TOPcast Episode #136:
Online Higher Ed: Finding Ourselves in Other People's Stories

Narrator: University of Louisville understands that their students come from diverse backgrounds with aspirations, drives and needs to match. With more than 50 online programs in areas like business, education, social work, engineering and more, Louisville provides students with a multitude of career-advancing options and flexible coursework. Students can complete their coursework from the comfort of their home, or on the go, via mobile apps. Learn more at louisville.edu/online. That's louisville.edu/online.

(*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. How are you?

Kelvin: Doing all right. Doing all right. Separated by the miles, but connected via the technology.

Tom: That's right. It is a connected world, and we're just two little cogs in the machine.

Kelvin: [Laughter] With cups of coffee because we do build this show as a collegial conversation about online teaching and learning, conducted over a shared cup of coffee, even if that sharing is virtual, as they say these days.

Tom: That's right. So, Kelvin, you mentioned the cup of coffee, and it is our signature. So, what is in your thermos today?

Kelvin: In the thermos today, Tom, is unusually a blend from Fuel Coffee Roasters in Alpharetta, Georgia. The blend's name is "First Call," and it was one of a set of three specialty blends created to honor and benefit, via a portion of

the proceeds, first responders. So, First Call honors 911 dispatchers, and there were other ones for other first responders. And you might know this. A "first call" generically signifies a "go-to" resource, the first person you reach out to. And in a bit of new-to-Kentucky trivia, I also learned that "first call" is another name for the famous "call to post" or, more trivia, "Assembly of the Buglers", properly named Bugle Call, now associated with horse racing such as the Kentucky Derby held just down the street from UofL at Churchill Downs. So, we'll even throw a link in the show notes to the Kentucky Derby Bugler. [Imitates bugler playing] Ta, ta, ta, ta, ga, ta, ta, ta, ta! We'll have that in there. Guy has been doing the job for 30 years there or something. It's interesting. So, the coffee is not bad. Can you find a connection to today's episode topic in my cup? Or maybe you could supply one of your own? [Laughter]

Tom: All right, so let me think. There was a lot of reference to first calls, and we are talking about a book that had a call for proposals to write chapters. So, I think that might be a piece of it. I do think "first" has something to do with it.

Kelvin: Yes, yes.

Tom: Yeah. I think I'm on the right track.

Kelvin: I thought to First Call as a go-to resource. I think we're going to be talking to someone you interviewed about this book that I think will be a go-to resource for online education professionals.

Tom: Yeah. So, I'm having an iced coffee, as I will sometimes do, but I don't know, all that talk about Kentucky Derby's making me want a Mint Julep here.

Kelvin: A Mint Julep.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Well, it is warming up outside.

Tom: It is. It is, and it is almost time for that big famous race. All right. So, should we talk about who I interviewed?

Kelvin: Sure. So, Tom, you recently interviewed Dr. Bettyjo Bouchey. And Dr. Bouchey is Associate Professor and Vice Provost of Digital Strategy and Operations at National Louis University. She's also the lead editor on this book project that you contributed to. And as we said, I think it is the first publication from the Online Learning Consortium's "OLC Press." The book title is, and you're going to say this again in the interview, but I'm

going to say it now, too, because it's long enough that you need to hear it at least twice, *From Grassroots to the Highly-Orchestrated: Online Leaders Share Their Stories of the Evolving Online Organizational Landscape in Higher Education*. Dr. Bouchey's co-editors are Dr. Erin Gratz and Dr. Shelley Kurland. Is there anything you'd want to say about your conversation with Dr. Bouchey before we cut to it, or the book, or anything else?

Tom: Mint Juleps, perhaps.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's right.

Tom: No, I don't think so. I think the conversation stands on its own as a good introduction to the book, the edited collection. I will say that I am not a completely objective interviewer. [Laughter] I do have the first chapter in the book and I'm very proud of that. I was proud to be associated with it. So, with that caveat, I think maybe we should take a listen.

Kelvin: Well, let's do that. From the modern miracle that is podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Bettyjo Bouchey.

              (*Musical transition*)

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

Bettyjo Bouchey: Thanks for having me.

Tom: So, the main thing I wanted to talk to you about, of course, we can talk about whatever you like, is the new Online Learning Consortium book. I want to make sure I get the title right, *From Grassroots to the Highly-Orchestrated Online Leaders: Share Their Stories of the Evolving Online Organizational Landscape in Higher Ed*. It is, I believe, the very first book from the new OLC Press, correct?

Bettyjo: It is indeed, and you passed the quiz right out of the gates and read the title of the books. So, thank you, Tom. [Laughter]

Tom: It's a mouthful, but that's okay because the book covers an awful lot of stuff, which is where I wanted to start. You've got these five framing categories that the book is organized into. Just for those who have not yet read the book, what's wrong with you listening audience? You should have read the book by now, but if not, this is a little teaser for you. Section one is leadership followed by administrative functions, academic functions, student onboarding and support services, and innovation. I was wondering if that was a framing that you started with, and then solicited

	calls for papers, or did you come up with those categories once you saw what you had?
Bettyjo:	Yeah, that's a great question, and as in life, it's both. It's a "Yes and." So, even though this is not improv, but we'll treat it as such for just a second. [Laughter] So, we had started out with looking at our research through the lens of the student development lifecycle. And when we did that, we bucketed these things into four quadrants. Then when we were doing interviews, we ended up collapsing the last two, and that was the support structures and the online student support, and partly because the interviews took us in that direction. So, for a while we had three dimensions, and that's perfectly adequate. That made perfect sense for us.
	Then we started getting all of the chapters coming in for the request for proposals, and noticed that there were a lot of need to look at online as a cross-cutting measure, as something that wasn't just something you would talk about in the context of say, enrollment or faculty management. It was this bigger principle, which of course we knew, but when we were seeing it through the eyes of our chapter contributors, it made more sense to then have these two other dimensions that could really begin the book and end the book for us. So, we were really thrilled. Then what's funny too, Tom, we got to the end of this and thought, "You know what? These are actually all innovation and leadership." But we still align to the original dimensions in the research study just to really honor those results as well.
Tom:	Well, I mean it still fits under the overarching theme of the title in the book, leadership and online higher ed. Your co-editors, Erin and Shelley, they work in very different kinds of institutions. I wonder if the way the three of you collaborated as editors, if that different institutional background, the variety there created some benefits, or challenges, or both?
Bettyjo:	Well, so, my co-editors, Erin Gratz and Shelley Kurland are, first of all, two of the most amazing human beings I feel privileged to know. So, I just want to lead with that. What I find really interesting about our triad is that we do come from slightly different institutions. We also come from different backgrounds professionally and personally. So, it really creates this lovely, beautiful chaos in the writing and the research process where we naturally challenge each other and reinforce, challenge, reinforce, and over time have just developed almost our own way of being, which makes these projects far less intensive, and maybe feeling laborious, and more just like, this is the fun thing that I do with my two friends. That ends up being this thing that we did with the Online Learning Consortium, for example. So, the short answer is yes, but it's also I think a little bigger for the three of us, too.

Tom:	Yeah. Well, some is greater than the whole of the parts or the parts or whatever that expression is. You were all better together, I guess, than individually. Well, and as somebody who contributed a chapter, I just found working with all three of you, really, really great, very supportive. I had some strange things in my chapter that you all helped me work through, and yeah, it was a really, I thought, supportive process. So, on behalf of the contributors, thank you.
Bettyjo:	My pleasure.
Tom:	I wonder if there was anything that surprised you that you learned through the process, whether it was something that an author, or authors said, or something like a fact or something that popped out that was a revelation for you?
Bettyjo:	Well, perhaps less surprising what we saw in the chapters because we knew everything that our chapter authors sent through would be fantastic, and it was. So, we already knew that. And I'll say in the research process, there were many surprises there. The first big one being that we went into that research project thinking we could make sense of online organizational structures through the lens of organizational behavior and organizational development. So, we did our research there and looked at those frameworks and thought, this will be so easy, we'll be able to line this up.
	I had this whole idea of this widget, and then you could move things around and figure out what the optimal structure was, which was ridiculous because really where we landed is that online organizations are fairly messy organizations in the truest sense of messy organizational structure, but also are very, very individual to the institution and the people, most primarily the people who started online, you can see their personality and their forever stamp on online at that institution. [Laughter] So, we weren't able to make sense of it through these traditional frameworks, but we were able to make sense of it from this individualized perspective, and also this greater idea that online perpetually evolves. So, it defies this inventory thing that we thought we were getting to. And so, it was all at the same time frustrating, but also wonderful to really bring that into my understanding.
Tom:	Yeah, it's funny you say that because we had Jocelyn Widmer on the show not that long ago, and Jocelyn did her own private research similarly about structure and organization, and she found the same thing, that it's very context specific. Yet, there are these common themes, but the way people execute on those themes can vary greatly. We all have the same goals and objectives, but how we accomplish them is really, I think, the centerpiece of your book because it talks about practices, and methodologies, and the

	things that worked in case studies that you can take the pieces of that that make sense in your context and apply them at home.
Bettyjo:	Yeah, absolutely. That was something that I started to say at one point too, is that we wanted other readers, other institutions to find a little bit of themselves in the book as well as things that weren't them to find their way, or find a new way for that matter. And so, we think that every institution will see at least some of their selves in this book.
Tom:	Well, despite that kind of context dependent nature of a lot of it, did any particular themes emerge that you say, "Oh yeah, well, this is a universal truth for everybody who's in a position like this?"
Bettyjo:	Interestingly, in some ways, sure. So, there are some domains of responsibility and accountability that we could in some ways start to hang our hat on. So, instructional design commonly came up in this portfolio as sometimes the learning management system management would come in their enrollment admissions. So, we found some functional areas that seem to line up more often than not. I will say that the biggest area of variability for us was in academic affairs, in the academic enterprise. That's where the real chaos really started. Part of that was about the type of institution that's about unions, and faculty governance, and all of those different kinds of things as well, but also some of the heritages that existed, or that still exists in those institutions.
Tom:	Yeah, I can see that. And living in a context with a faculty union and having worked in one where there wasn't, I totally get that, yeah. Despite how comprehensive I think the book is, I imagine that there's still some areas that could be explored further. What suggestions do you have for areas of further research exploration?
Bettyjo:	Yeah. So, interestingly enough, we are getting ready to, spoil alert, [Laughter] launch a small scale follow up study, and we'll be reaching out to the original participants to say, "Hey, what happened since? So here were your hopes and dreams at the time, and here's what was happening and what happened since?" So, we'll do a pulse check there. But I think outside of that, what I continue to think about is what does the full landscape of online look like when almost every institution has online programming, which is not something that we really would've said maybe even three or four years ago. We would've said, "Here are the folks that do it, and here are the folks that perhaps have chosen not to." And of course, we know what happened to change that. This idea that there are unlimited students pursuing post-secondary education is not true, and what does it really mean to compete in that kind of market?

That's different for us. We're higher ed in particular. We're not necessarily as focused as perhaps private industry might be in that competitive landscape, that kind of competition. We're used to understanding we have peers, and all of that. But when you're talking about competing student by student, that's a fairly different shift for us. So, I am very curious what that looks like, especially as we're seeing some of the really big players now double down on online as well, not just the national players that you always hear about, but the UCFs and the Ohio States. We're seeing the big players come into the market saying, "Oh, we're actually here, too, and here's what we're going to do." That will create some interesting times for us all to navigate.

Tom: Yeah, and even for schools like the ones you mentioned, UCF, Ohio State, big publics, the competition is growing as you said, especially in a post COVID context where even schools that didn't have an online strategy prior to COVID, now all of a sudden realize they need an online strategy. A book like this that really talks to how do you lead, how do you administer, how do you support a program like that? I think it's just really timely. Not that you wanted a worldwide pandemic to make your book super relevant, but it does make it super relevant right now. So, I don't know, maybe that's where we'll wrap up. If you could, I'll give you an opportunity to do a shameless plug. If you could explain why should somebody pick up the book, what would they get out of it, why would it be worth their time? Make your pitch.

Bettyjo: Sure. So, again, what we really hoped, and still hope for, is that any institution picks it up and says, "I see myself in this chapter. This chapter resonates with me. I can see a path for us here." But I would also say, especially if you run into that chapter early on in the book, keep reading because there are several sub-themes. I didn't get to hear that connect to those first few chapters as well. We intentionally front loaded the book with some of the bigger ideas that thread through some of the rest of the chapters. Because some of the stories are fairly specific, you're leaving your online program manager, and here's what you might expect, that's a very specific use case. Or you've lost your fee structure, and you have to completely rehaul your way that you fund your online organization. That's a specific use case, but generally speaking, you can hear and see the strategies that underpinned those stories.

They're stories. It's not a research case study where you're sifting through findings. These are real stories written by the people who were engaged in that work, and they left it all on the table for you. Many of them admitted when they made mistakes, they told you what they did about them, and what they might change in the future. So, it's also an easy read because of that. These are really relatable stories. These are very real people, very real institutions trying to find their way. And so, for me, there is this

feeling of subscribing people in these chapters, pulling in other people into these mini belief systems that exist in the chapters. So, I don't know. That was a lot of words, Tom, but this has been such a labor of love for us because we firmly, as do all of the authors in this book, believe that online is the ultimate access lever. It's the ultimate lever for us in higher ed, and here are these 18 stories that can help you get there faster.

Tom: I think that's a great shameless plug. And yeah, I think as I said, it's a book whose timing is perfect for the needs of the community. I'm proud to be associated with it. Thank you for including me in it. So, I think that was a great overview. So, on behalf of Kelvin and myself, Bettyjo, thank you for being on TOPcast.

Bettyjo: Thank you so much for having me.

(*Musical transition*)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Dr. Bettyjo Bouchey.

Tom: It was. Yeah, I enjoyed talking to Bettyjo, and I enjoyed working with her, and Erin, and Shelley on the book. As I mentioned, my chapter had some weirdness to it, and they were nice guides through it. I talked about leadership lessons from the pandemic, and it was a much more of a personal reflective chapter than I might typically do in a scholarly collection. They helped me find the path that allowed a little bit of that leeway, but still keeping true to the kind of book it was. So, I appreciate that.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's interesting. I recall her saying a little bit about just the placement of, it's important for how we make sense of the work, but then you have more scholarly research reports, research articles versus capturing of insights, and finding the way to do that is challenging.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, it is. And just for what it's worth, I appreciate the fact that Online Learning Consortium has leaned into this publishing mission, and I think this is a worthy book to jumpstart that. It really does address a lot of the waterfront of what online learning leaders are facing. I mean, she used examples like, I have to get rid of my OPM or whatever. There's specific things, but there's an awful lot of goodness in there. And it also covers a variety of different types of institutions. So, as she said, I think that you can find something in there to relate to, but even if it's a different kind of institution, there's pieces of what they have gone through that you can relate to, or apply to your own individual context. You don't have to just find the one that is exactly like you to get some real value out of it.

Kelvin:	Yeah, I mean, to be honest, it's on my list of books to purchase, and okay a bit of the commercial segment of the show, in the show notes we will have a link to the book purchase. But if you purchase, if you're an OLC member, there's actually a 20% discount if you purchase from the OLC Press site. So, we'll have both of those in there. I'm going to buy it at the non-discounted price because I'm learning this new institution, and it's apparently a Herculean challenge to buy things that… Yeah, so, I'm just going to buy it.
Tom:	Enough said. Yeah.
Kelvin:	I'm just going to buy it. I'm just going to buy it.
Tom:	Yeah. Well, I'll say this, too. I should know this off the top of my head, but I recall seeing that... I mean, I got an author copy, so yay for me. [Laughter] I didn't have to buy it. But it's not expensive.
Kelvin:	No, it is not.
Tom:	Typically, these kinds of books can get silly because they're being sold to libraries or something. That's not the case. This is real accessible.
Kelvin:	No, it really is.
Tom:	So good for them.
Kelvin:	I think the list price is somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 bucks, which is not bad.
Tom:	If you say so. That sounds about right. But I didn't want to put a number on it.
Kelvin:	I think so, I looked at it the other day, and I think that's right. So, I think I'm going to get an e-text. I'm trying to gauge when I'm going to do paper and when I'm going to be e-text. Speaking of text and context, probably good, another little plug here. Here's another, it seems like we've been talking about this a lot, institutional context. That's really in a sense what this whole book is about. So, another shout out to that interview with Dr. Jocelyn Widmer, and perhaps a plug to our recent Episode #135 on institutional context as a comparison between institutions. So, we try to make sense of that work. Anything else you want to say about some of the conversation that you and Bettyjo had? You talked about some of the themes, and so forth, and making sense of it?
Tom:	Yeah, well, I thought it was interesting that she identified some of the common threads like LMS administration, and overseeing instructional

design, and some of those things that I could relate to. But I think when you take a step back and you look at maybe the broader mission of say, access, or student success, or I mean, those I think are also common themes, but the methods, the strategies that are used to accomplish them within that particular institutional context can vary a lot. I think it just really underscores the research that Bettyjo and her collaborators did, and Jocelyn Widmer did. And others, I think back to even the interview we did with Eric Frederickson, when he was looking at just titles of people in leadership roles, and there wasn't a whole lot of consistency there, but the jobs were functionally very similar.

Kelvin: We'll throw links to those previous episodes in the show notes if you haven't heard any of those episodes. All worth a listen, and all interconnected, like you said. Yeah, I remember Bettyjo mentioning there was a lot of variability she found in the "academic affairs" area. Then I thought it was interesting, I wanted to learn more, and maybe this will be born out in the book. She's talked about how you could see, and I think this is where you really talk about what you see, what you were just talking about zoomed in context. She talked about the stamp of the person who started the initiative at individual institutions, that you could really see differences, peculiarities to the person as much as to the institution. I thought that was really interesting.

Tom: Yeah, that is interesting. And I think about, and you were there at UCF when it was started, and I think there's some truth to that, both structurally, but also just the human personalities that were involved and why things evolved, and took the shape that they did had a lot to do with that. And I bet it's the same in almost every institution across the country,

Kelvin: I'm going to guess so. I mean, unless there was a complete cleaning house somewhere. I mean, for whatever reason, I'm going to think that some of that DNA gets propagated and sticks around culturally.

Tom: It may be less true for institutions that are standing up like a new initiative. Now, that seems to be more of a top down administrative, "Hey, we got to get in this game." But for those that have been around a while, I think that there is some interesting evolution that had some sort of catalyst early on and was shaped by the personalities that started it,

Kelvin: Which I don't think that's bad. I think it's interesting. It makes places unique. And although there's probably on the flip side, things to be learned from seeing how other people do things, and you going, "Oh, we don't have to do it this way."

Tom: Well, it certainly explains the idiosyncratic nature of the various institutional context because people are different, and they're going to

make different institutions. So, I enjoyed the conversation with Bettyjo. I appreciated her, and Erin, and Shelley's work as editors on the book. So, shameless plug, I encourage people to check it out. I think it's worthwhile.

Kelvin: Maybe I'll say this last thing that I thought was, I think she said it quickly, but I thought was really salient that Bettyjo said that she said, "There are not unlimited students for whom all of our institutions are quote unquote 'competing.'" And so, that's where honestly, I think institutional distinctives have something to say. I mean, lean into what makes your institution unique, and that's going to appeal and connect to some sector of students.

Tom: Yeah, totally agree. Not unlimited, but at the moment, I think plenty because there's an awful lot of students being not served, yeah.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Plenty. That's right. That's right.

Tom: All right, cool. So, should I try and wrap it up, you think?

Kelvin: Yeah, please. Yeah.

Tom: So, case studies and stories, I think we would both agree are powerful tools for communicating contextual understanding, and reading about the experiences of colleagues helps us examine and improve our own work as online education professionals.

Kelvin: Yep. I think that's right. No, that's a good summation. Before we get out the door, you mind if I make a little shameless plug?

Tom: We've done a few already this episode; let's add one more.

Kelvin: [Laughter] So, we received a recent new endorsement on our Apple Podcasts page for TOPcast. Listener "MsMari" said the following, "TOP Podcast plus coffee. It's a winner." So, thanks MsMari. This is a good time to invite all of our listeners or viewers to leave behind a rating or brief endorsement on whatever platform you are accessing us. While Apple Podcast predominates according to our data, you can also rate and review on YouTube, Stitcher, Spotify or many other venues. So, please do. It helps the algorithms find us, or maybe it helps AIs come to us and listen, I don't know. I don't know who's listening or watching, but whether you're organic or synthetic, we appreciate your attention.

Tom: Hey, there's an Alexa command, whatever they're called, that will play TOPcast. You just ask her to play it, and she will. I've done it. So, all right, Kelvin, thank you. I'm going to have my coffee and a Mint Julep.

(*Musical outro*)

Kelvin: [Laughter] All right. Well, I wish I was sharing this coffee with you, pour it into your cup, but I'm glad to be able to have the virtual experience. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.