TOPcast Episode #161:
Taste the Rainbow of Online Ed's Possible Futures

Narrator: When you realize what your future can be, you want to do it right. UCF Online offers more than 100 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: 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: I'm great. I really am. I was thinking though we haven't really kind of done our little lead-in in a while. We do bill this show as a collegial conversation about online digital teaching and learning, conducted over a shared cup of coffee, which is why we talk about coffee sometimes, and sometimes why some of us, some of us on this meeting, Tom, talked too much about coffee.

Tom: Present company accepted, of course. I think it's our producer, Tim.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Well, Tim likes coffee. I don't know that he's the excessive one, but I wouldn't blame Tim. [Chuckles] It's me, Tom, it's me.

Tom: So, you mentioned coffee.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: I've got my UCF mug right here. Let's see the camera gone, whatever. You can't quite figure it out. And in it, I'm going to tell you what I have. I've got a Donut House vanilla latte. It's a nice sort of afternoon treat for me.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's nice. This is my first use of this Kentucky mug from the historic first occurrence of what was called Sanders Restaurant that became Kentucky Fried Chicken. I have something, Tom, from the coffee archives. Longtime listeners will recall that I employ the dubious practice of carefully freezing ready-to-grind

and brew packets of whole bean coffee when my supply is occasionally overrunning. This, in my cup, Tom, is a single-origin Kenya that you and I shared together in the physical studio back in March of 2020.

Tom: March of 2020. That was before everything changed, probably days before everything changed.

Kelvin: That's correct. So, the coffee is remarkably not bad for being more than four years old, but can you find a connection in my cup or your cup to the topic du jour?

Tom: Well, not in my cup, except maybe it's sweet, mine. So, there's maybe a little something there.

Kelvin: That's nice, that's nice.

Tom: But for you, you're kind of going in the Wayback Machine. Maybe the whole idea of going back to 2020, digging back into the archives, I think there's a little something there.

Kelvin: Well, that's absolutely it. So, you want to lead us on into today's episode topic?

Tom: Yeah, so drum roll please. [Kelvin makes drum roll vocalization] Listeners, if you are unaware, this is the first episode of our 10th season.

Kelvin: Woo-hoo!

Tom: We've done nine years of this nonsense…

Kelvin: Nine years.

Tom: ...and we're about to kick off a 10th year. All 10 of our season openers are now available at this URL, if you want to revisit them. It's bit.ly/topcastopeners.

Kelvin: Yeah, that'd be cool. I've at least gone back and looked to see what they are because as we prepared for our Season 10 kickoff episode, we wanted to see what we did before. [Chuckles] You can look at the list yourself, but there's lots of numbers. There's lots of numbers in those past kickoff episodes. One I'm kind of fond of is “6 Deadly Sins of Online Teaching.” There's even the alphabet, like last year's kickoff was “ABCs of Digital Learning.”

We looked at all those, we saw what was there, but we also found a sealed time capsule. We opened the time capsule, and we found a pack of five-flavored candy. It was a role of Lifesavers, multi-colored, multi-flavored, sealed, and well-preserved alongside our long-term predictions about the future of online higher education made in those early days of our response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, May 2020.

Tom: Wow. Four years ago.

Kelvin: I know.

Tom: We made some predictions and stuff, so we figured it was time to crack open the old Lifesavers and reassess our online higher education trajectory here in 2024 as we kick off Season #10. We're going to take a look at some of those 2020 predictions, and we've color-coded them, at least in our document, as kind of right, wrong, and sort of on the mark, and as green, red, and yellow. We're going to note developments that we did not predict also, some stuff that's come up that we didn't see coming. Can you spell A-I?

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: All before highlighting where we are heading as a field, and maybe even where we're heading, as a podcast here in our last year of our first decade of podcasting.

Kelvin: First decade. [Chuckles]

Tom: So, if you want... First decade. Feel free to pause the recording now if you want and refer back to TOPcast Episode 65, which we called "Field Report #2: Preparing for the Post-COVID Future." Grab a package of your own favorite five flavored candy, whether it's Skittles, or Jolly Ranchers, or Gummy Bears, or even Lifesavers. We'll be back here when you come back.

Okay. Did you do that? Are you there?

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Welcome back. So, looking back at our predictive comments from May of 2020, and color coding them by what we got right, what we got wrong, and what was somewhere in between, our list is a bit multicolored like one of those packs of five flavored candies. We made five predictions, and then we threw out three other unanswered questions. I remember doing those. Will we see? I remember ending the episode that way.

So, perhaps we should briefly review those eight items from 2020 before adding in the unforeseen elements and then turning our attention to the future, if that sounds all right. We'll try not to dwell in the past too long, but from 2020 our predicted longer-term effects of COVID on higher education and digital learning, first, Tom, we predicted, I don't know if you remember this or not, but we predicted that there would be a further culling and diversifying of higher education as a result of this. I don't know about you, but I kind of felt like, "Yep."

Tom: Yeah, I feel like that's still happening, certainly at the more macro level. I think COVID accelerated the demise of some financially strapped institutions that couldn't quite survive, and others have been merged or combined. And so, it does feel like that's happening, and by diversifying schools specializing more, or at

least framing themselves as specializing more, as part of their brand communications, I do think that that is sort of happening.

Kelvin: Now the second one, I remember at the time. I remember the conversation very clearly, and I remember you were like, "Nope, you're on your own on that one." I decided I would just kind of put myself out on the limb. I'm like, I'm going to take a risk with this one. I put it out there and you said, "Yeah, I don't think so," and I think you were right to have that position. But I said… I won't even say that we said, but on the podcast, we said that it would be unlikely down the road as a result of COVID. Unlikely, I said, that the high enrollment large lecture hall class would persist. And you said, "Yeah, I don't know about that." I think I was just wrong about that.

Tom: I mean, things just felt so upended during the pandemic that it was like, "Well, how can anything come back the way it was while we were in the midst of that?" You kind of put your head back in that space, and it was wild.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I do think the rubber band has sort of snapped back in some places, and in some places, there's even been an overcorrection for privileging face-to-face, at least to kind of attract students back. Some of that may be influenced by other wider societal forces, such as kind of a general dissatisfaction with higher ed that seems to be in the zeitgeist. There's people who are making different choices from COVID going back to work. There's the economy. There's just all kinds of lumps in the gumbo that I think are influencing that. [Chuckles] But yeah, I think you're right. I think if you walked across campus at either one of our schools, you're going to see some large lecture halls still going on.

Kelvin: I think that's right. Following up on some of what you just said there, we also predicted thirdly, that at scale perhaps there would be a wider implementation of a blended learning approach. I think we're seeing that. Do you agree?

Tom: Yeah, I agree. We did sort of say that the future is blended, if I can quote Dr. Kelvin Thompson. [Chuckles] And I think that is true. Things actually are different post-COVID. We've got more faculty teaching online or using digital technologies, and even at a school like UCF that was already pretty engaged in those spaces; we've got new faculty that weren't before that are now. I think that has ended up blending the modalities and pedagogical approaches that a lot of faculty are using in a way that probably would not have happened as quickly without the pandemic boosting it.

Kelvin: Now, I would say these last two predictions of the post-COVID future, I think you could argue are maybe a little bit two sides of the same coin. I'm going to put them out together. One is sort of more positively framed, and one, we even had in our notes. Well, this is kind of a dark side view… [Laughter] Kind of a danger,

like a warning. The two are first that there would be a larger number of online course sections and a greater reliance on online learning, which I would call "Sorta," which we should talk about and see if you agree. Then the flip side, dark side, shadow part of that, the danger is that online course and/or online program standards might actually get watered down across higher education. I'm going to put that in the" category as well. What do you think?

Tom: Yeah, I kind of agree with the "Sorta" because I think it is idiosyncratic and institutionally context specific. It might be the case in some schools, but not every school. And so maybe that makes it a "Sorta." I can see schools that have, at least I've heard sort of anecdotally of schools, that have enhanced their online strategy, developed an online strategy, hired a Chief Online Learning Officer – Hello, University of Louisville – where maybe it didn't exist before. That's if not a greater reliance on online learning, a greater recognition of its strategic value, which is maybe another way of coming at that.

The dark side danger of the standards being watered down I think is a direct result of emergency remote instruction. Some faculty's mental model now of online learning is just, "I get in a Zoom call and just talk at students for two hours," and that's not good. I think we still have some work to do there.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree. I agree with you. So, then we were into this little area of these last three, there's five little predictions, and then we kind of ended like Adam West's Batman show. Will...? [Chuckles] So, we had these three together. Maybe I'll list them all out, and we can talk about them a little bit. [Using announcer voice] Will we see a lasting increase in the number of virtual professional conferences? Will we get more comfortable with our institutions, faculty, and staff working remotely, while more of our student services occur via web conferencing and/or face-to-face only by appointment as a special circumstance? Tune in after COVID.

It was kind of like that a little bit. [Chuckles] In a sense, I kind of put these three in the "Sorta Yes," "Sorta No," "Sorta in the Middle," category a little bit. Now, I will say that first one, will we see a lasting increase in the number of virtual professional conferences? I do think we see that maybe more or different than we did pre-COVID.

Tom: Yeah, but they're still around.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: But being involved with several organizations, I know the internal talk is "We got to get back in person and stay in person." Because honestly, as an attendee, I'm terrible with the virtual conferences. I don't attend my attention as well as I should, and I get distracted by email and meetings, and people come into my office, and it's not like I'm really present.

Even worse, I sort of feel like I've reached a point in my career where I get more out of the hallways in the coffee shops, than I do the sessions. You just don't get that in a virtual conference, running into people, talking to potential partners or vendors, and catching up with colleagues, and learning stuff that you wouldn't learn otherwise. All that to say, I think I agree with your "Sorta." I think they're here to stay in certain contexts, but certainly not at the level they were when they had to be virtual.

Kelvin: Right. I think I agree with that characterization. Now, that next one, will we get more comfortable with our institutions, faculty and staff working remotely? I think it's kind of a "your results may vary" a category there. I think context matters, state, local institutional directives. I think all kinds of situations are different, but I do think we're seeing a lot more of remote and hybrid work than we did pre-COVID though.

Tom: Oh, I'm seeing it more at UCF. [Laughter] Ironically enough, I'm recording this from home today…

Kelvin: [Gasps] Tom!

Tom: ...even though you can't tell by my background. I think there's a difference between comfortable and doing it. [Laughter] At least personally for me, if I can be that transparent here on the podcast. It's a reality and we've been doing a hybrid work environment that is mostly remote for four years now, and I don't think it's going away.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, I think so. I do take your point that comfortability is variable relative both at the individual and organizational level. I definitely don't see societally at this point, 100% of workers, and 100% of organizations, 100% of the time being in person. It just doesn't seem likely.

Tom: Well, and I mean it's not even just higher ed or where we are. It's like corporations are starting to call their employees back. I'm not hearing a lot of five days in the office. What I'm hearing is three days in the office. So, like Apple and Google and Amazon, all these places are saying no more 100% remote, but it also isn't 100% in the office. You're here Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Kelvin: This last one, this one might... I mean, this wasn't an actual prediction. This was a question. This one might tilt a little bit more to the negative maybe, but I'm curious what you think. We teased out will more of our student services, and I don't really remember if we were really even suggesting student services writ large or... I assume so. Will more of our student services occur via web conferencing? And/or you could say face-to-face is only a special circumstance by appointment only. Will that happen? Maybe I'm wrong. Broadly speaking, I don't think that's what has happened.

Tom: I agree. Maybe with one slight caveat, two caveats. One is that the on-campus student services, I'm not in their day-to-day, so I can't really speak to their experience on the ground right now in great detail. What I gather from talking to those people and being in meetings where I hear them talk is that they want to get back face-to-face, and we have. Florida was back face-to-face ahead of a lot of other places. But that hasn't stopped virtual interactions from happening. They have continued. A lot of that's being driven by the students, because that's how the students want to connect. And so, it's basically they have a choice now where they can either connect virtually, or they can come in, and the staff has to be sort of prepared for either one.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's right. Again, it's in that “Sorta” space, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: So, all of that is from 2020, and then we said we would talk a little bit about what we didn't anticipate back then, and where we think we're going. There were some things... Well, there's a lot, Tom. There's a lot we didn't anticipate.

Tom: Yeah. Every day. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: As you say, how do you spell AI? [Chuckles]

Tom: I don’t anticipate stuff.

Kelvin: That's right. But there's at least a handful of things here. We've, I think, touched on some of these previously, but maybe just a handful of these. One of the things we've talked ad nauseam about is exactly how muddy and mutated modalities would get. I don't know that we sufficiently anticipated that.

Tom: Yeah, that's true. Yeah. Oh, my gosh. I was in Central America recently visiting another institution, and they were showing off their… Did they call it a hybrid classroom or blended classroom? Either way, my mental model of hybrid or blended learning is an asynchronous partially online, and then synchronous partially face-to-face. For them, that's not what that meant. It meant there was a camera and a microphone in the room, and you could stand in front of the room, and you could broadcast it out to somebody else. It was sort of the HyFlex model. I had to do this translation in my head once I realized what they were talking about. I think that terminology has gotten very, very muddy across the landscape.

Kelvin: I mean, look, blended hybrid, it was always a bit of an art to work, but blended and hybrid used interchangeably, I think it was clearer pre-COVID. [Chuckles] Now, hybrid sort of means what? You said pseudo-HyFlex, dual mode, simulcasting. Blended, even there, sometimes I say blended to people. And do you mean, "Well, what do you mean by?" [Chuckles] And you have to kind of

define your terms and all that. Yeah, also things like bichronous, we've talked about that some, I think. I think that's maybe Florence Martin perhaps coined that term. It gets used sometimes. Or things like this where we put together synchronous online and asynchronous online. Sometimes, people want to call that blended, but it's like a thing.

Tom: It's its own thing.

Kelvin: Not primarily this and a little bit of that. But it's a thing.

Tom: We don't have a lot of faculty doing that, but we've gotten some requests, and we've had to figure out how to fit them into our modality schema. We have, but it's required us to sort of scratch our heads and say, "Okay, where does this fit?" I just got to say, bichronous sounds like the bad Transformers villain who fights Optimus Prime.

Kelvin: [Using character voicing] I am Optimus Prime. I am Bichronous. [Laughter]

Tom: That's exactly right.

Kelvin: We've already talked a lot on past episodes, and even hinted here already a little bit. Look, we missed the rise of generative AI. I'm sorry. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. Well, so did a lot of people. I think we're a good company by not necessarily seeing that one coming to the extent that it has come. Yeah, that's a big one that we didn't predict.

Kelvin: I also, I think we'll talk more about this in upcoming episodes, and I don't know if you'll agree with the characterization here, but I also don't think we necessarily... Well, we talked about the dark side, and maybe the watering down, and all. [Using character voicing] We were feeling a disturbance in the force. We were feeling something coming as a result of the pandemic response and emergency ad hoc remote instruction. But I don't think we anticipated, at least in the US, this federal backlash, I might even say, against online education.

Tom: Yeah, you're right. We didn't see that coming. It sort of felt like the opposite should have happened, that there would be a little more acceptance and understanding, given its criticality in kind of keeping everything going during the pandemic. The fact that we're dealing with what we're dealing with right now, shameless plug, tune into the mid-May episode for a lot more on this. You're not going to want to miss it. Yeah, it feels a little weird that something like State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement could just go away. It feels like it's so backwards. This weird combination of Arnold Ventures advocacy groups having influence over the federal government to result in online learning, just being super regulated, has caught me by surprise.

Kelvin: "And tune in next..." Yeah, I mean, I think stay tuned, not just to the mid-May episode, but in general. We'll see how this all plays out. Maybe that's a good time to pivot to this final little section of "Where we think we're going." I think our colleague, higher ed futurist, Bryan Alexander, likes to talk about the plurality of futures. In the final chapter of the *SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education*, we riffed on that a little bit. I mean, I'm just saying Chapter 50, you should, if you have the book, you could read it. If you don't have the book, you could go buy it, or ask your library to buy it.

And so, I think the future has yet to be written, but we think we see wet finger in the wind, some things going on, and we have to acknowledge we're still in a bit of flux and transition, even here in 2024 with everything going on that we've talked about. I think we've already been touching on some things in recent episodes of the podcast and themes that I think point a way. Do you want to maybe run us through a couple of these, Tom, as we start heading toward the finish line?

Tom: Yeah, sure. We did just talk about AI, and I think you and I are both on the same page, that it's important to lean into the AI, and not resist it, and try to keep it out. I actually feel like that conversation has already moved past that. Institutions are already starting to adopt it. We've got a kind of walled garden GPT within the institution now that we can use, that all faculty, staff and students have access to, so it's not feeding the public LLM.

ASU has announced this big partnership for an AI strategy, and the few faculty that I think that are left clinging to the notion that we're going to resist AI, are going to end up being left behind, unfortunately. I think it's really important for us to lean into it. How can we use it for good? How can we help students know how to use it? How can we help faculty learn? How can we learn it, use it ourselves to build the online courses that we're going to deliver?

Kelvin: In general, we just, I think, did a recent episode about the importance of paying attention to trusted sources of trend data. I mean, that's a thing. That's like a compass, or a sextant, or it's a navigational tool to get a sense of things. Then related to that is the importance of... And hey, you've heard me say a lot about that in my transition to my new institution over the last 15 months or so, as we're recording this episode, the importance of collecting, and sharing, and talking about institutional data on quality of online learning. That is so important, but then getting out of our individual institutions, and doing it across institutions, and so forth.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, data, we've said it before, as Joel Hartman had said, data trumps anecdote. You can overcome a bad narrative with actual data. To that point, speaking of narrative, I do think it's important for us to continue to make the case, the value proposition, that not just higher ed, but in our cases, online learning, is a strategic asset to the institution to accomplish its goals, and not some

afterthought, or extension, or bolt-on. It is core if it's deployed and used properly, if it's invested in and used properly.

Then it circles back around to your point where the data are critical in helping to make that case, so that you can show impact, so that you can tie it back to the strategic plan's goals like, “Look, this is how we're enhancing time to graduation. This is how we're helping retention or reducing the cost of the education,” whatever it is, whatever your metrics are, I bet that whoever is listening to this in an online learning organization could probably draw a direct line to some of those.

Kelvin: Just recapping what we said a few minutes ago, I do think we're going to have to stay tuned, at least in the US, being engaged in the dialogue, and negotiated rulemaking, even specifically, and comments, and at least paying attention to federal government negotiated rulemaking, and regulations affecting online and digital education. We just have to buckle up, and stay engaged, I think.

Tom: Yeah. Just in the last minutes or so that we have, do we want to say anything about sort of the future of TOPcast?

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean, maybe real quickly. One, we have been looking at the responses that we've gotten so far to the 2024 TOPcast Listener survey. So, thank you if you took a moment to reply. We really appreciate it. We look at everything that you sent. If you haven't yet, it's still open for a bit longer. We're not going to close the door on it quite yet, so we'll keep looking. It's been helpful to glance at those, and we'll plan on building on the successes that our survey response indicate that are going here.

For instance, we have a loyal and devoted listener base. 100% of our respondents have been listening for at least one year. Nearly a third of respondents have been listening for more than three years, and more than 50% of respondents have been listening for more than five years.

Tom: Wow.

Kelvin: What is wrong with you people?

Tom: [Laughter] Get a hobby.

Kelvin: That's right. This is it. We are the hobby. [Chuckles]

Tom: You can listen to us while you do your hobby, maybe, whatever that is.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] That's true. But thank you. Thank you. We're going to build on that. People left specific comments, but generally our respondents say they generally like what we're doing, but there are some suggestions for us to try out some new

things. You want to comment on just a couple of the directions that we're pursuing over this new season?

Tom: Well, I mean, one was about our interviews because every other, just as a reminder, and if you're new, every other episode, so the middle episode in the month, is typically an interview. We have gotten some comments that people want to hear more from our interviewees. And so maybe those should be a little bit longer. We're going to actually deliver on that in our next one. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: That's right. Let's not let that linger. We'll get right on it, get right on it. We'll look for some ways to engage new listeners. In fact, hey, shameless plug, if you're listening to this, maybe share it with a friend, or go back into the archives, and some favorite episode from the past, share it with a colleague who doesn't listen, because we need to lean into engaging because all of our respondents have been listening for one to five plus years. But we also want to look at some more engagement opportunities with our current listeners, add more value to them.

Tom: If you've been listening since the very beginning, you've listened to every episode…

Kelvin: Oh, God.

Tom: ...we'd like to hear from you.

Kelvin: Please. Oh, yeah.

Tom: Yeah. I don't know. Maybe there's something we could do, but…

Kelvin: We'll at least send you a TOPcast listener sticker. We'll at least do that. Possibly give you a shout-out. Heck, I might mail you some coffee. You never know.

Tom: [Chuckles] You never know. Yeah, definitely the shout-out we can give you, that's for sure.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: We'll keep evaluating this. I don't know how long we'll keep doing this. We'll at least finish this season, and our listeners say we ought to keep doing it, but we'll evaluate annually, and keep trying to improve.

Tom: Yeah, I mean, as long as y'all are listening, we'll try to keep talking. I don't know, when you hit 10 years, you do sort of step back and go, "Okay, how's this going?" All right. So, should I try and land the plane here?

Kelvin: Please do. Please do.

Tom: So, Kelvin, we all do our best to try to anticipate the future. I think it's good that we took a look in the rearview mirror to see how did we do? But it's so that we can rise to meet the challenges of tomorrow. Sometimes though, we have to look backward for context and to assess our assumptions before recalculating our roots to our possible futures. Recalculating.

Kelvin: Recalculating route. Yeah, that's right. That's what we're doing. That's what we're doing. Well, Tom, this has been fun, kind of retrospective, getting back into that headspace, as you said of early 2020. Glad to get back into 2024, and to look to the horizon now, and look forward to journeying forward with you and our listeners. Thanks for the time together. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

(*Outro Music*)

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.