TOPcast Episode 107: “Peeling the Onion” of Online Program Rankings

Narrator: When you realize what your future can be, you want to do it right. UCF Online offers more than 100 fully online programs plus personalized support from success coaches, so you can get to the future that’s right for you.

(musical transition)

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

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast: The Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom.

Tom: How are you?

Kelvin: Such a deep question for such a short podcast.

Tom: Yeah, really. Yeah.

Kelvin: Doing all right, I think.

Tom: I’ve read some stuff in the past year or so about don’t ask people, “How are you?” Because it’s a perfunctory question, and you’re not really asking for the answer, right? There are other things that you can ask, and of course, none of them come to mind now, but sort of like…things a little more neutral if you want a neutral answer or things that are more supportive about, “I hope you’re okay,” or things like that, so I hope you’re okay, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Why, thank you, Tom. I feel okay. Yeah, and sometimes I answer that question. I take it seriously, and sometimes people will answer the question when I ask it, and I take that seriously and, yeah, I take the point though. I take the point. That being said, I don’t think we’ve said this in a while, and maybe we should. Pause for station identification, as they used to say, just briefly, and say that this podcast is what we call a collegial conversation about online or blended or digital or whatever teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee, so pull up a virtual seat with a favorite beverage and join us.

Tom: Yes, thank you. It is good to make that reminder once in a while, and so I hope, those of you listening whether you’re in your car or at the kitchen table or mowing the yard like I do sometimes listening, you’ve got some beverage of choice with you, whatever it might be. So today we’ve got coffee, and I don’t know what I’m drinking. Kelvin, what is in the thermos today?

Kelvin: Well, Tom, today’s coffee comes with a story.

Tom: Don't they all?

Kelvin: Yeah, I was waiting for that. Quite often. Maybe this one more than some, so hold on. So not too long ago, which is another way of saying once upon a time, I was out of town for an important family gathering, and perhaps surprisingly with everything going on, I had actually run out of coffee to carry with me, and I almost always travel with my own coffee beans and brewing setup so I can have a good cup of coffee wherever I go, but I had run out of coffee. So, I decided to venture out to the local supermarket to see what the best available whole bean coffee might be, and I went into it eyes wide open. I wasn't optimistic. My expectations were about right as I perused the shelves. Lots of commercial mass-produced names that we would all recognize and not much in the way of, well, nothing in the way of single-origin, freshly roasted premium whole-bean coffees, but I did—

Tom: It was all Tom coffee that you saw on the shelves, right?

Kelvin: No judgment. No judgment. No judgment. But I did spot a small group of bags from Kauai Coffee and the bag touted "100% Hawaiian," which of course made me a little suspicious because that's a statement that triggers the very broad reputation of Hawaii as a source of excellent coffee without addressing the nuance that the generally accepted best coffee in Hawaii is Kona from the Big Island of Hawaii, but given my meager options in the grocery store aisle, I nevertheless chose to give this 100% Hawaiian, somewhat mass produced-ish coffee a try. Now, I'm going to tell you. It has not been my favorite, but I've had worse, so I did think, though, that with the story in mind, this coffee might be a good choice for today's episode, so I will ask you. How do you find the coffee? And how do you find the connection to today's episode?

Tom: Yeah, I think the coffee is fine. It is serviceable. I would drink this coffee happily. I do know that the whole concept of Kona is a big one because you brought me back a bag of 100% Kona from Hawaii one time and explained to me that just because it says Kona doesn't mean it's Kona, so I don't know if this is or isn't, but I think it's good. I like it, but I am a generally easy-to-please coffee drinker. So, connection. You were talking about it's not your favorite, but Kona has a good reputation, so I'm thinking there's a thread to pull on there, and I'm going to say that that has something to do with our connection.

Kelvin: Yeah, I would say so. Yeah. Reputation was kind of the note I was hitting on and nuance versus simplistic understandings and kind of the concept of better and worse as a basis for decision making. Those were some of the notes I was trying to hit there.

Tom: Yeah. All right, so dear listener, strap in. Buckle your seatbelts.

Kelvin: Buckle them up.

Tom: Because if you thought our cameras on versus cameras off debate was controversial and spicy, wait until you get a load of this one. We're going to talk about the U.S. News & World Report online program rankings which, as we are

speaking now, have been released to institutions but are currently embargoed, but by the time this comes out, will have been released. So, if we slip up and say what they are, we'll hopefully be safe.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right. We'll be time traveling. Yeah, and a couple of shout-outs here. You're right. We'll zoom in because this is an online-related podcast. Zoom in, but there are some broad treatments of the U.S. News Best Colleges rankings in several of Malcolm Gladwell's episodes of the Revisionist History podcast. Specifically, in a recent season, he addressed the best college's rankings in two episodes, and we'll link to those in the show notes. I think they're called the "Lord of the Rankings" and "Project Dillard." They're both worth a listen. We might refer to some of the insights shared from those episodes, but we'll try not to be redundant, and as of kind of a related plug, back in TOPcast episode 18 back in season two, we addressed access to higher education and briefly mentioned a different mini-series of Gladwell's on higher education access from his season one, I think, and that's a three-episode mini-series, and that's worth the listen too, and we'll put all that in the show notes.

Tom: Highly recommend all of those, but relevant for today's conversation is the more recent two episodes.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right.

Tom: And he talks very broadly about the general U.S. News and World Report Best College rankings and, as you said, not to be kind of redundant to some of the stuff that he talks about, we're going to maybe zoom in a little bit on just the online rankings, which is maybe a little bit more our purview. But having said all that I was just fascinated listening to those Gladwell podcasts, and it generated a lot of discussion here kind of internally, and I think there's an awful lot of sympathy for the problems that Gladwell illuminates and frustration with the way the current system is set up.

Kelvin: Yeah. All that. I totally agree with all of that. I think he dove deep and critically and brought in a lot of different people, looked at things from all kind of different angles. All of that stuff's worth a listen. Can I just say, I have my hesitations about today's episode, right? I jotted down in the notes here "trepidation," even, right?

Tom: I had to talk you into it kind of.

Kelvin: Yeah, because I got a lot to say on this subject, and I don't want to get fired, and I don't want there to be backlash at UCF because of some smart aleck remark that I made about these things. We've aired everything that we've recorded, so I guess this one won't be any different. I'd hate to waste 30 minutes of our time here, so I say that as my caveat. I'm just owning my trepidation, but I will probably be forthright, nevertheless.

Tom: Yeah. All right, so when I talk to colleagues, we go to conferences or whatever, and we talk about the rankings, and there's a lot of eye rolls and, "Oh yeah. Well, they are not worth the paper they're written on," or whatever and, "It's all just a

popularity contest," because, at least for the online rankings—and I think that's the case for the overall rankings too—at least 20% is reputation, which is sort of just a popularity contest sort of thing. So, if everybody sort of complains about it and somewhat dismisses it, why do we all still keep doing it? Right? We do, and I'll say this as a bit of a big fat hypocrite. As critical as I am of the rankings, we tend to do pretty good. I should say pretty well.

Kelvin: So, it's okay.

Tom: I was an English major.

Kelvin: It's okay if we do well.

Tom: Right, yeah. Yeah. But so, I promote it. Right? I put it out on my social media, and I try to do what I can for UCF's reputation because we do well in them, and does that make me a big fat hypocrite? Probably, but I'm in the game, so I got to play by the rules I guess, but that doesn't mean I necessarily like all the rules.

Kelvin: Yeah, so let's talk about that a little bit, right? Maybe we'll talk broadly, because I think the online-specific rankings sit within the constellation of the broader U.S. News Best Colleges process and ranking and all that, why do you think that is such a thing in higher ed? People do roll their eyes, but people participate, right? Why don't we just sort of all turn our backs on it and walk away? Why do we participate in filling out the review forms and in celebrating going up or whatever in the rankings?

Tom: Yeah, it's funny. I think back to the interview I did with Sasha Thackaberry, and she talked about in order to help affect change on campus, especially with somewhat reluctant faculty, appeal to their sense of competition. They are a competitive bunch. We are a competitive bunch, and I'll say I am a competitive bunch. I'm as competitive as the next guy, right? I want to be good. I want to be the best that we can be, and you measure yourself against others, often, to do that. So, there's a certain amount of that. We are all competing in some form or fashion for, if not the same, similar pools of students, and like it or not, the students are looking at the rankings as a discriminator as part of their decision-making process on where they want to go to school, and online is maybe even ... It's exacerbated even more because you're not limited by geography. You could pick any school on that list and go to it and not leave your house, and that maybe makes it perhaps even more competitive, but maybe at the end of the day, nobody wants to not be on the list. If you're not on the list, then you're omitted, and is there an implication that you're not good if you're not on the Best Colleges' list?

Kelvin: Nobody wants to be left out. If everybody else is doing it, that takes a special kind of courage and steely spine. Yeah. I get that. I'm just going to go ahead and say it. I think this is one of the bigger boondoggles that we've got in higher education.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, and I don't disagree. It's a nice little niche that U.S. News has carved out for itself where they get—

Kelvin: Oh my gosh, yes.

Tom: Yeah, so for those not familiar with the way the process works, they create a survey that everybody feels they have to participate in, and then they sell you a very expensive five-figure badge at the end of that survey to say how you did on this survey that they created, and it's multiple badges that you need to buy because they have multiple categories that you get ranked in. And then they have a tool that you can also license that helps you figure out how you compare against others, so you can do better in their ranking, so you pay them for this software to help you do better on their ranking system, so you can buy a better badge later. It's this crazy circle. Yeah, and we're all in it.

Kelvin: I've been trying to be better behaved, Tom, but you know that around the office whenever these topics come up, I've usually got some unkind remark to make, or I just sit there quietly. Usually, I have some unkind remark to make. All of that's where I'm coming from. I'm like, "This is the most ridiculous boondoggle I know of," and yet here we are, but I get it. I suppose that you don't want to not be included, and if your aspirational peers or those for whom we are an aspirational peer, if they're all participating, right, then I don't know. I'm not saying, but in one of Gladwell's episodes, he does share the story of an institution that did make that bold move not to participate, and interestingly, they went down in the ratings.

Tom: Course they did, yeah. I think it was Reed College, right?

Kelvin: Yes, Reed College.

Tom: Yeah, there are others, too, that have opted out kind of at the macro level, and good for them. It takes some guts to do that. It's like the first school that went test optional or whatever. You have to have a little fortitude to withstand that and deal with it. Now, a school like Reed College has got enough of a reputation, I think, and it's got a particular niche for the kind of school it is that I think they'll be fine, but if you're some other school that's trying to raise your profile and your reputation, opting out is only going to hurt you, and we know, from our own analytics, that different parts of the country's presidents—this is for the overall rankings—rate us differently. I don't want to say too much. I don't want to get fired either, but there was one part of the country that rates all schools in the South badly, no matter what they are.

Kelvin: That's fascinating.

Tom: It is fascinating. It's such an onion that the more you peel it, the more interesting it gets, and the more it smells. It's so true, but back to the online rankings, I would say this. If the criteria were such that I think we had some broad consensus that we all agreed that these are the right criteria, then I might not have as much of an issue with it. One of the concerns I have is that ... Although this year's results don't seem to reflect this quite as acutely, but for the previous five years that the online rankings have existed, there's been no discrimination for scale. So, Arizona State, which has tens of thousands of online students, is being evaluated against ... I'm not going to mention the names because they're fine

schools, but at least one good school that I know of that was ranked very highly last year that had one bachelor's degree program and 32 students. It's apples and oranges, and as a school that's on the larger side of that spectrum, it drives me sort of nuts. If we only had one program and 32 students, you know how awesome we would be? We would be awesome, right? But it's so hard to be that level of awesome across a scale of tens of thousands of students or, in our case ... Well, yeah. It's that. Because of the way you have to report, it's not just our virtual campus students so, yeah, that scale thing has been the biggest problem for me. That and the fact that it's reputational, and I fear that too many people fill out that survey—the reputation survey—because I'm one of the people who fills it out for UCF, and I try to not answer if I don't know, so most of my results are N/A or, "I don't know," or something.

Kelvin: Integrity? What?

Tom: Yeah. I do rate us pretty high, but I think we are good, but I am afraid that other people ... Because the temptation's there. I feel it in myself as I'm going through it. "Oh yeah. I know that school. Yeah. I saw their football team last night," or whatever it is, and you want to rate them higher just because of familiarity or because of exposure, and that's not the right way to do it, but I'm afraid that's probably what's happening in many cases.

Kelvin: And there's nothing stopping that.

Tom: No.

Kelvin: And, in fact, Gladwell in one of his episodes, talks to the person who, at the time, was running the rankings overall, and he asked him questions like that. Like, "Do you have to have expertise or personal experience with the institution that you're rating?" "Well, no," and the person's sort of like, "Well, yeah. Our thought is you sort of know the landscape, and you respond accordingly," but I didn't hear anybody in that interview talk about N/A and truths like you did.

Tom: Right. Yeah, there was something that came out a few years ago. A previous president at one of our state institutions, the local paper did a Freedom of Information Act request and got that president's ballot to see how that person voted for all of the state institutions in the state of Florida, and their school was the only one that was ranked the best, and all the others were trash, and it was like, "Really? Huh."

Kelvin: There you go.

Tom: There you go.

Kelvin: There you go.

Tom: Yeah, it was a little disappointing to see, so maybe that's how this person really felt. Who knows? But I don't know. It seems like it's just a little bit of gamesmanship, and then the big thing that Gladwell goes into in great detail is the question of privilege, where some of the criteria are such that it's dollars

spent per student or something like that, so in the past, it's been also like selectivity. I think they've tamped that down a little bit. They've dialed that back a little bit. I think it's still in there in some form or fashion. And good grief. Selectivity and amount spent per students is a total reflection of just how rich you are, and it's not based on outcomes per investment or how many students you lifted out of poverty or something like that or how many Pell students do you serve, and how well do they do? Whatever it is. It's kind of what our provost calls soul metrics, and oftentimes—it's been a big debate here on this campus—how much do we pursue U.S. News rankings, and how far can you go without sacrificing your soul metrics? And so far, we haven't been willing to do that. We want to increase our rankings, but we also don't want to sacrifice our soul metrics.

Kelvin: Right. Yeah, I mean there's some ugly stuff that Gladwell surfaces. Privilege is probably the nicest word that can be used, but I thought it was interesting, like, one of the themes that he picks up on from both of his little mini-series that we mentioned a few minutes ago related to access and sort of social mobility kinds of things, is he drew two very concrete examples from this historically Black liberal arts college in New Orleans and Harvard and very concrete graduating Black physics majors, right? Same number of Black freshmen, and Harvard graduated 1 to Dillard's 13. Dillard College is 13, so you go, "Wow. Dillard is pretty successful at that," right? And of course, your input is Harvard's, as you say, selectivity was so much higher than Dillard's. So disadvantaging access-oriented, social-mobility-oriented kinds of institutions. So, none of that's pretty, and I just question the whole methodology in general—online or not—but I certainly don't like to be associated with stuff like that, but I guess one question to ask, Tom, is what alternatives are there to these rankings from the U.S. News?

Tom: Yeah. Well, it's funny. There are some out there, and you always see different ranking that pop up periodically. At one time, there was like a Washington Times ranking, and there is, on the Department of Education site, the College Scorecard that allows you to maybe search for things a little more specifically and compare them and look for outcomes of specific majors and stuff, and that can be useful, I think, in your search because you're not necessarily just going ... Comparing some Ivy League school to some regional comprehensive public school is just not fair. They're two totally different schools—or some local community college or something. It's just not fair. Too much of it is there was some problems, I think, with that College Scorecard in the past because it was using four-year graduation rates, and it disadvantaged community colleges and things and not recognizing that community college students are like part-time, and time to graduation becomes sort of a ... You have to take all of that into account, and I don't know, personally, the status of that at the moment or if any of that has been cleaned up; but Phil Hill, I know, wrote quite a bit about it at the time a couple years ago, so that was interesting. So, that's one. There are some others, right? I don't know if there are any others you're familiar with that you want to highlight.

Kelvin: I think there are different kinds of things, right? Most of us in higher ed are familiar to one extent or another with what we broadly refer to as the Carnegie Classifications, which are run out an institute at a university today but started out from the Carnegie Foundation back in the 70's. That's something. It's a way of

speaking about qualitative differences between kinds of institutions, but boy, it's complex. I was looking at the page today before we hit record, and I'm just a member of the public going there and looking. You have a headache. If you decide to actually look at the definition of anything, they give you the option. They shrink it all down, but if you want to actually see the definition, it expands to something that covers a page, and you go, "No, thank you," and you walk away, right? I appreciate the level of nuance, but it's highly complex.

Tom: It is.

Kelvin: And not built for quantification.

Tom: No, and it's a little inside baseball jargony too. I still call us a Research One university, even though that's not the name anymore. It's Very High Research or something. It's such a mouthful. You can't even hardly say it, and if you say that, you still have to explain it to somebody who's not in our business, so just say the thing that is the easier to say even if it's an old term. I would say the biggest challenge we have, though, with alternative rankings is that the general public still gravitates towards U.S. News and not just for higher ed, for all kinds of things, hospitals, whatever.

Kelvin: That's a good point. It's become the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval kind of thing, right?

Tom: Yeah. It's kind of the Consumer Reports, right? Like, which one's the best car of the year or whatever? Interesting experience, so one of my two trips to China, UCF was participating as part of a group with AASCU—American Association of State Colleges and Universities—and they had kind of a little room set up behind our booth where each college and university that was participating in this trip at this expo to attract Chinese students to come to your university had an opportunity to speak. So, I signed up for a slot, and I did a presentation on UCF to a room full of Chinese students and their parents, and I went through the whole thing, kind of school we are, what we do, blah, blah, blah, programs, what we're known for, and at the end, the first question and kind of the only questions I got were, "What are your rankings? What are your rankings?" And they're talking about the U.S. News and World Report rankings.

Kelvin: Wow.

Tom: That's what they wanted, and that's China, right? So, it's hard to overcome that. Now I get it. I guess if you're going to spend the money and send your kid halfway across the world to go to school, you want to send them to the best possible school you can send them to, but I felt that it was indicative of sort of a broader rankings kind of obsession, and, like it or not, U.S. News is the ranking of record.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's a very concrete example. I can see where that would be driven home for you very concretely, so I don't want to put you on the spot or put me on the spot, but I'll ask this anyway as we try to draw to a close. At the end of the day, are we going to agree or disagree that, whatever value the rankings bring

to higher education in society—whatever that value is—is that worth the perpetuation of a flawed and fundamentally inequitable rating system?

Tom: I don't know, Kelvin. Yeah, we can rage against the machine all we want, but we're all in the machine.

Kelvin: We're all in the machine. We're all plugged into the Matrix.

Tom: Yeah. Unfortunately, I guess, but again, I'm going to say I don't mind having the quality of our program assessed and evaluated and even ranked as long as we think that the criteria are fair and objective and, again, we've done fairly well. So, yay for us, but I don't necessarily think that excuses the major flaws that are in this process.

Kelvin: Yeah. Well, fair enough. You want to try to land this plane?

Tom: Yeah, I was just going to suggest that maybe I should try and sum it up little bit. So, as we've been saying, the U.S. News rankings for higher education institutions, they're probably not going away anytime soon. However, it would behoove all of us who care about higher education to turn a critical eye toward how these rankings are used and talked about in our fields and especially with the public.

Kelvin: That's fair. That's fair. I think so. Gosh, we're about at time. You think we slide in a plug, or do you think we let it go until next time?

Tom: Let's do it.

Kelvin: All right. Okay. Well, this is the shameless self-promotion part of the podcast, so we received an Apple Podcast review recently that we thought we might share and appreciate publicly. A listener with the online handle of Steve-at-Home—I don't think it's Colbert, I really don't—generously titled their review, "One of the very best podcasts about online learning with an emphasis on learning," and then this listener went on to say, "The hosts enjoyed digging into the concepts and mechanics of online learning." This is clearly a very recent review because they said, "They've had some excellent guests, most recently Dr. Shawna Dark, Chief Academic Technology Officer, who was interviewed about this new CATO role at Berkeley and about how people might prepare themselves to become CATOs at other institutions," which was the episode that precedes this one. That was good, so thank you for those very kind words, Steve-at-Home. We appreciate you taking the time to plug the show, and to everyone else, we try to find all the reviews that you might leave behind, so if you're so inclined, please do rate and review wherever you listen to or watch TOPcast.

Tom: Yeah. That's very kind. Thank you. Appreciate that. Yeah, and we appreciate all of you for listening. My coffee has dwindled. Thank you very much, Kelvin. I appreciate it, and I guess, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.