TOPcast Episode 126: COLOs, Context, and Community

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 100 fully online programs in healthcare, engineering, criminal justice, and more. So, you can get to your future and beyond.

(Musical intro)

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 things?

Kelvin: Things are good. I always get kind of thoughtful when you ask me that question. Some things are better than others. But generally speaking, they're all good.

Tom: Things are good. It's funny too, it's one of those things, we've talked about this before, I think it's like, it's not a great question to ask people because if things aren't so good, you really don't have time to actually have a deep, supportive, empathetic conversation. So, there are better questions you can ask.

Kelvin: Or you do, and the rest of it goes away. That happened to me not long ago. We had an event, faculty member came, said, “Hey, do you have a minute?” And I said, “Sure.” People were leaving and sat down, and he revealed a number of very personal tragedies that had befallen him in the interim since I had last seen him in person. And I said, “Well, my goodness, you're doing well just to be here, and thank you for trusting me with that.” They had turned the lights off. Everybody was gone. But I'm like, I am not walking away from this guy. [Laughter] So, sometimes that's a thing.

Tom: Yeah, it is. So, I'm glad things are good, at least mostly or in this context, yeah.

Kelvin: I can't complain. I can't complain.

Tom: Right. Well, so I guess maybe the next question is, “How's your coffee?” which I see you drinking there.

Kelvin: Excellent. How's yours?
Tom: It's excellent. I'm enjoying my… this is my second cup today.

Kelvin: Oh, won't tell anybody. I won't tell anybody. But we are not drinking from the same communal cup today. My coffee is thematically selected as I am remote from the office. Would you like to try to make a connection to your cup, Tom?

Tom: Probably not. Mine is a donut shop brand decaf. [Laughter] It's pretty standard, plain, generic coffee. It's good. I like it.

Kelvin: That's good. Well, I can say this, my coffee is neither plain nor generic, so it is filled with nuance and context.

Tom: Okay. Lay it on me.

Kelvin: I will tell you, I don't know that you're going to find any kind of a connection, but I liked the coffee, so here it is. So, this is in my cup, Tom, a single-origin Ethiopia from Brandywine Coffee Roasters in Wilmington, Delaware. This was a special small batch roast, which I get sometime through a provider, and it was packaged up for Halloween in association with fellow coffee products. And so, they call it, that's important to know the backstory because they called this, “This is Felloween!” Felloween. “This is Felloween!” With special packaging and the coffee bag artwork, spooky descriptions for everything in the coffee. For instance, “frightening notes of cherry,” et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. A spectral was in there and stuff like that. So, I thought, hey, as our listeners are listening to this Halloween's behind us, but as I stared into the darkness of my cup of coffee, Tom, I could find a connection to today's topic, and I'm hoping you can, too.

Tom: Frightening notes of cherry. I guess there's nothing more frightening than cherry. Oh my gosh. It's one of my favorite flavors. I'm drawing a blank. Kelvin. Other than the fact that it's that time of year, and we are recording in the season of Halloween, I don't know.

Kelvin: Well, Tom, I'll try to express what I was thinking with this sort of gratuitously chosen thematic coffee. So, it seems to me that Halloween is one of those seasons where we're brought together with two contrasting perspectives. We can either be overwhelmed by the “scary”, oh no, don't want to think about Halloween, too scary, nope, negative, dark. Or we can lean into the fun of facing a challenge head on. One of our family's favorite movies this time of year is Disney Channel’s “Girl vs. Monster,” or just a classic “Beetlejuice,” which is silly and fun. Or even maybe the really old classic, “Abbott and Costello Meet... [Insert Name of Universal Monster Here]” because they met everybody apparently. So, sometimes there are scary challenges we face in life, including in digital education. And I think we'll be talking about some of those today, so we can be overwhelmed by them, or we can face them head on and have some fun doing it. So, that's my attempt at a connection to this is Halloween.
Tom: All right, I get it. And I think that works, and I think that would work for our guest as well if I asked her that question in the interview. So yeah, I think that works. So, Kelvin, do you want to set up who we have as our guest today?

Kelvin: Sure thing. So, Tom, not too awfully long ago, maybe longer than we would've liked, you interviewed Dr. Jocelyn Widmer. Dr. Widmer is Assistant Provost for Academic Innovation at Texas A&M University. And prior to Texas A&M, she held faculty and administrative positions at The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine; the University of Florida; Virginia Tech University. And I was fascinated by this, I didn't know this. Dr. Widmer has wide-ranging academic interests and holds degrees in urban & regional planning, public health, landscape architecture, art history, and English. Wow.

Tom: Wow. She is a renaissance woman. I knew about urban planning, but yeah, I don't know if I knew all of that other stuff, but I am not surprised at all knowing Jocelyn. So, maybe the only thing I'd say about the interview is that we had a kind of real focus on administrative leadership kinds of topics. So, I got personally a lot out of our conversation is every time I talk to Jocelyn, I do. So, I think that when you listen to it, sort of listen to it through that lens.

Kelvin: Okay. Well, through the technological marvel that is modern podcast time travel. Here is your interview with Jocelyn Widmer.

(Musical transition)

Tom: Jocelyn, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Jocelyn: Absolutely. Thanks for having me, Tom.

Tom: So, one of the things we talked about in preparation for this conversation where the conversations you've been having with chief online learning officers at various institutions and your own little listening tour. I give you a lot of credit, you're always learning, and you're always seeking to share what you've learned. I thought that it might be really useful for the TOPcast listening audience to learn a little bit about what you've learned through that process. So, maybe the first question is like are there any particular lessons, leadership lessons, or lessons learned from those conversations with COLOs, chief online learning officers?

Jocelyn: Sure. That's a great kickoff. So, I started to do this sometime this past spring. So, as you know, we transitioned to a new learning management system and got everything wrapped up. I would say once we launched the Spring 2022 semester. Of course, we were supporting kind of fringe cases for remote instruction. So, it was kind of the first opportunity to take a breath and figure out where are we heading next? So, it occurred to me just looking at LinkedIn, talking to a couple different people that we were all sort of at that same place. I mean, certainly
before COVID, the narrative around my role and really why it was put in place at A&M was we're so behind.

So, I took the opportunity now that we had really overhauled the digital learning environment to figure out, now where do we head? I mean, COVID as one of the individuals that I have spoken to, kind of called it, “The Great Equalizer” for all of us. She said it really leveled the playing field in terms of what we were all doing because we all struggled with different pieces of our digital learning environment, of our program implementation, what recruitment and enrollment looked like, and then of course whatever we were dealing with our individual institutions. So, the spring of this year became an opportunity to just hit pause and figure out where we headed next and strategically be able to align some of those pieces with Texas A&M, and the strategic vision of really a new leadership that had taken place.

So, the individuals that I have sought out are really focused on scale. I mean like yourself. As much as I love sideways examples, scale was what I was really after because we can't do much at A&M if we're not doing it at scale. As you know, even small numbers and pilot projects can be quite big. So, just having that group of people that I could bounce ideas off of who are constantly thinking at scale was something that I didn't realize just kind of became people's north star in this collection of us that deal with really large institutions. So, scale was obviously one piece of it.

The other piece I was really interested in was understanding, was my particular unit structured correctly? I don't think there's a correct way to structure a unit. I probably spent three years trying to say, “It's just not right. How do I make it right?” Then that magical moment things will just fall into place. What I learned specifically from talking with you and others who have been in their roles much longer or at similar roles at previous institutions much longer was it's an additive approach and you just, I mean, there's some things you inherit, there are some things that you want, and they're not part of your portfolio, and there are some things that you're constantly trying to figure out where they fit, that you have. What I’ve learned in making the rounds is telling that story of why you have the pieces organizationally in your unit. And then particularly the next step is who you can partner with because you have those pieces.

Then the other piece, I mean, I think we all support a little bit of a different portfolio, probably yours and mine are pretty close. I’ve talked to others who they have more of the backend IT as part of their portfolio. So, obviously just some of those differences drive agendas and strategy. But we've all been dealing with staffing issues. And so, that's been really helpful, that was just at the crux of where I felt like I was stuck this past spring, and how was I going to staff up, and how was I going to continue to deal with the great resignation. I lost 13 people over a nine-month period from 6/1/2021 to kind of mid-spring. So, I don't want to take your people, I don't want to take anybody's people. So, it's like, where do we
go to find the talents? And so that was a big piece that I was asking where people are finding talent, but then also what are they doing to retain the talent? And I particularly focused on if remote work is not an option, what else is on the table? So, I would say that kind of summarizes what some of the discussions have been at a high level.

Tom: Wow. I can relate so much to so much of that. And for the record, I don't want you taking our people either, but I relate. [Laughter] Yeah, I mean, I don't know if we've had 13 people, but we've had more than we should have left for various opportunities. I would say, I think all of them, with one exception, have been to industry, not to other institutions of higher learning. So yeah, I think it's something we're all kind of dealing with right now. Kelvin and I have done episodes on that topic of the Great Resignation.

So yeah, that's fascinating. And so, you really were focused on scale, which makes sense. I think A&M and UCF compete annually to see who's actually bigger than the other. I think you have the edge right now, but not by a lot. [Laughter] So, we're both large, and so I get it. So, do you think anything that you've learned, maybe the way units are structured, or the way you partner with others internally or externally can be applied to institutions that aren't big R1 public scale universities, like a small liberal arts college, or a community college, or something like that?

Jocelyn: Sure. And that's a great question. From time to time I thought, what would I do if I went to a very small liberal arts college outside of Austin for my undergrad? And so, I just have these moments where I'm like, “What would I have done if I were in this role in a place with just very different resources and priorities?” So, I mean, that's tough because I sit in the role, and I just constantly think about if I can't do it one way, I can come up with another way because I have such an expansive institution to draw from.

So, I think one of the pieces just to kind of in interviewing individuals who have come from some of these institutions and may have done a lot of interviewing, I probably should have counted how many Zoom interviews I've done in the last year, I would say at least 100. I think the institutions like that are really leveraging faculty. And that's something that governance is another question that I'm constantly asking leaders, “How can I do it better?” I mean, it's something that I think we always hear when we're not doing it well. We don't necessarily hear when we're doing it at our institution. So, I'm constantly looking for new ideas with respect to governance. So, I think that's a translation at a smaller place is leveraging governance committees. We've done some things through pilots through our faculty senate executive committee, for instance, and they've been tremendous partners.

The other piece that I'm constantly reminded of, and we all have tools of student workers, student technicians. I mean, I think that's such an important talent
pipeline at any institution. I'm constantly thinking about, what more do I need to do in my role to bring up the next generation? Because we're going to have a talent block on the pipeline if we don't excite people, and just explain what it is that we do. One quick example of that, so we do a lot of touring through our new innovative learning classroom building. We had a group of prospective students come in from San Antonio. I was just reminded they kind of were like, who are you? Are we meeting with you? And I've got some shiny technology to show them. And they started taking pictures after I said, we're the office that supports Canvas because they were using Canvas. So, it was just like this aha moment of there's such continuity that exists if we're thinking about that next gen and leveraging just the experience that so many individuals have had in the K through 12 space in digital education and often, they get it before I have time to explain it. [Laughter]

So that's, I think, probably a sideways answer. I mean, think there are tremendous challenges facing a place that doesn't have some of these resources, I would imagine. And I think there's so much that we can learn from them because probably often we use too many resources to solve issues.

Tom: And even between institutions that are similar, the contexts, and culture, and organization are all going to be different anyway. So, it's not like anything you can just pick up as a template and put it down someplace else, it just doesn't work that way. I think as you sort of implied in answering the first question that you're not going to find that one right organizational structure, “Oh, I just need to do that…” [Laughter] because it needs to be shaped and adjusted for your particular context. And what works at one place may or may not work at another. We all tend to look west at Arizona State, I guess unless you're in California [Laughter] and what they do. It's pretty amazing, I'm a big admirer of what they do. And same with Southern New Hampshire and Western Governors and some of these really innovative places. But we couldn't do it the way they do it for a lot of… the way they're funded, the way they're structured, all of that. It just means that you have to think a little differently. Now, you can take the pieces that work, and that's what you've been doing.

So, speaking of pieces that work, or maybe more accurately, pieces that don't, [Laughter] I wonder if anybody admitted any mistakes that they made along the way or if you observed any kind of lessons that we can take from somebody else's misstep?

Jocelyn: Sure. I'll throw myself in the mix here. I mean, I think so many of us came into our roles from other institutions, and what we tried to do in our roles was in, as you just mentioned, the context and culture of another institution. And so, I think having… however, we almost all were given change it, improve it, make it better as quickly as you can. I mean, think that seems to be what we were all told. When you work quickly, you often don't have an opportunity to really understand why something is in place. And so, to tear it apart, or to cut it off, or shut down a
program, or something like that without really understanding the context. I mean, you're going to hear about that for years and years later. So, I think it's kind of a two-sided issue. We were all given such a velocity and a pace at which we were asked to work, and you just can't get to know an institution that quickly.

So, a number of us were in our roles, I don't know, a year or less before COVID, and my mind is blown by those who took roles during COVID because just can't imagine that. [Laughter] But COVID became an opportunity to hit reset, forget some of those things. I mean, we became necessary in a way that we maybe weren't before. I'm speaking broadly here; this is a summary of many people I've talked to. And so, it just gave us an opportunity to hit reset on some of the mistakes we made and dig deeper and make improvements through the high stakes environment of COVID, and I think that started to change people's minds about what we could do, maybe.

Tom: Our president started in April of 2020.

Jocelyn: I can't imagine.

Tom: I can't either. Yeah. That's crazy.

Jocelyn: The other thing, you and I have talked quite a bit about learning technologies, I mean, this is an issue more in the weeds. I think one place where we've all struggled, we wanted to have one strategy before COVID. COVID has had us have a different strategy with learning technologies, and now what do we do after? So that's been a big question I've asked, and it's been something where I think just different approaches and ideas that didn't work, maybe necessarily prior to COVID, COVID has helped put better policy in place behind tools, or better awareness on the fact that these tools cost, and we need a strategy for how we're going to think about cost sharing. Are we going to pass these along to students or not, all of those types of things. So, that was something that I've heard a lot.

I don't think anybody has the answer, today. I mean, online proctoring is one that I've specifically asked. I asked you, I've asked Penn State, Arizona State, University of Florida has theirs posted on a website, and so everybody’s doing a little bit differently and that's tough. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. Well, I mean, it does lead into what I think maybe would be a good kind of concluding question, which is, based on these conversations have you picked up any hints on what you think is around the corner as we hopefully turn the corner on this pandemic, and start instantiating some of the lessons learned or expanding some of the things that we were doing already? What's coming that we should be prepared for?

Jocelyn: Sure. Well, you and I have had really rich conversations about immersive experiences, and what's to come with digital twins of universities at scale. And I
have had some amazing conversations with our new interim, Dean of Performance Visualization and Fine Arts at A&M, Tim McLaughlin, who's a leader in the field of visualization about what this could look like at a place like A&M that has such a rich tradition of teaching excellence in the classroom, and traditions that surround the campus experience. So, I think we're all questioning how we continue to offer that, and create an environment where that exists, but then also know there's student demand for what's coming around the corner, and I think immersive technologies are really what's heading next.

From my perspective, this is my opinion, I think unfortunately hybrid's going to be something that just gets leapfrogged. I don't think we collected the data we needed to from the high flex experience that everybody tried. I mean by and large, people just weren't pumped about it, they didn't like it. I think space and technology and size of class, I mean, I think there are a lot of variables that could have been studied, and it just was taken as a catch all.

So, thinking about how we recreate spaces on campus in virtual environments and immerse students in them, that's where I think things are really headed. We can do that at really small scales, recreate a lab, and use haptics, and see, and study, and test, and replicate. There's all kinds of concerns with student services and what that might look like. I think they're just different ways of thinking about this than just the whole university model that are much more valuable proofs of concepts than getting stuck on, “Can we do academic advising in an immersive environment?” for instance.

So that piece, but I think we've got to continue to collect the data as we try stepping into these new types of learning environments. And then definitely a focus on ensuring faculty know how to teach in them, and are equipped to teach in them, and students are equipped to learn in them. I think that was just one of the pieces that couldn't get enough attention and rigor during the pandemic.

One thing I'll say, I mean, it kind of links into your previous question about where have we stumbled, and where are we headed? I think all of us, everybody I've talked to has that one student who they know they're not reaching, currently. And if they could just move their operations and their programming, and all that they do, and extend it to that one student, then there's just tremendous value, and that propels momentum forward into the next student that we can continue to reach. So, I think there's just a true commitment to access that immersive environments would afford us just thinking a little bigger and broader than the current inputs that I think we all juggle on a daily basis.

Tom: Well, bringing it back and grounding it on the student experience and student success is the right answer. It's certainly a theme here at TOPcast and probably a good place to wrap it up. So, Jocelyn, thank you so much for agreeing to be on the podcast. Really appreciate it.
Jocelyn: Absolutely. Thank you, Tom.

(Musical transition)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Dr. Jocelyn Widmer.

Tom: It was, yeah. I thought a really, really great discussion. I think that she's really thoughtful about her job, but also this industry, the space in general. So, I always enjoy talking to her.

Kelvin: No kidding. And I think we got ahead of ourselves before we hit record, if I understood correctly, listening back to that right, 100 or more interviews with COLOs.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, that's a lot. I'm not sure anybody has had that kind of scope of research and networking and just picking the brains of people who do this job. I think she should probably write a book or something about what she's learned based on all of those interviews. I think that maybe with the dawn of Zoom that's helped, although actually the last time I spoke to her except for this podcast was in person, it was at a conference. So, I think some of these were in person, too. I also see on her LinkedIn profile, she’s making the rounds in person also, where she's meeting some of these folks. I think that there's such a wealth of information and knowledge that she has captured. I hope that she shares it with the rest of the world, all of her lessons learned.

Kelvin: You know what we should do? We should connect further… This would be a good spinoff. We should connect further Jocelyn with Eric Fredrickson. Wouldn't that be a dynamic duo in this chief online learning officer work?

Tom: I bet their lists overlap quite a bit. Yeah.

Kelvin: That'd be an interesting conversation, I think. Anything stand out to you listening back through that interview again, that you want to underscore?

Tom: Yeah, I mean, there's a lot, probably more than we have time to dig into. But one was this emphasis on scale, which seems to be the higher education challenge of our day, not just in online learning. But just how do we support more students provide more access? And so, scale, I think is a very particular challenge that she's addressed just because Texas A&M is such a giant school. But also, how to apply some of the lessons that are more universal to even schools that don't focus as much on scale. I thought that she was very thoughtful about how those two areas are two sides of the same coin in many ways.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that. I thought it was great that she kind of gave attention to what we might frame as less resourced institutions, and the whole idea of, well, you lean into relationships with faculty, and you go through the faculty senate and
existing structures, and you try to leverage student workers and make that a co-curricular thing. I thought those were good ideas. Good ideas.

I also, just for the sake of saying this, I thought while there were a number of things, we could pull the thread on in terms of your what next question, I loved that where you both ended it was sort of a reminder of more perennial principles of the importance of faculty preparation in digital education, and the importance of remembering to center on student access and student success. Those were great.

Tom: Yeah, kind of anchoring back on the student, I think you can never go wrong, right? No matter what your mission is, how you're resourced, it's all about the students and their success. So yeah, I thought that that was a good way to end it as well. So, yeah. So, Jocelyn, thank you very much for taking the time to be on the podcast. We really do appreciate it.

Kelvin: You want to try to put us on the ground?

Tom: Sure. I think that you and I would both agree, there are always leadership challenges in the field of online and digital education. I mean, it seems like every day there's a new one, but dialogue between administrative leaders and surfacing effective practices can help the field move forward. I mean, we only get better by talking to each other. And this is a great community. If you're listening to this and you're new to the world of online learning, welcome, because this is a very open, accepting, sharing community. And all you have to do is just put yourself out there, and you're going to get all kinds of help.

(Musical outro)

Kelvin: Yeah. That's great. I agree with that. Well, Tom, looking forward to the next time we can share an in-person cup of coffee, because I'd happily pour one for you, but until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.