

TOPcast Episode #169: You Know Your Institution Is Doing Online Ed Strategically When...

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.

(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 are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom. We're listening to a podcast, and I forgot to tell you this before hitting record, so let's just put it all out there, having some work done at the house, so I'm also listening to some hammering in my ear, so if it's distracting to you, sorry, and if it's not, just consider it part of producer Tim's sound engineering for the show.

Tom: That's right. It's a bonus. It's bonus content. [Laughter] Yeah, I actually, despite my background, I am at home as well. This is virtual Tom's office. But yeah, I had some stuff done at the house this morning, too.

Kelvin: Well, there you go. There you go. Tom, we haven't maybe done this. We try not to do it egregiously, but we haven't done this too much lately. Sharing our tagline and the entree into the podcast. Because we know that we have a lot of longtime loyal listeners, and we don't want to bore them with stuff they've heard a lot of times, but as we have been asking our longtime listeners to share episodes with non-listening colleagues. Maybe we should redouble our efforts to periodically introduce the podcast. What do you think?

Tom: Yeah, I think it's a good idea. And longtime loyal listeners. You know what a sucker I am for alliteration, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Oh, tell me more about that alliterative goodness there, Tom.

Tom: [Chuckle] Well, as you know, we like to bill this little show that we have as [Using initial consonant "C" emphasis] "A collegial conversation between

colleagues about online blended and digital learning conducted over a shared cup of coffee.” Not bad, huh?

Kelvin: A lot of Cs in there.

Tom: A lot of plosives in the microphone, too, that Tim is going to have to fix.

Kelvin: Yeah, Tim likes a challenge though. That's why he works with us.

Tom: [Chuckle] That's right.

Kelvin: If he wanted an easy job, he'd find some really skilled and talented professionals to work with. [Laughter]

Tom: Well, since we do maybe have a few new listeners, maybe you can share with them who this little band of merry folks is that's listening; what kinds of people there are.

Kelvin: Well, I mean, what we say, because this is what we've discovered, is it seems to us that our primary audience is woven together from folks in online teaching, instructional design, and administrative leader kinds of roles, or something close to each one of those things, or maybe one or more of them. And so, we try to offer something for each group in each episode, and periodically, maybe there might even be an episode that leans heavily on one particular group. We try to listen with an ear toward relevance to those groups, I think. Do you think we do that? I think we do that.

Tom: I think so. I mean, we are intentional about trying to mix it up. It's like, "All right, we haven't talked about pedagogical practice in a while," or "This leadership thing has come up," or whatever. Yeah, I think we try to be intentional about a wide variety of things that fall under that tagline umbrella.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's good. That's good.

Tom: So, I saw you sipping.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: I am sipping as well. What's in the thermos, Kelvin?

Kelvin: This being a collegial conversation over a shared cup of coffee. [Chuckles] Yes, no thermos today. I don't have access to my kitchen at the moment. So, I went down the street to this local cafe, I had only been in one other time since moving here, called Stomping Grounds Coffee Company. And what I ended up with in my cup here is what the barista told me is called Ruthie's Blend. I don't know who Ruthie is, and if she blended it herself or not, but he tells me that the folks who

own the coffee shop, they roast this themselves. So, maybe there's an actual Ruthie involved. I don't know. Ruthie's Blend, so it's all a bit of a mystery to me, and I'm curious to learn more about who's Ruthie? Why is it a blend? Why is it not single origin? I'm curious about all of that stuff, but I thought because of all that, it might be kind of relevant to today's topic, curious if you find relevance, and what are you drinking in your cup that I can judge the relevance of?

Tom: [Chuckle] Well, let the judging begin because there's no relevance to what I'm drinking. [Laughter] I've got a San Francisco Bay Hazelnut, and I know exactly what it is, and it's quite good. It's good for an afternoon treat, but you, on the other hand, have been thoughtful about your coffee selection as the coffee sommelier is. I'm going to say, trying to understand more about it, being curious, not knowing who Ruthie is, and what she does, and how did she blend the coffee, and did she even blend the coffee? I think there's a kernel in there somewhere.

Kelvin: That's right. That's what I was going for. That is, it. And maybe I feel like I'm going to try to... Like the Hidden Brain podcast that used to be on NPR now is its own thing, hosted by Shankar Vedantam, and I'm going to do my best Shankar Vedantam channeling here. Tom, I think you are the instigator of this episode's topic based upon a question a team member asked you a while back. Would you mind telling us what the question was, and how that led to today's episode?

Tom: Yeah, sure. So, I've been taking it upon myself to try to meet in short little sessions with members of the staff. And as you know, we've got a pretty large team, and I've started with the Instructional Design Team, of which there's approximately two dozen, maybe a little bit more. I've been doing 30-minute sessions with them, and some of them I've known for years, and years, and years, and it's a great check-in, but some are new, and I haven't really had a chance to get to know very well. So, this has been just a great opportunity. I've loved the conversations. I didn't know where they were going to go, but they've been fantastic. One of the questions that I ask, I've been doing it in the format of a stay interview instead of an exit interview by asking exit interview questions. What do you like about working here? What can we do better? Those kinds of questions.

But one of the questions I always ask, and I always ask this of direct reports, too, is what can I do better? What suggestions do you have for me, so I could do better for you, or the team, or the division? And one of these people, who was new, said back to me, "Tom, I don't think I can offer you any suggestions for what you could do better. I don't even know what you do." [Chuckles] "Oh, interesting." Yeah, I mean, she wasn't being rude or anything, but it was just like, "I don't know enough to even make a suggestions. What you do during the day is a mystery to me, Tom."

And I thought, well, I wonder how many other people are in that position either sitting in a chair like ours, or any sort of leadership position, who may have people who don't really understand what they do, or would like to understand

what somebody, who has a job like you or me does for a living, that maybe this would be a good topic for conversation. And it's actually not a terrible time for this kind of a topic because for many of us, this will probably be the first episode as we all go back to school for the fall semester. And it's a nice way to say, "All right, how do we reset? What do you do for a living to support all those students that are the ravaging hordes that are coming back?"

Kelvin: Oh, that's good. That's good. Let me pull the thread a little bit more and say, well, I think that's a great story, and I'm looking forward to the conversation as I always do, but since we just said all that a few minutes ago about our multi-strand audience, some of whom are administrative leader types, why would others listening to this care about something as esoteric as the framing of an administrative role? I mean, what's in it for instructional designers who don't work with you, or maybe more importantly, online faculty?

Tom: Yeah. Well, I mean, we all work together. We are all collaborators in this big thing that we call post-secondary instruction. The decisions that online learning leaders make, I think have direct downstream impacts on the staff, obviously that report up to them, but also on the people that we serve. Policy decisions, practice decisions, decisions about faculty development, about how you should teach online courses, technology decisions about what you're going to use in the class. All of those things do have direct relevance to instructors and others as well. I don't know, you could probably think of some other examples, too.

Kelvin: No, I think all that's good. I think all that's good, and I think as you and I have talked about this before, and we might've even said this on mic before, that an institution's creation, nurturing, of some kind of a senior most role related to online or digital learning, indicates a little something about how seriously they're taking online or digital learning. I've talked before about excellent coffee, and so, how do I know that I'm likely to find an excellent cup of coffee if I go into a place? There's certain indicators, little markers that I might find. I think the same thing looking at an institution, is there a role and to whom does that role report? What are their duties? All of that stuff are indicators.

But maybe we should work on unpacking this a little bit. And I don't know if you want to go so far, Tom, as to... We keep saying things like "these roles," "roles like ours," "senior most role." Of late, maybe in the last nine years or so, in some circles we see mention of Chief Online Learning Officer, we hear others say Online Learning Leader. I've seen sometimes Chief Online Officer, all kind of things. And certainly, we're more familiar with maybe acronym roles that are in broader usage like Chief Executive Officer, CEO, or Chief Information Officer, CIO. We've talked about this on the podcast, maybe less so things like CATO, the Chief Academic Technology Officer, but COLO, C-O-L-O, Chief Online Learning Officer, is certainly one acronym that has surfaced for roles like this. But I wonder if you have anything you want to say about just the framing of that, and how we got here, and why it needs to have a name?

Tom: Yeah. Well, I mean, it's been an evolution, and I don't think we're at the end of the journey yet because titles are continuing to evolve. You're right that COLO is more of a function than a title in most places. I think you and I both serve as COLOs of our institution, but neither one of us have that as a title. So, it's more of a function. But someone exists somewhere, probably at most institutions, especially post-COVID, that is doing that job, and the title has evolved. You're right, the CHLOE report, up until I want to say a year or two ago, was using that COO title, the Chief Online Officer. And I think even on this podcast, we have been a little critical of that. Friendly, helpfully, constructively critical that COO is just more commonly known as Chief Operating Officer. And if you're going to adopt that acronym, you're going to just confuse people.

So, this year with CHLOE 9, which just came out this week, they're using COLO now, which I am a supporter of, and I think it makes a lot more sense. We've had, we go back a ways, Eric Fredericksen on the podcast, and we talked about Fredericksen's List. And I see in our notes you've helpfully looked up the episode number, so I'll share it. It's Episode #36. It was an interview we conducted during the OLC Accelerate conference several years ago. And Eric has just done, I think, groundbreaking work on trying to capture the titles at colleges and universities, including community colleges, in two separate studies across the country. What these titles are, who that person is, who do they report to, how many years have they been in the job? He's just done a ton of research. He's published it in Online Learning Journal and perhaps elsewhere. And I think that's been a bedrock for a lot of the thinking that I've done about the role more broadly in this space.

Kelvin: I was thinking about this, there were a number of things happening around the same time. I wonder what it was in the zeitgeist that led to this, but I mean, it's not exact, but we'll just say around the same time, around the same time that Eric Fredericksen was seeking to try to drill down and learn more about the experience of people in roles like this, and he had to start with, "Well, where do you even find them? Let me try to assemble that list," hence the Fredericksen's List.

UPCEA, the professional association, was laying some groundwork with hallmarks of excellence in online leadership, followed by an article co-written by Herron, Lashley, Salley, and Shaw that was called "The Chief Online Learning Officer: Competencies, Roles, and Trajectories," more of a prose elaboration on those hallmarks. And that was all happening about the same time. And weirdly enough, it was right as we were starting this podcast. So, since this podcast has existed, this was all bubbling up. So, isn't that interesting? So, all that's within say, give or take the last 10 years. So, I wonder what you think about that. Why was that the time period, and maybe wasn't it a good thing that it was pre-pandemic? [Guffaws]

Tom: Yeah, well, I mean, I have a lot of thoughts on this, and I'll maybe save some of them because a lot of this is in this book that Jocelyn Widmer and I are collaborating on, which is the *Chief Online Learning Officers' Guidebook*. So,

we've got a lot of thoughts on it. You were a contributor, our contributor along with a lot of others. So, I'll have more to say about that later, but it's been on my mind a lot lately. And just specifically to your question, maybe I'll reference Bob Hanson, CEO of UPCEA, who's also been on the podcast. At the last UPCEA SOLA+R conference, the DT&L SOLA+R conference that was in Minneapolis, he did in his opening remarks, a recap chronology of the history of the COLO role a little bit. There's mostly COLOs in the audience at that particular conference.

And it has evolved very much like that of the CIO, except we're maybe two decades behind the CIO, where the CIO role didn't exist everywhere 20 or 30 years ago at every institution. And it's only within that timeframe that every institution just realized strategically that it would actually be malpractice to not have a Chief Information Officer. [Brief chuckle] And I think we're emerging into a space now where something similar seems to be happening with the COLO, but without necessarily the consistency around the title. And Bob has posited that perhaps 2020 began the decade of the COLO. And some of that is driven by... It was already sort of happening, and that was some of his chronology, and he gave some of the history of how it evolved to this point, including the article you just referenced, but the pandemic, I think, just put a flag into the ground about when everything went remote, the strategic importance of having a leader in this space at your institution just became manifest in a way that it just had never been before for a lot of institutions.

And so, that momentum seems to have carried on post pandemic where schools that maybe didn't have an online strategy now realize they need one, and so, they're searching for this kind of a leadership position.

Kelvin: Yeah, and I wonder about things like you're maybe 15 years plus into online education as a thing from the mid to late '90s into that around 2014, 2015, 2016 time period.

Tom: 2012 was the year of the MOOC, don't forget.

Kelvin: Yes, right, so maybe that had a thing, I don't know. But I wonder if, to your point about maturity and all, were there some folks who were early movers and then there had been a level of maturity, 15 plus years in, it was that kind of a thing, and then it became, as we know, the accelerant that was the response, the emergency ad hoc remote instruction response to the pandemic in higher ed, certainly as an accelerant. So, like you said, it just put a stake in the ground. Yeah, all that's rather interesting.

We've shouted out a couple of professional associations. I think you mentioned interviewing Eric Fredericksen at OLC Accelerate. OLC's done some things in leadership development, like their IELOL Institute for Emerging Leaders in Online Learning. UPCEA, you've already mentioned, has the Chief Online Learning Officer's roundtable amidst one of their annual meetings around DT&L

SOLA+R. EDUCAUSE has institutes that, while I think we tend to think of CIOs, they've branched those things out into other kinds of senior leader roles, including Digital Learning Leadership. So, I think we're even seeing professional associations trying to lay groundwork for folks to develop into roles like this, I think.

Tom: Yeah, totally agree. And that's just a short list. There are others as well. But yeah, it's a space that I think a lot of people are trying to support.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm, and I just think that that must say something about where we are in, to your point, the ongoing maturing of the field. I mean, the fact that you're actually seeing this kind of, dare I say, formal professional development to prepare folks for higher roles and all that. Yeah. You want to say anything more about your book, tease it? I mean, we'll probably have you on your own podcast at some point. [Chuckles] Or have Jocelyn come and talk about your guidebook.

Tom: Yeah, it's in the works now. It probably won't see the light of day until late 2025 or early 2026 based on deadlines. So, I don't know if there's a whole lot more I want to say about it now, but it's just relevant to this conversation, and it's definitely on the top of my mind because we're in the throes of it right now.

Kelvin: And we should also, we've talked about this book before, but the edited collection from Bouchey, Gratz and Kurland, which has the world's longest title published by OLC, "*From Grassroots to the Highly Orchestrated: Online Leaders Share Their Stories of the Evolving Online Organizational Landscape in Higher Education*." And that has something, I think, to say about both organizations and this role that we're talking about.

Tom: Yeah, it was OLC Press's very first book, and I was honored to be in Chapter One in that one. [Chuckles] That was fun.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah, they did a great job putting that together.

Kelvin: I think you're the only person in the book, I went and looked, you're the only person in the book who used the phrase "Chief Online Learning Officer."

Tom: I did not know that. That's interesting.

Kelvin: But Chief Online Officer does appear in the book a few times. [Chuckle] There's that competitive title kind of thing.

Tom: Yeah. Well, that was probably in that CHLOE transition as they were changing their names. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, can I share some feedback that I got?

Kelvin: Please? Who gave you feedback? And was it good? [Laughs]

Tom: Yeah, I don't think I should say names, but people who are known in the online learning world, but at this DT&L SOLA+R conference, because I had just had that conversation with the instructional designer who said, "I don't even know what you do, Tom," and you and I had talked about possibly talking about it on a future episode, I did a little very informal straw poll over breakfast or whatever sitting with people, and I talked to maybe a half a dozen folks in this COLO role at different institutions all over the country, and a theme emerged. I'm not saying everybody said this exact thing, but one person did. But the rest of them said various versions of this. And they said, "What I do, Tom, is politics." And I said, "Interesting."

And they don't mean that in some sort of an actual go run for office, or any sort of pejorative negative politics...

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: ...but what they mean is, "I negotiate," and "I bargain," and "I try to build a coalition," and "I try to create a vision and get people behind it, and gather resources, and make my case," and all of that stuff is politics. It's just internal organizational politics. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, "Yeah, I can kind of relate to that." But I thought it was an interesting description that boiled down, at least the strategic work, of the COLO, maybe not the day-to-day tactical work that dominates probably so much of our time. But I don't know, what do you think about that description of politics?

Kelvin: I'm trying really hard, really hard to... Yeah, honestly, I do get why somebody would say that, and why you would hear it in other responses. I do have a knee jerk negative reaction to it for the reasons that you said, politics being a thing, and I think it just has a pejorative connotation. But I think here's what I hear in it. I think about, like you said, strategy, and I think implementing strategy, which I have this to say about that. I wrote this down some years ago, anybody can have... We've been talking recently about cultures in which good ideas emerge. You have to have a lot of ideas, have good ideas, and so forth; that's sustaining. Anybody can have a great idea, but it takes real skill to implement anything in higher education successfully. [Guffaws]

Tom: Wow. Amen, brother. Yes.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] So that, I think, is what we're talking about.

Tom: Yeah, and I think it's the same thing by another name. Yeah, totally agree. So, should I share my answer to the instructor designer?

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Like, "Well, here's what I do."

Kelvin: Yeah, what did you say?

Tom: It's a little abstract. I wish I could be more concrete, but it's hard to be pithy and concrete. So pithy, I think, necessitates abstraction in many ways. [Chuckles] But how I usually describe my job is I try to align the resources and mission of the Division of Digital Learning in the service of the strategic goals of the university. That's it in a nutshell. And then that works both up, in me sharing our capacity capabilities, and what we have to offer a value to the president and the provost and others, deans, but also down in that I'm translating the mission and goals of the university into policies and action, who we hire, the kinds of work that we prioritize. And so, you feel like you're in this middle place, where you're pulling a big thing behind you in a certain direction, but you're also trying to tell the people above you how you can help, if that makes sense. And so, that's why the politics thing sort of resonated with me.

Kelvin: No, that's good. Maybe I'll respond just with my own reflective thought on how I frame this role that I find myself in, what is it? We're 19 months or 20 months in, something like that now. One, I have said before, quoting a former UCF colleague, that I think much of what we do in higher education is to work toward lifting lives and livelihoods. And then I've tagged on, with digital teaching and learning as a lever. So, I think a lot about three functions that are in service of that vision. I think about people leading. So, being responsible for an organization, leading that, and being responsible for the health and the growth of the people in that organization. I think about strategy fostering or championing of strategy at an institutional level. And then I think about integrating with senior leadership.

And so, I actually wrote those things down just because I was getting whiplash sometimes because I'd be doing one thing, and then I'd have to shift gears abruptly to another thing, and then another thing. You know when you're on the playground as a kid, and you get dizzy on the little merry-go-round thing, you have to kind of find a point to focus on? I need to focus. And so, I'm like, "What am I doing?" And I boiled it down to, what I found more often than not, is I was doing one of those three things, or sometimes something that might touch on more than one of them, or I was wasting my time, so I didn't want to waste my time. [Chuckle] So it's going to be doing one of those three things. Right now, I'm doing the people leading thing. Okay, that's fine. Strategy fostering. Okay, got to deal with senior... Okay, I'm doing that. And sometimes you get a trifecta. You do all three, and you're like, "Yay, that's good. I feel very efficient." I don't know if that resonates with you, but your thing resonates with me. I like what you said.

Tom: I like what you said, too. I haven't really heard it put in those ways. Categorizing what's the thing I'm doing now to help me orient towards effectively engaging with that, I think is a really great strategy because I've talked in the past about managerial whiplash.

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: I'll be in a meeting at 1:00 maybe with, I don't know, the president or somebody, talking about high level strategy, and five-year goals, and accountability measures, or something, and its way up there and high stakes. And then literally 2:00 I got someone in my office upset because the person next to him in the cubicles is wearing too much perfume. These are not made-up examples. [Chuckles] So, having that whiplash is like, "Oh." But your little heuristic here I think allows you to put yourself in the right headspace. "Okay, I'm going from integrating with senior leadership and doing strategy, to now I'm people leading. Okay..."

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

Tom: I take that hat off, and I put this hat on."

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: I'm going to use that, I think.

Kelvin: Have at it. That's good. I know my coffee's dwindling, and I know the sands in the hourglass are dwindling. Shall I try to bring a pause to this part of the conversation by summarizing it, and wrapping it up, and getting us out of here?

Tom: Yeah. Give us the AI summary, ChatGPT.

Kelvin: The AI summary. No, this was not artificial intelligence. This was actual intelligence. That's the other AI. [Chuckles] I say that just because I think you wrote this one...

Tom: It was a group effort, collaborative.

Kelvin: Oh, was it? You and Microsoft Copilot worked together. [Laughter] No, just joking about that. Maybe by way of summary, we'll say each of us is doing our best to manage our own online learning roles in the middle of massive change in transition, and we all very diverse roles, all that, doing our best. The institution's framing of the nature and purpose of the work related to the mission is key to how strategically that work will be carried out. Yeah, it's a signal, right? The positioning and responsibilities of the COLO, Chief Online Learning Officer role, if it exists at the institution, is a big clue to the institution's strategy, or we might

even say, or lack thereof. No, I think that's, that's good job. I think that's well worded. Better written on the page than it was delivered, but a good summary.

Tom: [Chuckles]

Kelvin: No, that's good.

Tom: All right, so before I sign us off here, I thought it might... Since we opened with talking about potentially new listeners, close by saying, if you like what you hear, if you've listened for a while, or if you're new, maybe as we come to the end of an episode, ask yourself, "Who do I know who might benefit from hearing this or appreciate it?" And then just use that very convenient share button in your podcast app to send it along to them. We're trying to build a community here, and the more the merrier. We don't make any money from this. It's about just sharing with others and again, building that network. All right, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

(Musical Outro)

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.