TOPcast Episode #135: Different Institutions, Different Methods, Same Goals

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(*Musical intro*)

Kelvin: From the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning…

Tom: And the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning…

Kelvin: 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. Happy St. Patrick's Day. We are recording this on St. Patrick's Day, and I thought to give people a reason to go to YouTube, I'd put on my thematically selected chapeau for St. Patrick's Day.

Kelvin: I'm just going to tell you, if you're an audio listener, I'm not going to describe it too much. [Laughter] I just got to say, you got to see it to believe it. So, you should pop on over there to YouTube, and you should see it for yourself.

Tom: [Laughter] I will not do my Irish brogue at the risk of offending any of our Irish listeners, but hey, it's my heritage, too. [Laughter]

Kelvin: We've talked about this. I grew up saying Scotch-Irish, then the older I got, the more I looked into things, and I can't find any Irish. There's a lot of Scottish, it's American Indian, but there's no Irish. [Laughter] So, whatever Scotch-Irish is.

Tom: Well, even though this is coming out after St. Patrick's Day, we are recording it on St. Patrick's and, as they say, Kelvin, "Everyone's Irish on St. Patrick's Day."

Kelvin: That is what they say. That is what they say. All right, well, I am curious what's in your beverage container? So, I'm wondering now if it's Irish coffee. [Laughter]

Tom: I almost did that. I was this close. But I have to do some work after this. No, I went with the iced coffee again today. Yes. It's not quite as hot as it has been. It's actually quite lovely and temperate out, but because we're recording this in the afternoon, sort of felt like an appropriate selection for me.

Kelvin: I gotcha. Well, I will tell you what I've got here, but first I'll say, you might recall, because I know you keep score of these things, you might recall that a couple of episodes back, I think it was maybe in Episode 133, I brought in a single-origin, Guatemala "Los Volcanes" from Louisville roaster, Sunergos Coffee. You might remember the fact that I brewed it poorly, but drank it anyway and said, "Hey, I'm glad you didn't drink this one."

Now, today's coffee sounds similar. It's a single-origin, Guatemala "El Volcan" from Olympia, Washington and Atlanta, Georgia. There's a company, and they have roasteries on the West Coast and East Coast, and the roaster's called Batdorf & Bronson. And they're also known by this other name, because they're joined companies, Dancing Goats Coffee.

Tom: I like it.

Kelvin: Yes, I think our former colleague, Jackie Compton, tried to sell me on that coffee a few years ago. I've been meaning to get some, and it turns out I got some, didn't really quite realize it. So, I thought it would be interesting to compare and contrast the two coffees: the one from a couple episodes back and the one from today.

So, this one I did brew appropriately, and it is tasty, so there's at least that. The titles of each coffee reference the volcanic region of Guatemala, "Los Volcanes" and "El Volcan," which that volcanic region enriches the local coffee growing soil. But the two areas are separated by about 15 miles from each other. The earlier coffee came from an area in Guatemala called Antigua ("antiguah") or Antigua ("antihua"), I don't know. And today's coffee comes from an area called, I'm scared to even try it, but Acatenango.

One coffee was roasted near where I now live in Louisville, and the other was roasted in the East Coast roastery, a little closer to where you live, Tom. So, I wish I could be sharing this with you in your cup, but I'm hoping that maybe there somewhere you found a connection to today's topic.

Tom: I think I did, and I don't think it's the geography of Guatemala, which was fascinating. [Laughter] Acatenango. I learned something new today. But you did mention something about comparing and contrasting the two brews, and I think that's it, because we're going to compare and contrast and talk about differences and similarities in different contexts within the world of higher ed online learning. Am I close?

Kelvin: Yep. Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. So, as you and I have been talking about off microphone, prompted somewhat by my move to a new institution, we've been discussing the importance of institutional context to how we carry out our work of fostering excellence in digital teaching and learning. And if you are paying attention, dear listener, Jocelyn Widmer wisely observes the importance of context back in Episode #126, COLOs, Context, and Community. You should check it out if you haven't already done so.

We thought we might do a bit of compare and contrast between our two institutions as the basis for making some observations related to how institutional context affects our work.

Tom: Sounds good. And I might, I don't know, draw on other campuses I've visited, either spoken at or consulted at. I know you've done similar things, so even though that's a bit of

a more surface understanding of a place, you still kind of get a sense. So yeah, I think it's a really interesting conversation.

Before we clicked record, we were saying that most of us have the same goals, or similar goals, anyway. It has to do with students' success, and revenue, and enrollment, and all the things that are the measures of higher education. But accomplishing those goals within the context with where you work, it can be wildly different. The strategies you have to employ, the way you go about it, the way things are funded, all of that stuff. So, you going to another institution seemed like a really opportune time to just, at least given your knowledge of UCF, and now your knowledge of Louisville, an opportunity to just reflect on that.

Kelvin: Yes. Although I will say as a bit of a disclaimer that, as I say all the time, I'm kind of new here, so I certainly don't have quote, unquote "complete understanding," whatever that is, of the institution. I don't even have a whole lot of institutional data yet, which we'll talk about. So, it's possible that I'll inadvertently mischaracterize some aspect of UofL, but that's not my intention. I mean well.

I'm reminded of this one thing that I remember Jocelyn Widmer saying in your interview with her. She said, "Everybody tends to start from their previous context and kind of want to lay that on a new context." And she sort of said that you could make decisions based on that sort of graft of context and be, I think she said something like, "Be paying for it for years to come. You could make dumb decisions." [Laughter] So, I think about that in every single conversation that I have here. As you know, I've been pursuing 90 conversations in 90 days, and every one I start with, "I'm new here, I don't have a lot of institutional context, I'm looking to form some vicariously, and I don't want to do dumb things."

Tom: Was it Shubha Kashyap, when we interviewed her on the show, talked about when you go into a new context and new job, it's like going to another country and understanding the culture and the language and all of that.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I think that there's some truth to that, because when I've traveled, going to a country like China was very different than going to a country like England as far as the cultural milestones, the language. In some ways, you're able to start interacting a lot more easily because the context is similar, as opposed to someplace else where the language is completely different, and the institutional culture is very different. So, I thought that was kind of an apropos analogy.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. We'll stick a link to Shubha's episode back in the show notes, because if you didn't listen to that, or you haven't listened to it in a while, you should listen to it again. It was extremely insightful. I remember that really, really well.

I mean, I guess starting off, I mean, we could do a little bit of ping ponging comparisons and contrasts between some of the various structural features of the institutions and the surrounding communities. But as you said before we hit record, the important thing is really in what we make of that, how you digest it, and what you do with it, I think. But maybe we just kind of bounce around a little bit.

For instance, Florida and Kentucky, in some ways similar, in some ways different – both in the Southeastern part of the United States, but opposite diagonal corners. I'm still fascinated by Kentucky. Cross the river one way, and you're in the Midwest, cross it another way you're in the North Central part of the United States, cross it another way you're coming up on the East Coast, and we're in the South, and "Gateway to the South," some people say. And then Florida is the South, and yet not so much. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, well, it's like I like to say, in Florida, the more north you go, the further south you get. So, there's something to that.

Kelvin: I've said that exactly the same way. And vice versa, the farther south you go, the farther north you go. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, that's true. That's interesting. And we have palm trees, so we got that. And gators. Got that going for us. I mean as far as the state goes, I think there's a lot of similarities even in the broader political context that you're at another public institution, and so you got to navigate those waters sometimes. So, that's probably something that's more similar than different, I would imagine.

Kelvin: Yes. Another similarity is the Carnegie classification of the institutions is darn similar. There might be some of those... What do they call them? What are they? They're not optional. Whatever. Those other little descriptors, there might be a little variation there. But both institutions, I think, are research universities, very high research activity. Some people still say R1 by shorthand, and both are also community engaged. I think UCF has some other descriptors as well.

Tom: And of course, UofL's been around a lot longer than UCF, and probably within that very high research activity, I would presume generates a lot more funded research dollars, sponsored research dollars, than we do. But we're doing our best to catch up.

Kelvin: UCF, what, 60 years old in the year 2023. UofL, 225 years old in 2023. It is a very weird thing to be at an institution that has roots that far back. One of the things I thought was interesting is both institutions claim that phrase that now departed former UCF president, Dr. John Hitt used to invoke, "Metropolitan Research University," and both are very proud of that. So, it might be worth making a moment or two note of the surrounding metropolitan areas of Louisville and Orlando.

Orlando and Central Florida are bigger population-wise. I found it interesting. I guess the census, they try to keep things consistent, so they look at a roughly 4,000 square mile metropolitan statistical area, and Central Florida is basically twice the size of the Louisville Metro area, population-wise.

Tom: Well, for good or ill, Florida, I think, is officially the fastest growing state in the country.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: There's like 1000 people a day move in here, and an awful lot of them end up in Central Florida. I think at one point we were, maybe we're higher than that now, but the 19th largest TV market, or something like that.

Kelvin: You see house prices are a little lower in Louisville, a little higher in the Orlando area. Both have some Fortune 500 companies, although I think Louisville has a Fortune 100 company as well. The largest employers, maybe this is not surprising, involves healthcare and public school system in some ways. Although Orlando has Walt Disney World. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, we got that.

Kelvin: And Louisville has UPS. Which is like Disney a lot. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, exactly. You got to wait in line for rides. No, I'm just kidding. At least the boxes do, right? [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I think in some of your notes here, you reminded me that we have two Fortune 500 companies headquartered here. And I'm not sure I realized... I mean, one I knew, Darden Restaurants, the other one was Publix, which, I guess, hasn't always been a Fortune 500, but maybe it is now. Disney's not headquartered here, but it is a major employer and major influence in the state.

Kelvin: Believe it or not, Tom, when I looked at Publix, it's like three, four points off from being a Fortune 100 company.

Tom: No kidding. Well, they've been expanding a lot. I don't know if they're in Kentucky yet, but if not, they're heading,

Kelvin: On the outskirts of Louisville, there's a Publix opening. People are excited.

Tom: "Where shopping is a pleasure." I have not been paid for that endorsement.

Kelvin: That's right. Louisville area, little bit less diverse. Orlando, the core county, Orange County, in the Orlando metro area is 33% Hispanic, 25% African American, 7% Asian. Median age 36. Versus Louisville, the main county, which is Jefferson County, 25% African American, 6.5% Hispanic, 4% Asian and the median age, 38. So close, but just a tiny bit older, little bit less diverse. But in that context, these two universities sit. So, UCF grew like a, I don't know, sunflower. I don't want to say weed. [Laughter] Big and beautiful.

Tom: Yes, that's right. Like bamboo here in the South.

Kelvin: Bamboo.

Tom: That's interesting. I think that owning and really leaning into that "Metropolitan Research University" label is a definite area of similarity. You may be a little more urban than we are, but we're not in some remote small town, like a small liberal arts college, and that's all there is in that space. I mean, we are in a large metropolitan area. We're the university in this city. So, there you go.

Kelvin: That's right, and what a university. I don't know, what are the current enrollment numbers at UCF?

Tom: This past fall, I think we were at 68,500-ish. I think our enrollment plan has us being around 70, and we're trying to shape the mix of that a little bit between in-state, out-of-state, undergrad, grad. We're mostly undergrad. As you know, we have about 10,000 graduate students. About 10% of our headcount is in UCF online. We're big, we're big.

Kelvin: Whereas UofL, so just a little bit over 23,000 students. So, that's almost a third the size of the student population. And you mentioned UCF online, there are, what, more than 100 online programs at UCF, and there's a little bit over 60 online programs here. But here too, it's somewhere in the neighborhood of about 10%, a little more than 10%, of those 23,000 students are enrolled in exclusively online programs here. So, for the proportions, maybe a few more online programs than you would expect to see. Maybe, but the proportionality is not far off.

Tom: That's interesting that 10% number being the same.

Kelvin: More or less. But I think what's distinct is delving into other aspects of digital teaching and learning, though. I think we start to see some differences.

Tom: So, let's do that in the time we have remaining. So, recognizing you're still on your listening and learning tour, but you're familiar with how we're organized here to support distance learning and blended learning, and it's, I would say, a primarily centralized model with the academic work owned in the colleges. So, that's distributed out.

            The faculty own the courses, they schedule their courses, all of that. I know in some places the online unit does a lot more when you say centralized than we do, but as a support unit, we're centralized. We don't have instructional designers in the colleges and things like that. So, how does that model compare to Louisville?

Kelvin: It's both similar and different. I mean, there is a central support unit that's under my purview, but I would call the culture itself, you can kind of feel it, it's a little more decentralized. So even though there's a central support unit, there's a lot more collaboration. I don't even know that that's quite the right word. A lot more involvement, a lot more dependent on other entities, as well as the academic units in terms of vetting online programs, let's say.

            And it's clear to me that to move forward anything, that's not something I'm going to do unilaterally. You wouldn't do that, either. You'd be very collaborative. But I don't see any way but to do that. [Laughter] You have to work together in that sense.

            Another difference is you got required faculty development at UCF serving as a bedrock foundation for quality assurance. While there's a lot of great robust programming here, none of it is required. And so that part is a little different. Central support unit, but not everything flows through. There will be more likelihood to seek online program marketing help and less instructional design process, that kind of stuff. Which is a little concerning to me, because you start with quality, then you go sell it.

Tom:	Right, yeah. Well, I don't know. I'm going to make an observation. It's based on no data, except my own personal anecdotal experience, and what you just said, but my experience has been when I've dealt with institutions that have a history like Louisville's, been around for 200 years, it's more likely that it's going to be decentralized and not have required faculty development, as opposed to a school that's maybe a little younger, like a UCF. It's an interesting dynamic, that if you're working in an institution like that, you're just going to have to figure out your path.
Kelvin:	Totally agree with that. That's been my observation through the years, and so, I expected that coming in here, and it's been born out. There's a lot more digital course modality variation at UCF. I mean, I won't even try to stay up to date now, but I mean that includes…
Tom:	We're thinking about changing it again. Don't get started.
Kelvin:	I heard word on the street that. But at the very least, it includes in-person, online, and blended, along with asynchronicity and synchronicity. Here in-person, and there's online. One of the things I've been learning is there's a bit of a backlog. I'm waiting on getting my hands on some institutional data. So, I've just been scouring public stuff. But what's fascinating is the word "online" generally only applies to online programs. It's very difficult to find any mention of online courses.
	So, you could think, "Oh, there must not be any outside of the online programs." Not true. So, I went, and I scoured a former semester schedule search, and Fall 2021, which I was looking at a lot of data, and that was the semester that there were complete data for everything. And in that fall, there were like 1100 fully online course sections. And if you look at attempted credit hours, if I read it all right, and kind of approximated a little, it's maybe not far off from UCFs proportions. About a third of the credit hours came from online course sections, which is about what UCF runs, as I recall, more or less.
Tom:	Yeah, when you talk about especially credit hours.
Kelvin:	All the digital. That's right.
Tom:	Which is usually how I measure and report it, because it correlates to revenue. Yeah, that's interesting, too. What else you want to compare and contrast?
Kelvin:	See, you've got, very conservatively, 85 plus percent of UCF students are "digitally engaged," we might say. They're taking at least one online blended course every year. I have no idea at UofL. I think that's probably the case, but I think that's an area I want to explore more, because as you and I have discussed, I believe that hybridity is the future. Fully online programs are just one part of the pie, so we need to understand more about student course taking behavior, and make sure that we're working with it and not against it.
	You've got a robust funding model at UCF?
Tom:	Well, yeah, we do. I can't complain about the Distance Learning fee, which is really how we're funded. It's a per credit hour fee that students pay. The good part about that model, there's two good things, and then there's some bad things. But the good thing about the

model is one, because it's tied to the credit hour, as people enroll more, it scales up so that we can support it. It's not a flat funding model, so that's good. It scales with growth.

The other thing is it's statutorily governed, which means that the institution can't swoop in and spend it on other things, so it's protected it from being used. Now, that same protection also limits us from spending it on other things that we'd like to spend it on, like supporting in-class, on-campus, digital innovation. We just can't use it for that.

Over the years, thanks to different times when the state has given and the state has taken away, our Non-distance Learning fee allocation has shrunk significantly, so we're mostly funded by this restricted fee. In years past, we would've been more able to do that kind of work, and, frankly, to market and even pay faculty, which is often a barrier to growth, we just don't have the faculty bodies for capacity. We can't spend that DL fee on that, and that's been a limiter in our ability to grow.

Kelvin: That's right. Here, it's just one university budget model, which is a kind of RCM, Responsibility Center Management model in which a portion of tuition revenues fund all service units, including the one that reports to me, which includes Online Digital Teaching and Learning. So, that's not growth oriented; it's after the fact you're going to get ... and so, if enrollment, I know this is radical Tom, but in other places in the country, enrollments are concerned. They're going down some, I know that's not quite the case in Florida, but as enrollments go down, tuition declines. That means that money flows less, it trickles, and it's hard to lead and be strategic if that's the way that you're funding this innovative effort.

Tom: Interesting. So, the funding is lagging. It follows the semester after you measure, right?

Kelvin: That's correct, that's correct. I'm hoping to change that over time, to at least... Well, I should say change. I'd like to complement that. I do not seek to change the university budget model, but I do seek to complement it with an approach that allows for strategic growth-oriented investment.

Tom: Yeah, it's almost kind of borrow against future revenue. Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah. What about staffing? As you know, we've got here pretty much soup to nuts, everybody who, from instructional designers, to the help desk, to media producers, to programmers, everybody, to develop and deliver an online course. Is that similar in your centralized model there? Or does some of that reside out in a decentralized place?

Kelvin: The core functions are here, and you've got the whole Division of Digital Learning there, including the Center for Distributed Learning, which all told is what, you're bumping up against 200 people probably. You're getting close.

Tom: Yeah, I think including our part-timers, it's like 190, something like that.

Kelvin: Here, when you include full-time and part-time, I think you're slightly in excess of 60. But I would say the roles, in some ways... It's not that the individual roles are more diverse, it's just the groupings are a little bit different. We have both the digital teaching learning responsibility as well as general core university teaching learning responsibility, so traditional teaching and learning center and digital teaching and learning.

Plus, there's a conference and event center and a permanent Quality Enhancement Plan office, QEP being a specific outgrowth of both of our regional accreditors at the moment, SACSCOC, that kind of seeks to foster institution-wide continuous improvement. So, whereas they kind of swirl around in institutions most places, here there's a devoted QEP office, and so, it's part of the unit here.

But you don't have a lot of dedicated marketing people directly in the division, mainly because of that funding stipulation that you said. Here, there's a lot of emphasis on online program marketing. That's one of the major things that got my attention at first.

Tom: That's interesting. Well, as you know, we do fund with the little non-restricted funding. We get several lines and a media budget, but it's not adequate.

Kelvin: It's modest.

Tom: It's modest to do what our ambitions are. In comparison, with our peers, we're not even close. So, I'm working on that, as you know.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. I mean, it's probably worth noting when you're talking about institutional comparisons, they're never perfect. They're never truly apples to apples. There's always differences. We've talked a lot about numbers, and quantitative, and all that, but context is not only quantitative. A lot of institutional context is qualitative and best understood in conversation and relationship with colleagues. It's why I'm doing these 90 conversations in 90 days. But as I know we're going to bump up on time, go over a little bit here probably, but as we kind of talk that through, you have any takeaways about this compare and contrast between the institutions?

Tom: Honestly, I can't say I'm terribly surprised because I've seen what you've described in other places, but it's also, like we said when we kicked off, the goals are the same. You want students to do well in classes, you want to prepare faculty, you want them to graduate, you want to generate revenue for the institution, you want to have a high quality, engaging experience – all of that stuff.

We all have those same goals, but we live in this little special place where you have a quasi-RCM model, or I have an internal OPM, or I have an external OPM, or whatever it is. Hey, all the IDs live in the colleges, and I have to get them to do the work.

I think about places, like what little I know about Penn State World Campus. They've got the World Campus, and I think on-campus teams can almost contract with them to do their online courses for them, if I'm not mistaken. Somebody from Penn State will email me and correct me. But I think all these models, you just got to find the one that works for your institution to accomplish those goals. You're in the midst right now of sort of finding that path and figuring out how to navigate and work within the system.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I'm used to having very ready access to all manner of data. For almost since the inception of the initiative there at UCF, it's been very data driven. Originally, there were a bunch of Excel spreadsheets or whatever, and then a database, and it harvests from the student information system… all kinds of data.

Having institutional data does inform our understanding of context. I can't wait to get something. But reality is, every place is different in terms of how easy it is to get those data and know how you're doing. So, as we've talked before, it's easy, it's tempting even, to define your progress, your work, your success, in terms of your own, I don't know, your own terminology, your own work, your inputs rather than your outputs.

Tom: Right. How many faculty did we train?

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: All of that. That's not what it's about. That's a means to an end.

Kelvin: That's correct. That's right. Can't wait to get me some data. [Laughter] There's different ways of conceptualizing online and digital teaching and learning. Like we've talked about, there's all kinds of approaches to modalities, and the emphasis on fully online programs, and the marketing of those, and in what spheres are they marketed. That can vary. The extent to which online, or whatever's kind of over there, versus a core part of the institution. We didn't talk about that explicitly, but it's very core to the work of UCF.

Tom: Yeah. Wow, I don't know, maybe there's a "To be continued" on this conversation. I feel like we've just barely scratched the surface on some of this stuff.

Kelvin: We can check back in down the road a little bit, maybe. But in the interest of time, since we've already exceeded the patience of our listeners, maybe shall I try to get the plane on the runway?

Tom: Let's.

Kelvin: All right. So, perhaps we'll say by way of wrap up that while institutional contexts vary, our missions and goals are all very similar, as you mentioned, Tom. This diversity of context informs the ways we effectively pursue these goals of our online digital education work. Whether even we are working with, or occasionally, dare I say, against institutional culture, at least we do so knowingly, right? [Laughter]

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: How's that?

Tom: Sounds good. Well, thanks for sharing that and reflecting on your kind of unique perspective with a foot recently in this world and now both in that world.

Kelvin: I hope I haven't done a disservice to UofL. I'm new here. Don't hold it against me. I look forward to learning more, and we'll talk. Maybe we should do that, go a few months down the road, do another check-in or something.

         (*Musical outro*)

Well, Tom, I wish I could be really sharing the coffee with you, but it was nice to visit and have a virtual remotely shared cup of coffee. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.