TOPcast Episode 76: Learning from the Calbright Model

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)

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

Tom Cavanagh: And I’m Tom Cavanagh.

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

Mystery Woo: Woohoo!

Kelvin: Tom, is that—?

Tom: What was that?

Kelvin: Was that you?

Tom: No. Have we brought our guest back who was our mystery woo-er from last episode?

Kelvin: Well, funny you would ask that Tom, because you had this genius idea of perhaps there’s the mystery woo and I said that could be a whole new segment, so now it is.

Tom: I didn’t know I had that idea!

Kelvin: We actually have a mystery woo now, so mystery woo-er, why don’t you identify yourself?

Susan Wegmann: Hello everybody, I’m Susan Wegmann from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Central Texas. I’m the Associate Dean of Digital Learning and Innovation, and I’ve been listening to TOPcast for a lot of years it seems like.

(laughter)

Kelvin: It seems like a lot of years to us, too! (laughter)

Susan: (laughter) Since the very beginning, I should say, and I really appreciate you all, and I love the way that… You know, you seem to hit on topics that we’re all dealing with, and I just really appreciate it, and I just enjoy the feedback that we
get, and I love sharing your TOPcast interviews, and just keep it up. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Tom: So, thank you for being our mystery woo. It’s great to see you! We are old friends and colleagues, back from when you used to work actually here at the University of Central Florida, and you’ve been on the show before—

Kelvin: —Episode 55, dear listeners, should you not have heard Susan elsewhere. You can listen to her there, episode 55.

Susan: Absolutely!

Tom: That’s awesome.

Kelvin: Well, thanks for joining us!

Tom: Susan doesn’t have coffee, but you and I do. Well, maybe you do have coffee but not the same.

Susan: Well, you know…

Kelvin: Maybe not this coffee! Two-thirds of us have the same coffee as far as I know. Well Susan, you’re welcome to stick around to join us and watch and listen and partake and comment as you wish. But yes, we do have coffee, and you’re probably wondering, Tom, what you’re drinking.

Tom: Always. Always wondering what I’m drinking.

Kelvin: Yeah, we wonder that, too, Tom. We’re wondering, “What’s he drinking?” People ask me that, too. Well, today’s coffee is a single origin Ethiopian from Panther Coffee in Miami, Florida, or (different pronunciation) Miami or (different pronunciation) Miami, depending on, you know, how old in Florida you are. Specifically this coffee is called “Suke Quto.”

Tom: Suke Quto?

Kelvin: Suke Quto. I had to look that up. Suke Quto is a coffee farm, washing station, and drying station in the Odo Shakisso district of Ethiopia, and Suke Quto was founded by this gentleman named Tesfaye Bekele whose goal is that coffee production is done in an environmentally sustainable way, and it provides—get this—a livable income for producers. In fact, he maintains a nursery which provides surrounding farmers with coffee seedlings, and also, it acts as kind of a model farm benefiting the farmers in the area. So, this coffee comes from both Suke Quto directly and from the surrounding area, so we’re getting to taste the benefit of the dissemination of knowledge and skill brought about by Suke Quto. So, how’s the coffee, and how’s the connection?

Tom: Okay, I like the coffee. It’s good. Have we had Ethiopian coffees on the show before?
Kelvin: Yeah, we’ve had, I think—I meant to look this up because we’ve had it a few times. I’m rather fond of Ethiopian coffees in general.

Tom: Yeah. All right, so it’s good. I approve. Panther Coffee. Is [there] any relation to our friends at FIU in Miami?

Kelvin: I think that might be where the “Panther” comes from.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. And then as far as the connection goes, you’ve given me some of these audio breadcrumbs to help.

Kelvin: (laughter) We do what we can.

Tom: Yeah, you punched a few words. Gave a little extra emphasis so that even Tom can maybe make the connection. So, I’m gonna cue in on livable income [and] model farm, because both of those things—not the farm—but the model and the livable income are related to our topic today.

Kelvin: Yes!

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So, an A+?

Tom: …A.

Kelvin: …Okay. Yeah, you’re a tough grader.

Tom: Yeah, I am.

Kelvin: I still remember the one A+ I got an undergrad school. I think I’ve still got it in a box somewhere. Like, dude, you gave me an A+? I’m holding on to that thing! Yeah. Yeah, exactly. You found the connection, because many of us within the online education field have commented during the COVID era that the more online we already were pre-pandemic, the more resiliently we have been able to weather the challenges of the pandemic’s effects on our institutions. All institutions have their own unique contexts, and there are no one-size-fits-all approaches, but some institutions are helpful—as you said—as models, so that we can learn from how they’ve innovated in solving their local challenges and we have such a model to share today. So, Tom you interviewed Ajita Menon recently since we’ve been working, teaching, and learning remotely. You want to tell us about her and your interview a little bit?

Tom: Sure. Yeah, I really enjoyed the conversation. So, Ms. Ajita Menon is the President and CEO of Calbright College in California, the new “all-digital,” innovation-oriented community college that is dedicated to serving the residents of California. Previously, Ms. Menon held positions within the California Community College System and in the US federal government. Notably, she served in the Obama administration as Special Assistant to the President for
Higher Education Policy at the White House Domestic Policy Council. And I will say that this is part one of a two-part interview. We just had a lot to say, or at least I had a lot of questions for her and she was very generous with her time. And we felt that it was more than we could fit in one episode. So, for this month and for next month, the interview segments will be with Ajita. This first half, we talk mostly about the Calbright model, about how it works, how it’s structured and then next month we’ll get into some leadership questions, because she’s faced—if you’ve followed any of the press around Calbright, there have been some challenges that she’s had to deal with and address, and I think it could be very instructive for other leaders around the country to kind of hear how she’s faced those. But first, we talk about—for this month—the model itself and how it’s structured for workforce development and other kinds of things for California.

Kelvin: All right, well with no further ado, through the magic of podcast time travel, here’s your interview with President Ajita Menon.

(musical transition)

Tom: Well, Ajita, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Ajita: Thank you for having me, Tom.

Tom: So, there’s a lot I think we could talk about. I’ve been kind of following along with the launch and development of Calbright since its inception. I think it’s been a really interesting model. Having kind of had a front row seat for the creation of UF Online here in Florida, looking at a state-level initiative to serve a particular audience through online learning, I wasn’t aware of others besides maybe that one and what was happening in California. I wonder for our listeners who maybe aren’t as familiar, if you could kind of give a background of what Calbright is, maybe what it’s mission is, and what makes it special.

Ajita: Sure, absolutely. I’m happy to do that. Calbright actually was really conceptualized as a community college that could be focused as a public sector entity with a very population-specific approach to help lower-wage, unemployed, and otherwise economically displaced individuals. So, you know, its origin story is very much about differentiating itself on addressing some of the gaps in serving that population that we’ve historically experienced in the post-secondary education marketplace. It was designed to be a new kind of college that was more responsive and adaptable to changing conditions in the economy, but also how those transformations actually needed us as higher education institutions to respond differently than we may have previously done. So, you know, its mission is to serve that population. Its mission is to do so in a way that meets with the real lives that people have. These are individuals who often cannot access some of the more traditional forms of post-secondary education because their schedules don’t allow, because they are needing increased flexibility, because of demands on their time and resources whether it is the amount that they work or whether it is, you know, childcare that they’re responsible for, elder care that they’re responsible for, those kinds of things. And, you know, I think that is truly what makes it unique. In many cases we look at the workforce mission of a college as
a little bit subordinate to the kind of degree level mission that they have, so most of the focus is often on transfer level coursework at the community colleges or within the four-year market degrees, and here we want to think about those individuals for whom that might not be a feasible entry point into post-secondary learning and skills building. And so, you know, that’s what we are designed to do. That’s the entire focus of what we do, and I think that’s one of the key ways in which we’re distinctive. We’re also distinctive because we are focused on a competency-based education model, and that model often doesn’t mean much on the employment side of the market, but what it really means is that rather than the kind of traditional time-based approach that most conventional education takes on—which is the, you know, the amount of class you attend and the time you spend inside and outside of the classroom—we really look at skills mastery. So, the model is designed to allow individuals to demonstrate mastery over skills that they’re learning. Not just kind of those high-level learning objectives, but really getting down to the grain size that provides a better translation opportunity for what the needs might be in the labor market for specific jobs or occupations or within specific industries.

Tom: And if I’m not mistaken, you’re currently focused in three workforce areas. Correct?

Ajita: We currently have three pathways. So, we’re focused on healthcare technology with the inaugural credential that we have in medical coding, as well as in the IT field with two programs: one in IT support, one in cybersecurity. I described that because they’re sort of a reality that we think about at the college a lot which is IT can be more expansive and can be everything. So, if we focus our college on thinking about the aspects of industries that are in need of new skills that are technology based, that’s how we see ourselves: adding additional programs, adding additional direction to skills-building, micro credential opportunities, etc.

Tom: And is the program free for California residents? Am I correct in saying that?

Ajita: Yeah, the program is currently offered for free. We’re in the building stage of the organization. You know, we launched with students less than a year ago, and it was important to us that in the early offerings to individuals, it was free, you know. We are in more of a beta state where we are refining aspects of the model. We’re looking at new models that are responsive to some of the realities that we’re seeing in the economy, and so, in the future, we would anticipate it continuing to stay either free or, you know, very low cost.

Tom: Have you found communicating the concept of competency-based education difficult or have people picked it up? Because it’s still relatively new and I imagine that, you know, students still need a little bit of education on what it is.

Ajita: Yeah, I think it’s maybe one of the worst monikers to explain so we talk about it, especially in educational settings because people understand generally what the competency-based approach is. It’s a distinction that I don’t know is as relevant to students themselves. I think there’s a simpler way of explaining a college and a program that gets you the skills you need to transition better into the labor market or to enter a new industry or to, you know, in the context of that
interaction that they are in that goal that they’re seeking: in getting a new job or a promotion or a change of industry. So, I think the way that we communicate it is evolving. We’re testing some of that out, and we know it’s not going to be continuing to say competency-based education to students.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, well, you know, as you’re out there making those communications to students, I wonder how do you find students? How do you make them aware of this opportunity? Does Calbright have like a marketing budget or is it a part of, like, a larger state communications initiative?

Ajita: I mean, we have a very lean marketing budget. I think we would be doing something very wrong if we were spending at the level of some of the large for-profit colleges, for example, where they can spend as much as half their budget on that. We really want to optimize our resources towards the educational investments themselves and the services investments more than anything else. And so, what we are building is a sort of savvier way, so really being able to test in specific communities, how best to reach individuals, and using that to inform a broader outreach strategy. I think we have the benefit of not just being standalone as a college but being a part of a very important system in California. The California Community College System is comprehensive. It’s one of the largest systems in the country, and it is important for us to think about how the work that we do in learning about how to reach into specific communities complements, enhances, [and] also supports that connection to the broader system. So, I think there’s two ways that we think about how we should expand marketing resources but more importantly, how we think about marketing in the context of outreach and connectivity to the public education system.

Tom: You mentioned a workforce kind of orientation, and I’ve seen in some of the research I’ve done that you’ve got connections to employers. How do you work with the employer community within California to try and make sure that you’re bringing them students who are prepared and you’re matching your curriculum to meet what they need?

Ajita: Yeah, this is a great question. It’s also an evolution for us. You know, when we first launched the college, we were in a full labor market where there was a premium on talent at all levels—not just at the BA level but even to some degree at the sub-BA level—and, you know, within the first five months into the program, our entire economy shut down, and what it reflected was changing conditions for employers that we had to take account for. So, whereas some of the early thinking was very much focused on singular employer relationships within the specific industries we were providing educational opportunity in, it quickly became clear that there’s so much uncertainty around that. That the original idea of kind of a pay-for-placement type of model—which was what the college launched with—was not tenable in the economic conditions that we would be entering in. So, what it forced us to do was to really think about where some of this information and knowledge lies. Where can we get more reliable information from industry, from employers, both about current opportunities but also what’s on that horizon line in terms of skills we need to be preparing students for in the near future that would have both the broadest applicability to them and sort of increase the size of potential opportunities for them? And that’s
what we’re very focused on now. We think the secret really lies into being able to leverage more of the public workforce infrastructure in the state. And it is also speaking to some of the gaps that we observe and that folks who work in that space have shared with us about where some of the gap exists between what information we traditionally get from employers, which is, you know, either a passive analysis of, you know, Burning Glass or MZ data—which is important—and signal bearing word-of-mouth information from employers about what they think their needs are—though those are also not precise—and really being able to supplement that with the next level of understanding. The next level of understanding is really not just what is the job opening that we forecast, but what is our understanding of some of the business and operational decisions that are happening in the industries that we’re in that give us an insight into how skills might change or evolve over time? So, we are very reliant on partnerships in different ways to really find better ways of doing that, because if we cycle through the same things we’ve done over and over again in workforce development—particularly, you know, lessons learned from the past recessionary period and recovery period—it doesn’t go far enough to meet the gap for the individuals that we’re talking about. So to me it sounded like an abstraction but I can make it a bit more specific, which is, you know, if we think about some of the shifts to cloud-based computing and the rapid shift into online, if we look at where the current unemployed population is in California, what skills they have, what we understand about...Let’s take an industry that’s not likely to rebound to its fullest, like frontline retail. What we understand about that is there are inherent sales skills, inherent customer service-oriented skills. Those all have value, and those all can be translated into roles that are tracking the tech transformation that’s happening in e-commerce, for example. So, part of it is kind of looking at two levels: the level that might get somebody that next job now and then that understanding of how we can reliably discern what the skills needs are going to be for those employers going forward. So, it involves, you know, that and, right? Like, more and. That’s how we’re thinking about it, and we also think about this on a regional basis because California is, as you know, a tremendously extraordinarily sized state. It is very much a microcosm of the rest of the country. So, we have very different contexts: urban, rural, different industry mix, all of those things. And there has been a good amount of foundational work in thinking about economic development as a regional strategy that complements this approach.

Tom: Yeah that’s fascinating. I mean it’s a complex state, right? It’s very large and, as you said, it’s very diverse, and I imagine what Bakersfield needs is very different than what Los Angeles needs or Sacramento or wherever. And you were touching on some things that I find really interesting. It’s almost like you’re supporting two different dimensions: one is the workforce needs of the here and now. What do employers need, and what skills do potential employees need in order to make that match? But you’re also addressing some of that Future of Work-ish stuff that like McKinsey has been doing, and skate where the puck is going to be kind of thinking, and that’s difficult, right? Because you may not be able to necessarily always get that from employers, so I commend you for trying to do that work. That’s hard and it requires some investment and popping your head up from the day-to-day work now and again to kind of look at the horizon to see what’s coming. You had mentioned at least one impact of the pandemic and that was another question I had which is, you know, how has the pandemic
impacted what you were doing, or has it? You know, you’re an online college so maybe it hasn’t.

Ajita: You know, I think we were as a college already adept at working in a remote setting. We have individuals throughout California that are employed by the college. And so, that transition itself was not as difficult as it was for some other organizations who are used to much more face to face/in person. That being said—this is true for our students, this is true for our staff—life overtook us all in ways that made working different and difficult and learning different and difficult, and, you know, I think that was, as an organization and continues to be as an organization, something that we’re working to try to better support individuals in the organization around. For our students, it profoundly has impacted them, unsurprisingly. All of the economic impacts in this period have been concentrated in equity communities and in low income communities, and our students come from those demographics, and so we, you know, did a COVID survey, and we found that of our beta cohort of students, almost 60% of them had experienced either job loss or reduction of work hours or furlough. To understand that in the context of what folks were already managing, it’s been extraordinary. We’ve, in response to that, tried to step up our support to understand better what is it that our students are needing more. So, whether it was device access or Wi-Fi hotspots, we did some of that. We did some of that to support our sister institutions where we had capability to do that. We also had to think a lot about how to connect individuals to resources like mental health resources or other things that were such a critical dimension of managing through this period that we’re in that are the sort of first order needs relative to, you know, the learning opportunity, and so, I think we continue to evolve our services to try to find new ways to do that. In some cases, it was being assistive with unemployment insurance and other areas of need. So, we’re constantly tracking that, and we’re trying to find new ways to intervene and to support and to be more present in their lives as a supportive force.

Tom: Well as we’re recording this, I just happened to see yesterday in the Chronicle or Inside Higher Ed that overall, nationally, I think community college enrollment was down like 7.5% this year this fall. Unsurprisingly, right? We certainly experienced something similar here in Florida. We have a very large tourism/service industry kind of workforce, and they were really hit hard by the pandemic. Did you experience a drop like that, and if so, what are you doing to mitigate it?

Ajita: Well, we experienced some drops. It’s, you know, hard to know under what conditions people have separated from the institutions. You know, I think we would hypothesize absolutely that that had an impact on the ability of students to progress for all the reasons we identified, but I do think these things are a temporary readjustment and for different reasons perhaps. So for us, the population we’re serving is particularly struggling. And so, we would imagine there’s gonna be some fluctuations, some readjustment around that before individuals can find the space in their lives to manage an additional thing like the educational pursuit. I think we’re hoping that as we get better at connecting with that individual at that point in time dislocation where they’re electing for unemployment or experiencing that loss that we might find ways to better bridge
that. I think for other institutions, they’ve had to do this very rapid shift into online, and it’s table stakes and, you know, everyone applauds and I do, too, how rapidly they were able to put content online. I think that was a tremendous first step. The reality is that putting content online is the smallest part of the challenge, and all of the other things that it takes? It’s a redesigned experience for a set of institutions, sometimes they’ve rejected that migration to online, and even when they have embraced it, it has been with a degree of difficulty. And so, getting folks who have conventionally taught for a very long time to do something that is so much harder and different, I think there’s a lot required. So I think there’s going to be a lot that has to happen there in order for us to support students in the right way to keep them in our institutions, and I think the other reality is that because we’re just in this adjustment period where people are figuring things out, you know, we haven’t seen the shoe drop on the recession and we haven’t experienced the full reopening of the economy, however that re-emerges, to know once the dust has settled, you know, are folks going to be able to reasonably return to the work that they had or whether they are going to find themselves in need of those skills? And typically during the recessionary period, you sort of see that.

Tom: Yeah, well thank you for describing the Calbright model, a little bit of the history, the students that you serve.

Ajita: Thank you!

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, that was your interview with President Ajita Menon.

Tom: Yeah, as I said, I really enjoyed the conversation. I’m fascinated personally by the Calbright model, the competency-based aspect of it, the fact that it’s at no cost to residents of California, [and] the very practical, intentional workforce focus, especially given the kind of context we’re living in with the pandemic right now and with a lot of people losing their jobs or getting furloughed or looking to be maybe a little more, you know, safe in their employment. All of that, I think, is to the good. So, I’ve been really fascinated by it since it was first proposed, and I’ve been watching it from—as I said—3000 miles away.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with all that. A couple things that stood out to me that are really broadly applicable is that I liked her framing of, kind of, during the COVID response, right? That the “table stakes”—as she put it—of institutions, just getting content online versus the differentiated performance in helping students succeed online. I think that was an excellent insight and I think it also speaks to the focus of their model, right? That whole idea of— I think she said Calbright is population specific. That’s an admirable connection to serving a particular demographic of students well, right? Rather than just sort of, “Well…we’re a college.”

Tom: Right, and it gets to some of the stuff we’ve talked about previously: the difference between remote instruction and online instruction.
Kelvin: Of course.

Tom: And I think she’s getting basically the same concept there, maybe with a slightly different framing.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: You know, I didn’t get a chance to ask her about like—if you’ve read any of Phil Hill’s blog, he has been a little critical of some of the implementation of Calbright, in fairness before Ajita was president, and I didn’t get a chance to really talk to her about that, but honestly I think you could chalk a lot of that up to the fact that they’re a startup and they’re still with a machete hacking their way through the forest, you know, setting their path. It’s hard to build a college from scratch. So, you know, I’m willing to cut them some slack while they try some things and refine processes.

Kelvin: Yeah. I love that she talked about their beta cohort of students, right? 60% experienced job loss or furlough. That’s not something to celebrate but to me, I thought, what was great about that is it showed that they were on track with their demographics, right? You know, in terms of who they’re trying to reach? Bam. Those students experience job loss or furlough.

Tom: But they’re very specific about the…They’re actually not awarding any sort of academic credential. They’re not offering associate’s degrees. They’re doing these very targeted certificates, and I think, you know, that’s meeting a particular need in the system in the state. And in the next episode—or at least the next interview that we do with her—we talk a little bit about some of the partnerships that they’re setting up with some of the other more traditional community colleges in the system in California, and I think that’s an interesting kind of laddering of opportunity for students in the state.

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean, the other thing—maybe I’ll let this be the last thing I say about this—but the other broadly applicable thing that I took away from your interview, this first part, is the importance of flexibility was a word she used in serving students who have real life adult responsibilities, and amidst our general COVID response, as you know, I remain concerned that we’re going to have an industry-wide reconceptualization of online, you know, that’s kind of a watering down due to our remote instruction, and I think that their hyper focus on a particular set of demographics for students, you know, she said, “You know, we got to provide flexibility for students, so that they can get an education, so they can get gainful employment and workforce development,” and that kind of laser focus is what you need, you know? We’ve got to make sure that we don’t, “Oh, let’s try to cater to, you know…Let’s have a bunch of synchronous stuff all the time! Let’s serve 18 to 24-year olds only.” You know, we got to remember, dance with the one who brung ya, in our non-traditional students with adult responsibilities.

Tom: Agreed. So, you know, again, really, really interesting conversation, really interesting model, and we’ll learn a little bit more next month.
Kelvin: Yeah. I don’t know if this is egregious indulgence here, but I wanted to offer a pairing suggestion for this episode.

Tom: You are the coffee sommelier.

Kelvin: Yeah sure! Gotta offer a pairing suggestion somehow. I was relistening to this interview again last night, and I just happened to listen to right after it an episode from the podcast Solutions for Higher Education, which originates from Southern Utah University and is conducted by SUU’s president and a member of his cabinet, Scott Wyatt and Steve Meredith, and they’re starting a yearlong series on disruptive innovation in higher ed. So, the first episode of that series—their episode 92—“Innovations in Higher Ed: Lessons Learned” pairs excellently well with this episode on TOPcast featuring this interview with President Ajita Menon. I recommend it.

Tom: Good. So, listen to ours first.

Kelvin: (laughter) That’s right, which I think you are because you’ve heard this part.

Tom: If you haven’t already then, yes.

Kelvin: If you’re fast forwarding through it, stop and go back and rewind!

Tom: That would be the magic of podcast time travel.

Kelvin: That would be. Why don’t you land this plane before I jump out?

Tom: Sure, all right. So, if we have to kind of put a bow on this, higher ed institutions are facing increasing challenges—we know that—and being workforce focused and innovative and delivery are going to be increasingly important, especially in the post-COVID landscape, and new models such as Calbright can serve as an example for many of us.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that’s right, and I can’t wait for everybody to hear that second part of your interview with President Menon. All right.

Tom: Cool. We should thank Susan—

Kelvin: Susan! Thank you! Susan!? I thought she left! Ah! She’s still there! Look at that! She’s hiding behind my Google Doc.

Tom: She’s been hanging out. Thank you so much, Susan, for being our mystery woo. It was great to see you.


Kelvin: Come back next month if you want! I don’t know if it’ll be as much a mystery anymore but you could! All right. (laughing) Well, until next time for TOPcast, I’m Kelvin.
Tom: And I’m Tom.

Kelvin: And she’s Susan. See ya!

(musical outro)

Kelvin: You know, we never do takes. This is hilarious.

Tom: Yeah, I’m going to stop recording.

Susan: So…

Tom: You missed your cue!

Susan: I missed it!

All: (laughter)

Susan: I told you, I didn’t know when! I’m so sorry! (laughter) Okay. (laughter) I thought, “Well, do I do it? Do I not?”

Kelvin: I was waiting for the delayed thing to kick in. That was going to be even more hilarious!

Tom: If you miss it, just woo away!

Kelvin: That’s right! We’ll lean right into that!