TOPcast Episode 95: Return to Campus Work. Or Not.

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 are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom.

Tom: Hey Kelvin! How's it going?

Kelvin: It's going well. It's not storming today. It's sunny outside. I like it.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, we usually start with the weather. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: That's right. Traffic on the nines. *(laughter)*

Tom: That's right *(laughter)*. But the weather is lovely here, although it is you know, it's late July in Central Florida, so…

Kelvin: It only gets worse.

Tom: It's pretty… You could swim to your car in very warm water, but that's okay. That's what we signed up for.

Kelvin: Yeah, I guess so. You know, it occurs to me, we haven't said this out loud in a TOPcast episode for a while. If folks joined us along the way and weren't sure what they were listening to, we can help them out at this point by saying we do bill this show as a collegial conversation about online teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee. That's the shtick we've been aiming for. If you thought it was something else, thanks for sticking around anyway.

Tom: *(laughter)* That's right, and nothing's better on a 94˚ 98% humidity day in Central Florida than a hot cup of coffee.

Kelvin: Yeah. Nothing's better than that. *(laughter)*

Tom: That's right. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: Yeah…

Tom: So, yeah. What is in the thermos today, Dr. Thompson? What am I drinking?

Kelvin: Well, let me preface this by saying a lot of the coffee that I've brought in during the past year—more than a year now—has been purchased online from craft coffee roasters all across the US, but today's coffee is a single origin Colombia from a local shop called San Julian's Hills Coffee, and this shop, you might remember, was mentioned in a prior episode. But this Colombia is different from the previous Colombia. There was a bit of serendipity involved in my acquiring this coffee because my family was out on an errand at a storefront nearby when they saw this coffee shop. And hey, they know me, right? So, they popped in. They liked what they saw. They talked to the manager and ended up buying this bag of coffee from which we're drinking right now. So, how's the coffee? And could you find a connection to today's episode?

Tom: I like the coffee. Thank you, Thompson family. It's good. Connection.

Kelvin: Connection.

Tom: Yeah…

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: Thank you, Thompson family!

Kelvin: That's right. *(laughter)*

Tom: Maybe you're the connection, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Did you notice that I used to say, "How was the connection to today's episode?" And along the way, I've started saying, "Could you find a connection to today's episode?"

Tom: *(laughter)* Yeah, well, I'm also stopped being critical because it's a lot of, you know, mental gymnastics sometimes for you to try to connect the coffee that you want to bring in with whatever we're talking about today. So, I don't know. I think I may need a little map to help me through this connection.

Kelvin: Here's my nav aid here. So, I was thinking, well, I've been doing online coffee buying and this was local brick and mortar coffee buying. And there was some serendipity involved: serendipity of the immediate in-person context. So, I thought, you know, that is somewhat in the neighborhood of what we're going to talk about today. Maybe?

Tom: Okay, all right. I think I got it now. So, you know, you're basically talking about a hybrid buying experience in many ways. You're typically buying online from coffee shops, and this was an in-person coffee shop. The serendipity I may need a little help with, but that's okay. So, I get the connection, I think. So today, we're going to be talking about a topic that really seems to be on everybody's minds. I know it's been on mine and a lot of folks here but I have learned recently that

I'm not alone. There are a lot of people in a position like mine that are just really grappling with this idea of remote work. And, you know, you and I have talked a lot about this concept of remoteness over the past year and a half plus in the context of the pandemic and in instruction. So, remoteness, being in person. But now it's expanded into the work context of how we do the work that accomplishes all of this online and blended learning that we built. Because in the past, we've typically always been a face-to-face environment. At least most schools have been very traditional. And now we're being forced to be maybe not so traditional.

Kelvin: Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, for anybody keeping score at home, we touched on this topic previously, back in TOPcast episode 85 "Blended is the Future. (And It's Not Just Courses.)" And in that episode, we noted, "It is difficult to imagine that 100% of employees will return to their campus workplaces 100% of the time post-pandemic." And that's still true, right? There are, as you say, a range of options that institutions generally and online learning teams specifically have at their disposal as we emerge from a year plus of emergency ad hoc remote instruction and remote work and so forth. But recently, this idea seems to be coming up all over the place. It's not just you. You're right. Perhaps we've all seen the general news articles reporting on business sectors in which employees are resigning, rather than returning 100%.

Tom: The great resignation is what they're calling it.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's wild, right? Within higher ed, there have been articles in Inside Higher Ed, the Chronicle, and other outlets addressing remote work post-pandemic in the higher ed context, and we'll put some of those in the show notes. And Tom, you recently participated in an UPCEA "Conversations with Colleagues" panel on this topic, which we'll talk about more probably in just a moment or so.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. So maybe I'll save some of the details for that. But that was one of the recent places where I sort of felt not so much on an island in grappling with some of these topics around the return to campus, and I've been chastised appropriately for, you know, slipping and saying return to work. And I've been reminded, "We've been working, Tom." So, I've tried to be very deliberate about and intentional how I say return to campus, rather than return to work. But, you know, we thought it would be helpful to kind of delve into this topic today, because it is so relevant for so many. And I think it might be useful for us to talk a little bit about our experience at UCF, touch on those of others, especially those that I kind of learned about through the UPCEA panel. But you know, we're not trying to convince anybody of a particular viewpoint on all this all remote, all in-person, hybrid work continuum. In fact, you name it, there's somebody doing it at UCF. Whether it's all back, or it's all remote, and something in the middle. So even at one institution, as large as we are, you might imagine that there's some complexity and idiosyncratic practices. But even in one institution that has a policy, there's wildly divergent practices. So instead, we're kind of advocating for this idea of, "Let's see how it goes. Let's collect the data." What we specifically are doing within the Division of Digital Learning here is a pilot, and it's going to run through the calendar year of 2021, and we are going to assess it and we're going to evaluate it. We're going to treat it like we do any other sort of

empirical analysis that we do here. So, you know, let's be sort of explicit about why we're doing what we're doing with the on-site or remote or hybrid or blended or whatever work environment label you want to put on it. We'll collect the data, we'll review it, evaluate it accordingly, and then we'll decide based on the data what we're going to do next.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's good. I think that's a really healthy thing, right? I mean, we're institutions of higher education. We aspire to be places where we're rational and we look at evidence and, you know, we should apply that here.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah. What do we eat our own dog food or whatever they say? Yes.

Kelvin: Something like that. So, you want to talk a little bit about what this UPCEA panel was and how it came to be?

Tom: Yes. And as part of the chief online learning officers roundtable that UPCEA has, which I participate in, it's something that I brought up a couple of times, but I am pretty sure I'm not the only one who has brought it up. But I did suggest it as a topic. Others probably did too. So, it resonated enough that UPCEA thought it might be a good "Conversations with Colleagues." We don't have a link to send you to have a recording. There is a link of the materials that's available. But they typically don't record those sessions on purpose, so that people feel free to actually have an honest conversation with their peers that's not inhibited by potentially saying something that they don't want repeated back, you know, to their staff, colleagues, bosses, wives, husbands, whatever. So, it was not recorded. But it was a great conversation, and if anything, it did sort of validate for me that so many of us are just trying to grapple with this. And we're getting similar sorts of input from our teams, that there are really mixed feelings about coming back to the office, return to campus. So, the primary kind of like visual aid for that panel was something that was developed primarily by Kansas State University under Karen Pederson, and there was input from several of us on the panel that provided some feedback and input. And so, I think if it's cited, all our names are on it sort of as a CC-BY kind of attribution. But anyway…

Kelvin: We'll stick that in the show notes.

Tom: Yeah, it's worth it. And then there was an article that Josh Kim wrote for Inside Higher Ed that references it, and Josh was on the panel. So, he had an inside view of the whole conversation as well. But I think it's worth maybe even if you want to pause and open that visual aid while we're talking, it's worthwhile. I found that graphic enormously helpful in sort of framing in my mind how these things work. So, it goes on a kind of a spectrum, from traditional on-campus, everybody back in the office, all the way to 100% remote with no space at all in the office. And then there are a couple of gradations in the middle that talk about different kinds of implementations at different flavors that are more or less remote, depending, and some of them include the option of staff to come back and work in the office partially, some of them are where you have some people remote and some people in the office, and one of them is where like everybody's remote, but you still maintain like an office space where people can kind of convene and meet but nobody works there 100% of the time. It was a really interesting and

useful illustration of the various options. And funny, I don't think any of us fit 100% into any of the boxes. We all sort of fell in the gaps between them. Or if you overlap them, it's like, "Well, you know, we're like three quarters this one and one quarter that one" or something. But yeah, it's a really useful construct for understanding, communicating, and potentially planning.

Kelvin: Yeah, I know that we talked about this while you were prepping before the panel and you shared a version of the visual with me. I think it changed over time a little bit, and it got more refined. But I think one of the things that was lost on me at first—and again, we'll direct our listeners to go find that visual—but there's sort of this visual representation of a physical building, and it was lost on me the first time until you pointed it out that the building gets smaller as you work your way from the 100% in-person traditional to the, you know, 100% remote where there is no building anymore, right? And it just slowly shrinks. And I did not notice it the first time that also these little colored sections that indicate not dedicated workspaces but flexible workspaces start popping up more within the dwindling building. That was a very interesting use of the visual medium to get a lot of complex ideas across, I thought.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. And so, here's an example of how like the model, the way those are defined—as useful as they are—they're limited. So, Kim Siegenthaler, who runs online learning at Georgia State University, who was also on this panel, Kim was telling us that so it's not so much that the building is shrinking for her as she implements a hybrid work environment. Over the past year or so as she's been hired at Georgia State to try to establish and grow their online learning program, she's had to hire, and she's hired during the pandemic, where people have been mostly remote. So now people are going to be coming back to the same physical footprint, and she's got more people than can fit. So, she's going to have to use a hybrid work environment, not to shrink her space, but to grow her staff with the existing footprint that she has. And I think that's an interesting use case as well. Karen Pederson, who was sort of the main one who helped actually, you know, build that graphic, she's been given permission by Kansas State to be the 100% remote pilot for the university. And they're maintaining I think, 1000 square feet on campus, for landing pad and meeting space, but that's it. Everybody's going to be remote. So, that's a completely different part of the graphic, of the spectrum.

Kelvin: Yeah, one of the things that's in kind of the fine print as you go is little things like, no matter what the predominant approaches at each phase, that there might be some team members who are fully remote, even within, like some kind of proportion of folks who were in-person or hybrid, there might be some folks who were 100% remote. That's a nuance that, you know, was lost on me at first I would have placed our UCF Division of Digital learning pilot plan in what the graphic calls hybrid model one probably if it wasn't for that stipulation, because right now we're not pursuing 100% remote work for anybody.

Tom: That's true, and I think if we fall mostly in any of those boxes, it's in that hybrid model one box, but I think we bleed into the one next to it a little bit. And you're right, and maybe this is a good segue to talk about, like what we're doing a little bit, if anybody finds that sort of useful. We are implementing a hybrid work

environment, where staff is partially in the office a couple days a week and partially out of the office a couple days a week. However, the idea is that nobody's 100% remote, but we have some exceptions. We have some health-related exceptions specifically around the pandemic. And you know, obviously we're accommodating those exceptions, and we're going to make it work. So, even though it's not really part of our plan, and it's not really part of our default kind of like what people are "allowed to do," we're able to provide an accommodation on an exception basis for almost any of those boxes in that chart.

Kelvin: Yeah, right. I think another thing that we've talked about here a little bit that I don't think also is really completely captured in the remote work continuum graphic is something you said when we had a little retreat, teasing out the details of our pilot here at the Division of Digital Learning, and that is, when we're working on plans, they are the default plans, right? And just like you mentioned, we have some exceptions related to health issues or whatnot. There might also be more occasional exceptions, where you might authorize a team member to work remotely for a day or two on a particular project. You know, the reality is, we were probably doing that kind of thing pre-pandemic, right. It's not the kind of thing that you fill out a work agreement for, because it's not like a regular week in and week out kind of thing. It's a special circumstance. But, you know, when you get so hyper focused on this. Like, I know, some team members were saying, "Well, how can I request to do an occasional?" Well, you don't, right? Not in the official paperwork. You ask that as a special circumstance.

Tom: We were doing all of that before. That's not new. It's like, if you need to be home because you had to pick up your kid that day, or if you know, had your cable guy coming or something, you work from home. We've always, you know, accommodated that. So yeah, I think a lot of people are sort of overthinking it naturally because everything is sort of changed and now there's official stuff around it. But you're right, those sort of ad hoc, as you go along, that's just stuff.

Kelvin: That's just stuff.

Tom: That's just life and work and you figure that out. Yeah. So maybe it's worthwhile just talking at a very high level about kind of what we're doing.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, as I may have mentioned in a previous—maybe Episode 85? I don't remember—we had a taskforce that we stood up here within our division to look at the future of hybrid work within the Division of Digital Learning, and we have broad representation from across the entire division, and they spent a semester—the whole spring semester, basically—working on this, and the charge I gave them was, "I want recommendations on what we should do and how we can best implement that." And I got that. And it was, you know, a lot of work everybody put into it. And basically, they said that we should have a period of transition prior to coming back that people can sort of ease into it. And then when we come back, we should allow up to three days per week out of the office to work remotely. Obviously, you could work up to five days in the office if you want. But if you didn't want that, you had to work at least two days in the office. So I

said, “Okay, and we’re going to implement that.” And the minute that I said that—

Kelvin: I think it was a day later or two days later, but it seemed like a minute.

Tom: It was a Saturday afternoon when I sent the “Here’s our plan.” And then it was Monday when the President sent out, “Here’s what we’re going to do for the university.” And obviously, it did not match what I said we were going to do.

Kelvin: You can’t make this stuff up.

Tom: No. And we were waiting intentionally. Or we were not waiting, I should say, intentionally because we weren’t really getting a lot of signals from the university that something was imminent. So, it caught all of us a little bit by surprise. And even I’ll consider myself sort of on the senior leadership team. All of us didn’t know it was coming. So anyway, to the Provost’s credit, when I asked him, “Do I need to walk any of this back so I’m in compliance with the rest of the university?” He said no, to go ahead and move forward. And of course, I did say, as we alluded to at the beginning of this episode, we’re going to do this as a pilot. We’re going to assess it. We’re not going to prejudge it. You know, we have good faith and good intentions, and we’re going to do the best we can to make it work, but we’re going to see if it does work. And if it doesn’t, we’ll take a step back and we’ll course correct. So, we are going to have a little bit of a transition period through the middle of August, where people work a one day a week in the office. And then after that, we’re going to implement the recommendations of the taskforce, and that’ll run through the calendar year. And we will then assess and adjust going forward into the spring. But then there will be all sorts of—we don’t need to go into details of this—but sort of downstream consequences of that, such as lease footprint and assigned space within the building. And you know, if you’re out of the office more than you’re in, is it fair to keep an assigned space, as opposed to somebody who’s in more than they’re out? Yeah. All of those things are questions to be answered, but we’re not going to address any of them until the pilot is concluded and we have some data.

Kelvin: Sure. So, I just want to underscore a couple things there, right? So, semester-long taskforce, talking this through, making recommendations, which the leads share with you, you have some dialogue back and forth, you essentially endorse those pretty much as is, I think, we have a like a day-long retreat with all the supervisory folks within the entire division, kind of socializing and talking through the implications of all of this, and then coming off of that we stand up an implementation committee to work out the fine grain details. There’s a lot of paperwork. It’s not our paperwork. It’s the university’s paperwork. And I just want to summarize that by saying it’s not easy to do this. *(laughter)* The easiest thing probably would be to say, “Everybody come back,” or “Everybody stay away,” but to work out something in between, there’s a lot of moving parts to that.

Tom: Yeah. And then it turned out that I think our plan was a lot more transitional than what the university ended up implementing broadly as sort of default policy, which was, “Y’all come back now, you know, on June 23,” which was sort of the

start of our summer B semester, and the expectation is you're here five days a week like you were before. There was some defined provisions for working one or two days remotely without getting sort of vice presidential approval, but that was a process. And then of course, we had to go through the exception process that the Provost has approved so that we could do what we were planning. So, it's not like we're living in some sort of weird, you know, rebel zone that is secretly not following the university's rules. We filled out all the right paperwork for these exceptions.

Kelvin: Dang it, we should maybe not have said all this in the public podcast then if that was the case. That's true. This is all known.

Tom: It's all known, and we filled out all the forms, and the appropriate vice president, who's my boss, has signed them. So, you know.

Kelvin: There's a lot of forms.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So, it's all kosher and we're good. But so that's our experience, right? That's just one and we are in the midst of it right now. It's not like, we are going to have an answer by the time this podcast is released. It'll be months before we sort of have any sort of results.

Kelvin: Yeah, I just want to underscore again—all I'm doing is underscore—I think the brilliance of this, right—and this isn't just your thing so I'm not, you know, just, you know, blowing smoke or anything—I think the smart thing from the taskforce was this emphasis on transition. And I think we're seeing that play out, like, within the last two weeks, right? Within the last two weeks, as we're recording this, we have team members who are setting foot into this building, showing up one day a week to work, and I've personally spoken to people who say, "This is so weird to see other people who are not my partner, because I've been at home for the last 16 months" or whatever. So, the emphasis on transition, I think, was exceptionally wise and so, so important, right? And I think that gets to some principles that we've been talking about a lot in our work, a key one being lead with empathy, right? Recognize the whole spectrum of where people are in terms of their comfortability with coming back in and health concerns and everything else. But being 360 empathetic is the top of that list, I think.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. And I agree, and it's something I think all of us in leadership here try to strive to do is to be empathetic, and to try to, you know, understand where people are, because everybody's in a different place right now sort of coming out of the pandemic. But it also means that we still have to make sure we comply with university expectations, you know, keep pushing the ball forward. And so, I think you can be empathetic, but still try to bring everybody along.

Kelvin: Well, and part of bringing everybody along is being extremely clear, transparent for yourself, right? And with the entire team, everybody around you, and even your stakeholders about why you're adopting it. No matter what that approach is that you're adopting, why you're adopting the approach that you're taking. That's, I think, really, really key, and again, I told you, you know, a month or so ago, I think, like a visual like this remote work continuum, I think is really

helpful in like, talking about these issues and saying, “We’re at this point on the continuum,” or “Notice how the building shrinks” or whatever it is. You know, “Here’s the issues,” because you can look at it more holistic than just, you know, an individual’s personal experience.

Tom: Yeah. And also to make it, I think, you know, to use your word, make it clear. So, that graphic that the Kansas State put out for that panel, it’s not a journey. It’s not like there’s an in-state where we must be 100% remote. And I’m not seeing anybody interpret it that way, but I have kind of experienced this in my conversations with the staff and with some folks on the taskforce who were sort of like, “Alright, so this is like where we’re starting. But, you know, we’re going to continue to get more and more remote as time goes on. Right, Tom?” I don’t know. Maybe, but maybe not. You know, maybe this is the model, or maybe we get more face to face, depending upon what the data say. So, what I told them was like, “I have an open mind about it. I don’t have any preconceived notions, but I don’t think we have some sort of arbitrary end state of remoteness that is the answer.” I keep saying that if we can compare this to anything in our experience as online professionals, it’s blended learning. We know blended learning has the best outcomes and has the highest student evaluations and the lowest withdrawal rates, and if we can extrapolate from that, then let’s presume that a blended work environment also will have, you know, better outcomes than either fully remote of fully face to face, and let’s strive to accomplish that.

Kelvin: But also, similarly, blended learning is kind of the hardest to get right. And I think that’s going to be true of this blended or hybrid work state as well. There’s a lot of moving parts. We’re already seeing that. And then I think, you know, like you said, there’s no pre-determined outcome. There’s also I think, a principle that I think we’ve been practicing is be flexible, right? And be willing to change if the data support it. You know, just kind of be open minded, and things might cause us to change midstream if something’s not working, you know.

Tom: Sure. And I chuckle because you’re aware of this, but listeners may not be. I’ve been on a journey.

Kelvin: While the remote work/not remote work thing might not be a journey, you personally, Tom, have been on a journey.

Tom: I personally have been on a journey, yeah, about this, because I was very much sort of biased towards the face to face work environment. And that’s not because it wasn’t a trust issue of the staff, right? It was just because of the culture that we have here and the way it worked, and I thought, “Let’s not mess it up, right? We’ve got an awesome culture, we’re super innovative, and it worked before while we were face to face.” And I’ve evolved. Certainly I’ve seen our teams step up during the pandemic as a remote team, and we’ve done some amazing things while everybody was kind of distributed. And, look, if I put my sort of supervisor hat on, it’s just a pragmatic reality, that there are jobs now that are available to people that are 100% remote, that are going to be some siren song, and if we have any hope of having a defense against that, we’re going to have to be flexible—to use your word—we’re going have to bend so we don’t break. So, I’ve also come around, you know, due to all of these factors, kind of in the soup

that is my brain. All of the ingredients floating around in there, that's a scary place. It's brought me, I think, a long way. I've come a long way compared to where I was two years ago, if you would ask me what I think about this, and that's probably for the good, and I hope others are at least willing to, you know, be objective about themselves and step back and say, "All right, I don't want my personal biases to get in the way of actually doing the right thing."

Kelvin: Yeah, and I think to that point, right? I think as we start to wrap up here, I think if there's any admonition—I think this is true of both of us—I think if there's any admonition that we would offer our listeners it is be evidence-based, right? How will you know whether— Whatever approach you're taking, how will you know, whether that approach is successful or not? You know, what are the data? What are the sources of evidence that you're going to hold to? What's going to be sufficient for you? How are you going to go about collecting those data? That whole thing, and then I think you've been good about this, and so has the taskforce, you know, staying very open in dialogue, and not just kind of, you know, "The door is shut. We're done." But, you know, keep massaging it and talking about it, and you're not done.

Tom: No, I'm having, as you know, open forum town halls, every other week for a half an hour just on this subject to just say, "Hey, how's it going? What have you learned? What do we need to change? Let me know." And, you know, so far, those seem to be well received. We haven't done a lot of them. But the good news is the kinds of things that are coming up are related more to the fact that we're in a new building for everybody. Even though you and I have been in here for a year. Other people are coming in for the very first time and sort of like, "Oh, well gee, that light doesn't work." Those are the kinds of things that are popping up like, okay, if those are the problems we have, I'll take it because you know, we can get a bulb.

Kelvin: That's right. But, you know, maybe a place to kind of seal this off is a comment that emerged during our supervisory retreat on return to campus work, and it was in a small group in which I was participating. I didn't make this comment although I do find it to be insightful and pressant, right? Like if we as digital learning people can't figure out how to make this work, who can? I thought, yep. Well said.

Tom: Yeah. No pressure.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah, no, that's true. That's true. Yeah, I agree. So, I don't know. Maybe that's a good point to kind of zero in on the bottom line.

Kelvin: Well, are you going to try to land this plane for us?

Tom: Let's do that. So, as online education professionals—as you just kind of referred to us—many others in higher education will be looking at us to lead the way in demonstrating how to find the appropriate balance of in-person and remote work

post-pandemic. We've done it for blended learning. Let's see if we can figure it out for blended work, and if we can't figure it out, who can?

Kelvin: Well said. Yeah, agreed. Well, as always, Tom, thanks for an insightful, stimulating conversation and dear listeners, we hope that your synapses were firing as well, and let us know what you think about where you are with this whole set of topics. Shoot us a note at topcast@ucf.edu and until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.