TOPcast Episode 106: Rise of the CATO

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 am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey Tom.

Tom: Hey Kelvin. How's life?

Kelvin: Life is good. I got my first usage of this mug that I forgot to use during Christmas time. So, I'm using it now.

Tom: Hey, keep Christmas alive in your heart all year long.

Kelvin: Thank you, Mr. Dickens.

Tom: And even if "You there, boy, what day is it?" Yeah. Yeah. So, even if it means just drinking out of the Christmas mug, why not?

Kelvin: I leaned into that 12 days of Christmas thing this past year. Just keep it going, keep it going, keep it going.

Tom: I'm drinking out of a Cub Scout Day Camp travel mug. So, I have no—

Kelvin: Keep Cub Scouts alive.

Tom: Keep Cub Scouts alive. I'm all for that. Yes.

Kelvin: That's right. Your kid's about to graduate college, but keep Cub Scouts alive.

Tom: That is true. Yeah. And it's one that he earned for being a counselor for Cub Scout camper, I think.

Kelvin: There it is.

Tom: So, what am I drinking in this Cub Scout thermos?

Kelvin: So, speaking of December holidays and gift giving and all, I got the gift recently of a subscription to one of those coffee of the month type clubs.

Tom: Clark, it's the gift that keeps on giving all year long.

Kelvin: I'm going to have to up my coffee intake, because I got more coffee than I know what to do with. So, the reason I say that is I don't really know who the roaster is. They don't tell you. They broker it and send it to you in this kind of this generic kind of packaging. But this is one of the first two coffees I received, and it is a single-origin Sumatra Mandheling that has been roasted to the level called "Full City+." Now we're following up a little bit on the Tim McKean-inspired episode back in 105 with all that talk of roasting levels, but "Full City+" is a label that roasters use to denote the beginning of the dark roast coffees. And some coffee folks claim that the Sumatra Mandheling is particularly suited to dark roasting as this brings out chocolate notes in the beans. So, how is the coffee? And could you find a connection to today's topic?

Tom: I like the coffee. It's good. Yeah. I could see myself drinking this again. And this is my kind of connection, Kelvin—

Kelvin: I thought it might be.

Tom: —as you know. This is the no ambiguity, on-the-nose kind of connection. So, I love it. Yeah. So, you punched the word "dark" a couple of times as in dark roast, and we have as our guest today, Dr. Shawna Dark. So, I love it. Yes. I assume if that's not the connection, it should be.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's it.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: That's the connection because, Tom, not too long ago, you did interview Dr. Shawna Dark, and Dr. Dark is currently the Chief Academic Technology Officer—or CATO—and she has the title also of Executive Director of Research, Teaching, and Learning. All of those titles are hers at the University of California, Berkeley. Previously, Dr. Dark was the Associate Vice President for Academic Technology at California State University, Long Beach, and a full professor of geography at California State University, Northridge. So, is there anything you want to say about the interview with Dr. Dark before we cut to it?

Tom: Not much. I really enjoyed the conversation as I do every time I get a chance to talk to Shawna, but I did kind of prep her that I wanted to talk specifically about this CATO role that she has. And so, we kind of just jump right into it. So, don't be surprised that there's not a lot of preamble, but we had done some prep with her beforehand, and that is the subject of today's conversation.

Kelvin: All right. Through the amazing technology that is podcast time travel, here is your interview, Tom, with Dr. Shawna Dark.

(musical transition)

Tom: So, Shawna, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Shawna: Thank you so much. It is a pleasure to be here. And I'm looking forward to talking about the position of the CATO: the Chief Academic Technology Officer.

Tom: Yeah. So that is what we want to talk about today, the Chief Academic Technology Officer, for those who are not familiar with that acronym CATO. It is becoming more and more common, and I hear it talked about more and more. There's been an awful lot of great work done by people like Helen Chu and Bill Hogue and your colleague, Jenn Stringer. A lot of papers and presentations within EDUCAUSE, but it happens to be your title and I thought you would be an excellent person to sort of talk about it. So maybe a place to start is, can you just sort of define what the role of the Chief Academic Technology Officer is?

Shawna: Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's probably going to vary on different campuses depending upon how campuses are organized, but at Berkeley, my position is housed actually under Undergraduate Education. So, I have a direct reporting line to the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and a dotted line to the wonderful Jenn Stringer, who's our CIO at Berkeley. And really from a very high level, my job is to support and help the campus be strategic around anything related to instruction and research and technology. So, our unit houses everything from classroom technology to our digital learning services—which is a team of instructional designers and media specialists—as well as our research IT program—which consists of a team of consultants who help researchers with figuring out what to do with their data, where to house it, how to store it, what to do before and after, cradle to grave sort of guidance around their research and the use of our high performance compute platforms. So, that's very... There are a bunch of other units that I have oddly. So, I also have a DevOps team which helps to connect all of our platforms together, as well as all the instructional tools that we provide on our campus. So, things like Poll Everywhere and Turnitin and Gradescope and all those kinds of things are also managed and licensed through our unit, and we have service leads for each of those products. I also have KALX radio station and advising under my unit and the last group, which I think is really critical and maybe we'll have time to talk about, is the Center for Teaching and Learning on our campus, which is sort of the faculty center for professional development around teaching and instruction, and also serves as a pedagogical resource around research and connecting faculty to research associated with teaching and learning. So, it's a really kind of a comprehensive group where I think normally a lot of these teams would be embedded in different places on a campus, maybe an IT unit under the CIO. Maybe some would be in undergraduate education and some other type of administrative unit supporting student services or something like that. But at Berkeley, we're positioned in such a way that all of these are housed under me, and I really help to be a part of the campus conversation about how we use these tools, what direction we need to go in with regard to online education, the importance of the different types of services that we provide for both instruction and research as well.

Tom: Wow. So, it really feels like you're breathing through both lungs. You got kind of the technical IT side, but you've also got this very academic, like the Center for Teaching and Learning kind of side. How common do you think it is that this

role—this CATO role— maybe at other institutions is kind of bifurcated like that? Do they all report up through a CIO, or do you think some report up through academic affairs, like a provost reporting line, or do you think it's always sort of dotted line somewhere?

Shawna: Yeah. Tom, I think it really depends on the campus. And I think we probably haven't seen any significant trends emerge around this. And I'll give you an example. I was at Cal State, Long Beach prior to this and worked in the CSU system for almost 20 years. And in my role at Long Beach, it was the exact same role. So, Jenn and I had a very similar vision about what a CATO should kind of have oversight of. And my job title was not CATO. It was Associate Vice President for Academic Technology, and I reported into the provost and not into the CIO. In fact, there, I didn't even have a dotted reporting line to the CIO. I think time will tell. I just think we're still early on in rise of the CATO throughout higher ed in different types of campuses. And I think it's really hard to say sort of where the trend will emerge, but I will say I feel very strongly about being an undergraduate education reporting into the academic side of the house. I think this is really critical for the success of the CATO and for the success of the campus in terms of making decisions that align with kind of that core mission around academics, whether that be instruction or research.

Tom: I see some similarities between the CATO title—and even function—and that of the Chief Online Learning Officer, the COLO. And in the past, we've talked to Eric Fredericksen on this podcast about some of his research in looking at COLOs across the country and trying to identify who they are and what they're called, because they're not consistently called the same thing on every campus. And I'm sensing that maybe there's a similar challenge with the role of CATO. And in some cases, they actually have responsibility that might be the same person as the COLO on a particular campus. Do you think that there will come a time where the CATO title becomes more consistent across institutions like a CIO? Because I'm not seeing it honestly in the online learning world. Everybody's got kind of a different title, but maybe this is something different. And if not, do you think it's important that that develops so that it becomes something that's much more understandable from a consistency standpoint?

Shawna: Yeah. I do think whether or not we actually use that title for Chief Academic Technology Officer or not, I do think these positions are beginning to emerge just from my own personal experience, right? And being in a position that was very similar to the one I have now that's twice in a row, which I think is pretty unusual. Although, I was, both times, under leaders who had a lot of foresight, right, around what was really needed to help propel the campus into a more resilient campus as we look at a future with a lot of disruptions. I do think they're critical. I think these positions are really critical for really helping campuses to navigate the new normal after post-pandemic in particular, because what we're seeing are faculty are relying more on technology right now than they ever have before, and now they're returning to campus and they've developed a new sense about technology and what that sense will look like, how people are using, faculty are using technology for instruction is just, it's not entirely clear yet, but it definitely will be more. And because of that, I think it's very important that there is a strategic voice that is just focused specifically on technology and instruction

and pedagogy and the impact of these tools on the way in which students go about learning. I think that is something that is absolutely critical for every campus to be thinking about and building a structure around so that we're not making assumptions about what are the best tools just based on our conversations with vendors, right? We're thinking about what are the best tools based on what our faculty need and what we know have a positive impact on student learning outcomes. How my position sort of interfaces with a Chief Learning Officer, I think, is super complicated. At Berkeley, we're going through a process right now where not only has the use of tools increased, but our interactions with third-party vendors around the development of online programming, so companies like edX/2U or Coursera. We have another vendor called Shorelight on our campus, and all of those vendors have been extremely strategic about approaching our campus about the development of comprehensive online programs, which we've not had in the past at Berkeley. And so, our campus leadership has really raised awareness about Berkeley's presence in terms of online education and is really thinking a lot and having lots of discussions about what that looks like and what it means. But what's really clear is that my job, my role definitely overlaps in this area as does Suzanne Harrison, who works for me. She's the director of our digital learning services. So, she oversees our instructional designers and our media team. And her role is kind of being elevated more strategically too, because there's no way I can do everything I do, right? Understanding the research side and the instruction side and delve into kind of the development of these comprehensive online programs and really be strategic. I just don't have the bandwidth for it. So, this is the biggest challenge that I think I'm facing right now, that our campus is facing, is sort of trying to figure out where does that piece around the online education end up landing, right? And how is that represented and who needs to be engaged in discussions about revenue generating programs in a way that makes sense and is responsible and true to the culture of our campus. So, it is just an absolutely fascinating time because of that. And I'm not sure what's going to emerge from that. I don't know what the answer's going to be.

Tom: Well, I mean, you mentioned the pandemic, and in previous conversations that you and I have had recently, you made a comment about how the pandemic seems to have accelerated some of this adoption of technology and maybe has lowered some barriers, some objections that faculty have typically had because they were sort of forced to use things and now that they maybe aren't as forced to be online, they still want some of the same tools. It seems to me that having somebody in a CATO sort of role becomes even more critical in the context of this accelerated cultural change that we're experiencing as a result of the pandemic.

Shawna: Yeah, absolutely, Tom, and I think one of the things that... For a lot of different reasons, I think that's true, right? I mean, one is trying to figure out how do we support faculty with what their needs are? How do we ensure that our faculty are connecting to this generation of students that grew up with two years remote? Right? I mean, this is like that right there is something that's sort of changing the way these students that are coming in have lived a completely different educational experience than ever before. Right? And so having somebody who's there can help connect all of those pieces. And then there's a whole other piece that's starting to emerge that I think a lot about, which is sort of issues associated

with accessibility and security of the tools that we're using. And I know just recently everyone got an announcement from the FBI about concerns related to proctoring software and concerns related to third-party integrations in the learning management system and how we need to be more cautious and aware and make sure we have workflows and procedures in place to really think about how we're managing security around all of these tools. And I couldn't agree with that more, and without having a CATO, who's sort of organizing that for all of these tools, I think would be hard to be as strategic, right, and as secure and as accessible as you might be otherwise. So, I do think this role really is becoming increasingly critical for campuses. And I hope, my hope and I know Jen's hope too is that all campuses will begin to develop [or] will begin to add a CATO role to the campus. But higher education can be so complicated, and every campus is organized differently where power structures are, and those kinds of things make it complicated to just create something like that. It takes time and thought and really, as I was saying when I first started speaking about this, leaders with great foresight and bravery to start kind of preparing the campus for a different future, and that's not easy to do. You've really got to have a leader who's willing to embrace that and who kind of has the gut for change, which is just not easy in higher education.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah. It's generational sometimes unless you have a pandemic that changes everything in a summer.

Shawna: You get pushed off the cliff.

Tom: Right. Right. Well maybe in the time we have left, the last question. You sort of alluded to the fact that this is something that's needed, that's growing. Leaders with foresight are starting to establish these types of positions. If somebody aspired into this sort of role, what do you think that they should do to prepare themselves, to put themselves in the best position to get one of these positions as they open up? Is there a certain education training, temperament, background that you would recommend?

Shawna: Yeah. Right now, because this is an emerging role, it's pretty fascinating. And when I talk to other people on other campuses who have similar positions to mine—maybe not, again, titled exactly the same thing—but we run the gamut of who we are, what experiences we have. And so, I come from faculty. I was a tenured faculty member in the CSU system and, like I said, taught for many years and went into administration. And I ended up going into this without really thinking about, oh, I want to have a career as a CATO because they didn't exist when I started getting involved in this. Right? And so, I think right now, the door is open for people with a variety of experiences and background. And I think some advice that I would give is really for, if you were interested in becoming a Chief Academic Technology Officer, that you really understand faculty, that you really... If you can teach part-time in an effort to sort of prepare for a leadership role in this field, that would be really good because you're spending time really learning about some of the inner kind of cultural systems at play in academia that you just are not going to get, unless you've had some experience as an academic. So, I think that is a really critical thing. You don't have to be a tenured faculty member or anything like that, but I do think having that experience is really

critical. I think as these positions evolve, certainly having a background in academic technology will be incredibly helpful and having some experience in, I would say, definitely around instructional design would be helpful. But then I also run research IT, which is our high-performance compute platforms, which is something I've had to learn a lot about in starting this role. So, you're never going to know everything, right? And there's not a CATO school you can go to, but certainly engaging yourself in that academic culture, spending some time really professionally developing through EDUCAUSE is another great resource. But also, maybe thinking about attending academic conferences and that kind of thing that your campus is willing to sponsor for you to attend, where you're going to learn maybe about advising or something completely different, but just really expanding your knowledge and making it as broad as possible about higher education and how we use technology at large in higher education.

Tom: Well, that's great advice and maybe a great place for us to kind of wrap up. So, we could talk about this a lot more. Maybe we'll revisit this in the future as you expand your role or grow into different areas and have an even bigger impact at Berkeley or wherever. Maybe we can continue this. So—

Shawna: Yeah. I'd be delighted to come back anytime. I love talking about it. It's so fascinating how lucky we all are, how we are all exhausted, but we are all super lucky to be working in this time where we really have an opportunity to shift higher education to a place where it needs to be, to support our country. So, I'm excited to be here.

Tom: Yeah. Absolutely. I had a friend, a colleague say when the pandemic first started, "Isn't it something to be relevant all of a sudden?" And I agree. So, Shawna, on behalf of Kelvin and myself, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Shawna: Great. Thank you so much.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Dr. Shawna Dark.

Tom: Indeed, it was, yeah. I really enjoyed talking to her and I think that the reason why I'm so interested in this CATO role, I just think it's emerging across the kind of higher ed/ed tech landscape. And she's really on the leading edge. And a school like Berkeley that has really embraced this role, even as that title—because we talked a little bit about titles not all being consistent—I think is maybe a bellwether of what's to come in other spaces.

Kelvin: She said rise of the CATO, which is my favorite phrase from the entire interview because it makes me think of like sci-fi B movies or something.

Tom: Yeah. It's like a *Transformers* movie or something: "the Rise of the CATO." Yeah.

Kelvin: But I guess and then it could be like "Attack of the COLO."

Tom: Which is probably what most people are afraid of around here. I am interested though in that overlap, and I asked her about that, between the CATO and the COLO—the Chief Online Learning Officer and the Chief Academic Technology Officer—because in many places, they're somewhat embodied in the same role. It seems like Shawna plays that sort of a kind of dual function at Berkeley. And in other places, it's not quite so clean where maybe some stuff sort of lives in academic affairs and other parts live in a CIO kind of more IT kind of function. And how is that bridged? I think it's interesting how those roles are being defined on campuses, how they're being led, because I think it says a lot of about how institutions and leadership view these functions strategically in how they organize them. And just as sort of a student of the space, I just find it really, really fascinating.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think all that's true. I think it's fascinating. I can't help but think and say that of course institutional context is everything though, right? Like, as you already said, that might lead you to place these individual roles in different parts of the institutional hierarchy than in some other place. I also, as an example, thought that online education at a school like Berkeley is likely to be quite different than, say, at an institution like UCF. Like, Shawna talked about self-contained online programs and OPMs, distinct from the teaching and learning mission. She made those comments about the Center for Teaching and Learning. And here, I think those two things, online education is deeply ingrained. We had some guests from out of state yesterday and we were talking about online education as it pertains to the fabric of the teaching and learning mission of the institution, which is very much where we come from, I think. So, context matters.

Tom: Yeah, it really does. Like for example, we have a Center for Teaching and Learning here at UCF, and we partner with them and have a great relationship with them, but they are very separate and distinct from what we do. And we're much more sort of in the COLO space. And then some of the other academic technology areas, some of which I think we have some jurisdiction over, but in others, we don't. Certainly not research. And at the moment, not anymore, classroom technology kind of belongs to the IT function. So, we're a bit more decentralized or distributed here than maybe Berkeley has it. But in other areas, I mean, we have a bigger online operation than they do. So, it maybe requires a little more focus. I'm speculating. It could probably be a good follow-up conversation with Shawna to kind of better understand that. But all of that to underscore your point that context matters. It depends. Everybody's a little bit different and there's no one-size-fits-all kind of structure.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's interesting. I'd tell you, hearing you say that, the theme that comes out of that that probably cuts across those contextual differences is the importance of collaboration. Whether you're in the same silo or not, collaboration's the word of the day probably.

Tom: Yeah. I mean, how often is that true? Right? Especially in higher ed where you may have authority, but not responsibility, or responsibility, but not authority—which is much more common—or maybe responsibility and no resources. So, you have to partner to get things done. And so, I'm thinking if in an area like say research computing, which Shawna mentioned was an area that she kind of didn't

know a lot about in her background but had to learn a lot about as part of her new role. I imagine you'd have to a partner pretty closely with Graduate Studies and the graduate researchers that you would be supporting. And that's probably a finite resource that you have to somehow govern and manage and ensure everybody gets what they need when it comes to something as critical and intensive as research computing.

Kelvin: Yeah. I know we need to kind of wrap up this postlude after our interview listening, but I did, just to say this, I appreciated Shawna. She talked about... You asked about kind of preparation for the role, and she said, well, broad understanding of higher ed holistically is important, but I love that she emphasized “understanding faculty,” and shout out here at TOPcast episode 99, “The Importance of Faculty Voice and [Faculty] Valuing in Online Education.” I think that's so important and it's great to hear somebody in her role say that. Very important.

Tom: I totally agree. It really resonated with me. I know it's something that you and I both do and try to teach on occasion. Maybe not as often as we would like, but at least often enough that we stay fresh because I find things in the LMS have changed. Some processes have changed, and it keeps me so much more grounded in the work that we do to actually do it and feel what faculty feel when they're teaching a class. So, I totally agree with that. I didn't think to grab the episode number. I should have. But another one to maybe go back and listen to, if you haven't, that's kind of a corollary to this is the one where we interviewed Eric Fredericksen about the titles of Chief Online Learning Officers across the country. It's a similar sort of phenomenon to the CATO where there's maybe not one defined title at every institution, even if the role exists. And it's an interesting analog to what's happening in the CATO space as well.

Kelvin: Yeah. As always, we'll put that in the show notes. I mean, hey, if we mention it here, it's a good chance that it's in the show notes. And—you check me—"Finding Fredericksen's List,” I'm going to guess that is episode 36. I think I looked at it not long ago, so I think that's right, but hey, it could be something else, but it'll be in the show notes.

Tom: I would not counter or argue with Rain Man here. Definitely. Definitely 36. Yeah.

Kelvin: Definitely Wapner. Definitely Wapner.

Tom: Definitely Wapner. Yeah. All right. So maybe this is a good place to try to wrap things up. So, today's higher education, as we've kind of alluded to, can be very, very complex, and key leaders such as the Chief Academic Technology Officer can help bring a lot of clarity so that faculty can be more effective in their roles and students can be more likely to learn and succeed. And I think that having that kind of a role puts an institutional strategic emphasis on that kind of an effort.

Kelvin: Yeah, totally agree. Totally agree. Producer Tim says, I'm pretty sure that, yep, 36. Ha ha! I feel—

Tom: Thanks, Tim. Wow.

Kelvin: I feel very Dustin Hoffman-ish now.

Tom: Yeah, definitely 36. Definitely.

Kelvin: Definitely 36. I know we're pushing time, but do you mind if I slide in a plug before we get out of here?

Tom: Slide.

Kelvin: So, it's been a while since we have said this, but dear listeners, wherever you access TOPcast, there is more than likely a rate and review option. So, we sure would appreciate it if you would look in your app or website or whatever and give this podcast a favorable rating. Our analytics tell us that most folks find us on Apple Podcasts. So hey, if you're there, all the better. But while you're at it, would you please consider leaving behind just like a sentence or two regarding what you like about TOPcast? This all helps new listeners discover TOPcast, and thank you in advance.

Tom: Thank you in advance. Yeah. And if you happen to be listening to this on the web, it is available through pretty much all podcast platforms: Spotify, Stitcher, Apple, you name it.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: TOPcast is ubiquitous.

Kelvin: Or as close as we can get to ubiquity. We're working on it. Yeah. All right. Well, thank you, Tom, for a good interview. Thank you, Dr. Shawna Dark. And thank you, Tim, for keeping us honest with fact-checking our history here of our TOPcast inventory. And until next time for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.