TOPcast Episode 116 Bonus Clip:
Interview with Dr. Stephen C. Ehrmann

Kelvin Thompson: Hi, this is Kelvin for TOPcast. As an accompaniment to Episode 116, Tom and I would like to offer to everyone a brief bonus clip with Dr. Stephen C. Ehrmann from late 2021, in which Steve reflects on the impact of the famous article he co-wrote in 1996 with Arthur Chickering. The title of that article, if you're not familiar, is “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever.” And in this clip, Steve shares a couple of delightful anecdotes surrounding the writing of the influential article.

Kelvin: It occurs to me that we are at UCF. We're celebrating our 25th year of offering online teaching and learning, and it occurs to me that you have a 25 anniversary too, of sorts. The famous “Chickering & Ehrmann” paper that I know in my early days at UCF, we were quoting, and citing, and anchoring a lot of work around that. I just wonder, 25 years in, what do you think about that work now?

Stephen Ehrmann: Well, I think it's as true as ever, and it's as applicable to online as it is to face-to-face. What had emerged, from my point of view, was an earlier time in the '70s and early '80s where people tended to attribute educational outcomes to particular technologies. There was actually an article published, I don't think it was a very good one, but an article that was published, trying to answer the question, do you learn to write better with a Macintosh or with a PC?

Kelvin: Right, right, right. [Laughter]

Steve: Those were the kinds of things that people were asking, and it became clear through experience and the literature that the only thing that matters to student learning outcomes is what students do when they're learning. Period. End of thought. The value of technology is insofar as it enables or encourages students to do those things, which are the kinds of things that would help them learn more, or contrariwise, if it discourages them from doing things that would help them to learn more, then that's a negative educational value. Chickering and Gamson had, about a decade earlier, come up with a list of “Seven Principles of Good Practice.” Art and I were talking, and he said he was interested in writing something that would somehow relate this to the educational uses of technology. He already knew that I was working along those lines. So, I was excited, and we did it. I will say, though, to correct what I just said to make it a little more factually accurate, my actual response to Chickering was, “There's no need to write anything like that. It's obvious. [Kelvin laughs] I mean, you just look at the seven principles. It's clear that do you want to have students' interaction? Well, why not email? If you want to have active learning, why not work...” He said, "No, I don't think it's that obvious." So, we wrote it. It was actually just published in an association newsletter. The other pivotal event, though, was this was right at the beginning of the World Wide Web. This association, which was called the American Association for Higher Education, AAHE, had just established its website. I went to the WebSmith, and I said, "Is it possible that this article could somehow be attached to this one-page website?" They said, "Sure." So, the

original URL for the article was www.aahe.org/ehrmann.hgm. Pretty soon, there were 4,000- 5,000 hits a month on it, and it's really remained popular ever since. Influential, I think, ever since. A lot of dissertations have been built on these ideas.

Kelvin: That's fantastic. Thank you for that retrospective, your looking back, comments on relevance today, but also just the delightful colored commentary of the moment in which that work emerged and the context. And I agree; I think it is... I was skimming it again, I don't know, within the last month, I think, and finding relevance, just as you said. So, thank you for that work. Thank you for this new work. And thank you for working, even though technically you don't have to. [Laughter]