TOPcast Episode #125: Serving Our Communities with Non-Credit Online Learning

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

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And I am Tom Cavanagh.

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

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. How are you?

Kelvin: I'm good, with coffee in my mouth.

Tom: Yeah, I caught you mid-sip.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: It's like a good waiter…

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: ...comes up just as you're taking a bite, "How are things?" Yeah, yeah. What I love is when the dentist or the hygienist is in there cleaning, and they start asking you these detailed questions about your life.

Kelvin: That's right. [Laughter]

Tom: [Makes unintelligible obstructed-sounding mouth noises]

Kelvin: "Oh, is that right?"

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: "Well, my Aunt Sally had that, too."

Tom: [Laughter] I'm sure we're not the first people to make this joke, but it's true. They must understand, right? They must teach you that in hygienist school or something.

Kelvin: You develop it through the school of hard knocks or something.
Tom: Maybe, maybe, yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

Tom: Well, as long as I caught you sipping, what is in the...? Actually, it's not a thermos.

Kelvin: It's not a thermos.

Tom: What is in the cup?

Kelvin: Well, yes, there is no thermos today. Instead, I drove down the street to a local cafe and came back with a cup of their freshly brewed coffee for each of us. This is from Foxtail Coffee right here in Central Florida, and it is a blend of theirs called “Midnight Oil.” So obviously, the name of this Dark Roast blend is a reference to the old expression, “burning the midnight oil,” to refer to someone staying up late at night, hard at work for their employment, schooling to get ahead, or maybe even both. So, how's the coffee and did you find a connection to today's episode topic in that dark brew?

Tom: I like the coffee, I like Foxtail, been there many a time, as well as on campus. They're our campus provider, along with several other names that you might recognize on campus. Let's see, the connection. So, you mentioned something about hard at work, and so I'm clueing in on that. I think I can pull the thread there.

Kelvin: Yep, yep. That's what I was thinking. Working hard and that whole idea of advancing in your career, maybe even some learning something along the way. Yep, that's it. So, you want to tell people what we're hoping to talk about today? [Laughter]

Tom: Sure. We're talking about high volumes of caffeine, which is the key to getting ahead in business. No, we want to talk about non-credit, alternative credit, kind of certificates, that alternative credentials kinds of space. There is a big debate within some of the listservs that I'm on about the use of the term, “non-credit,” that you shouldn't define your thing as not something else. I get that. So, some people lean towards alternative credentials, but I don't know, I'm not as hung up on it because everybody knows what credit programs are and this is to differentiate it from it. But that... just to get that out of the way in case someone objects to that term.

Kelvin: I object!

Tom: We may use them both interchangeably. We don't mean anything by it. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: It's just to make sure everybody's clear on what we're talking about.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, what are we talking about, Kelvin?
Kelvin: What are we talking about? And we outlined this a little bit of... because I think there's a lot that we can talk about. We're going to break it down simply. We'll try to anchor down to some – what is this, and what's that look like, and why is it a thing, and how does this relate to us? We'll try come back to those as home base along the way. But I would say, and I don't know if you would agree with this broad characterization, I would say that it is meeting the continued learning needs of diverse people in our institution’s communities. And that could include, maybe all kinds of different things. How's that?

Tom: Yeah, and it's funny, I have just spent the last two days in Washington DC with the Education Advisory Board talking about these kinds of things. It was an interesting event, great discussions. One of the things we talked about was there isn't a universal definition of what a certificate is. I mean, if you want to talk about a bachelor's degree, you know what that means. A graduate certificate even, you know what that means, typically it's 12 to 18 credits as part of a master's degree, a track or something. You know what a master's degree is. But if you say, "Oh, I got a certificate in X," what is that? Because that could be a 12-month bootcamp that you completed. It could be a morning seminar you attended, and you got a certificate for it…

Kelvin: That's right. [Laughter]

Tom: ...and everything in between, right?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: Sometimes they carry a PLA, Prior Learning Assessment, or credit by exam kinds of credit that you can earn alongside of them. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they correspond with industry certifications, AWS certified, or something like that. So, it really is a big tent term that doesn't necessarily denote one thing, and that's part of its advantage, but also its struggle.

Kelvin: I threw down a couple of, maybe, seeming to me anyway, some somewhat current implementations like partnering with providers, like outside third-party providers to offer turnkey curricula. That's a thing. Repackaging relevant academic coursework for local employer needs in smaller chunks. That's a thing. Here's some buzz-speak for you: Stackable micro credentials.

Tom: Amen, brother.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Preach.

Kelvin: And of course, you've said non-credit, but non-credit to credit, is where non-credit is a very helpful term. To have non-credit to credit pathways, that's got some currency.

Tom: The whole concept, this came up, too, of earned admission through non-credit performance.
Kelvin: So, want to talk a little bit about... a little more concrete about, okay, what's that look like in practice? What are some concrete, on the street kind of thing?

Tom: Yeah, right, so I mentioned a couple. So, we actually do have relationships with third-party providers. We also build our own custom programs. We're fortunate in that we have access to world class faculty who are experts in these things, and that we can ask them to help us build or deliver programs. When we get approached or we work with a local company who has a particular need, and it happens all the time, whatever that is. So, "We need customer service training," or, "We had a sexual harassment incident, and so we need to remind everybody of the laws." And so, we have people on the faculty who are experts in these things who teach human resources, or who teach whatever, or will build a custom program in cybersecurity or data analytics, or something. I mean, it really runs the gamut. But to your point earlier, it's meeting workforce needs. And one of the things that I think is so powerful about this line of business, is how nimble it can be, how agile. You can be super responsive to workforce demands, to community needs. Way more so than an academic program, a for-credit program where, I mean, it can literally take years from idea to delivery. I'm not even exaggerating.

Kelvin: I know you're not.

Tom: You got to go through the curriculum committee, and then you got to go through your academic affairs bureaucracy, you've got to go to your board of trustees. And in our case now, after that, you have to go to the board of governors at the state level to get everything approved. And there are iterations in every one of those steps, and it can be stopped or revised along the way. I've heard of it taking four years to get a degree out there, and I mean, it's super high quality, and it's valuable. I'm not saying that there isn't a reason for that rigor, but it's not responsive.

Kelvin: No.

Tom: And even when, just within the last two years during the pandemic, we had situations where we had so many people here in Central Florida who were service and hospitality workers who lost their jobs because everybody just shut down for so long, that we were able to work with our local workforce boards and immediately stand up some re-skilling training for these hospitality workers, so that they could be employed doing something else, at least in the interim, until the industry could kick back up. I think that's something that can only be done in a non-credit, alt-cert kind of context.

Kelvin: Yeah, that makes sense. I guess for our listeners, I think most of, when you said “we,” on behalf of UCF, the more specific “we” is our Continuing Education area, which is within your portfolio as a sibling unit to the Center for Distributed Learning but within the Division of Digital Learning. That's most of the “we” there, right?

Tom: That's correct.

Kelvin: But there's some semipermeable membrane to our academic programs in there, right?

Tom: There is. And then there are also, without getting too wonkish on UCF regulation and policy, there are some colleges or programs that we'll do their own noncredit sort of offerings, that we either consult with, or help them, or are aware of, that are very specific
to whether it's hospitality as a program with one of the theme parks or a hotel or something like that. And we'll try and help them. But they've got those industry connections, they serve on their advisory boards or whatever the case might be.

Kelvin: Here's another concrete example, I think this was from... This might even be two months ago now, but our UCF colleague, Bob Reed and I, were meeting with some academic unit administrators, new to UCF in both cases, like a little bit of an onboarding, "Hey, welcome!" And it was interesting, they were separated by a week or two, but just came up organically in both conversations, interest in doing something beyond the academic programs, academic coursework. And one was in Nursing, and it had to do with... Well, in the field, there are these preparation courses that professional associations might offer for professional exams, and hey, we might be interested in doing that. Is that something you could help us with? And so, we talked about a little bit and then like, "Yes, we'll bring in our colleagues from Continuing Education." And similarly, I think in, maybe it was Communication Sciences and Disorders, there was some interest in, "Well, I know..." I think maybe the example of Coursera was used, "They have those big open courses. Could we do something like that, that would get some attention, and bring people in, and then it would be kind of a gateway?" Well, yeah, we could talk about that. We've done some stuff like that before, and that would probably come out of Continuing Education. So, you have the balancing act there. But I think those are practical examples of mutations of this stuff. Maybe not at scale, but they're in the family.

Tom: And maybe, if I could maybe share two examples within a theme. So, the theme is how non-credit and for-credit can interact with each other. Actually, there's multiple areas. So, you touched on a couple that we're not doing, which is non-credit to credit pathways, or earned admission, we're not currently doing that. But two that we are exploring, we haven't gotten very far. But one is, you mentioned the term micro-bachelors, which is really just a certificate by another name. But the components of that certificate is for-credit activity. But the certificate itself is not a credential, like that an accreditation body might say that's a degree.

Kelvin: It's a way of packaging something.

Tom: Exactly, yeah. So micro-bachelor's is really, I think... Or even micro-masters, which is the same thing basically, is an interesting way for students to earn some kind of credential, in air quotes, that has some workplace currency. So, it's a thing that has a value that you can put on a resume or LinkedIn profile, but also get these for-credit academic credits that's portable, that they could take with them to another institution. Or if they ever got admitted to the institution, like at UCF, if that's where they earned it. So, I think it's a twofer in that way. They get the workforce thing that goes on their resume, and they have the credit that allows them to do something in the future with it, which I think is a win-win. And then the other one is... It's my term, so I've made up this term, I'm trying to see if it'll catch on…

Kelvin: Neologisms from Tom. A new segment here at TOPcast.

Tom: Yeah, I call them, “Sidecar certificates.”

Kelvin: Sidecar certificates.
Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: Hey, would you like a this with that?

Tom: Yeah, so I'm getting my bachelor's degree in Humanities and not sure what I want to do when I graduate. I can get a non-credit alternative cert in Cybersecurity while I'm pursuing my academic degree, graduate with my bachelor's degree, and this non-credit thing that I'm also sort of interested in, but not enough to major in, or I discovered it too late into my academic career, and I didn't want to change my major, and lose all my progress. So, it's this certificate that's in the sidecar as you go through your academic program. I think there's a lot of interest by policy makers within the state in those kinds of things. Because they want people in the workforce as soon as they graduate, high paying kinds of careers, STEM careers in many, many cases, but not always.

Kelvin: So, would you think of that as a... just peeling that onion in a second, would you think of that as a minor, made up of non-academic stuff?

Tom: It's not a bad way of describing it, yeah.

Kelvin: I don't know if you know this. For a number of years after I graduated undergrad school, I said, "I've got a minor in English." I don't think it was until I actually worked in higher ed that it became clear to me that I never declared that minor. I met the requirements of it. I was a peer advisor, I knew exactly what I was doing, except that nobody told me I needed to actually file the paperwork.

Tom: It's not on your transcript.

Kelvin: It's probably not, but the coursework is there. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, yeah, isn't that funny.

Kelvin: I did my 12 hours above X in the discipline. So, I got a sidecar credential, but nobody's giving me a label.

Tom: It's a secret sidecar credential.

Kelvin: I like that. A secret sidecar credential.

Tom: [Laughter] They don't do you much good when they're secret unfortunately.

Kelvin: I'm proud of it, I mean…

Tom: Yeah well, as you should be.

Kelvin: ...I learned some stuff. Took that Elizabethan authors course. Form, deform, reform. That's what I took away from there.

Tom: Well, all right.
Kelvin: Okay, that's right. So why is this a thing now, Tom?

Tom: Well, I think maybe a couple reasons. Some of which might be just in the moment, and some might be maybe a little more enduring. We have seen a flattening coming out of the pandemic of enrollment across all of higher ed. It's not isolated in any one geographic area, or I think in any... maybe, unless you're Princeton, where you're always going to get as many students as you want. But for all the rest of us, it's really softened. And what has not followed that trend though, are these alternative, non-credit certificates. That is booming there. I think it's very much countercyclical, at the moment, unemployment is low, which means typically you don't see as much academic enrollment. But if people are concentrating on their careers in this low unemployment kind of environment, then it makes sense that they're moving towards these workforce-oriented certificates. So, if I'm in a job... I don't know, let's just make up a job. I'm in an application development job or some coding job, and I'm not going to quit or spend my evenings going to school because I'm working too hard in this, but I could go get a certification in AWS, or Salesforce, or something. That seems like it's really relevant to what I'm doing, could actually help me. And it's much less of a time commitment, right?

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: It might just be a couple weeks or something. And a lot of these, in many cases are online now. You don't even have to come into campus to do it. I think that's one reason why it's a thing at the moment. The longer commitment, like bootcamps, which might be a year or something that you might commit to, that is making an investment in your career. But it's a very practical investment, not unlike a degree, but one that I think that they see as, the students see, as having a much more immediate return.

Kelvin: Yeah, perception, reality. speaking of English degrees, I think there's a lot of rhetoric in all this, right? There's a lot of just framing, and what you look at as authoritative, and why you look at it as authoritative. But I digress. Yeah, I think all that's right. Also, maybe I think we've talked this a little bit before, the theme, the trend, the thought of lifelong learning being more of a thing, learning for the lifetime, 60-year curriculum, all that kind of stuff. That's a thing too, right?

Tom: It is. And I think we have a long way to go as an industry, but I think there are some schools that are starting to lean into that in a good way. This idea that, all right, we don't just have you for four years, and then you leave and then we just mail you requests to donate from the advancement office for the rest of your life. It's, stay connected to the university. You come in and out as...

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: ...you need things. And in fact, that is actually better for the advancement office than just some sort of transactional, "You got your bachelor's degree."

Kelvin: I'm really reminded of our former UCF President, John Hitt, who really was committed to the concept of the Metropolitan Research University. It's not a phrase that's completely unique to UCF, there are others. But I was always inspired by his vision of serving the community as a research institution. I think this is part of that, what you described is this
ideal state of the community coming and going, and benefiting from not just the much-berated ivory tower, right?

Tom: Right, right. Well, there's even been some work, I think it was Stanford Design School, had done some brainstorming about the future educational model, in that you don't even necessarily come for four years. You come for a year or two, and then you work and then you come back, and then it was very much in and out, and you get a certificate and then maybe you complete your degree a couple years later. And then it was an ongoing lifelong relationship with the institution, where the institution was providing you different things that you might need along that lifetime career journey. I think we're getting there, but we're not there yet.

Kelvin: Yeah, we need an enriched vocabulary, so to speak. We need other terminology, other packaging, other ways to talk about it, and have to be willing to do things a little bit differently. Which maybe is maybe a good last little bit to do is what are the implications for higher education broadly and online education specifically? I think we've begun reaching into that a little bit. There's maybe even a disruptive element to this.

Tom: Well, before the pandemic, I'm thinking about our bootcamps that we do. They were all in the classrooms. It was full if you walked around our building. And then during the pandemic, like everything else, they all went online. Now that we're back, those classrooms are still pretty empty. So, they've moved online in many cases, and we've pushed our partner to say, "We still want to have... We're renting this space, and we want this classrooms." And we just haven't had students sign up. The students are voting with their feet, that they prefer these experiences to be online. So, it's interesting. I do think it has been exacerbated by the pandemic experience.

Kelvin: Which is a connection to, I think, a recent episode that we did, reflecting on the CHLOE 7 report. We talked about the broad nature of hybridity in higher education. What do you think about in this non-credit space? I mean, what you were just talking about was the impact of the remoteness, "onlineness," in these alternative credentialed pathways. You think the hybridity thing is a thing there too? The idea of having the utmost flexibility based on the needs of the learner? It could be in-person, it could be online, it could be a blended. I mean, what do you think?

Tom: I think it depends on the program and it depends on the audience you're serving. Because, from just a very practical standpoint, if you're marketing to an online audience that could be anywhere, and you've got students that are not within driving distance, putting a hybrid, in-person requirement in there becomes difficult. So, in that regard, I think some of these programs are very binary. But having said that, we did have some face-to-face classes running this semester, do have them. And we just had a major hurricane that came through here. The university was closed for eight days, and our Continuing Education team had to do a couple of sessions online when we were coming back, in order to make up time. And it worked. So, it was more the opposite where it was a face-to-face class that they went online to deal with the exigent circumstances. But that was because we had this hybrid technology, and we had the experience of the pandemic, we were able to easily accommodate that.
Kelvin: So, that's an example of a kind of a flexibility as well. Anything else come to your mind about higher ed in general, or online education specifically being impacted by this whole trajectory of, I'll try to adopt your terminology here, the alternative credentialing?

Tom: The only thing I would say is that some schools, I think get a little too hung up on, "Well, that's the non-credit stuff."

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And there has traditionally been an othering of the Continuing Education…

Kelvin: Yeah. True.

Tom: ... unit. And I think the schools that forego that, eliminate that boundary and embrace continuing education, are the schools that are going to run circles around the rest of them. In just discussing strategy about continuing it with our provost, he's made some interesting comments about how he views that as the nimble, agile, responsive arm of the university for serving the local community, in a way that, as we just said, that the academic programs can't be quite as agile. And so, I think that provosts and others who see that, and can position these organizations to serve that community need, especially for public schools like we have, that have that as part of their mission. I think that's a really important thing, going forward.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's good. I like that. Learning's learning, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: But it's more about how you talk about, what was it supposedly Twain, maybe, "Education's what remains after you forget everything you learned," right?

Tom: Yeah. [Laughter]

Kelvin: How you talk about this packaging of the experience that you had. I like how you said before, there's more robust through the formal accreditation channels, and there's more responsive to the needs of the community. But learning is learning on that spectrum somewhere.

Tom: That's right, yeah. And I think some students are telling us something at the moment, that they're signing up, maybe in some cases more, for these alternative credentials than they are for the traditional degrees. So, I don't know.

Kelvin: Yeah. Shall I try to land the plane topically?

Tom: Let's try.

Kelvin: Yeah, let's try. [Laughter] Pull up, pull up, pull up. That's a mountain, no! All right, I'll say this. Online education professionals need to continue to think differently and act innovatively if we are to help higher education stay relevant amidst ever-changing
demographics. Non-credit or alternative certification, online program work is one example of that.

Tom: Amen, that's true. And will you indulge me a plug?

Kelvin: Please plug away. [Laughter]

Tom: Before we wrap up, and pull up to the gate in our plane. Please remain seated until the plane comes to a full and complete stop. So, during this most recent summer, 2022, depending on when you're listening to this, we announced that we would hold a drawing for a TOPcast branded coffee mug.

Kelvin: Ooh, I've got one of those.

Tom: You may have seen those. I have one, too.

Kelvin: Nice.

Tom: We've shown them on the show. From among those who emailed us links to social media posts mentioning TOPcast. [Makes desktop drumroll with crowd noise] And so, we have a winner to announce. We are happy to say that we will be shipping a TOPcast mug to Chris Olsen.

Kelvin: Yay, Chris.

Tom: Congratulations, Chris, Assistant Professor and Instructional Designer at National University of Health Sciences. Congrats, Chris!

Kelvin: Congrats!

Tom: And everyone, please feel free to continue to mention TOPcast in your networks at any time.

Kelvin: Two, three times a day, maybe.

Tom: At least, yeah. We do appreciate it, sincerely. But for what it's worth, only Chris gets the mug. Yes, yes. Although they are available for purchase at Zazzle.com.

Kelvin: That's true. [Laughter]

Tom: We don't make any money off of it, for what it's worth…

Kelvin: No, we really don’t. No.

Tom: …but as a service to the vast TOPcast community…

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: …you, too, can have a TOPcast mug.
Kelvin: That's right, that's right. No, that's good. Yeah, thanks Chris. And hey, we appreciate the positive press. We really do.

Tom: We absolutely do, yeah.

Kelvin: And we'll get that mug out to you, and enjoy a hot beverage in your new... I'd wash it first, probably, but...

Tom: Recommended, yeah.

Kelvin: …drink along with us here. That's right. Well, Tom, I enjoyed the conversation as always. I hope you enjoyed the coffee.

Tom: I did, yeah. Thank you, Midnight Oil. Very good. I'll be up all night now.

(Musical outro)

Kelvin: [Laughter] I see what you did there, that's good. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.