TOPcast Episode 116: 3Fold Gains and the Improvement of Higher Ed

Narrator: When you know what you want for the future, you need the present to line up with your goals. UCF Online offers more than a hundred fully online programs in healthcare, engineering, criminal justice, and more. So, you can get to your future and beyond.

(Musical transition)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Greetings Kelvin Thompson.

Kelvin: Greetings, Thomas B. Cavanagh.

Tom: Oh, yeah. You threw the B in there. That's good, yeah. Appreciate that. That's my author handle for my novels. Might as well throw a shameless plug in here as well. [Laughter]

Kelvin: You should do that. Go out and buy Tom's books, would you?

Tom: Yeah. For those who may be new to the podcast or maybe didn't know this, I've written a few novels. They've done okay. If you like mystery, private eye novels, they are under Thomas B. Cavanagh. So, check it out.

Kelvin: So, you're not confused with anybody else.

Tom: That's right, yeah. There is a famous actor, Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: Who?

Tom: The Canadian actor. It's spelled exactly the same way. We're about the same age. He was on *The Flash*. He was in *Ed*, the TV series *Ed*. He was in the *Yogi Bear* movie.

Kelvin: Yep, Ranger Smith.

Tom: I know his whole filmography.

Kelvin: I wonder if he is as conversant with your vitae as you are with his?

Tom: I like to pretend that he is, yeah. [Laughter]

Kelvin: So, he has to distance himself like, "Oh yeah, I'm not Thomas B. Cavanagh." [Laughter]

Tom: Right. I wonder if he finds me when he Googles himself, yeah.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: It's unlikely.

Kelvin: It's multiverse madness.

Tom: Yeah, maybe. [Laughter]

Kelvin: It's like that, it could be. It could be like that.

Tom: Yeah, but that is apropos of nothing today, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Oh, that's the alternate name of our podcast, “In Some Other Universe.”

Tom: That's right, yeah. Apropos of nothing. [Kelvin sips his coffee.] We'll add that also to the bands list. The list of band names.

Kelvin: “Adults & Gurgles.”

Tom: Yeah, “Adults & Gurgles.” All right. So, I heard some slurpage.

Kelvin: I'll try to do better. I just try to bring local color. But I have heard from at least one colleague who like, "Yeah, I don't know if I want to hear the slurpage." I'm like, “Oh, dang it.” Another minion in the Tom Fan Club who like, "I don't like to hear chewing or drinking."

Tom: Yeah, I got a thing about that. Yeah, not a fan of chewing in microphones. So, you'll never hear me doing that.

Kelvin: But the same person did say, "I don't think Tom drinks the coffee. I was watching the video."

Tom: Oh, that's not true!

Kelvin: "And he just, he just pretends." And I'm like, "No, no, he drinks the coffee. He drinks the coffee."

Tom: Let me assure you, the buzz I walk out of the studio with is evidence of the coffee that I drink. So, we are drinking coffee. [Laughter]

Kelvin: We are drinking coffee.

Tom: And as a reminder to all of our listeners, this is a collegial conversation over a shared cup of coffee. Kelvin, you always try to bring some thematically selected coffee, like a good coffee sommelier.

Kelvin: I try.

Tom: I imagine that today is no exception.

Kelvin: Well, we try. So, we'll see. So, you probably want to know what this one is.

Tom: I do.

Kelvin: So, this one, Tom, is a single origin Columbia from Ligature Coffee right here in Orlando, Florida. I thought one of the impressive things about Ligature is they explicitly strive for transparency in the entire process and pricing in sourcing their coffee. They have a whole webpage on transparency by itself. But I will make three comments about this coffee. First, this coffee is from a legit high quality craft coffee roaster. Ligature is the real deal. Second, as with some other roasters, Ligature makes their coffee… We might say more accessible to a wider customer base by selling through local cafes in addition to selling directly. This coffee came to us from XO Coffee Shop in Kissimmee, Florida. And finally, thirdly, this coffee was a gift from a friend. So, free to me, and free to you.

Tom: Oh, wow. All right.

Kelvin: Yes. So, how's the coffee, and how is the connection to today's episode?

Tom: The coffee's good as always. You are an excellent sommelier of the bean, so it tastes good. And how is the connection? So, you said maybe two things that jumped out to me. One was, it was a gift from a friend, and so you're doing an interview with a colleague and friends.

Kelvin: That's true.

Tom: And that, what did you say? It makes it more accessible by going, not just to the direct, but also…

Kelvin: To the cafes.

Tom: Yeah, so accessibility is a theme that we're going to touch on today. So, those are two maybe hooks.

Kelvin: Yeah, low and no cost affects affordability. Access is a thing, and this is a legit high quality coffee roaster, and those are three things that we do aspire to in our work. And yes, in today's interview, our guest is going to talk about those three things among others. Plus, as a bonus, I think he tries to pull the curtain back and bring some transparency to the process of higher education. So, we will be talking today about how efforts around access, affordability, and quality can be combined to improve higher education.

Tom: Well, why don't we eliminate the suspense, and I share who you did talk to Kelvin?

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: You interviewed Dr. Stephen C. Ehrmann a while back. Actually it was in 2021. This was…

Kelvin: The very end of 2021, though.

Tom: Yeah, this was another one that's been on the shelf a little too long. [Laughter]

Kelvin: We're trying to do better.

Tom: Yeah. Dr. Ehrmann, now technically retired, is a former grant maker, consultant, and Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at George Washington University. He was founding Vice President of the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group and Director of the Flashlight Program for the Evaluation of Educational Uses of Technology. He has held positions with the Annenburg/CPB project and FIPSE. Seasoned listeners may find it notable that Dr. Ehrmann is the "Ehrmann" in the famous 1996 citation, "Chickering & Ehrmann," which was a follow up to the maybe arguably even more famous 1987 citation of "Chickering & Gamson." Steve's most recent book is "Pursuing Quality, Access and Affordability: A Field Guide to Improving Higher Education." You guys spent some time talking about that. Kelvin, is there anything you want to say about the interview before we jump in?

Kelvin: Maybe two quick things. One, this is one of those dumb things, it wasn't until the very end of the interview where I heard Steve say his own last name that I realized for 20 something years, I've been pronouncing his last name wrong in my head and including on mic. So it is "airman" and not "urman", as I keep saying.

Tom: He's being too polite to point it out.

Kelvin: That's exactly right. So, oops, sorry. Secondly, listeners, we are sliding in, we don't do this very often, sliding into the actual podcast feed a little five-minute bonus clip where Steve and I talk about a lot of the context around that Chickering & Ehrmann paper. It was really fascinating. I liked it, but we didn't keep that in this interview. We made it separate, so you should go listen to that.

Tom: Cool. All right. So through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Steve Ehrmann.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Hi, Steve. So happy to have you join us on TOPcast today.

Steve Ehrmann: Well, it's a real treat for me. I've been listening to TOPcast for years, and it's wonderful to find myself on it. Thanks very much for inviting me.

Kelvin: Well, that's fantastic. That's great, thank you. High praise indeed. As you know and I know, but our listeners may not know, we've had occasion to interact, you and me, you and some other colleagues here at UCF over a period of time because of this project that you were working on that has finally seen the light of day. Your new book, “Pursuing…,” would you still call it new? “Pursuing Quality, Access and Affordability: A Field Guide to Improving Higher Education.” You nicely pulled UCF in as one of several case studies. So, I'm just so happy for you that this has emerged into the world. So A, congratulations, and B, I was wondering if you could just kind of talk for a moment about what led you to that project?

Steve: Well, it's interesting. I've been seeing examples, I think going back at least to the '90s, where using, let's say online interaction, would enable both an increase in access and an improvement in quality. I was also aware that a lot of people thought that was impossible. Their feeling, the sort of knee jerk feeling was if you're trying to improve access, you must be lowering your standards one way or the other. If you're trying to improve quality, and of course, a lot of the early technology projects were about really upping the pedagogical stakes, simulations, and so on. Other people's knee jerk reaction would be, "Well, that's elitist because who can afford computers? Who can afford this? They wouldn't have had the background for that." Then Carol Twigg came along with her course redesign project and was arguing that you could have both quality improvement and affordability improvement. So, I guess starting about 10 years ago, I was more often hearing people talk about quality, and affordability, and access. But if I tried to dig underneath it, they were three different agendas. You've got your quality steps, then you come from faculty. You've got access steps, that's probably from staff. You've got affordability, well that's budget makers. That just didn't seem right to me. By conceiving each of these things separately, they could really compete with each other for attention, competing with each other for resources. Plus, I'd never heard an institution claim that they actually had improved quality, and access, and affordability. Yet, at the base of my mind was a conviction that there should be a simple interrelated set of things that could be done, which would have all three benefits, as a consequence of the one set of actions without saying, "Well, this element is specialized for this, and that is specialized for that." I decided when I retired that I wanted to look into this, I could give myself the freedom now to do that. Happily for me, I went to a meeting at the University of Maryland, where Tim Rennick of Georgia State University came. He basically said, "Here's what we're doing now that's enabling us to improve quality, and access, and affordability, and here's the story of how that capacity developed over the last 15 or 20 years." At that point, I'd just been sort of trying to imagine what it was I was looking for, and suddenly Tim had described it. Not that they were doing it the only way, but it was that idea of the story of how, over the years, what was a more or less ordinary institution could develop the capacity to do this extraordinary thing was what the book should be developed around. Then I started thinking, "Well, let me see if I can find five or maybe six institutions that do this each in their own fashion, each emphasizing something the others might have missed. So, that together they would tell a more unified story about a strategy that almost any institution could use to begin

moving in this direction." In fact, one satisfying thing about that was to realize that most institutions probably have already taken some steps in this direction. They just don't know it, yet.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's interesting. I mean, what a great seizing of the opportunity of your retirement. Lesser individuals might be fishing, or golfing, or binge watching something. But you're out diving deep into multiple institutions. I know from just interacting in your research process, I know you dove deeply. [Laughter]

Steve: Yeah, we did it together. You and me, and Tom, and some other folk at Central Florida. Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, I know that the resulting work reflects a lot of deep thought, and it was not a cursory look. I think you did, what is it? Is it six? Five? Six institutions that are in the case studies?

Steve: Six.

Kelvin: Yeah, which is great. As you say that it's, there's not one story, there's multiple stories, and you can pull out themes. Look, people should buy your book, right? So, listeners, please go buy Steve's book. So, we don't want to spoiler it too much, but having done the deep dive, and having written the book, and having released the book, what are your takeaways? At least from looking at six different institutions through that those lenses of the threefold gains, and considering quality, and access, and affordability, what do you walk away with, and what lessons do you have for all of us?

Steve: Well, let me first say that five of them were similar to each other in an important way, and one of them was different. The five that were similar include Central Florida. I think almost any listener to this podcast would probably be at something like one of those five. So, let me describe them first, and then I'll just note briefly about why the sixth was different. All of them are using teaching and learning activities like what have been called high impact practices and other forms of active and collaborative learning. There's been research for decades that kind of approach to teaching and learning improves outcomes. Starting about a dozen years ago, however, research began to come out that some of these things like learning communities, undergraduate research, capstone courses, service learning and so on, not only improved quality for potentially everybody who's taking part, but are especially advantageous for students who in one way or another are starting behind. Students from underserved groups whose education before college might not have been the best and so on. That they actually make greater gains and can potentially end up having graduation rates that are similar to students from more privileged groups. What I first realized from listening to Tim Rennick talk was that if you've done those things, if you have higher graduation rates for everybody, well, that's at least a hint that the quality of learning has gone up. You've got the equity of access, but students are now graduating faster. They're graduating in higher numbers. Attrition rates are down. All those things save money and time for students. To some degree, they save money and time, and earn money for institutions. Georgia State's a big place, that

something like 25,000 undergraduates, they gain two or three million dollars of revenue annually for every percentage point increase in graduation rates. So, if you go from 50 to 51%, you've got two or three million dollars more of revenue coming in. So, that's sort of the basic model, Step One. Step Two is to recognize that these kinds of changes in the fabric of teaching and learning. I don't mean you're going away from having courses or something like that, but significant changes from a pedagogy that's based on faculty explaining things to students while students take notes. That kind of thing is hard to do at scale and to sustain unless there are also organizational changes.

Kelvin: Right.

Steve: What I was seeing at all these institutions was that some of those organizational adaptations were inward facing, faculty reward systems, a center like the Center for Distributed Learning at Central Florida. Others had to do with the way the institution interacted with its wider world. So, for example, if e-portfolios begin to be used as a way of communicating, what it is that students are capable of, and what they've actually achieved in a way that communicates more to employers, that's an interaction with the wider world. Changing transcripts is recruiting students using a different image for the institution, recruiting faculty and staff, while perhaps boasting about some of the things the institution's already doing, and talking about the promise of what could be coming next, and why it would be a very exciting thing to be working for this university at this time. Those are all kinds of changes in the way that a university or college interacts with its wider world or with its operating environment. In retrospect, the organizational changes are just as important as the teaching and learning changes. That was, I think, is counterintuitive for a lot of folks. If you want to improve education, you improve teaching. End of sentence, you improve learning activities. That's it. No, these two things have to co-evolve, and that's the third aspect of this, and the last I'll mention for the moment, which is that this capacity, these educational strategies, the organizational foundations, these interactions with the wider world were built up element by element over years. The institutions that I was looking at 15 to 20 years to get to where they are now, in terms of really having an elaborate, what I call constellation of educational strategies, organizational foundations, and wider interactions, which all reinforce each other, that takes a long time. The exception to that is if you start a brand new institution and design it this way from scratch.

Kelvin: Is that a clue as to the nature of the sixth case study? Or is there some other way that the sixth institution is quite different than the other five?

Steve: Good question. The sixth institution was created from scratch, but so was one of the five. The difference is, I mentioned that all of this is powered educationally by forms of collaborative and other kinds of active learning. Five of the institutions are getting more and more out of student-student interactions of various sorts. Peer critique of one another's work, student facilitated small group work, students working in teams on those service learning projects, or in the capstone projects. That's very powerful. If you, the traditional model of one faculty member sitting in front of 50 or 100 students, and the main line of communication is faculty member broadcasting out students, which by the way, was the first form of distance learning, broadcasting to the back row of the room,

not much peer-to-peer interaction going on. But an institution like Central Florida, like the others that I studied, can adopt pedagogies, which involve more of this peer interaction and thereby make educational progress. The sixth institution, or the sixth program I should say, is called College for America. It's a program at Southern New Hampshire University, and it's individualized. So, it is using project-based learning and problem-based learning, which are high impact practices. But the interaction among learners is more social than it is academic. That is, it's not within the context of an assignment, let's say that we're going to do together, or we're competing against each other to do, or I'm advising you or whatever, the students are going along their own pathways at their own pace. So, there are other things about a competence-based program, which this is, that are their claim, that this is how we are going to improve quality, and access, and affordability. So, that's the big difference is that an institutional pursuit of threefold gains, which is building on human interaction, and especially peer to peer, and peer to near peer interaction, as five of them do, or is it one which is sacrificing a lot of that peer to peer in order to get the advantage of the student be able to go at his or her own pace, working on things that they're now ready to work on that are challenging enough to learn from, but not so challenging as to defeat them.

Kelvin: That's interesting, and that makes sense. As you've eloquently articulated, the difference between the nature of your five institutional programs, and the one and just the way that so many of us, as you say, carry out our teaching and learning activity makes total sense. It's been a delight, Steve, to have you join us and share just some highlights from your book. For our listeners or watchers, again, I'll give you a little plug here. The book is "Pursuing Quality, Access and Affordability: A Field Guide to Improving Higher Education." 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]

Steve: Well, you're welcome. Again, my hat's off to you guys. What you've done with TOPcast and what Central Florida has done over the last 25 years has been remarkable. Just to try to put this in one sentence, I think you've taken this idea of pursuing threefold gains to a whole 'nother level with particular ways in which you've used online. That's one of the things that's in this UCF chapter in my book.

Kelvin: Well, thank you for those kind remarks regarding UCF, and what a great teaser for folks to go out and get the book, and learn more about UCF, and the other institutions. Thanks so much for joining us today, Steve.

Steve: Thank you, Kelvin. I appreciate it.

(Musical transition)

Tom: So Kelvin, that was your interview with Dr. Steve Ehrmann.

Kelvin: It was. He's a legit, experienced, I guess, elder of the field at this point, right?

Tom: Yeah, I mean, he's definitely got a lot of credibility in the space and having… You and I both participated in the research of his book. He put a lot of time and effort into getting that right.

Kelvin: Absolutely, he did. If he did this the same way everywhere else, he did here…

Tom: Yeah. Well, it's no wonder his work has been so widely cited. He's the real deal.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, one of the things that struck me, as I listened to that, was his use of the framing of the iron triangle. I don't know if he mentioned that word, that term, but that's what he was talking about with quality, cost, and access. We talk about that a lot. We've talked about it in previous podcast episodes, and it's something that really resonates with us here. I was pleased to hear that that was kind of a central theme for Steve's book.

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, I didn't get into that differentiation with him in the conversation. I know, seeing an excerpt of his book, I know he actually uses the phrase, "iron triangle" in the book and does some framing, but I don't know if he takes it apart completely in the book or not. But I kind of wish now I had asked him a little bit, but I'm assuming something here based on some things he did say in the conversation, there seems to be a little bit of a whole versus some of the parts thing. I think, in his view, the threefold gains, there's a synergy there, right? He certainly talked about… you could pursue those three things at an institutional level and get good benefit, but not have them really well-coordinated.

Tom: Yeah. Another thing that he mentioned that caught my attention was his reference to Dr. Carol Twigg and her National Center for Academic Transformation. I mean, besides being aware of her work, it's also worth pointing out that when Carol retired, she sort of bequeathed her archives of her writings as well as the archive of the NCAT website to UCF. So, we are now honored to be the custodians of that work. So, if you go to our website, you can access all of Carol Twigg's writings, and work, and all of her case studies that she did through NCAT.

Kelvin: That's really cool. We'll put a link in the show notes, but honestly you could just Google "National Center for Academic Transformation," and you're going to go right to the page. It'll work. No, that's cool. That's cool. Any comment on the sixth institution thing? I think it's interesting his point of… there's not one way to kind of pursue this kind of stuff, so let's look at it from the vantage point of six different institutions, and they're very different kinds of institutions, despite Steve saying, "Well, five are the same and one's different," I mean, they all are different.

Tom: Yeah, they are. But I kind of get what he was saying. I mean, College for America was the different one, which is a spinoff of Southern New Hampshire…

Kelvin: Very different.

Tom: Total competency based model. It was associates degrees. It's a really interesting model to look at if you're interested, but the others are you could make an argument that they're somewhat birds of a feather. But I mean, he mentioned Georgia State, and we're at UCF when we're both in the book. Georgia State hasn't achieved their improvement in outcomes by the kind of digital learning investments we've made. They've been really into the analytics, and advising, and kind of intrusive kind of student support. It's been different paths to kind of co-opt Steve's metaphor, but different paths to get to that same destination.

Kelvin: Yeah, and that's right. I was listening back to it. I don't even remember this in the conversation when we actually had it, but I was struck by how Steve kept emphasizing student interaction, again, the kind of legit framing of teaching and learning, and really holding a high bar for that. But I think he kind of makes the point that a lot of the gains, right pedagogically in that context, are really about interaction between and among students, and faculty, and so forth, which again, is why College for America stands out because it's an individualized kind of process.

Tom: I don't know if this, I mean, this is probably just pure coincidence, but it's interesting. He picked six institutions, and we were part of the Making Digital Learning Work Report that was put together by Boston Consulting Group, funded by Gates Foundation and run through Arizona State. But there were six institutions that were profiled there as well.

Kelvin: It's a very helpful number.

Tom: Yeah. I guess, I don't know. It just seems to maybe fit, but all right, Kelvin, as I see my coffee winding down, do you want to try to give us the bottom line?

Kelvin: I will take a swing at it. So, we might say that as higher education institutions continue to differentiate themselves, and the ways they seek to serve students, studying unique approaches of others to solving challenges like affordability, access, and quality can be instructive, and as Steve says, can help us improve higher education. What do you think of that?

Tom: Yeah, absolutely, and thank him for his work there. I think this will be an important contribution to the field. So, thanks to Steve, thanks for including us in the process, and UCF in the book as a case study. Thank you for the coffee.

Kelvin: You bet.

Tom: Maybe I can be indulged with one quick plug/reminder?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: So dear listener, did you know that each episode of TOPcast comes with its very own text transcript?

Kelvin: I knew that.

Tom: Yeah. Along with a whole lot of other great resources out at the Show Notes. But speaking specifically, the transcripts, they're valuable for many purposes, including easily capturing and sharing an episode quote, because we are so quotable.

Kelvin: Hint, hint. At least our interviewees are.

(Musical transition)

Tom: Yeah, quote Steve. Transcripts are linked from inside each episode's notes on your listening app or online at topcast.online.ucf.edu. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I am Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.