TOPcast Episode #141: “It’s Star-Spangled Learning, Baby!”

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.

(*Intro Music*)

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: I'm Tom Cavanagh.

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

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. How are things?

Kelvin: Things are good. Things are good. I guess we're past due for maybe, I was thinking about this, for saying, we do bill this as a collegial conversation about online blended digital teaching and learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee. Just in case you wonder what you've stumbled into, that's what this is.

Tom: That's what it is. You will soon discover that the coffee shtick has something that has stuck around for nine years, and we're not going to let it go. It’s with us. That's why because it's this collegial conversation among colleagues over a cup of coffee. I'm a big fan of alliteration as you know.

Kelvin: Indeed. Indeed. No, that's exactly right. Occasionally, you even hear from people that say, "Oh, I feel like I'm having kind of a little know collegial coffee chat, and I enjoy pouring my beverage of scotch or possibly bourbon." [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, whatever. Whatever floats your boat, whenever you're listening, in the office having your scotch like I do. Oh, sorry, was that out loud?

Kelvin: At 8:00 AM. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, at 8:00 AM.

Kelvin: No, that's not true. It's not that kind of podcast. [Sips coffee]

Tom: No. No, although we have gotten funny kind of binary opinions about the banter. Some people sort of like, "Why don't you just get to your thing?" [Laughter] Other people are like, "I kind of like the coffee talk." As you know, we've both been handed coffee by various friends, colleagues, and listeners at conferences and things.

Kelvin: That's true. Yeah, that's right. I don't know. Well, if we only had better analytics, we could see how many people are skipping this part. Somebody did tell me once; I think I told you, "Yeah, I skipped past all that until I realized that you somehow tried to connect it to the topic. [Laughter] Then I tried to listen to it. Tried to listen to it." [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. Don't skip, don't skip.

Kelvin: Don't skip.

Tom: It's worthwhile. It's gold. So, speaking of all of that coffee, and connections, and collegiality, I see you sipping out of your mug there. Look, I saw the word “Dad” on it. We're coming up on Father's Day as we're recording this.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, what's in the thermos today, Dr. Thompson?

Kelvin: Yeah, as I said before, I'll tell you what's in the thermos and in the cup, and then I'll tell you what was going to be, and then I'll tell you why this is the weakest connection I've ever made. [Laughter]

Tom: Let us be the judge of that.

Kelvin: Not even going to try to fluff my way through it. This is a locally roasted single-origin Ethiopia Sidama roasted by Heine Brothers Roasters here in Louisville. My intention was, between meetings, to dash out across campus and get a cup of mass-produced McDonald's coffee. That's what I was going to do. You can probably see why that would be a good connection.

Tom: Oh, yeah. I see where that's going. Yeah.

Kelvin: I didn't do that. [Laughter] I've got this probably superior cup of coffee from allegedly the very birthplace of coffee in Ethiopia, but it doesn't have quite the connection to today's topic that that hypothetical cup of McDonald's joe would have. This might be the weakest connection, but you could at least see the intention there. [Sips coffee]

Tom: Well, here's what I wanted to do, set up helped a lot. If you had just gone to the Ethiopian coffee, I would've been like, "Okay, I'm not getting it," but sort of the

birthplace of coffee, I sort of am getting that, and I'll share that. Although I've finished it, what was in this cup was some good old-fashioned American Donut House Coffee.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: Yeah, that's what we're talking about: good old-fashioned American coffee. [Laughter] No, good old-fashioned American learning.

Kelvin: Donuts. Oh, okay.

Tom: Learning. Yeah. That's what today's topic is about. As I like to call it, “It's star-spangled learning, baby!” That's as we approach or release this around the 4th of July holiday, we thought we'd do a little celebration of the stars and stripes and look at what makes online learning in the US of A, kind of special and unique.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. I guess some of the sourcing of this is you and I, Tom, have collaborated on a chapter in a book to be discussed at another time, focused on the distinct context of online education in the United States.

I'll give you credit, Tom, you thought that using some of the themes from that to be released chapter might be appropriate, given this timing so close to the American Independence Day holiday, which is, in case we forgot, the anniversary of the approval of the Declaration of Independence, some 247 years ago in 2023.

Tom: That's pretty cool. Yeah. 'Merica. God bless 'Merica.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's only five year, no, no, no. It's like 25 years older than the University of Louisville. [Laughter]

Tom: Really? [Laughter] Wow. Hey, well, I think this month, UCF celebrated its 60th birthday.

Kelvin: Yeah. There you go. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Happy birthday. Happy birthday.

Tom: Happy birthday to both of us, I guess.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And America.

Kelvin: And America.

Tom: Yeah, so, as you said, this chapter you and I worked on that will be forthcoming, and maybe we can talk about that book in more of the aggregate when it comes out, but this chapter in particular does focus on the uniqueness or the unique features of American higher education, within the context of online learning. Going through that process of saying, "Okay, what is unique, and what's different?"

As you have pointed out, and that was some of the things that you really, I think, honed in on as we wrote this, were like, US has perhaps a greater than average influence on the global higher education ecosystem, culture, expectations. Even though education as a university, it didn't start in Bologna, and you had the University of Paris, and you have all these European middle-aged institutions.

Today, though, when you think of higher ed, I'll give one small anecdote I may have given on the podcast before, but I was in China. I was participating in a fair, where high school students from around China came to Beijing. They met with all these different institutions from all over the world that were in this sort of convention center almost, and were learning about schools that they could attend outside of China. I had an opportunity, we were part of a consortium, to give a little presentation.

I did a couple of these to various people who came and showed up to learn about these American institutions. When I talked about UCF, the very first question almost before I even started, hands went up. The question was, "What's your rank?" I'm like, "Wow, let me tell you about Orlando and our programs and stuff." I had to tell them the number, what our rank was at the time. When people think about higher education, they're looking at those rankings.

Those are dominated by the US News rankings, specifically what they were asking about. These are American ranking systems, and they just have a real influence internationally. They certainly did in China at that time.

Kelvin: Although, I think we had talked about this when we were writing that chapter, we pulled a number of competitive ranking products.

Tom: Things, yes.

Kelvin: Again, and again, and again, whether it's the top 10 or the top 20, the greatest proportion come from American institutions.

Tom: That's true.

Kelvin: I think that was a point you made and at the time, and I think that you can't argue with that, that there is this influence, which is not to take anything away from any other country. Then arguably, some of the earliest people debate what the origins of online learning are. Some people want to take it back to the sixties, but at least

in the for reals, like nineties, a lot of the splash, the pebble in the pond, seems to have sourced to the US, and certainly the professional associations and early scholarship, all in the US.

So, I think all of that maybe serves to explain some of the outsized influence globally that American online higher ed has. Some features that we could use to describe American online higher ed generalize, others, not so much, but we thought we might comment on some of those themes.

Tom: Yeah. Do you mind if I start with one that I thought really resonated with me as we work through this, was that the, I don't know, independent, cowboy spirit that Americans have, that I think is represented in sort of a federalist governmental system. Here, well, let me say, in other countries I've been to, when I've given talks at an education conference or something in South America, or as I did in the Far East, there's usually a "Ministry of Education" that is at a central government level, that oversees the higher education system within that country.

In a way, that's different here, in that, yes, we have an Education Department in Washington, but it doesn't have the same kind of influence as a Ministry of Education does in one of our other countries that you can name almost any of them. Instead, here, everything, at least in public education, is controlled at the state level. The federal government is the provider of funding, like Title IV financial aid, for example. It's like a major thing that they distribute to people.

There's policies and regulations that we have to follow, but they're not necessarily having the same kind of influence that state governments have on institutions like yours or mine. I think that then, and if you extend that kind of independent, "We're going to do it our way" mentality down to online learning, I think it becomes even more true.

This goes back to maybe a podcast we did not that long ago, when we were talking about institutional differences, just based on your early observations at Louisville, each school, each institution is going to do things their own way, within their own context, within their own state, which is different from the state that they're next to. I think that you can't overstate, I think, the importance of that dynamic when you compare us internationally.

Kelvin: I think that's right. I think that's right. You could call that a kind of centralization versus decentralization nationally. Then I think some of what you just talked about, about that variation, we might also say that there's a range of implementations at the institutional level, and that includes a range from more centralized to less centralized, more decentralized models across the board.

Yeah, it is true. It is very much a, I don't know if this is quite the right terminology, but it is a bit of a competitive marketplace of models and ideas across these institutional implementations.

Tom: Yeah, I think that's true. Then within an institution, there are multiple different models within that centralized, decentralized, and these are things that we've touched on over the years in various episodes. Are your online operations kind of mainstreamed into your normal, your academic operations of the institution? Are you using the same terms, the same faculty, the same admission, all of that? Or, are you set up as its own thing, like a separate campus, with a separate admissions staff, and a separate tuition and everything else?

Both can work, depending upon your context, but they all exist in this broad ecosystem. Then look at public versus private. You're going to see, I think, a lot more variety across the US because of all these factors, plus just our size, than you might see in other institutions or other countries.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think all of that is right. I think all of that is right. Then I know something that when we were conceptualizing this chapter that, well, there are a few things, but one that I think you put on the table early on is as maybe another particularly American idea is the mega, the big, go big or stay home, [Chuckle] the rise of the mega-university, and even maybe related, the rise of concepts like Massive Open Online Courses, that kind of outsized implementation, not necessarily as a model for everybody to follow, but as a construct that has had ripple effects.

Tom: Yeah, I think that's true. Of course, there are exceptions. You've got something like the Open University in UK.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: I was told, I have to admit, I don't know a lot about it. Here we go, talking about stuff we don't know anything about. [Laughter]

Kelvin: A distinctly American trait. [Laughter]

Tom: That's right, yeah. [Laughter] Do it with confidence. Right. I think there's an institution in Turkey that's got something like close to a million students or something like that. I probably should have researched that. It just occurred to me as we were talking, but I remember hearing about that in years past. I think there are examples, but by and large, I would stand behind the idea of the mega-university as kind of an American phenomenon.

When you look at schools like Western Governors, and Southern New Hampshire, and UMGC, and ASU, Grand Canyon, Liberty, these are schools that are really pushing to just get big, and try to have as much impact as they possibly can. I know a lot of them are, it's probably not fair, it's probably reductive of me to say they just want to get big.

They're looking to serve a market, and to serve students who have a need, and there's a demand for what they're doing. The result of that is that they end up

getting large, and they're not afraid of size. “Everything's bigger in Texas,” as they say. [Laughter] I do think that is somewhat unique in the US.

Kelvin: Billions and billions served, if only I had trekked across campus to get that McDonald's cup of coffee. [Laughter]

Tom: Get that McDonald's coffee. Yeah. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That would've been such a great connection at this point. Would've been wonderful. Yeah, swing and a miss. Yeah.

Tom: Starbucks, you could have maybe done the same thing with Starbucks. Although I've seen, well, shoot, I walked into a McDonald's in China, so and in South America as well. Yeah.

Kelvin: Absolutely, absolutely. I think that's right. I think the mega-university concept, and I don't know, I'm stuck lately with thinking about the reactions to, because sometimes people want to emulate. It's like, really? You want to try to compete with mega-university X on their own terms?

I don't know that that's the value proposition you need to be going after. It's more a matter of how about we let them be them, and what are your unique affordances? [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah, I agree. Yeah. Well, that's happening in the US, too, right?

Kelvin: Yes, that's right.

Tom: Are you sure you want to be ASU? Why don't you be the best whatever you are that you can be?

Kelvin: That's right. That's right. I mentioned MOOCs, right? I will say, I guess there's... Like everything that has rises, they have falls. Maybe we'll call this a residual MOOC emphasis, but this idea of large-scale courses getting attention, and maybe recruiting students into paid learning experiences. Maybe they're free or low cost, and then there's a way to recruit into paid or academic connections.

That still is kind of a thing. It's a bit entrepreneurial. I think that some of the open, in the British Open University sense, open educational efforts, I think, are very global and egalitarian. I think this entrepreneurial spirit thing of hook and upselling, I think that's rather American.

Tom: Yeah, I agree. I think maybe a corollary to that is the whole OPM market. It's a free market kind of response to a need that institutions have had. Now, without commenting too much on that, because that space is in a lot of flux right now, and we'll see what happens with “Dear Colleague,” and regulation, and all of that.

Essentially, institutions are outsourcing components of their services to a commercial entity as nonprofit, in many cases, governmental state institutions, they're outsourcing to a private, for-profit entity to provide services to them, that some argue are somewhat core to their function. I know that there are other institutions around the world that do use OPM or OPM-like services, but it's not like it is in the US.

It's much larger here. I think that's an interesting American solution to a need is sort of let the market figure it out.

Kelvin: I suppose on that topic also, I'm not as clear. This feels rather American in emphasis, but maybe it's happening elsewhere, too. It's sort of a market-ish driven thing. That's the, we've talked about this in previous episodes, the non-credit, particularly stackable, micro-credential online efforts, and relationships to academic credit programs.

Maybe there's a little bit of a parallel there to the MOOC thing that I mentioned a while ago, that responsiveness to employer and employee needs, and what's happening in industry and career potential, that sensitivity, that feels to me rather American.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Do you agree?

Tom: Yeah, I agree. Yeah, I think that's true. There is, I think, a real connection to workforce needs that has only grown in recent years here in the US. I don't know. This wasn't in our chapter, but one anecdote that I'll share that I think another difference, it's not so much about online learning, but intercollegiate athletics is something that's just like in Europe, it's nothing like it is here.

Kelvin: Right, right.

Tom: Maybe there's some Olympic sports or something that people do. I remember hosting a delegation from Europe, various European countries. I remember the Netherlands, I think Germany was in, there was a bunch of them. We probably had a dozen, maybe 15 people. It was over on campus. It was in the library. It happened to be the day of our big pep rally that they were here. For those of you that are unfamiliar with UCF's pep rally, it's a phenomenon. It's been rated by ESPN as the best college pep rally experience.

It's something called Spirit Splash. The students all run into our fountain. It's the one day of the year they can do that, and they go bananas. They throw rubber ducks, and there's rap music blaring, and a marching band, and cheerleaders are flipping, and there's mascots. It's pandemonium, a spectacle. These Europeans, I

said, "Let's come on outside and let's take a look." Their hair was blown back. [Laughter] They were like, "We have nothing like this. This is crazy."

They had no frame of reference for what they were experiencing at that moment. I think that's uniquely American, that spectacle.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, I think that's right. Plenty of days giving a wide berth to Spirit Splash at UCF. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. Yeah.

Kelvin: That's nice over there. See you, bye-bye. [Laughter] I try not to get trampled on by the marching band. Yeah, I think that's right. This probably cuts across the globe, I think, more, but we've certainly leaned in in the United States into varying levels, emphases on access, and revenue, and student retention, and quality, and affordability.

Those themes, we talk about a lot on the podcast here, but I think pursuing those underlying goals through online education is both something that is very prevalent to one degree or another, and something that's more generalizable across the globe.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, I agree. Everybody wants those things, I would think, although access is an interesting one. In a lot of countries, there's like a…

Kelvin: Oh, good point.

Tom: ... An assessment test that's given, and you get sorted into a vocational track or a university track. There you go. That's your path. Access becomes an interesting concept in that kind of a context.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's a good point. Again, I wouldn't take this away from anybody, and I would encourage it for everyone, but I think the construct of social mobility does line up rather well with some of the historical American values of getting ahead, the American dream, and so forth. Education as a pathway, I think. Yeah, that's definitely a thing. Any other themes from the book that you think we ought to hit?

Tom: Well, here's one more that wasn't in the book that... [Laughter]

Kelvin: A distinctly American trait. Just make up stuff, and put it on the table. [Sips coffee]

Tom: I'll just make it up. Yeah. I'm thinking maybe I should rewrite the chapter. [Chuckle] It's probably too late now. European, for example, institutions are often available to their citizens at no cost. That's a pretty unheard-of concept in the US,

unless you're got some reason to get a scholarship, whether it's athletic, or academic, or whatever it might be.

The average citizen, student going to a university, is probably not going to get it at no cost in the US. That's a little bit of a difference as well.

Kelvin: Yeah, some might say tragic, but it is American entrepreneurialism at its best, I guess. Let's try to make a buck. The flip side of that is, which we touched on a moment ago, maybe to call it out, is maybe more than a lot of countries, we tend to think that higher education should be within reach of everyone, in that way that bridges background, and social class, and all that.

It's ironic, but not freely. [Laughter] It's a weird interplay between those two dynamics, perhaps. No, that's a good point.

Tom: Cool. All right. Before I put a bow on it, anything else you want to add or highlight from the chapter yourself?

Kelvin: Maybe just the passing reference. This seems to be American. There's a lot of talk around the United States these days about birth rate drop off and demographic enrollment cliff, maybe everywhere except in Florida, is a thing. I think that is very much contextualized. That's going to be country to country, region to region. It depends on what's happening in your particular area. That's something that a lot of institutions are wrestling with in the United States right now.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Well, there's maybe one more that I remembered that we did touch on in the chapter, which is, I think, a uniquely American thing, which is this concept of accreditation, regional accreditation.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: A Ministry of Education might authorize an institution to operate within a country, but the idea of regional accreditors being the gatekeepers of financial aid eligibility coming from the federal government, I don't think that's common elsewhere. I think that's an interesting comment. Since so many of our students, especially online, are on financial aid, that becomes an interesting piece of the puzzle.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's well said. You want to land this plane for us?

Tom: Let's. All right. American online education continues to provide models for the entire global community. While some of these are distinctly American, others are adaptable in other national contexts. Take what works, and ignore what doesn't. [Laughter]

Hey, can I just say one thing about the podcast before you ship us out? That is, if you're listening to this on your favorite podcast app, give us a rating and a review. It does help to allow others to find it if they're looking for content like this. We do appreciate it. If you're watching this on YouTube, smash that Like button, as the kids say. [Chuckle]

Kelvin: The kids, the kids. Yeah, rate and review, please. Like us. That's right. That's right. Yeah. Thank you for that. Well, it's been good being with you, Tom, and virtually, asynchronously sharing a cup of coffee with you. You drank yours earlier. [Laughter] I drank mine now. I wish I was drinking McDonald's, which is very ironic. Thanks for that. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

(*Outro Music*)

Tom: I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.