TOPcast Episode #154:
Alternative Educational Programs and Digital Higher Ed

Narrator: When you know what you want for the future, you need the present to line up with your goals. UCF Online offers more than 100 fully online programs in healthcare, engineering, criminal justice, and more, so you can get to your future and beyond.

(*Musical Intro*)

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

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

Tom: I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you friends are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom. Friends, I like that, you friends.

Tom: Friends. I get that from Julie Uranis from UPCEA…

Kelvin: Oh, yeah?

Tom: If you know Julie, Julie's awesome about this. She always says, "Friends, let's do this," and I find that very welcoming and like, "Yes, I want to do that because you're my friend."

Kelvin: Sure, that's good.

Tom: That's good, why not?

Kelvin: That's good. You have a beverage somewhere in there?

Tom: I do actually. It's right here, and it's hot coffee.

Kelvin: Oh, nice.

Tom: And it is... [Chuckle] You're going to laugh at me. It's Pumpkin Spice, Starbucks pumpkin spice K-cup that I made just for...

Kelvin: Is it year-round now? Pumpkin spice season is year-round?

Tom: It's leftover from the holiday season, I will say that. We had a few left and I'm drinking them up.

Kelvin: [Laughter] Well, as long as you brewed it today, and it's not leftover from brewed a long time ago. [Chuckle]

Tom: No, it's only a few minutes old.

Kelvin: All right, that's good.

Tom: So, how about you? I assume you have something.

Kelvin: I have tasty coffee in my... We don't often divulge this, but today, for those who observe, today is as we're recording this, the 12th day of Christmas. So, I've right under the wire got my only use of my Dr. Who meets The Grinch coffee mug, so it's the only time this season I've used the mug, gotta go back on the mug tree.

Tom: That's quite a mash-up.

Kelvin: It is. It's “How the Grinch Stole Dr. Who” is what it's called. [Chuckle] So, in said mug, I have a La Unica Honey, single-origin Honduras from Quill’s Coffee right here in Louisville. There's no actual honey in the coffee. This is kind of a bit of a throwback, I guess. We first talked about, I looked this up, honey processed coffee way back in Episode #13, the first episode of Season Two. And if you're interested, you or our listeners, in knowing what honey processed coffee is, if you check out the first few minutes of that episode or you skim the transcript of Episode #13, I tell you about it then, but back then we said that honey process was trendy in the coffee making business at that time, and we were talking about a trendy topic in that episode. So, I thought that another honey processed coffee might be appropriate for today's topic. And of course, just because the topic is trendy doesn't mean that it isn't important, but that's my coffee. I like it a lot. I seem to always like honey processed coffees. Can you find a connection to today's topic?

Tom: Can I find a connection to today's topic? I don't think it's the honey. I don't think it's the... What was it, La Unica, did you say?

Kelvin: La Unica, which is the name of the coffee farm, I guess, that the coffee came from.

Tom: I don't know, you sort of punched the word trendy, and I'm thinking maybe that's it because there could be…

Kelvin: That's all I got, Tom. That's all I got.

Tom: …potentially a trendy connection there, but I don't know if that would've been, without that extra emphasis I would've gotten it.

Kelvin: Hey, just every little bit, you do what you can to nurse these things along. [Chuckle] That's right. That's what I got. That was my attempt at a connection.

Tom: All right, so shall I explain why that is potentially a…

Kelvin: Please do.

Tom: ...a tenuous thread of a connection for our audience? So, Kelvin, you recently interviewed Dr. Anna Porcaro. Dr. Porcaro is currently the Senior Director of Monitoring and Evaluation for the Kansas Leadership Center, and she was previously the Executive Director of Online and Adult Learning at Wichita State University. Her 25 years in higher ed also included roles at the University of Dayton and UNC Chapel Hill. So, you had a nice conversation with her. Is there anything you'd like to say about it before we listen to it?

Kelvin: Yes, so we talked mainly, I guess, about what she refers to as alternative educational programs. And I might have framed all of that up as trendy. Not saying that it's not important, just there's a little buzz around it right now. Ooh, look at that, buzz and honey process.

Tom: Wow.

Kelvin: Ooh, nice.

Tom: Look at you, wow. I'd be proud of yourself. [Laughter]

Kelvin: Somebody ought to be, yes. No, it was a good interview and Anna's very knowledgeable, and I think otherwise it stands on its own.

Tom: Great, so through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your conversation with Dr. Anna Porcaro.

(*Musical transition*)

Kelvin: Hi, Anna, so glad you could join us on TOPcast today.

Anna Porcaro: Thank you, glad to be here.

Kelvin: So, we were speaking not too long ago based on a follow-up from a fairly recent UPCEA SOLA+R session that you did about alternative educational programs, kind of broadly conceived. I wonder if you might unpack what we mean by alternative education programs first before we go further.

Anna: Of course. So, when we're talking about all kinds of alternative education programs, we're oftentimes talking about the credentialing part of that in higher ed. So, in higher ed, we want to usually look at what the traditional four, two-year degree pathway in graduate studies does, or what the gaps are. And so, for the longest time, higher ed has been involved in the certificate space. When we start to talk about alternative credentials, we're talking about certificates as a standalone unit, not necessarily as a subset of an entire degree. And on top of that, other micro credentials like badges, or small credit workshops, or non-credit workshops that give you some sort of academic credential in some way, or maybe a digital badge. Those are the biggest things that I can think of. There's also a few different ways about how you can pack those things and stack them together oftentimes to equal up to something that's bigger, but that's kind of the gist of it.

Kelvin: I think that's helpful framing. I think there's a lot of trendiness around microcredentials and/or badges, but I think it's fascinating that you included the standalone, we might say more traditional certificates, certificates that are not bound to another academic program. So, that's a more inclusive conceptualization really.

Anna: And I know that the US government has been trying to allow a little bit more flexibility with that type of credentialing in order to get financial aid. Now, the bar is pretty high. You have to demonstrate that there is employment after the end of this, and they have minimum criteria for that, [Clears throat] but excuse me, a lot of people will do things like add on a certificate to say help you to be qualified to meet the regional accreditation standards for teaching college classes to high school students. So, that's another use for that standalone that is outside of that entire even graduate environment.

Kelvin: One of the things I've personally been kind of fascinated with and interested in and kind of exploring in my context here, and that we spoke about a little bit previously, is sort of the process logistics involved from moving from academic curricula, toward offerings that are more employer and employee workforce relevant, whether we consider those micro-credentials or not, but we'll call them non-credit. So, rather than just being, "Hey, what do people out there need? Let's make something," going from

the academic toward that, I wonder if you might comment a little bit about what you've learned about the logistics and especially pitfalls to avoid for faculty, instructional designers, and other administrative leader people.

Anna: Of course, so what I talked about at UPCEA, and I've talked about a few at different times, is Wichita State's path from creating basically an alternative credential ecosystem. And originally, I think the biggest pitfall that we ran into, and I've been telling people there are better ways of doing it than what we did. [Chuckle] We started with the faculty and their expertise and moved that to, "Hey, is there anybody in the workforce who would want a more atomized learning of the things that we're doing?"

And what we found is there wasn't very much on this side, on the workforce side that said, "Yeah, we're all in," because I think a lot of them thought, "That just looks like traditional education, just a little more bite-sized." And so, the ones that we had the most success were, like you said, going to workforce, and seeing a gap in some sort of skill or knowledge that they don't have from that degree and saying, "What is it that you're hoping to do to fill that gap that you feel like you're having to spend six to 12 months to onboard somebody through an extensive training program to get them up to speed? What can we do to prepare them before they come to you?"

And we had several programs that were built that way, and they were infinitely more successful than the other ones where we took learning we already had and broke it into smaller bite-sized chunks. So, my biggest advice to anybody is start with what your workforce needs are. Look at that triangle of elements that put together good program development, so workforce, student need, and faculty resources, and look at how all three of those can come together.

Kelvin: That's good advice. I think that's right, and what I'm hearing kind of implied in there a little bit is, but correct me if you think this is not true, there's a little bit of an interplay between those workforce needs and the subject matter expertise of the faculty. I think you're wise in saying start with what the need is, but there's got to be a relationship. You got to be back and forth a little bit, right?

Anna: Yes, 100%. So, I can tell you one of the things that we hear from... Well, I'm not there anymore, but when we were doing this work, we'd hear from the employers, they'd say things like, "Do you have anybody who can teach our employees how to use Tableau, or to code in Python, or things like that?" [Chuckle] And it's like, "Well, let's talk about the aim of higher ed and the idea that we're not necessarily a specific software platform educator." What we look at is the ideas, and the thoughts, and apply them on a bigger scale. And so yes, there is that to say, "Well, maybe we don't

have anybody who does Python, however, we can find somebody in the ecosystem, and bring them in, and then bring them more to this higher level of instead of just learning Python, you're learning other concepts about data and data coding."

Kelvin: There's really some kind of a sweet spot in there somewhere between these traditional conceptualizations of what we might call education versus training. There's some kind of an in-between in there somewhere to get to what you're talking about, I think. Can I just pull on this thread a little bit? You mentioned, I think a six-to-12-month window as a framing. Is that what you found to be an optimal time period that seems relevant for employers and employees in workforce settings?

Anna: Well, what I meant by that is the time that it takes from the hiring of an employee until they kind of reach their full potential of being an important part of your workforce, that if it's taking a year, then you are constantly having to have these people in your pipeline for a year before they become incredibly productive. So, that's what I was talking about is asking the workforce, "What are those gaps in knowledge that are taking you a long time in order to onboard somebody with?" And so, I think in higher ed, we can kind of conceptualize that a little bit differently and say, "Maybe it's not a six-month process, maybe this is a three-month thing, maybe it's a two-week thing. And after two weeks of intense study, they'll have a better understanding of it." They can't do that two weeks of intense study while they're working at your job doing the labor that you expect them to do.

Kelvin: No, that's helpful. Thank you for that, and thanks for elaborating. You've now been doing, I think, somewhat similar work, non-credit work we might say, in both an academic setting and in a nonprofit setting. I wonder what insights you've developed as you've been in those two settings that might inform how one better pursues effectively meeting the needs of employers and employees. You might've touched on this already in what you've already said, but I wonder if there's anything unique that has come out of that kind of the tension, the interplay, we'll say, between those two kinds of settings and maybe especially if you see any real role or value of the academic imprimatur in the process. [Chuckle]

Anna: At Kansas Leadership Center where I work now, we talk a lot about competing factions, and the idea that you have these different priorities that sometimes take shape in the same space. And I do believe in a lot of the professional development that we do around civic engagement, there are gaps to understanding. So, there are people who are in the workforce, or in public service, or volunteers for an organization, and a lot of times they don't have the necessary skills and knowledge to get them to that next level. So, when they engage with a non-profit to do that, they're 100% there to better their ability to do the work they're trying to do. And on top

of that, I think the competing value there with higher ed is the value of that credential and what that credential means. A lot of higher ed, in the 25 years that I was involved in it, we really emphasize in higher ed the importance of the theory, the underpinnings, the understanding why and how we do things, not necessarily, here are the six discrete skills you need to learn.

And so there is a gap. There is a gap between people who have the theory and being able to apply ideas in the workforce as a professional, and oftentimes that's when they turn to nonprofits or other non-credit providers of further education is because they need something they never got. And it's usually soft skills in higher ed. So, there's a back and forth between the two. However, it is my strong opinion that those two things need to be joined together. There is value in both, and it's a “yes and” proposition, not a “yes but,” so I'd like people to consider that and say that people like the organization I'm working for now are not in direct competition with what's happening in higher ed. We're a supplement, and the same thing, we're not asking people to necessarily drop higher ed and just come to us and gain the knowledge. We see them as valuable together.

Kelvin: Yeah. That makes sense. That makes sense. You commented a little bit on your current organization, the Kansas Leadership Center. I wonder as we begin to wrap up, if you might share a little bit about how the work of the Kansas Leadership Center might benefit your colleagues in the online higher ed space.

Anna: So, the five principles that we have surround leadership is an activity, not a position, and that's kind of where the genesis of that is, and that it's the idea that anyone can lead anytime, anywhere, and that good ideas, they start with you, and they have to engage others. You're not a leader when you tell other people what to do. You're a leader when you energize and engage others. And that act of leadership is a really risky thing, and it means you putting yourself out there, other people putting themselves out there and saying, "I might not be an expert in everything, but I understand this piece," and this person says, "I understand this piece." And together we come together to work through our toughest challenges, especially across differences, and that's the work that we do and try to talk to people about that.

And I can tell you, it's not necessarily something that's taught in the higher ed, even in leadership courses through business schools or other organizational leadership programs. They don't necessarily always talk about that, that we often frame leadership as a person, not an activity. So, those are kind of the underpinnings of the things that make us a little bit different, and then we layer on top of that the idea that this leadership

development is important in healthy civic engagement, and that could be the health of a community, the health of an organization, and so on.

Kelvin: No, that's great, thank you. We'll be sure to put in our show notes for this episode, information on the Kansas Leadership Center if folks are interested in learning more. My understanding is you're not constrained to being in Kansas to reach out and get benefit from you, right?

Anna: [Chuckle] No, we reach out to everybody around the world. We have people who participate in our programs from all over the world.

Kelvin: Well, it's been a pleasure having you on the podcast today, Anna. On behalf of myself and Tom, who will join us in the wrap around, thanks so much for the giving of your time and expertise. It's been good seeing you.

Anna: Thank you. It's been an honor. Thank you.

(*Musical transition*)

Tom: All right, Kelvin, that was your conversation with Dr. Anna Porcaro. I thought that was a really interesting discussion about a really interesting program happening right in the middle of the country.

Kelvin: [Chuckle] No kidding, again, not to belabor it, but I think we throw around some of these terms. We get a little jargony: micro-credentials, digital badging and so forth, but beyond that buzz, that hype, that glitz, there's some really important work going on. And I really kind of am growing fonder and fonder of her framing in this more inclusive way of alternative educational programs. I'm fascinated by that standalone certificate kind of thing. I think that's great.

Tom: And over and over again, I keep hearing that there's such a need for leadership development, that a lot of academic programs prepare you with disciplinary knowledge or general knowledge to be a good citizen. And then a lot of workforce programs prepare you to be, I don't know, like a Python coder or something, but there aren't a lot that sort of take that person who's in a technical role to help them become a leader. I've heard that from others. I remember going to a big meeting downtown Orlando with our economic development folks, and it was about cybersecurity. And an executive from Walt Disney Corporation who runs cybersecurity there was saying that, yes, it's a big need to get coders and people responsible for cybersecurity, but what she really needed were people to manage those people because they've got the technical skills, but they don't have the leadership skills. So, listening to Anna's description of her program, and I thought that there's probably a real demand for that out there now.

Kelvin: I would think so. I guess just to kind of riff on your point a little bit, I keep thinking about... I know we cite him a lot and in his retirement, he'll never listen to our podcast ever, [Chuckle] but our friend and colleague, Joel Hartman, I remember being in a meeting... I'm pretty sure it was in a meeting with a military group across the street from your office at UCF, where we were looking for some kind of collaboration, I think, and they were doing a lot of really good training work and all that. And I don't know really what pushed Joel's button at the time, but he got that wry tone of voice and smirk on his face that he could get. And he said, "Well, I think it's great, this training that you're doing," and because he said that we try to train everybody, so that they can deal with surprises when they come up or some such and he said, "Over at the university, we try to do it with education, so that people aren't surprised." [Laughter]

Tom: Sounds like him.

Kelvin: So, I've always thought about then that interplay between training and education, and I think somewhere in this alternative educational program space, there's a sweet spot to be found.

Tom: Well, even Anna said that these things are not in competition with each other. These things are complementary to each other, and there's a place for them, but they also support each other in many ways, and we're having conversations in the state of Florida now, probably like everywhere, about the idea of you're a humanities major, but hey, you can get a continuing education certificate in AWS or in some low-code software that gives you a marketable workforce skill alongside the sort of general knowledge citizenship sorts of stuff that you get through a general education program. So, this idea of these, what I've been calling sidecar credentials, it seems like there's a place in the Venn diagram in the middle where these kind of help each other.

Kelvin: I also liked Anna's construct. I hadn't really thought about it, it seems rather obvious to take nothing away from her insight, but I'd never thought about it quite this way before, what she called the triangle of workforce needs, student needs, and faculty resources that in there somewhere you find an opportunity. [Chuckle]

Tom: I think that's true. As we're looking at the broader conversation of education across just the general media, and social media, and trying to justify the value of education, I think it's becoming much more of a... We're going to have to accept the reality that it's probably, for most students, not just how do I become a good citizen, that there has to be some workforce component in there, even if it's not going to be their eventual career, it's like to kind of get them jumpstarted a little bit.

Kelvin: No, I think that's right. I also kind of thought she had a good cautionary tone of being aware and being wary of the pitfall of just sort of offering, I think she said, traditional education, just a bit more bite-sized. Just because you bring the granularity down doesn't bring the relevance up. She didn't say that, I'm saying that, but she was nicer, but I think that's a good concern.

Tom: I think that's an interesting perspective, and I don't think she's wrong, and I didn't really think about it like that before. You don't want to do something that's just shorter and less rigorous, but you also don't want to just take a piece because you can chop it up, because then it goes to your relevance comment, is this of relevance to somebody or is there market demand? Do people want it? So, I think it's much more intentional than that, and it seems like that's what they're trying to do in Kansas, is try to be a little more intentional about it. They created this center and they're trying to come up with programs that are really meeting a need.

Kelvin: Well, should I try to bring a close to this conversation for today?

Tom: Yes, let's try. [Chuckle]

Kelvin: I'm trying out a new metaphor because we're always putting a bow or a landing…

Tom: I was waiting for the…

Kelvin: ...Or a runway. [Laughter]

Tom: I was waiting for a plane or a gift metaphor, but you've thrown me off a little.

Kelvin: [Laughter] I know. After nearly nine years, you got to change it up a little bit, which is a good reminder of hey, if you haven't heard all nine years of our shtick, you ought to go back and listen to it.

Tom: What's wrong with you if you haven't?

Kelvin: If you have, you should do it again. [Chuckle] So anyway, here's our attempt at putting a bow on it. Alternative education programs are one meaningful way for digital learning to bring higher ed relevance to a wider array of potential learners. How's that?

(*Musical Outro*)

Tom: That's good, I agree. I'm sure Anna would agree as well. Awesome. Well, thank you, Kelvin, and thank you, Anna, for the conversation and for the

thoughtful bits of insight, appreciate that. Until next time for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.