TOPcast Episode #188:
How Do You Do It? Leading Strategy and Practice in Online Education

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(*Musical Intro*)

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

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

Tom: I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

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

Kelvin: Greetings, Tom. That's the part where you're supposed to say, "The final 15 episodes," and then I say, "Well, the final 15 scheduled episodes, Tom."

Tom: I blew my line.

Kelvin: That's all right.

Tom: So, this is how people…

Kelvin: You just didn't want to do the thing without the scheduled. I know. It was Freudian.

Tom: I know. Well, no, I've subjugated the whole concept that we're ending, and yeah, I've pushed it deep, deep down.

Kelvin: Deep down, deep down.

Tom: But yeah, these are our final 15 episodes that we're in the midst of.

Kelvin: 15 scheduled, 15 scheduled episodes.

Tom: Thank you. Yes, of course. 15 scheduled.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah, we're in the home stretch here. And for those of you who haven't heard, yes, we are going to be bringing the scheduled episodes of TOPcast to a bit of an end, but we're going to keep the feed open, and we may drop in a special episode from time to time, or if we just feel like having coffee together and shooting the you-know-what. Who knows? So, we hope you will be also keeping the feed open when that time comes.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. That's right. You got a beverage that you might be drinking while we're having a conversation?

Tom: I do. And I have it in my pink travel mug, so it's not thematic. It is my organic Gorilla decaf, which is going down smoothly.

Kelvin: Made by organic gorillas.

Tom: [Chuckles] Yes. How did you know? Fair Trade gorillas.

Kelvin: It was pink. I thought maybe it was like that Nestle Quick strawberry or something.

Tom: No, my froof has its limits.

Kelvin: Oh, okay. That's good. I have my Dr. Who mug since as we're recording this, the finale of the Disney+ Dr. Who era has aired. So, I've got a TARDIS on the thing. And so, here's the deal. This I would call sort of incidental and accidental coffee. I had good intentions. I was going to run out just a little bit before this and go down to the cafe down the street, and I was going to pick just a really nice cup of coffee that was going to bring in fresh, and then it was raining outside. I mean... So, this is my, I believe, second attempt at trying ye old industrial commoditized office coffee.

Tom: Yeah, the old brown water. [Laughs]

Kelvin: I don't like it. It's not good. I had to drink it in a good mug just to feel better. But just to give you a little hint, it's sort of the incidental, and circumstantial, and even accidental part that I wanted to play up in service

of an attempt at a possible, maybe, could be thematic connection to today's...

Tom: Okay. I'm picking up the emphasis. I'm not making the connection though. [Laughs]

Kelvin: Well, I mean, here's where I was going. This is a guest episode, and our guest talks about the fact that it was really because of being on the podcast before that that sort of one thing led to another thing, led to another thing, that has brought her back because she's here to promote a new book, which sort of sources back to the topic of when she was on before. So, incidental, circumstantial, that kind of thing.

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: I don't know.

Tom: Yeah, I get it.

Kelvin: Roundabout.

Tom: No, it's very recursive. Like an Ouroboros, a snake swallowing its own tail.

Kelvin: It's just like that. Just like that.

Tom: [Chuckles] Awesome.

Kelvin: You want to tell people what we're listening to?

Tom: Yeah. We'll move on from the strange obscure analogies.

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: Kelvin, you recently interviewed our colleague and prior TOPcast guest, Dr. Jocelyn Widmer. Dr. Widmer is Dean for Weapons Learning Transformation, the coolest title that I've heard, at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Previously, she was the Chief Online Learning Officer, or COLO, at Texas A&M University. Dr. Widmer is the co-author of a brand-new book releasing one day after this episode on June 17th, '25, *The Chief Online Learning Officer's Guidebook: A Framework for Strategy and Practice in Higher Education*. And oh, there it is, a picture of it for those watching co-authored by some guy named Thomas B. Cavanagh, I have heard of.

Kelvin: Yeah, I've heard of him.

Tom: Dr. Widmer was previously a guest on TOPcast on Episode #126: "COLOs, Context, and Community," and you talk a little bit about that in the interview. Anything you want to say about the interview before we cut to it?

Kelvin: I think it stands on its own. I mean, maybe it's not immediately apparent though, in that former episode, you conducted that conversation. You all talk about the fact that she interviewed, I mean something in the neighborhood of a hundred sitting COLOs. And it's kind of obliquely referenced here in my interview with Jocelyn. But that's what we're talking about. So, you can find out more about those details in that episode and more about the book in this episode.

Tom: Yep. That was again 126, Episode #126. All right, awesome. Through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Jocelyn Widmer.

(*Musical Transition*)

Kelvin: Hi, Jocelyn. So good having you on the podcast today.

Jocelyn Widmer: Yeah, thanks for having me, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Absolutely. As you know, or at least as you can imagine, there have been little breadcrumbs of hints at this book. I don't know, somehow my co-host here seems to have insider knowledge about the thing, and maybe drops little hints now and again. [Laughs]

Jocelyn: [Chuckles] I'm sure he does.

Kelvin: I wonder if we might start just by your take on how this COLO, Chief Online Learning Officer, book came about?

Jocelyn: Absolutely. It's been a project in the making for a couple of years now and I would say the putting it together and working with all of our expert contributors seemed like the easy part. So, I'll take things back a couple of years before we started to engage with the group. You are certainly one of those expert contributors. And it all started over just innocent conversations as we were coming out of COVID, and finally having a chance to engage with the COLOs that many of us had met, really for the first time, via Zoom. We were going to conferences face-to-face, having a chance to meet these wonderful people, live over coffee, or dinner, or whatever. And I just started to have a consistent conversation, same, it was like six or seven questions or so, that I seem to frame my conversations around.

And it was just started to amass this catalog of how different universities were treating the role, what portfolios look like, what strategy, strategic plans look like, budget models, et cetera. But I really I say this kind of jokingly, but it really was the reason I had these conversations. I was looking for the perfect org chart, and we were all dealing with great resignation, which I think I talked about in the previous conversation that I had with you all. And it was just about how those who many of us in these roles were new to the role during COVID really thrust some of us into the roles, or we had just assumed the roles in the year prior to COVID. And so, it was a chance to sit down with some of those who were new to the role, but then also some particularly like Tom, who were seasoned in their roles, and get a sense of what was working, and particularly as we came off of COVID.

And I have to say, I have to give complete credit to this podcast because I think this podcast really shined the light on those conversations, which then led to several steps later the chance to share some of those insights with the C-COLO Board of UPCEA. After that conversation with that group of people at the time, Tom really was the one who encouraged me to take the next step into thinking about writing a book. And of course, I had never done that before, and Tom has vast experience on the fiction side. So, he just really was the perfect collaborator, partner in crime, however you want to frame it. And we started to put the proposal together from there. And I should also say UPCEA has been a tremendous supporter of this work. Bob Hansen wrote the foreword and really sets the stage for why the COLO matters now, and that I think is a nice frame for how the book unfolds with wonderful perspectives like yours, and then about 50 other individuals who we were able to collect insights from.

Kelvin: I'll indulge myself with one intended to be humorous comment at the risk of derailing the conversation entirely. One, despite Tom Cavanagh's contributions, the book, not fiction.

Jocelyn: Absolutely not fiction. [Laughs]

Kelvin: Not fiction, nor is it a crime against higher education.

Jocelyn: [Chuckles] Yes, I realized, as I said, partner in crime who I was talking about. [Laughs]

Kelvin: [Laughs] I can't resist. And listeners, if you don't know what we're talking about, Google, Thomas B. Cavanagh, you'll figure it out. So yeah, you've spoken a bit, Jocelyn, about the origins and hinted at some of the value of the guidebook for I guess what we might broadly refer to as the COLO community. But I wonder, these kind of things that are role specific, I wonder to what extent do you see value for non-COLO audiences in

reading and discussing the book? Who else could this be useful for, and how could it be useful?

Jocelyn: Yeah, absolutely. Great question. I mean, at the end of the day, we have some of the most wonderful minds and hearts who are COLOs today who have contributed. So, we got to a point in writing the book where we were like, "Who will read this book? We've got everybody writing it, so who is our audience?" [Both chuckle] But that, I'm sure it came to Tom's mind as he was writing, and it was top of mind for me. So, a couple different audiences. There are the aspiring COLOs, so I am not sure if you're excluding that group from your question, but we think that's an important group to speak to, and to give those a peek inside of what the role looks like. There are still universities without this type of role, and/or institutions that are constantly going through some kind of state of change where this role will continue to be relevant, or there are new roles to be had.

So, we've got that group of aspiring COLOs, and then we've got another group who we hope will heed some attention to this book, and those are the senior level leadership at universities. So, COLOs as we found typically report up through the academic affairs chain to a provost, sometimes through a president. So, really speaking to that C-suite, the leadership, the cabinet to understand what do these roles entail, and who is a typical fit, or a not typical fit for these roles. As universities go through the search process, there's always an interesting process go through to interview as you have had that experience, you contributed to the chapter on the first 90 days. So, we were trying to capture some of that perspective, and we wanted to make sure that those who are writing the position descriptions, and have all the hopes and dreams for what this role can do to an institution understand what the role really is, and what it takes.

And then we were reminded recently doing another podcast that the EdTech vendors, leadership in that space, this book is valuable to them. Some of my greatest relationships in my COLO role were those higher ed strategy type individuals at the EdTech companies because those were in a lot of ways our thought partners when we may not have that type of thought partner on campus. So, that's a really important group of people, and we got some of those individuals to contribute to the book. We've got Melissa Loble in the final chapter as well as Christi Ford. So, it's neat to have their voices.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's great. I guess I should ask you maybe without completely giving away the farm, you've hinted at a few things. Like you said, you've sort of hinted at there's a following the tour along the multi-facets of the COLO role, and maybe even the timeline trajectory of somebody in a

COLO role, like you mentioned the first 90 days, or going through the hiring process. What are other elements, without going through every single chapter, but what are other things that people might be surprised to find in there?

Jocelyn: Yeah, that's a great question. So, the book, just real quickly, the book's organized into three sections. It's that kind of what is the role, the definitions, those types of things, the little bit of the history of the role in the first section, which is the section that you contributed to. And then we've got the second section, which is really the meat of the book. In my mind, if you're going to pick the book up off the shelf, and you're a sitting COLO and need a chapter that's most relevant to you, that's probably the midsection, which are just kind of the core tenets about strategy, and relationships, and those sorts of things. And then the last part of the book, section three, is really looking forward, and it's probably the section I find most interesting. That part of the book, we have such a diversity of contributors from COLOs, former COLOs, to all of the big professional organizations contributed to that section. And then we have a handful of university presidents, some who were COLOs and ascended into their leadership role, and then others who just have always been champions of online education.

So, that last chapter I think is an important one today and moving forward because it talks about what we need to do to foster a pipeline. And a lot of us sit in these COLO roles not really knowing what's next. That was my last question I asked to everybody who I sat and had coffee or dinner with is kind of, "Where are we going? Where are you going?" Because I was trying to, in a lot of ways understand what was possible in my own career trajectory and growth. I read somewhere during COVID that we all worked in one year, the equivalent of three years, or something like that. So, I was looking at myself pretty early career still at the time, but just realizing the hours I had put in had kind of matured me beyond what I might look like on paper.

And so, I think it's important that we all have some sense of what's next. And that was a question that sadly COLOs couldn't really answer. And I think this section three is one that begs the question and kind of forces our hand to think about not only what the pipeline looks like, but what does succession planning look like, and what do future roles look like for us? And then those who are outside of the academy, how are the skills and competencies of these roles still relevant?

Kelvin: That's helpful. And speaking of what's next, but maybe a little bit different angle, as you've worked through the book, and as you look at the field of higher education as a whole, and you've said the word strategic a lot, I wonder, not in a bad way, in a good way, I wonder how do you envision

strategic online higher education evolving in just the next few years? To your point about time, I mean, I won't give you a number, I mean whatever the near-term future. [Chuckles]

Jocelyn: Yeah, another great question. And I think the strategic piece is the important, it's the operative word here. I mean, we have so many institutions who have been doing online education for so long, and maybe it started for all kinds of different reasons, and then all different little pockets of an institution. And the COLO role and certainly COVID gave us a chance to see what does centralize in a robust movement forward look like. But I think we still didn't always see the strategic approach lead with the pandemic and then afterwards. And some of these COLO roles went away as state politics played into things, and universities looked at their brand and looked at online education, and those two may not have been in sync. So, we have a chapter about seat at the table. I think we still have a ways to go to get the COLO role and online education as a delivery modality and an option for our learners, a seat at the table, because I don't think it squarely is centered at institutions today.

But I think moving forward, the major win, and this is what we all live our lives based on the flexibility that we came to realize was so critical to our lives during COVID, that the flexibility to choose how we participate, that is going to continue to drive things. And our learners are going to continue to push on that front. And where there are not flexible options, I don't think we'll see learners choosing those options versus the flexibility piece.

But I also think, I mean, this is not new, but the connection to workforce and the career readiness component that online education, I think has kind of baked into its DNA is going to continue to be a very important piece, and I think the strategic link to why universities want to continue with online education into the future. Now that I'm kind of on the other side of the coin, I don't think we do enough in higher ed to meet those workforce needs, and those employer needs in the ways that employers are really looking for. So, that's where I see things moving forward. And then of course, the scale of the learning, the scale of the credential then starts to probably break down away from our tried-and-true degree when we start to really forge those relationships with employers and industries. And I would be remiss to say AI, I'm sure. [Laughs]

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Just going to slide AI in there. AI.

Jocelyn: I am. And AI. [Laughs]

Kelvin: And AI. I, for one, welcome our robotic overlords. I slide that in every other podcast just in case they're listening, maybe.

Jocelyn: Absolutely. [Laughs]

Kelvin: I joke-ish. Kind of. Maybe. Jocelyn, it's been so great having you on. Tom's going to join us in the wraparound, he says, “Hi,” and everybody should go out and take a look at this book. I can't wait to get my hands on it, and see the final product, the little glimpses that I've gotten behind the scenes. This stands to be a really helpful volume for the field, to your point, I think regardless of role. So, thank you for your hard work that has gone into this. Thanks for joining us.

Jocelyn: Thank you.

(*Musical Transition*)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Dr. Jocelyn Widmer. Yeah, I enjoyed it for lots of reasons. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Oh, yeah? What are those, Tom?

Tom: [Laughs] Well, you're talking about a book I co-authored, which was kind of cool. I enjoyed that. To be frank, I really enjoyed collaborating with Jocelyn. I thought she was a great partner through this whole process. It really was her idea that it originated. I was flattered that she asked me to join her on the journey, but I think honestly, I'm proud of it. I think it's something that will really help to contribute to the space.

Kelvin: Yeah. Plus, I mean, people could Google Thomas B. Cavanagh, they could find other books.

Tom: I wish they would. Yeah.

[Both chuckle]

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree. I was kind of joking about it just before we hit record. My copy of this book came in the mail last night, so I just brought it into the office this morning, and I was thumbing through it in more detail this morning a little bit. And I think it's solid. I mean, it's really interesting in that it's sort of a comfortable, manageable size, but it has a lot going on in it, right?

Tom: Yeah, that was the intent. I mean, the word count honestly was a little bit dictated by Rutledge, the publisher. It's actually in the contract, and we kind of blew it away. Hopefully, thankfully, we were within whatever margin they build into those contracts, because we just couldn't fit it into the word count. The structure, I mean, Jocelyn talked about the structure of the three parts, but the way it's framed is each chapter, half of the

chapter is authored by her and I. And the other half of the chapter consists of short, practical, expert perspectives, kind of informed by practitioners, people in the field. And we feel like that's sort of a nice complement between sort of, here are some of the ideas, now here are people that are kind of living those ideas. And we were thrilled with the caliber of people, yourself included, that agreed to contribute to the book. As Jocelyn said, we have several university presidents, almost every association head in the country of the big associations that we work with. And yeah, I think it turned out pretty well.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's some of what I was skimming through as I looked at a few of those, what's your standard language? I got to figure out how to cite that on my vita, expert guest contribution or what have you, something like that?

Tom: I think we call them expert perspectives.

Kelvin: Something. Yeah, there we go. I was looking at those, and for the most part, the length is fairly consistent, there's some deviation. But the styles are a little bit different, and that's interesting. And it's interesting how they each engage with the content of each chapter. I found them, just skimming through, I found them very readable and very grounding, and I would sometimes flip back and forth between the content of the chapter and the case study thing. I thought it's a really nice approach that you all came up with. I thought it works.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. I think it did, too. And you're right, because we got a lot of questions from the contributors, "How informal can my expert perspective be?" And we did sort of ask them to within 750 to a thousand words, and as you see, in most cases, they are, one or two exceptions in there that maybe got a little bit longer. But, "Can I use first person?" All of those kind of conventions. So, we had some conversations with the editor, and eventually, yeah, you can. We want these to be authentic, and practitioner based. And some are very personal, and some are a little more scholarly with all kinds of citations and stuff. And so, I think it runs the gamut, but taken as a whole, I think it kind of all fits together in a way.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, I like it. And I thought just the idea of, well, I kind of practiced that this morning, the pull off, the shelf reference, and kind of like, okay, get familiar with where the topics are, and then I might, "Okay, I got this challenge right now. Let me think about this again. Let me go back to the starting blocks and okay, let's hit some highlights." And thinking about even at a high level, you align with what are they call the hallmarks of excellence of UPCEA…

Tom: It's the competencies, the PCO competencies, although we do reference the hallmarks in there, too.

Kelvin: So, go into that kind of grounding and then, “Okay, well what does this contributor say, and what does that contributor say?” I could see myself doing that, getting comfortable with what's there, and just pull it off the shelf, and kind of going back to the basics a little bit, and I think that's good.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. And I think you can look at those competencies and say, "I'm really good in these four and I know that, but this one, maybe I could use some brushing up or some extra support there," and kind of inform your own personal professional development that way.

Kelvin: So, to push you a little bit on this, we joked about it a little bit before the recording. I think Jocelyn mentions it on mic, but maybe one of the challenges of this is you have received so many contributions from the community of COLOs. I mean, I'll form it in the form of a question, but who's going to buy your book, Tom?

Tom: [Laughs]

Kelvin: And then I'm going to answer it and say, "Hey, look, if you're looking to grow in the field, this is probably good material for a career path." [Chuckles] So, if you're not a COLO, go buy the book.

Tom: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I mean, that is sort of our joke. We've put everybody who might buy a copy in the book, so they all get a free copy, but that's not true. So, as Jocelyn said, the secondary audience, maybe the primary audience is sitting COLOs. We think it would be useful for them. We kind of wrote it for ourselves in many ways. But as you say, aspiring COLOs, people kind of in the pipeline. I think honestly, if you're working in any sort of distance learning or academic context that involves distance learning, I think there's utility for you to read something like that even to just understand how your unit is being managed, and the decisions that are being made.

And I think Jocelyn also mentioned it's not bad for provosts to maybe understand this role, especially if they're writing job descriptions and hiring a search firm to go find one of these roles. It might not be a bad book for you to take a look at and kind of understand what the job is. Part of it, I think, was some of Jocelyn's own experience in the job market. A lot of schools sort of had unrealistic expectations, I think for what they were looking, they were looking for the unicorn person. And you're going to end up probably disappointing yourself and the person if you don't really understand what the job is.

Kelvin: Well, that's good. Any final comment before I try to bring us in for a landing?

Tom: All right, well since people have listened this far, I want to reward them for that. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Ooh, reward them.

Tom: Yeah. So here, as a special gift for our final 15, and for TOPcast listeners, if you are interested in getting the book, go to the show notes page, and we'll put a 20% discount on the purchase of the book. I have a code I can share. It's for a limited time, I think it's only about a month or so, I think after the book comes out. But we'll stick it out there and try it if it works. Hopefully, you're listening to this in time, and you can take advantage of that if you are interested in picking up the book.

Kelvin: Ooh, now that, that'll boost some listenership we start giving stuff away.

Tom: Yeah, besides coffee.

Kelvin: Yeah, besides coffee.

Tom: Actually, usually we're the ones who are giving coffee, aren't we?

Kelvin: Well, that's true. I mean, we can give something out to other people, too. Yeah, that's generous. So, thank you for that. Check out the show notes. That would be TOPcast@online.ucf.edu or in wherever your app is, just tap the little show notes thing. You'll find all the links inside there. Shall I put the plane on the ground?

Tom: Let's do it.

Kelvin: So, perhaps by way of wrapping up, we might say amidst, maybe it's okay to say much flux in American higher education…

Tom: [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Clarifying guidance for strategic administrative roles such as the Chief Online Learning Officer is more important than ever.

Tom: Absolutely, yeah. And as we track sort of the trajectory of that role, and I think as it grows in strategic importance, similar to how the CIO role has in the past, I think what you just said is even more relevant.

(*Musical Outro*)

Kelvin: And similar what John O'Brien said in the book. There's a plug, you know the CIO COLO.

Tom: Yep, absolutely. Yeah. In fact, we have a whole chapter on the relationship between the COLO and the CIO. Awesome. All right, so thank you Kelvin, for the interview. Thank you, Jocelyn, for sharing her perspective about the book. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.