TOPcast Episode 118:
Observations on the Online Education Job Market

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. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hey, Tom. I'm glad to know I'm in the right place.

Tom: Me, too. Although we are both in different places. So, due to circumstance, we are both doing this remotely again, but we persevere. And again, never let a podcast listener down.

Kelvin: That's right. We're in. I'm in the right virtual place.

Tom: That's right, that's right.

Kelvin: That's a thing now, I think.

Tom: Me, too.

Kelvin: Virtual place, that's a weird concept. Yeah, I think.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: It's like head space. I'm in the right head space. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Yeah. Headcanon. I like headcanon. That's a good one, too.

Tom: Yeah, all right. So, I see you sipping. Just as a reminder to our listeners, this is a collegial conversation among colleagues over a shared cup of

coffee. The coffee thing is our thing. Mostly your thing. So, because we're separate…

Kelvin: It's a shared cup of coffee thing.

Tom: It's a shared cup.

Kelvin: So, yeah.

Tom: Yeah, that's true. So, I do have a cup, but it's a different cup and a different contents than what you have. Yours, I presume, are thematically selected, if you are true to form.

Kelvin: We try, we try. What about yours? What you got?

Tom: I'll share my very loose thematic association when we're done.

Kelvin: Okay, leave us hanging in little suspense. All right, that's fine. Well, my coffee today, Tom, is a single-origin Kenya from a coffee roaster called Regalia Coffee in New York City. I do love that name. I always like that word even, "Regalia." I found a comment from the co-founder of the roasting company emphasizing the "regal" aspect of "regalia." Now, those of us in higher ed, of course, undoubtedly think of academic robes and accoutrement when we hear the word. But Regalia's founder was inspired by a coffee farmer, I think it was in Guatemala, who saw coffee beans as jewels and treasures of the earth. That was like his inspiration, his metaphor. So, this founder loved that. And so, Regalia. So, I came across this coffee roaster due to an awareness campaign, raising money for the roaster, when sadly their facilities burned down there in New York. Regalia also housed equipment used by 30 other coffee businesses. It was like a coffee cooperative along with being their workplace. So, the coffee community is rallying in response to the disruptive event. If our listeners are compassionately moved by that story, they can certainly find opportunities to help in the show notes for this episode. My coffee tastes good to me. I am curious if you can find a connection to today's episode, and I can't wait to hear your coffee in connection.

Tom: Yeah, you can wait, trust me. [Laughter] All right, so that's an interesting story, and sorry to hear about their troubles. So, you said something about the community rallying, that stuck out to me. I'm guessing that there's something to do with kind of this shared challenge, this shared crisis that they're having. Because I think those two things are germane to our conversation, today, a little bit.

Kelvin: Yep, yeah. That's exactly what I was thinking. That plus, I just like saying the word regalia, and it makes me think of graduation with the robes, and

the hoods, and stoles, and all that stuff. So, I figured that, despite the jewels and treasures of the earth, there's some invocation of pomp and circumstance in there. But yes, that's exactly right. What you got?

Tom: Yeah, all right. So, maybe I should just say what we're talking about today, which is kind of, again, we've talked about this before, but this is a slightly different take on it. This idea of the Great Resignation and what is what's going on in the ed tech, higher ed workspace, as far as employment space goes. [Laughter] So, I was looking for something new to replace what I typically have, but I didn't find it. So, I ended up hiring an old standby, which is my San Francisco Bay decaf. But yeah, I thought I would have a new hire, but I kept, I was able to retain what my existing incumbent was.

Kelvin: Yeah, okay. I follow that. I see what you did there. Although…

Tom: I was stretching it, stretching it far. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Although, I was following that narrative thread, I was like, "Oh, Tom branched out. He got some other kind of new coffee. And no, he did not." [Laughter]

Tom: Well, I looked in the pantry and I was like, "Nope, I've had all of these before." [Laughter]

Kelvin: It actually involves shopping.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: To replenish, which is maybe, if you keep doing what you've been doing, you're going to get what you've keep getting.

Tom: Well, a guy, a man knows what he likes.

Kelvin: That's also true, and I respect that. I go to places often where I look at the menu dutifully every single time and end up at the same destination. [Laughter]

Tom: Yep, I do that too.

Kelvin: So, I do that. So, as you say, this is a kind of a springboard off of an offshoot of that, maybe that Episode 109 topic, where we addressed sort of the potential impact on online higher ed by the so-called, “Great Resignation,” or some say, “Great Reshuffling, Great Reprioritization.” But we were inspired because we had a listener who wrote in, and they said, "As an experienced instructional designer who recently started

exploring the job market again, they wanted to have a response from us to how to make sense of the higher education instructional design job market explicitly."

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So, we're taking a shot at it.

Tom: And perhaps they'd like to come to Orlando and work. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Yeah, there you go. [Laughter]

Tom: There you go. Well, I'll just… self-serving side comments.

Kelvin: That's right, that's right.

Tom: So, to that end, Kelvin, you recently interviewed our friend, Megan Raymond. Megan is the Senior Director of Membership and Programs at WCET, which is, I always describe it as an acronym within an acronym.

Kelvin: It is.

Tom: It is the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies. Unlike many of our professional associations that we belong to, and we do belong to WCET, they provide a job posting service for their members, and we have posted jobs there many times. So, you both spoke a lot about trends in these job postings for all kinds of digital learning professionals, including instructional designers, as our listener pointed out, but not just instructional designers. I look at those postings all the time just to get a sense, not for me personally, but for what's going on in the space.

Kelvin: Thank you. Thank you for clarifying that. We all appreciate that. We can all breathe a little easier. Yeah, agreed. All that, yep. [Laughter]

Tom: So, is there anything you want to point out before we listen to your interview with Megan?

Kelvin: I don't think so. I think it stands on its own fine. I enjoyed speaking with Megan and as you said, valued colleague. We'll let it stand on its own, and we'll maybe make some comments on the backside.

Tom: Awesome. So, through the magic of podcast time travel here is your interview with Megan Raymond.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Hi, Megan. Glad you're with us on TOPcast, today.

Megan Raymond: Hi, thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Kelvin: Even if “here” is separated by thousands of miles. But we feel so close because we're looking through the virtual digital window at each other.

Megan: Right, right.

Kelvin: Well, you and I were talking, not too long ago, about one of the things that your organization WCET does, like some professional associations do, is you all will distribute, promote job postings from the field. We were talking about this recently that there are folks who are interested in what's happening. What observations are there to make in our digital teaching and learning field, our online education professionals, and so forth. So, we were just talking, maybe we'll have a little on-mic conversation about that. So, thanks for being willing to have that conversation.

Megan: Absolutely. Thank you so much for the invitation. As you know, we do select job posts from our members, and we share those out. So, it's a great member benefit so people can see what jobs are out there, and what jobs are emerging. Instructional designers seems to be the hot ticket item, at least from what we're seeing. If anybody has an instructional design certificate or credential, they could easily find a job immediately, and make some pretty nice demands around that. I don't know what you're seeing, what positions you have available?

Kelvin: That's a good place to maybe to start right there. I mean, I certainly hear word on the street things like that. So, I was going to ask what kind of patterns you've seen, but maybe we'll start there. So, of all the things that get posted, you certainly see “Instructional Designer,” or I would imagine related similar kind of titles as sort of the predominant thing, right now.

Megan: Right, that seems to be where the most demand is, instructional design, learning experience designer. The job descriptions are becoming more robust with certain perks and benefits associated with those. So, we're seeing more that are remote-based. Some that are specific to the institution needing to be placed-based. But more and more, I would say fewer qualifications, more perks in the job descriptions around instructional design and learner design.

Kelvin: That is a little bit of framing right there. Right. So, say that fewer qualifications, more perks.

Megan: Right, right.

Kelvin: Wow.

Megan: So, that seems to be where I'm seeing most of the demand. I know rural institutions are really struggling with recruiting instructional designers. So, that's where the allure of a remote position is very appealing for both the institution that's hiring and trying to fill those positions, as well as the worker. But, I think we talked about this, too, is if you are looking to be a remote employee, there's also a lot of corporate opportunities. So, that might be much more appealing because the pay could be more competitive. The benefits could be more competitive. The job security might be more competitive in a corporate environment versus at an institution. So, that's the flip side of the coin.

Kelvin: Are you seeing for institutions that, whether it's instructional designer or any other kind of position, on this topic I'll ask? Are you seeing for institutions that aren't doing remote, are you seeing them selling themselves in some other way to try to, like you said, perks a while ago? I mean, other than remote, what kind of things are you seeing?

Megan: I just saw a really interesting post from an institution where they're hiring for two face-to-face positions. The incentive was that you could choose which of the locations you wanted to be in. So, you have to be physically there, but you had the choice of two pretty nice locals. So, I thought that was an interesting framing, too, is apply. Then let's see where you want to be situated. I think learner benefits like access to course content, or certificates, or degrees is also really a nice benefit that's being offered. That makes sense for higher ed, right? We should be offering that. Come to our institution, and up-level your knowledge, and your certificates. Speaking of credentials and certificates, there's more and more around microcredentials. I'm trying to figure out, but I don't know where that's being situated at the institution. So, for some, the momentum is coming from faculty. From some, it's coming from administration, some it's coming from the career center. So, that's something that I'm trying to keep my eye on, too, is there is this momentum toward microcredentials and initiatives within an institution, but where is that going to end up living? Because right now it's just sort of ad hoc and tacked onto that category of other duties as assigned, I think.

Kelvin: I think those initiatives do sometimes vary within institutions, but I am curious. So, when you say you're seeing more microcredentials, do you mean positions that are to work in support of microcredentials? Or, in terms of those qualifications, people are like, "Hey, if you've got a microcredential in instructional design, we would take you." Or, do you see both those things?

Megan: That's a really good point of clarification. I think it's interesting because in higher ed, we are all about starting these microcredential initiatives. Then we aren't really as quick to reflect that we will take that as a certificate or a credential when we're looking for employees. Maybe that tide is starting to shift a little bit? But I think, from what I'm seeing, is there's more institutions that are really interested in taking on microcredential initiatives. And a few reasons, it's a compelling revenue source if you can make it work, right? I never understood why we said, "Hey, high five, here's your diploma. Maybe we'll ask you for money in a few years." When they're already invested in our organization, they see the value of the institution, and we already have a relationship with them. Why don't we keep kind of saying, "Hey, here's something that matches with your degree, and it's a bonus on top of it. So, reinvest and we'll reinvest in you." So, that's the kind of thing I'm seeing is that more institutions really want to investigate and start the process of launching their microcredential program because they do see that value. But I think it'll be a little while before we really start to see that reflected across institutional job descriptions. I don't know. What do you think?

Kelvin: Oh, that's quite possible in that way. Higher ed institutions have a bit of a conservative bent it seems like to me, even the most innovative. Like we are going to stand up stuff, but well, no, you need to have seven degrees and 50 years of experience. [Laughter]

Megan: Right, right.

Kelvin: Although I was curious to circle back around, you said earlier that you thought you were seeing more perks listed, but fewer qualifications. What comes to your mind when you say fewer qualifications? Just like a undergraduate degree versus a master's, or a master's versus a…

Megan: Well, it seemed before that there was a long list of skills and qualifications. You needed to understand all these different systems and processes associated with whatever the requirements were, and now it tends to be broader. Do you have an instructional design certificate? Do you understand ADDIE? Do you understand X, Y, Z? And show me some evidence of the work that you've done. So, the qualifications, I think, are getting shorter. The expectation is still broad. Also, I'm starting to see more and more where it says, "If you don't match all of these qualifications, still apply and show where your experience translates." I think that's something that we've talked about for a long time, is that everyone has transferable experience. We need to help them understand how to articulate that. But now, it's actually being pushed out there saying, "It's okay if you don't check all of these boxes, but show us what experience you have that translates." I think that's exciting and refreshing.

Kelvin: That's interesting. Yeah, that is very interesting, I think. It reminds me of the early days. I was hired as an instructional designer in 1998. At that time, in those first few years, maybe five years or so, we certainly saw a lot of hires, at our institution and others, where folks who maybe came out of K-12 systems, but then had a bent toward instructional technology, educational technology, or other college contexts as instructors, but had a bent toward instructional technology, educational technology, there was sort of a pivot. And it's exactly that point you're making about the transferable skills. I think in many of the intervening years, we've seen sort of the rise of the kind of the professionalism, professionalization of those titles, and of the field, the subfield of say, instructional design, instructional technologist. So, sometimes I've heard people talk about, "Oh, if you're not an exact match, well then, see you. Have a nice day." But you're seeing a trend of like, "No, no, no, don't walk away. Talk to us. Talk to us. We'll be happy to talk to you."

Megan: I think that just really opens up the market for those that are hiring, and those who are on the other side. I think there's pros and cons to being remote, and face-to-face, and we go back and forth all the time about what seems to make the most sense for our team. But I think when you really can look at a global marketplace when you're hiring for somebody, that's exciting. You're not limited, especially in rural areas, to those that are willing and can afford to live in your small town.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Megan: So, I think there's tremendous opportunity, but there's also a lot of caveats.

Kelvin: Any other patterns? Can I pick your brain a little bit? Your experience there as we begin to wrap up. Any other maybe kind of quick insights, like unusual positions? You mentioned instructional designer and similar, but any other kind of experience, sorry, any other kind of positions that you've seen pop up? Any other creative framing of like, "Hey, we can't offer remote, but we'll offer you more money." [Laughter]

Megan: Well, I was thinking about that today is it wasn't too long ago that we saw this research that said the best way to have a productive team is to just get rid of all the office walls, and just have an open space where people can collaborate. Then everyone invested in that, and thought, well, this actually is kind of counterproductive because everyone's working in a fishbowl. So, up with the walls, and now the walls are often the walls of your home or your home office. So, I think it's just really interesting to see where these trends in the workplace being “placed-based,” quote, unquote, really are going to end up. I think there is a lot to be said for the culture and the team and what your priorities are. So, if your true value is maintaining an office building that you own, then it is important to have

people filling those office spaces. If your priority is to have a varied workforce that has different experience, and lives in different regions, and they're the best people for the job, and it doesn't matter where they're seated, that could be different too. But then you also have to be available for whoever your constituents are. So, I don't know what the answer is, but I think it's really interesting to try and see what the trends are and what's going to stick.

Kelvin: I think that's always the challenge. We don't always predict the future all that well, but it's certainly a good show to watch. Kind of watch how things play out and make the best decisions we can along the way. Hey, listen, I really appreciate you joining us today. It's been great having you here. Any parting words, insights, or nuggets before we go?

Megan: Just thank you so much, Kelvin, it's always great to chat with you, and I'm glad I had this opportunity. Wherever you end up working, or wherever your staff ends up being, I hope we just always keep in mind that it really is the people that matter. We have to stay connected some way, somehow, and things like this really make that happen. So, thanks for facilitating these conversations.

(Musical transition)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Megan Raymond. I enjoyed the conversation.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, I did too. I did, in real time, and I do listening back to it now. Thank you, Megan.

Tom: We appreciate her coming on the show. So, a couple of interesting things that she said, and that you and I kind of reflected on before we hit record, but one of them was that she made a comment about the job perks increasing while the qualifications were decreasing. So, as a person who hires other people, I had to scratch my head about that one and go, "Whew." That's definitely got my attention.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, looking at our perks, and obviously we only have so much control over our perks because we're a big giant state institution, and they are what they are. We can control schedule flexibility perhaps, and maybe even salary a little bit, but otherwise tuition, benefits, and stuff are going to be what they are for everybody.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think as, as she hinted at, not all of those perks are necessarily...

Tom: Financial.

Kelvin: Tangible, financial, anything else, right. It's just like, what can the institution possibly do to sell itself to the employee in an employee market? Some of that is ground that we've trod previously, back in that Episode 109. Things like you sell the compelling vision, the mission, maybe even historically, for public institutions especially, some degree of stability. I don't know if that remains, to some extent perhaps, the education benefit. I think she even, I'm pretty sure I remember that she said something along these lines of even talking about the team that you're hiring into. That matters, that matters.

Tom: It does. I think she touched on remote work, which is kind of at the top of mind for a lot of people now. I thought it was interest... Go ahead.

Kelvin: Even the geographic location.

Tom: So, that got my attention too, because you may recall, every time we kind of make a posting, and I try to amplify it on social media, through my channels, I always remind people that it's pretty awesome here in Orlando, in February. So, even though we're working a hybrid schedule, when you do come in, the weather is not bad. Now, I'm not saying anything about August, but February is awesome in Orlando. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right. But as you say, just like it's difficult to compete with potential employers outside of higher education on salary, it's also for many of us, maybe not all of us in higher ed, but for many of us, it's also hard to compete on that 100% remote thing.

Tom: It is for a lot of schools, institutions of higher ed, just because they're grounded in a place and a community that there's usually some expectation to at least be present part of the time. I know that's changing, and some schools are being a little more aggressive about that than others. But even so, like a lot of state schools, you still have to live in that state. You can't necessarily commute from some other jurisdiction. So, even then it becomes a bit of a challenge, but people are doing what they can do. I keep reflecting back yesterday, as you know, we were visited by our president and some other key leaders of the university, kind of on an annual “get to know everybody check-in” with all the colleges and divisions. Yesterday was our day. It came up, obviously, we've got a new strategic plan. One of the big things in that is to make this a kind of a destination, not just for students, but for employees, faculty, and staff. How do we do that? He touched on a lot of these same things. It's like talk about the mission, talk about the kind of work that you do, talk about the people you're going to do it with, and just make this a great place to work. So, I think that's a big piece of it.

Kelvin: It definitely sounded familiar when he was saying that yesterday. Just to maybe comment on this a little bit within that sort of employee market and higher perks, lower qualification. We talked about this a little bit in the interview, but I'm fascinated, maybe very obviously, by this concept of maybe you hire more for capacity, and potential, and demonstrated ability to learn quickly and come up to speed, and relevant transferable skills that aren't necessarily the exact title and all that. That's fascinating. I've been around long enough to remember that it was more like that 20 plus years ago. Then we've had a period where it was like, "Do we count the experience if you didn't have exactly the same title?" I've been in conversations where people ask that question. So, maybe that's a different era again.

Tom: I think that's a really interesting conversation because it's sort of philosophical about kind of HR, and recruiting, and talent acquisition. It's sort of like, I like to think about it as the draft, like the NFL or NBA draft. Do you draft based on positional need? "We need a point guard." Or do you draft based on who's the best player on the board, and let's just get the best player. Then we'll kind of shape our system around the talent that we have, and teams have won doing both. You got to figure it out, what works for you. I don't know what the right answer is for that, but I think the bottom line is hiring is definitely more art than science. How many search committees have you been on, where you've been the hiring official, and somebody's got a resume that's just like, "Wow, this person's awesome." And you interview them and you're like, "Ooh, no, thank you." Or somebody else, where you're like, I'm not sure how this person quite made the cut for this interview, and you interview them, and you're blown away. You're like, "Wow. Yeah, that's the person." So, it's sometimes, it's hard to tell. Or, even if you hire somebody, and then after six months you realize, "Oh, it's not working out." Or, "This person's way better than I thought they were going to be. I'm so pleased." It's so hard. It really is.

Kelvin: I totally agree with that. One other tangential thing, which I don't think that Megan and I address squarely, but I think it is an implication from this conversation is the potential opportunity, “opportunity” in quotes perhaps, for institutions to make use of external service providers in order to get some of the talent functions that we've been talking about, instructional designers or other related digital learning professionals. Outsourcing, if you want to call it that, or some kind of partnership, or something. I think that's a disruptive kind of different way of thinking for many of our institutions though.

Tom: We know that there are definitely firms that can provide that service. Now, obviously you're going to pay more than you would if you hired them yourselves, but there are advantages. The advantages being you can staff up quickly without having to do that kind of a search, by hiring contractors

basically. But I don't see that as a long-term solution for sustainable operations. I could see that getting started, or for a time limited need where you just needed to add capacity for a project or something that you're working on. I kind of feel like we're in a point right now, in some of our areas, mostly in the application development area where we're having a hard time recruiting, just to be completely transparent. Because we're competing with industry, and it just…

Kelvin: Directly, directly.

Tom: There's such high demand for those IT and developer positions right now, that it's just tough. We have had some internal conversations about like, "Well, does it make sense to bring in contractors just until we can get permanent people hired because the work has got to get done." We're going to have to evaluate that, whether or not it's something we want to do. So, I do think it's maybe an arrow in the quiver, but I don't know if it's the full solution, especially for schools like ours.

Kelvin: It may be an arrow in the quiver, but it certainly isn't a magic bullet.

Tom: Hah! Ooh, all right. I don't know. Maybe that's the signal that we should start to bring this sucker in for a landing. [Laughter]

Kelvin: I couldn't resist. It was just right there. It was just right there. Shall I take a swing at wrapping this up then?

Tom: Please.

Kelvin: All right. So, we might say that the online higher education job market continues to be disrupted. Institutions vary greatly in the packages of compensation and perquisites. That's what perk stands for after all, the compensation and perquisites that they can offer to instructional designers and other online education professionals. Discernment by job seekers and creativity by employers will both be needed to make the best hiring matches. Agreed?

Tom: Agreed. It's true. It's what we're trying to do, right now. All right. So, will you indulge me a plug before we put a bow on it? So, as you know, Kelvin, podcast listening can be a solitary pursuit, but it doesn't have to be. So, just like recommending a book, or a movie, or your favorite Netflix show to a friend, and then kind of chatting about it together can be fun and social. Would you, dear listener, consider sharing a favorite episode of TOPcast with some of your colleagues? We actually hear anecdotes all the time of people that do that. You might offer to have a conversation afterwards and compare your reactions, maybe over a cup of coffee. Most of the listening apps that we distribute through have a share

option, or you can just copy paste an episode link from our website, which is at topcast.online.ucf.edu. Again, topcast.online.ucf.edu. So, make this communal and social, and we would love to hear your feedback if you do that, and how it went. We've actually heard stories of people who use it in professional development for faculty. They assign an episode, which is kind of cool, "Hey, listen to this!" So, if you find that useful, let us know. Cool, all right. So, Kelvin, I would say thank you for the coffee, but I brought it myself.

Kelvin: Thank you for bringing your own coffee, Tom. [Laughter]

(Musical fade-in)

Tom: All right. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.