in spring. Summer? We expected a little more and a little better because we were able to get faculty up to speed on maybe effective use of the technology but honestly not a whole lot better than that, but for fall? We have some time to get a lot more faculty prepared to be effective online instructors. And if we don't…His expectation is we don't want to put out bad online courses and we don't want to have students going through bad online courses just because we can. I'll repeat something I've repeated many times on this show and elsewhere, which is that it's too easy to outrun your quality supply lines in online learning. And I think the use of Zoom, or just standing up a Canvas shell or Blackboard shell or D2L shell is way too easy. “Here you go, faculty member. Here’s Zoom and an LMS shell. Go teach.” Well, that does not make a quality course, and so there's an awful lot of infrastructure that goes into that, and I'm sure we're preaching to the choir to the listeners of this podcast, but honestly, we've had a lot of success at UCF. And I think that that's because of the investment we place in faculty development. It's not by accident. And I'm feeling a little hamstrung right now because we haven't had the time to get faculty up to speed in the way that we feel they should be put up to speed. So, we're doing the absolute best we can in the timeframe we have and given the limitations that have been placed on us.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think it was great that you have been coordinating so closely with our interim provost and the fact that he would actually send out a message articulating that, I guess what we might call it, online first strategy, I think is immense. Right? But then following up from that it's been really important to communicate clearly and continue to coordinate with college deans, department chairs, associate deans, those various college contacts. Our UCF colleague Bob Reed does a lot of the shepherding of those college contacts, and I think working out those details of course scheduling and “are you going to schedule a fully online course? Who do you have already that's already credentialed to design and

develop such a course? Who isn't credentialed who you want to put on this list? What are you talking about? Well is it a W fully online course or is it a remote instruction course? What's the place of Zoom? How do you—?" and lots of back and forth communications teasing that out.

Tom: Yeah, and it's not been easy, and we've been trying to navigate this because we've thrown out all kinds of training at them, like how to use Zoom kind of training. So, we're getting all these very legitimate questions like, "Okay, so if I've been through that, does that mean I'm credentialed to teach in the fall online if I have to go remote?" and our answer is we have to figure out our answer, but, you know, so far I've been saying, I've been trying to—this is probably more than I should say to a public podcast—but I've been trying to thread that needle by saying, "We strongly encourage faculty to go through this Essentials of Online Teaching. Here's why." Because they didn't get that deep pedagogy of effective instruction online in the stuff we've done so far. Yet, putting some sort of a requirement on summer training when some faculty aren't even on contract and we can't compel them to take it, I'm afraid that I couldn't enforce that kind of a requirement, you know, ex post facto on faculty, when they come back if they've already taught [or] if they're already starting to teach remotely and say, "You didn't go through our training. I'm going to take that course away from you." I think I'm gonna lose that fight. So, I'm trying a bend not break strategy, as far as compliance and requirements. And that's art, not science.

Kelvin: Yeah. And related to that, something you brought up right before we hit record today is there's also this…We're pretty fortunate, right? Our forebearers delineated clear modality definitions which we have enacted in our core scheduling. That's pretty well understood. But these times that we're in are causing us to look carefully at those modality definitions and possibly adjust them a little bit, tweak them a little bit to—what would we say—support the use case scenarios wherever possible of what faculty and departments are wanting to do, rather than saying "Nope. This is the line. What you're doing doesn't count." That would be not good.

Tom: Yeah, and as I think I alluded to earlier, we're not in a really good position right now to tell faculty or departments or colleges, "Yeah, what you're doing doesn't fit in our box, so you need to change what you're doing." I think what we need to do is encourage them to do whatever they're doing right now in the highest quality way that they possibly can—and that's where the training comes in—but it's also, I think, incumbent on us to take an objective, step back, and look at what is the reality? What are these new practices that are emerging? We typically haven't done much synchronous online learning at UCF. I know some schools have but we really haven't. I think that's not going away, and we need to figure out how we can potentially have synchronous online learning or combinations of synchronous and asynchronous courses that don't fit neatly into our current modality definitions. So we're going to have to either tweak them—or as some on-campus deans or associate deans are demanding. I'm getting emails demanding new modalities—but we have to take a really broad perspective to that. We can't just create a new modality for every weird permutation that someone can come up with because we'd have this crazy long list that just wouldn't make any sense. What we need to do is be strategic and smart about it,

and that's what we're trying to do and involve like the registrar and our institutional research office because there's reporting associated with this to the state and others. So, all of these things are new waters that we are finding ourselves navigating. I actually am energized by it because I think it's a huge opportunity for us. But we also don't want to get it wrong, you know.

Kelvin: Right. No, for sure, and I think in just a moment before we wrap up, we should talk about a little bit of the evidence that we're seeing. It's formative evidence of whether this strategy is paying off or not, but one of the ways that we get that evidence is because of that coordinated activity and those definitions and the data that are generated from them. But I do want to make one other comment about enacting strategy because I think we would be remiss if we didn't. Just communicating a strategy—what did Casey Green when he was on the podcast talk about? The proclamations of presidents and provosts.

Tom: Yeah. That sounds like Casey.

Kelvin: It's important right but just communicating that strategy doesn't make it happen, doesn't carry it out into the tactical realm, and we've talked about a little bit about coordination and communication. But there's more to it, right? That we, in our central support offices, we support the design and development of new online sections by existing faculty and support the onboarding of new-to-online faculty as well. So that's a resource intense set of things there, right? I just wanted to be clear: faculty aren't on their own. Credential faculty have access to instructional designers and media producers and others, and we're all getting drawn upon to support faculty in carrying out this increased proportion of actual online courses. That being said, maybe, Tom, we could talk for a moment about some of the nascent embryonic evidence that is surfacing that we think this is working thus far. It's early yet.

Tom: Yeah, it definitely is, but you pulled some numbers from our information system, and do you want to go through those, or do you want me to?

Kelvin: I can comment on a couple, then you can jump in as well. At UCF—and correct me if I'm wrong but I think this is true—like semester to like semester comparisons—say fall to fall, year in and year out—our growth is kind of like one percentage point per year in fully online. Like spring 2019, we were 15% fully online courses versus spring 2020, 16% fully online courses. That's the kind of growth that we typically see but already for summer, we're seeing a much—not surprisingly, this is not rocket science—but we are seeing a much bigger proportion for summer 2020 of fully online courses. We went up 14 percentage points over summer 2019 from 24% fully online courses to 39% fully online courses. We've always been more online in the summer but that's a lot of increase from one year to the next.

Tom: Yeah that's interesting, and for those that have maybe heard me talk in the past about our penetration of online learning at UCF, you may say those numbers sound different. Typically, I talk in terms of student credit hours. So, you're talking about sections.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And so we went from last year 24% of the sections being online last summer in our web modality, fully online. From 24% to 39%, that is a huge hit. I'm sorry, a huge, huge jump, I should say. I'm thinking about how we're going to support that, I think.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And then fall is still a bit of a question mark, because we don't know exactly what's going to happen, but we are looking at the trends. We know what the, you know, deposits and enrollments and at least some registrations because we have multi-term registration. First time in college like freshman orientations are only just now getting started. So those registrations haven't really hit. Although they usually try to steer a lot of those kinds of students away from online learning. We'll see what happens this year. It might be different, but you pulled some of those numbers for fall as well.

Kelvin: Yeah, current data show fall 2019, we were at 15% fully online course sections. Already just right now—as you say it's still a bit of an unknown—but already for right now, it's 23% fully online core sections, and to your point about semester credit hour production and registrations, I did look at that briefly. I just didn't write it down. We're well over 50%, but somewhere between 50 and 60% of semester credit hour production and registrations duplicated headcount enrollments of students in the fully online course sections. That's amazing.

Tom: For summer, I think.

Kelvin: For summer. That's right.

Tom: It was over 60%. It was higher than it's ever been.

Kelvin: It's amazing. So, I take heart from that. I'd say that those are early indicators, but that looks like this online first strategy, wherever possible, is perhaps taking hold.

Tom: Agreed. Yeah, I mean we always see sort of, like, you know, annual growth of 2 to 3% as you said sort of semester to semester growth probably in the one-ish range. I think we're gonna see a lot higher than that from 2019 to 2021, that's for sure.

Kelvin: And I guess just to say this, right? To kind of make this real clear. The reason again that this online first strategy is important is we believe that well-prepared faculty and intentionally designed online course sections yield benefits institutionally, right? Less tech support requests, more successful students, better satisfied students, better satisfied faculty. Those are all good things. So, if you can rely on those more and more and more, that's great. You're still gonna be doing the remote instruction stuff that we said that we were setting aside for most of this episode. You're still going to be supporting that. But if you can give your attention there rather than on the intentionally designed stuff, that's better for everybody.

Tom: Yeah. So maybe I should take an attempt to put the proverbial bow on podcasticum. So, as we were sort of saying, relying more on well-designed actual online courses and less on these ad hoc online delivered face to face courses is one strategy for progressing through the remote teaching era that we are all living in, but it takes work to carry out such a strategy and the benefit to faculty and students is certainly worth it.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree.

Tom: That's probably a good place to wrap it up. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya!