TOPcast Episode #186:
Expert Tips for Online Program Marketing and Enrollment

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*)

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

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

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you're listening to the final 15 episodes of TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, Tom.

Tom: The final 15 scheduled episodes.

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: I will keep saying that.

Kelvin: The final 15 scheduled episodes. That's right. You keep inserting that in there, that'll be our…

Tom: That's right, yeah. Because if you've listened to the last episode, you know that we're winding down the regularly scheduled TOPcast episodes. We're going to run through the finish line. After 10 years of all this nonsense of us talking, we're going to run through the finish line at 200 total episodes through the end of the 2025 calendar year. It's a little bittersweet, but I'm also excited about it. I think we've got some really great stuff planned in the next few months.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree. I've been pondering, I find myself wanting to say winding down, but that doesn't sound quite right, right? Because winding down, like we're slowing down, and we're going to sprint through that ribbon at the end, I think, so lots of good stuff. I don't know if this is okay to say,

but we were just doing some planning on a call, yesterday. We have some in-the-works plans for some special TOPcast happenings on site at OLC Accelerate this November 2025 in Orlando. Hey, you don't want to get left out. You should go ahead and make plans to be in Orlando in November, probably. What do you think?

Tom: Yeah, yeah, agreed. It should be a lot of fun, we've had a really long-standing relationship with OLC, an original partner when we launched this thing, and it just seems fitting that we close it out and have a bit of a frou-fra, a hoedown, I don't know. I'm trying to find the right word; it's not coming to me.

Kelvin: Hootenanny?

Tom: Hootenanny, yeah. A shindig? [Chuckles]

Kelvin: A shillelagh? I don't know. Is that a thing? I don't know.

Tom: Something. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: I think that's a stick. I don't know.

Tom: That is a stick. It's a stick for hitting. My Irish heritage comes out on that one.

Kelvin: Yeah, there was something.

Tom: Yeah, so it should be fun. More details to come, but we got a couple of things in the works for OLC Accelerate here in Orlando. Yeah, try and come see us.

Kelvin: Shivery is the word that I was looking for, and it came out shillelagh, but shivery, that's another thing.

Tom: That's one I don't even know.

Kelvin: Shivery. Google that, I think it was on... It's lore. I don't know. Stop me.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: Stop me and take me into this podcast, Tom.

Tom: All right, what is in that coffee the way we're going? You want me to start? Maybe I should start.

Kelvin: It's coffee, but what's in yours?

Tom: Yeah. I have the organic coffee company, Gorilla Decaf, which I've had before, and I use the compostable K-Cups, [Chuckles] trying to be a good citizen here, but it's good. Nice afternoon… Don't get the caffeine buzz that wires me sometimes. So, it's not thematically selected, but it is yummy.

Kelvin: Well, that's good. I'm happy for both of you, you and your cup of coffee. My coffee today, Tom, is a single origin Peru San Fernando from Wonderstate Coffee in, I don't know how to pronounce this, Viroqua ("viroka") or possibly Viroqua ("virokwa"), Wisconsin. This is an area in rural Wisconsin, part of the so-called Driftless area. Google it, I'm not going to even mention it, shared by several states. I wouldn't have known about this coffee if it hadn't come out of my phone and spoken to me. I think I might've mentioned previously that I have used a couple of different online coffee connection services to vet high quality coffees, and one of these, Fellows Drops, sends me a weekly text message about a specially prepared coffee from a high-end roaster, and I can choose to buy it or not. That's how I found out about this coffee. I bought it, the description and the price point converged with my interests. So, the coffee's good. Can you find a connection between my coffee and the topic of the day? I heard you go, "Ah."

Tom: Yeah. I think I get it. You're on a list, you got marketed to, you chose to buy or not, you made a purchase decision. All of that seems to be of a piece of what we were talking about today a little bit, or what we plan to talk about today.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. So, Tom, you recently interviewed our colleague and former TOPcast guest, Dr. Sasha Thackaberry-Voinovich. She's got a lot of syllables…

Tom: [Chuckles] Just say, "Sasha."

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Dr. Thackaberry-Voinovich was previously on Episode #100, which was "Managing Change in Growth and Online Initiatives," and she's the author of the recent book, *How to Grow Enrollment in Online Higher Education: Strategies for Marketing and Recruitment*. While Sasha has spent her most recent years in leadership within the corporate space, previously, she held leadership roles within online learning and educational technology operations at several universities and community colleges, including, but not limited to, National University, Louisiana State University, and Southern New Hampshire University. Anything you want to say about the interview before we cut to it?

Tom: I think it stands on its own. Sasha's an old friend, and somebody that I used to call a lot when she was working at some of those institutions to

just run ideas by and get her expertise on, and she sent me some amazing spreadsheets on how they model things, and price, and market. I'm not at all surprised that she's written this book; she is really qualified to do so. So, yeah. Yeah, check it out, and maybe we'll come back on the other side and offer a few reflective thoughts.

Kelvin: All righty. From the modern technological marvel that is podcast time travel, here is your interview with Sasha Thackaberry-Voinovich.

(*Musical Transition*)

Tom: Sasha, thank you so much for coming back to TOPcast.

Sasha Thackaberry-Voinovich: I'm thrilled to be here; thank you for having me back.

Tom: Last time you were here, you were in a different professional position at a different company organization. I wonder if you can just update us on where you are now and a little bit about the company.

Sasha: Sure, absolutely. I am the president of a company called SkillsWave, and what we are is an upskilling education as a benefit platform. We are matchmakers between corporations that want to really upskill their employees and educational institutions that have fantastic courses and programs, and it's all in an easy-to-use platform. I have the privilege of working with an amazing team. It's very startup culture. I really, really love it.

Tom: Great, thank you. Yeah, that's hot off the presses, sort of.

Sasha: Yes. [Chuckles]

Tom: It hasn't been around that long. Yeah. Today, I want to talk to you about something. I know you have a ton of knowledge on, so much knowledge that you couldn't fit it all in your head. You had to put it into a book that has recently come out.

Sasha: [Chuckles] Yeah.

Tom: The book is called *How to Grow Enrollment in Online Higher Education: Strategies for Marketing and Recruitment*, and I can't think of anything maybe more relevant to the world of online higher education, right now. Why did you write this book? What was the calling, and what did you think the need was?

Sasha: Well, so part of the reason for writing it is just because it's not much out there in this space, and I felt like I had plenty of scars from putting this

into action from the ground up at Louisiana State University, but actually, I was having a conversation with Morgan, who works with Phil Hill, and we were talking about micro credentials, and how to use micro credentials as part of the enrollment funnel, and I just got into some metrics with her and she was like, "Nobody knows this stuff. You should write a book about this stuff." Well, and I don't mean to imply I'm the only person who knows this stuff, but it's not unlike something like instructional design or program development, that higher education institutions have really embraced for a much, much longer time and are truly experts in the front end of how to actually get students and recruit them into fully online programs is not something that every institution actually has experience with, and not every institution can afford to hire amazing people with tons of experience marketing and recruitment, like the big onlines.

Like the Southern New Hampshire University, or Western Governors, or UMGC. The idea behind it was a very practical guide, lots of pictures, lots of explanations of why things are done the way they are, and how to set up your own shop, so that you can do it yourself.

Tom: Yeah, well, I mean, I agree that there's certainly a need and demand it's filling. I think it's fantastic, and as you know, have been sharing it on social media, telling people to check it out. If you lead online learning, I think it's something that you should really pay attention to, and it's a primmer of sorts. Maybe this is a little bit of a jump right into the inside baseball question, but this is something I struggle with a little bit in my role. How much of growing enrollment in online ed do you think is the media spend, and the advertising, and classic marketing that you do, the SEO, versus the lead cultivation of following up, and having humans have a conversation? Because they're very different things, but they're two sides of the same coin. I always wonder which one maybe is more important.

Sasha: Right. I think part of that actually is dependent upon two things. One, the type of institution you are, and two, if it's today or if it was yesterday, because marketing just changed overnight, and it's going to change overnight for the rest of the week. Even since I wrote the book, how search ads work and function are so different, because of gen AI and how they're putting the little summaries in. How you can maximize your ability to be seen is constantly transforming, but there's basics that always matter. On the front end, you can't recruit a student who doesn't know you exist, so you absolutely have to invest money, but it doesn't have to be the same for every institution. We see a lot of big TV ads from certain institutions; that's great for them. They have a specific target audience they're going after.

That's not what every institution wants, can afford, or needs. There are a bunch of other channels that you can use that are marketing channels to

really drive, first, awareness, so the top-of-funnel pieces, and then drive people to your website to actually apply. I think that even more so than a good marketing strategy, a good recruitment funnel is both hard to manage and not as well known about. Once your student actually puts in a lead form, what happens? How fast do you get back to them? There's data around this stuff. If you don't get back to that student really fast, the likelihood of them selecting your institution goes down, and a lot of these online students, they'll explore a handful of institutions, but they're looking for something now. These are fundamentally different types of students. They're not planning for next fall, they're planning for next month, so you have to be responsive to them.

Then every single step of that funnel, you've invested more in that prospective student. If you lose them, if they're part of melt, which melt in our world... You can measure it a bunch of different ways, but typically, it's after the student has somehow financially committed to the institution. If you lose them between that and the class, well, actually for most institutions' census, which is 15 days in, that is the most expensive student to lose. You've already spent marketing on them; you've already spent all your internal staff time getting them down the funnel. This is why designing your funnel to be more of a pipeline and less of a sieve is really, really important, and I think that is a big gap for most institutions. If you are an institution that somehow markets to a student, the student gets to an interest form or an application form, and then they are sent to a department, that's where the student funnel goes to die. You have to have a central place to manage all of the inquiries and get them through the funnel.

Tom: So, that rapid response to an inquiry, some of us don't necessarily have a giant building full of people…

Sasha: [Chuckles] Right.

Tom: …like a Southern New Hampshire might have, or Western Governors. So, how much of that can be an automated start of the student journey and still be effective?

Sasha: So much, so much and even more so. I think that's where consumer expectations are going to begin with. I think where you get to needing a human being to really talk, even if you don't have a building full of people, to your point, is when someone starts talking about finances, right? Because for a traditional institution, if a student is seeking federal financial aid, or if they're going to be finding some other mechanism to pay for it, maybe they're going to go on a payment plan, that's a commitment that turns from an interest to, in many cases, a tens of thousands of dollars commitment. Typically, not all the time, but typically,

people want to talk to someone before they're making that. [Chuckles] I make the joke sometimes that you can buy a car on your phone, you can get a mortgage on your phone, but you can't really just immediately sign up and start going to college the next day from your phone, and it's because of how we design higher education institutions.

But also, fundamentally, unlike getting a mortgage on your phone or buying a car on your phone, neither of which... Actually, I think I did get my mortgage on my phone, have not bought a car on a phone. But unlike that, it's like something that you get. When a student buys a degree, they're buying a ton of work and a huge amount of delayed gratification, because for many of these students, they see nothing until they get the degree. There are no stackable credentials along the way. When you get to the point of where the finances are involved, that's probably where you want to invest your people time. But for the rest of it, absolutely text them, do voicemail drops. You don't need to do cold calling all the time, but they do need to be in a really personalized nurture cadence.

Tom: Yeah, that's great advice. You did mention something there that caught my attention, and I guess we can't have any conversation these days without the letters “AI.”

Sasha: [Chuckles]

Tom: I was in a session, in a meeting, a week or so ago, and it was a consultant talking to a bunch of us, and one of the things they were talking about is, in recruiting online students, that we don't just need search engine optimization, but AI optimization.

Sasha: Yes, yes.

Tom: As you start thinking about your digital PR strategy, and articles you may write from faculty, or whatever the case might be, you have to start thinking about how the AI is going to pick it up, because as you mentioned, even in a Google search now, as we're recording this, above the search results is an AI response. So, how is that changing the way we market our programs catch the eye of the AI, so to speak?

Sasha: Yes, yes. It's interesting, so phrases are more important than individual keywords now, and also voice search is different, so the cadence of how things are happening around larger blocks of context is really important, but even the way that search happens now is you can have those search ads actually generate the right text at the right time that they determine is going to drive more traffic. There's all of this… If you're creating AI-generated phrases to put in to optimize for AI using your thing as a source, you get into, "When does that become a ghost internet?" That's just a

philosophical thing that's really interesting. Like you said, AI talking to AI.

Tom: [Chuckles] You've got AI talking to AI.

Sasha: Right, right, right. I think the best thing to do, at the end of the day, is aggressively secret shop yourself and have other people secret shop yourself. If you're not showing up, and you're still spending money all over the place, you have to adjust and you have to adjust fast, because Google will happily keep taking your money. You have to think creatively about how to get your brand out there, because for someplace like UCF, that's a really well-known brand. It is somewhat geographically constrained, but there are brands that are completely not geographically constrained, and there are ones that really... If they were to start advertising nationally, nobody would know who they were for two years anyway, so why would you do a brand campaign like that? A huge part of how you're going to market from a geolocation standpoint is your brand, and that's where... One of the things I talk about in the book, too, is about how to build your portfolio.

If you have multiple things in the same domain, you want to capture anyone who's interested in a certain type of business, like finance, accounting, whatever. If you put those together with a short set of options, you're more likely to have a student convert, but this stuff is changing all the time. If you're not learning about it all the time, you're going to be at a disadvantage, so you need to hire utility players. Hire curious people who are not intimidated by learning every single day, and they will keep you on top of your marketing game.

Tom: Wow. All right, so that leads into what I want to maybe close with, give you an opportunity to share your wisdom. If somebody steps into a chief online learning officer role or a chief head of marketing for an online program role, and maybe they don't have a ton of experience in it, what would be the advice you would give to that person? What are the top three things, or whatever, that they should maybe concentrate on as priorities?

Sasha: Yes. From the marketing and recruitment perspective, I would say you absolutely have to know what your current state is. At every institution I've ever been to, there is a big delta between what people think students are experiencing and what students are actually experiencing. An example of this on the program side would be hidden prerequisites. It's not necessarily a prerequisite, is this in the catalog as a prerequisite? But if you don't have this level of math, then it is a prerequisite. Knowing what the student journey actually is and designing it for the majority of the students, not for the outliers. I can't tell you the number of times I've been in a position entire policies are created, because Susie Johnson in 1989 did

this really weird thing, and we can't let anybody else do that. Policies will crater your ability to convert a student.

You've got to focus on making it simple for someone to choose you. The other thing I would say is actually not in this book, but it is about program development, which is, if you don't have the right programs, or product as we call it sometimes, nobody's going to buy it. You have to have product market fit, which means the programs that you are offering to your adult online students have to be the programs they actually want to take. Those have to be relevant. That would be a couple of the key things. Then the other thing I would say is, depending on the type of institution, it would be find your faculty advocates from day one. That is so critical, because if you have good faculty partners, if you have people who are motivated to grow their programs and really interested in doing it in a way that works for students, that's gold. That's absolutely gold. [Chuckles] I've had the deep luck, I guess luck, of working with amazing faculty.

Tom: Yeah, wow. That is great advice. The advice I would offer is for everybody to go pick up a copy of your book, because I think it's enormously helpful.

Sasha: I'll take it, great advice. [Chuckles]

Tom: [Chuckles] Yeah. Sasha, thank you so much for coming back on TOPcast and sharing all this information with our audience.

Sasha: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

(*Musical Transition*)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Sasha Thackaberry-Voinovich.

Tom: Yes. Indeed, it was, Kelvin. I really enjoyed talking to Sasha. I always learn something whenever I talk to her, and this was no exception. I thought she was dropping a lot of wisdom. The book itself is... I was honored to get an advanced preview and offered a quote for it, and I think it's got all kinds of really practical guidance. In the conversation that we just had, we also got into, I think, some of the emerging strategy stuff, and I thought that was a really good compliment to the book.

Kelvin: Yeah. Hey, I'll say this unsolicited endorsement. I spent Kelvin's own money personally out of my pocket, and I bought a copy of Sasha's book when it came out. I agree, I think there's good stuff in there. I go back to it and look at stuff and talk about things in there with our team here, and so forth. Goodness, like you said, she... I won't say that she speaks in

soundbites, but she dropped several key principles and they're like, "Write that down."

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Well, you want to give an example of one that spoke to you?

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, a couple that they're not maybe... I'm not going to say they're not rocket science, because I think they're just succinct and like, "Yeah, hold onto that," right? That's an elegant expression that those are wise words. “You can't recruit a student who doesn't know you exist.” Well, yeah. Then I think about the implications of that. There's data that we generally know that what? 60% plus of students enrolling in online programs typically are within driving distance of a physical campus. So, what does that mean? Are you leveraging that fully? You don't just do that, so where do you go beyond your immediate context in the saturated market? How do they know that you exist and how do they see you... We've talked about this before, value differentiation. How do they see you as different from somebody else? It all comes, "You can't recruit a student who doesn't know you exist and can't pick you out of a crowd." [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. That one spoke to me, too. I was like, "Wow, okay. Yeah, it's true." Even if they know that... If they're familiar with your institution, do they know you offered an online program that they're looking for? If you're not marketing, they don't know, unless they take the trouble to seek out your institution, because they like your institution, but meanwhile, they're getting bombarded with ads and marketing from institutions that have much bigger budgets than yours or mine, and those are going to be what they see. It's a lot easier to respond to something that's being pushed at you instead of going out and say, "Well, I wonder if my local university has this thing I'm looking for." You have to fight fire with fire, but be strategic about it, and the first step is they have to know you're out there. Yeah.

Kelvin: There's several other things I could comment on, and I know our time is dwindling. I'll say that I appreciated... You had a line in there that stood out to me, "Catch the eye of the AI." I thought, "Yeah, there's something to that probably."

Tom: Yeah, it's really true, and she agreed. It's really changing everything. We talked about that, the fact that if you're searching Google now, the results at the top of the page are going to be Gemini results, and Gemini's looking for different things than the general Google search is looking for.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, that changes how you market, and instead of necessarily buying keywords and working on your SEO as hard, now you should still do those things, but now you need to be writing articles, and having your faculty do

interviews, and putting them on your pages, so that you can become an authority that the AI looks at and says, "Someone's got a question about," I don't know, "How to be a social worker. Well, here's an article from UCF about their masters of social work program that addresses that exact question." That's harder. You got to really work at that.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's right. Just to speak about a little bit more automation, I thought it's a fine point to emphasize that finding the balance between automation, and human contact, and enrollment counseling.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: I mean, there was no easy answer in there, but just pointing that out. In the interview, I thought was wise, and something that we're all going to be trying to figure out probably.

Tom: Yeah, and finding that balance, because I think everybody recognized that you can't be on either extreme of that. If it's entirely automated, then the students feel that and they know they're just a number, but if it's entirely personal, that is not scalable and becomes super expensive and the institution just can't support it, and you're setting an expectation you probably can't deliver on. So, what's the middle ground? How can you let the computers do what the computers do well, and let the humans do what the humans should be doing? I think that's a constant pendulum that's swinging. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's right. I know our time is growing short. Do you want to point out anything else before you look to put this plane on the runway?

Tom: Maybe I'll try and bring us in for a landing. All right, so how do the wider range of potential learners served well by online programs come to know about your institution's offerings and then actually enroll? How do they do that? The insights from experienced online marketing and enrollment colleagues, like Sasha, are more important than ever in helping institutions carry out a values-aligned online strategy that benefits our modern 21st century learners.

(*Musical Outro*)

Kelvin: Yeah, that's good. Yeah, that's right. Well, thank you to Sasha for coming and dropping wisdom, and thank you to Tom for having a collegial conversation over... If not a shared cup of coffee, at least we each had a cup of coffee, and we shared the experience, so thank you for that. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.