TOPcast Episode 129: Education Deserts and Online Strategy

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 today?

Kelvin: I'm doing all right.

Tom: Yeah?

Kelvin: How about you?

Tom: I am doing all right.

Kelvin: It is for our listeners… the new year.

Tom: It is the new year. Yeah, well.

Kelvin: We're time traveling.

Tom: We are time traveling. I wonder what it's like in the future in January 2023? Do you think we have jet packs, and flying cars, and stuff yet? [Laughter]

Kelvin: One can only hope. [Laughter]

Tom: One can only hope.

Kelvin: I've been hoping this for such a very long time.

Tom: [Laughter] I know. Where's my jet pack? I was promised this as a kid.

Kelvin: *(Singing)* Rocket Man… Yeah, I know. It's a... And I'm disappointed every day.

Tom: I know. I had visions of Iron Man and, yeah.

Kelvin: Dancing in your head?

Tom: That's right. [Laughter]

Kelvin: On a winter's night? [Laughter]

Tom: It is the holiday season, yeah.

Kelvin: Just after.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I am... I don't know, I'm all kind of conflicted, Tom, I'm... We had our colleague, Aaron, in here a few minutes ago taking pictures because this might be the last in-studio recording we do for a while.

Tom: Yes, it might. So, if you're not watching this on video, you probably should because this might be the last time we see this recording booth for…

Kelvin: The sweaty booth.

Tom: The box.

Kelvin: The box.

Tom: The torture box.

Kelvin: Yes. [Laughter]

Tom: For a while, and do you want to tell the legions of TOPcast listeners why this might be the last in-person recording for a while?

Kelvin: [Laughter] All seven and a half of them. That's not quite true, but there's more of you than that. So, at least eight. Yes. And it'll be more apparent in the next episode, the mid-January episode, but by that point will be starting another position elsewhere, geographically remote from the University of Central Florida. [Laughter] So, it'd be awfully hard to commute here to the in-person studio.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Well, there's airplanes, right?

Kelvin: Can you imagine? [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Commuting just to do some... We're going to do 20 podcast episodes to make it worth the airfare. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, definitely. Well, why don't you tell everybody where you're going.

Kelvin: I will be starting in mid-January, a position at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky, for those non-US listeners. Some 800-ish miles away from Central Florida, and a world of difference in mid-January, as I am led to believe. [Laughter] I will be the new/first Vice Provost for Online Strategy and Teaching Innovation, overseeing an existing center and trying to take it to the next level, I hope.

Tom: Yeah, well…

Kelvin: They do too. [Laughter]

Tom: …I've said this to you privately, and I'll say it to you publicly. Congratulations. It's a fantastic move for you and for U of L. We will miss you. But you've been a key contributor to the success and reputation of UCF over 24 years. And I will not use the full 30 minutes of our podcast [Laughter] to list all of the ways you've contributed but they have been many, and varied, and we appreciate it.

Kelvin: Well, thank you for that, Tom. I do appreciate it. I saw you, a little video note you sent out to our Division of Digital Learning earlier today, and I haven't gotten as far as sending you an email, so I'll just tell you now. I was real touched by the nice things you said, so thank you for that. And as we've hinted already, our plan is to keep going with the podcast just remotely, but gosh, we made it through 2020. [Laughter]

Tom: I know, really, if we can make it through 2020, we can make it through a little geography.

Kelvin: That's right, yeah. So, excited, and we'll have a little bit of a varied intro starting I guess the next episode. But be kind of co-branded from both institutions, and looking forward to that.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Bring some more context. But here we are today.

Tom: Here we are today, and as long as we're together, you have poured me a cup of coffee.

Kelvin: I have, and we're going to figure that out. We could divide the labor, we could alternate the person who makes the coffee connection.

Tom: We could.

Kelvin: We could try that.

Tom: Yeah, and I'll be in the unenviable position of trying to come up with some sort of a connection and have you criticize me. [Laughter]

Kelvin: 0.3 from the German judge. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: No, I won't hold you to that. We'll figure it out. I don't mind bringing some connection for a while, but hey, we can play with the format a little bit, but you're probably wondering what you're drinking.

Tom: Always.

Kelvin: Yes, me too. So, today's coffee, Tom, is a blend called, and I'm going to tell you, when I saw it, I thought when I had this bag that a friend gave me, I thought it was "Dual Axes," sort of Cartesian coordinates and something…

Tom: Yeah, right.

Kelvin: ...Like that. I thought, "Oh, that's kind of cool. It's like mathematics and stuff and maps and things." [Laughter] Then I realized, I looked into it more, and I'm like, "Oh, the picture is like two chopping implements. It's dual axes." [Laughter]

Tom: Double hatchets.

Kelvin: Double hatchets. So, it's like a homograph, right? But this is a blend from Honest Coffee Roasters in Huntsville, Alabama. And I thought the coffee was kind of appropriate for today's topic, both because of the homograph, axes ("aksis") or axes ("aksees"). And because its roasting location, Huntsville is about 70 miles away from a small northern Alabama county with local charm, geographic appeal, but only one small, good, but small, community college.

And there are several such areas within driving distance of Huntsville, even though I should say quickly, Huntsville itself is home to a number of institutions that bring access to higher education. So, how's the coffee, and how's the connection to today's topic?

Tom: I like the coffee. It's chopping good.

Kelvin: Chopping.

Tom: And…

Kelvin: Is that a new thing? Chopping good? [Laughter]

Tom: I don't know, I just made that up, but it seems to fit, and I do get the connection.

Kelvin: I like it.

Tom: Yeah. So, I think you kind of hit me over the head with this one, so to speak. [Laughter]

Kelvin: But not with the ax.

Tom: With the other side. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That would not be good. No, no, no. So, what kind of connection did you see there?

Tom: Well, I mean, you were talking about its sort of remote location in DeKalb County there, and the fact that there's only one institution of higher education within a reasonable driving distance. And that's what we're talking about today. We're going to be talking about the concept of “education deserts.” Education deserts, if you're not familiar with that.

Kelvin: And I will admit that I wasn't. We were talking a bit ago, maybe as we walked out of the last one of these recordings. What are we going to talk about next? [Laughter]

Tom: It's usually our process. [Laughter]

Kelvin: People will be stunned at how creative processes work around here. And you floated this idea, and I said, "Education desert. What's that, Tom?" And I will say though, that I kind of got it when you said it, but it wasn't a phrase I knew because there is sort of an immediate, intuitively perceived meaning, I think. But would you break it down for us?

Tom: Yeah. There is sort of an official definition, and it's a geographic area where there are fewer than two "broad access higher ed institutions." I think I've even read somewhere where it's like 50 miles, and I've seen maybe others where it's a hundred miles, but I think maybe the 50-mile one is the more common definition.

So, within that range, which is basically kind of commuting range, there are fewer than two broad access, higher education institutions.

So, if you think about a rural location, but they have a very well regarded, selective liberal arts college, it's kind of a destination, that wouldn't count.

Kelvin: No, right.

Tom: Because it's not broad access. What they're talking about is maybe a regional comprehensive, or a community college, or something else. So, there are these deserts, if you will, where there's just really limited, or no access to higher education for those people who live there.

Kelvin: In that broad…

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: ...In that, we talk a lot about educational access in these episodes in a way that doesn't go... I liked broad access, I think 80% or higher acceptance rates.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: Maybe there's not even... Some schools don't even really, I guess, they're open access institutions, they wouldn't even use that kind of language. But if they do, 80% or higher. And a lot of this work I was fascinated by, I guess we would consider the seminal work around this comes from University of Wisconsin Madison, Professor Dr. Nick Hillman in his 2019 work, *Place Matters: A Closer Look at Education Deserts*. We'll put that in the show notes, it's open.

Tom: Yeah, I did a little Googling in preparation for the show, and a lot of the articles I found, even just popular press kind of articles, cited that study. So that, yeah, I think that's a good source to go to if you want to find out more about this.

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean, I'm just really struck. We just don't, I mean maybe you do, because you knew about it, but we just don't talk about this concept in quite this way. I mean, it's related to things we talk about.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: But it's a real "sharpen your pencil" kind of a construct, I think.

Tom: Yeah, and I first I think was exposed to it, if I remember through the Gates Foundation. I can see that some of their work…

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: ...Because they're really interested in education access and post-secondary attainment. So yeah, it's something that's always resonated with me. And in doing some prep for the show, I mean, a stat that stuck out was that about 10% of the population, one in 10 people in the US lives in a technical education desert. That seems like a really large number.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that. And like you said, in Hillman in his work, he gets really into the details here. But you've got the, maybe what you think of as the prototypical example of a rural area, low density area. But there are high density areas, too, because I'll kind of flip on its head the example you gave of a bucolic environment with a highly selective liberal arts thing.

You could have a more, somewhat more urban area that all they have is institutions who, they don't have any open access institutions, and institutions that do exist are below that 80% acceptance…

Tom: Threshold.

Kelvin: Threshold of acceptance. And so that sort of stunts... In fact, I ran across this. Did you see this? So, I love somebody who stretches a metaphor to the breaking point. [Laughter] So, while there's an education desert, there are education mirages.

Tom: What's an education mirage?

Kelvin: It looks like it's not an education desert because there are all these institutions.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: But when you look at it carefully, it's like you approach it looking for access.

Tom: It gets further and further away.

Kelvin: And it does not materialize because it's not broad access.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: Isn't that fascinating?

Tom: That is. I wonder how many of those there are?

Kelvin: Right, right.

Tom: Yeah. Well, and the reason why this sort of resonates with us in the world we live in and the work that we do is that I contend that online learning is a potential remedy to the problem of education deserts in the United States.

Kelvin: Yeah, sure. I absolutely agree with that. But there are folks who would say, "Yeah," I mean I think maybe broadly the “Yes, but” to that is digital divide kinds of things, right?

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: I think one of the things that you supplied in preparation for this is a note from the think tank, Center for American Progress, which says that "Only about 63% of people in rural areas have broadband internet access compared with 75% of people in urban locales." That's one little data point. But if you're already having difficulty because there's no institutions, there might be compounding factors.

Tom: Sure, yeah, and that's real. That broadband issue is real. I'm a little more familiar about that with our own state of Florida and when people think Florida, they think Miami, and Disney, and Tampa, and these kind of metro areas. But there are plenty of places in this state that do not even have broadband. I don't think there are as many education deserts. We're pretty covered here. I looked at the map…

Kelvin: Yeah, I did, too.

Tom: ...In that Hillman study.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: But we do have digital divide issues, and that is a potential barrier for online learning becoming a solution to this problem.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think there's probably creative solutions to that, maybe. I wondered about everything, there's all kind of creative solutions, like some sort of place bound access to online. That could be partnerships with, I don't know, public libraries, or K-12 schools. There are things that aren't new ideas…

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: ...That have surfaced around, or community centers, or whatever where it's not optimal. I'm not saying it's optimal, but we've seen around the world, this kind of strategy be effective where you come to – it’s a more of a distributed model. You may not be able to

get access directly to where you live, but maybe within walking or commuting distance, there's a place that does have access to that central hub.

Tom: Yeah, I could see that sort of hybrid solutions. That makes some sense. Something else I thought of, it's not so much education desert, but I think it's maybe a corollary, and it's based on anecdotes I've heard from the Florida Virtual School, which is the K-12 system for those who are not familiar with it.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm, sure, yeah. It's longstanding. Well regarded.

Tom: Yes, I think it's the largest K-12 virtual school in the country. The anecdotes I've heard is that there's a student in Highlands County, which is a rural county, and south of Lake Okeechobee, who's brilliant, wants to take Chinese Mandarin, and their high school is just not resourced for that, right? But they can take that from the Florida Virtual School, and be able to access the education that they want online virtually that's not offered on ground.

Even though they're in a physical high school. It's not like they're denied high school, but they don't have all the options that perhaps the internet and providers like the Florida Virtual School can provide.

And I think about the same thing at the post-secondary level. So, you think about programs where we have really high workforce demands, like nursing. Nursing shortages we always hear about, yet nursing programs are, they're very difficult to scale because of the requirements associated with clinicals, and they're just expensive, and you just can't grow them really fast.

So, even if you're in an area that has a broad access institution, their nursing program may not be big enough to suit the needs of that area.

Kelvin: Right, right.

Tom: Online learning providers could potentially fill that gap and meet that unmet demand for a program like nursing. So, it's not even like these things have to be binary. They can work in concert with each other potentially.

Kelvin: Yeah, I like that. But to your point, there are so many options for online and digital learning to bring creative solutions to this. And just a shout-out, you mentioned a map, it's an interactive map in Hillman's online article, that again, check the show notes. I played with that, too, and I'm not super facile with it, but it was fascinating, I agree, Florida, no education deserts according to that article. But I went around and looked at places where there were, and zoomed in, zoomed out, played with the thing. What's cool, I think I told you about this the other day. You can, again, not faciled, had to play with them a little bit. You can zoom in a place of interest, and you can click and kind of select these different cells. These different, I think his unit of analysis was "commuting zone" or something, which is kind of a census terminology.

And you can download that to a CSV file, like a spreadsheet file, and it's got longitudinal, latitudinal coordinate data. And you go, "Well, what good is that, Kelvin?" Well, you can

find reverse geocoding free online websites. You upload that, and it converts it to county and municipality addresses.

So, you can imagine, with that in hand, now you can much more to your point about online education being a lever, you can much more directly reach out, and partner, and try to do something…

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: ...About those areas.

Tom: Yeah, I mean it's cool, and it's a great resource, and especially if you're interested in this. And in many ways, at the bottom line, it's all about access and equity. One stat that stood out to me when we were doing some of the prep for this was in the Native American community, and I think this was in a Chronicle article, 29.5% of all Native Americans live in education deserts. So, if one in 10 in the US total population is an education desert, three in 10 Native Americans are in education deserts. That just seems like a tragedy to me.

Kelvin: Yeah. The word, that was the word that came to mind, it's shocking, and an injustice for sure. I'm sure there's complex reasons behind that, but it doesn't seem like a good thing or justifiable in any way.

Tom: Yeah, and the tribal colleges, I know do yeoman's work in this, but there's just not enough of them.

Kelvin: Right, that's right. So, I mean, that's one concrete example, and behind every single one of these education deserts, how many stories are there? How many very sad stories? This just puts a bright light on the broader education access, aspirational goal, and mission that we've talked about so many times in our digital and online learning work.

Tom: Right, and kind of circle back to the digital divide issue. It makes me wonder, because I don't think like this so much anymore because we live in a world where broadband is just ubiquitous. But should certain online programs, especially those that might be targeted at such populations, kind of be gracefully degradable depending upon the bandwidth which somebody will be interacting with it? We don't do that so much.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: I think the infrastructure, the LMSs are better at that. But if we're putting hour-long videos, or whatever into these courses, or really…

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: ...Dense images or something, I'm not sure that we're being entirely fair to some of those populations if they are in our service area.

Kelvin: See, I think that's an excellent insight. I mean, there's design implications, and I'll pull a thread on another sort of theme that we've talked about over the last year or so that

intersects with that and comes to loggerheads with it is the rise of synchronous online courses.

Tom: Right, yes.

Kelvin: So, in our world, we would say, "Hey, fine, synchronous online, asynchronous online, what's it matter really, as long as students are clear, and online is online." But in your scenario, if you don't have broadband…

Tom: Good luck with Zoom, right?

Kelvin: ...And if you use my scenario of public library, community center, whatever, and you can't get there on Monday at 6:00 PM…

Tom: Or somebody's already on the computer.

Kelvin: ...Somebody's already on the computer. That's a real problem.

Tom: It is. I was, just before this meeting, before I walked over to the sweat box. [Laughter] Sorry, Tim. I was on a call meeting with others on Zoom across the university, and one of them, I assume he was at home, had his camera off, and he put in chat, "I have really bad internet today, so I can hear you, but I've got my camera off, and I'm not going to talk much." And then I was on a meeting yesterday, and the person who was running the meeting kept having bandwidth issues, and we lost her for a while, and then she had to come back in. And these are people with broadband.

Kelvin: That's right. These are well-resourced people. [Laughter]

Tom: Yes, right. And even they have problems with this on occasion. Could you imagine then, in a synchronous learning environment, where that's your default? That's a really good point.

Kelvin: Yeah. This all comes back to design and knowing who your students are, knowing who, we don't always like language like this, but your target population is, right?

Tom: Sure.

Kelvin: Knowing them and knowing what you're trying to achieve. If you're really going to achieve goals, then you got to be, oh, there has got to be in alignment for sure.

Tom: Yeah. Or at least make people aware, right? I know that in some undeveloped countries, and especially in Africa, that mobile learning is, in many cases, the first option because they just don't have the fiber, but they have towers.

Kelvin: Right.

Tom: So, they use a lot of things on the phone for training and for education. It is part of our faculty development to teach faculty how to design for a course that could be viewed on a phone.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: I wonder if that's a potential angle for serving these kinds of students?

Kelvin: Yeah, a mobile first.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: A mobile first strategy.

Tom: Mobile first.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think that's right. Although even there, right, you have to kind of be thinking, do you have whatever, unlimited data on your phone? [Laughter]

Tom: Right. True. Yeah.

Kelvin: I know that's a thing.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Well, you want to try to wrap it up, and put the plane on the runway for us?

Tom: Sure. So, I'll do the bottom line here. The construct of education deserts enables online education professionals, like us, to more precisely devise strategies that achieve educational access for those who need it most.

Kelvin: That's right. That's good.

Tom: So, I think we have a little bit of time. Will you indulge a plug?

Kelvin: Plug away, Dr. Cavanagh.

Tom: All right. So, whether you are a newer listener or have been with us for a while, we would like to cordially invite you to please rate and review TOPcast on whatever platform through which you access it.

So, our data indicate that most of you access TOPcast on Apple Podcasts, but we would invite your one click rating, or the two-sentence review on whatever platform you use, whatever it is. We would also invite you to view the video because we do make them. [Laughter] And oftentimes, now that we're recording remotely, you can see our interviewees when we have an interview show, you'll see them on video, too, and you can get to know them as well.

Kelvin: Tom brings in a different funny hat for every episode.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: That's not true. [Laughter]

Tom: If you watch you'll know that. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's not true. [Laughter]

Tom: You'll know that's a dirty lie.

Kelvin: That's not true. That's not true. Well yeah, that's great. We would really appreciate it. And it really does help people find the show, and it makes us feel good to know that you're out there listening. This is a passive medium.

Tom: Yeah, that's right.

Kelvin: Our voices echo, echo, echo. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. So, Kelvin, enjoy the warm room we're in while we can, yes. Before you get on I-75 and start that drive north. [Laughter]

Kelvin: [Laughter] Yeah, yeah. Well, will do. Although I keep finding in colder climates the heat works too well. [Laughter] That's what I find. Do you people not know it's cold outside? But maybe I'll acclimate.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: It's possible. Yeah. Well, thank you for that, and enjoyed our in-person thing. Maybe we'll find a way to do it again on a special episode at some point.

Tom: Who knows, yeah, at a conference, or something like we've done in the past.

Kelvin: That would be fun. Right?

Tom: Yeah.

(Musical outro)

Kelvin: But until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.