

## TOPcast Episode #191: Student Retention Through Online Learning

Narrator: The University of Louisville empowers students with over 50 fully online degrees, and certificates in areas like business, public health, social work, engineering, and more. Flexible coursework allows time to focus on all of life's priorities. Learn more at [louisville.edu/online](http://louisville.edu/online).

*(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'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the final 15 episodes of TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: Final 15 scheduled episodes, Dr. Cavanagh.

Tom: Of course, of course. That's what I meant to say. For those who maybe have been skipping some episodes, how dare you? We are in the homestretch here. We're winding down the official scheduled episodes of TOPcast to conclude at the end of the calendar year of 2025. And we've got something special planned for our final episode at OLC Accelerate in lovely Orlando, Florida. So, we hope you'll be able to join us there.

Kelvin: And if you didn't get the message, we'll put a link in the show notes. We'll put some info on it, but love to hear some questions or comments that you'd like to have featured in that recorded live plenary panel that we're calling, I'm calling, I don't know. It says that on the program, "Last call at the TOPcast Cafe."

Tom: I like it. I do like that. Yeah, so I'll give you credit for that.

Kelvin: [Sips coffee] Well, credit or blame. Two sides of a coin. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. So, Kelvin, before we hit record, I did see you with your little cup. I won't say what's in the thermos, but what's in the travel cup?

Kelvin: My coffee today, Tom, came to me rather conveniently, as I walked right next door to the newly renovated cafe that they're calling "Established 1927 by Marigold," or "Est 1927 by Marigold," in the beautiful Speed Art Museum here in Louisville. It's right next door to my office. And I've been looking forward to getting back in there because the pathway was recently cleared of construction obstacles, so I didn't have to go a whole bunch out of my way, which I was too lazy to do. This coffee is a blend called "Buckle Down" from a Nashville, Tennessee coffee roaster, Good Citizen Coffee Company, branded in partnership with 8th & Roast Coffee Company. And I think it's pretty good. It's not bad at all. They were pretty proud of it in the cafe. I wonder what you're drinking, and I wonder if you can find a connection to today's topic in my cup.

Tom: Well, I'm drinking as we like to say the deconstructed coffee. It's coffee clear.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Oh, sorry.

Tom: Yeah. [Chuckles] But I did have a giant mug this morning, so I'm a bit caffeined out. Connection. Connection, you say. You talk about that there were obstacles on your pathway. I will say that the name of that cafe, it's a mouthful. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: No kidding.

Tom: It doesn't hold trippingly off the top.

Kelvin: No, it does not. [Chuckles] But I read it, because I was like, "What is that?" And I looked it up. And so, the "Established 1927" is a reference to the museum itself, which was established in 1927. So, they're trying to be "buddy-ish," I guess.

Tom: Is that something to do with the racetrack there, I assume, the horse track, speed?

Kelvin: No, it's a family name. Big family name. I, too, wondered about all that stuff. In the museum, there's some old stuff. It's fascinating, there's Speeds that go back to the Lincoln administration. And so, there's silver place settings that, I don't know, secretary of whatever, somebody Speed, had in D.C., and all kinds of stuff like that.

Tom: Cool. I was thinking about my experience of going to the museum in Daytona. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Different kind of speed. [Laughs]

Tom: Yeah. I don't know, Kelvin, I'm drawing a bit of a blank. You need to take me by the hand on this one.

Kelvin: Well, the obstacles thing was in my mind, as was the sort of the immediate convenience of pop next door or pull off the shelf. And good lord, there's lots of

brands, and my little soliloquy there, and a personal connection that keeps you coming back. I thought all that stuff maybe was in the stew of the topics that we're going to touch on today.

Tom: Okay. I can see it. I can see it. I think there is a bit of a stretch, but I can see it. Tenuous line, I think going through that.

Kelvin: As long as it doesn't snap, it's okay.

Tom: [Chuckles] You want to share with the audience what that connection is?

Kelvin: Sure. Well, I'll give it a shot. So, similar to past episodes in which we springboarded from a chapter of the *Sage Handbook of Online Higher Education*, a pull off the shelf reference to guide our podcast conversation about important key topics in the work of online and digital higher education, today we're going to turn our attention to the important goal of student retention, partially at least guided by Chapter 46 from the *Sage Handbook*, "Student Recruitment Retention and Completion Strategies." Really tackling the middle of that title, the retention part. That chapter was authored by Dr. Lorena Neria (de Girarte), I think. Check out the show notes page for links to past episodes drawing upon other chapters for inspiration and for a direct link to the *Sage Handbook* itself.

Tom: Yeah, awesome. So, you mentioned retention, sort of where we're doing a core sample through that chapter. And I think that's an interesting one, because so much emphasis is put on enrollment, and registration, and preventing melt, and how many students are we going to get this semester? And look, I'm as guilty of that as anybody. [Chuckles] I look at those numbers, I have them reported to me on a weekly basis, but, as they say, it's cheaper to keep a student than get a new student.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And isn't that our job, is to try to keep and graduate these students? That's the goal, it's not just to sign them up, and sign them up faster than they drop out. That's not good. You may be getting a lot of students, but if you don't have good retention, how successful is your program, really? So, I think that's a good area to concentrate on, and probably one we don't really talk about enough, at least in our business. I know it's a whole effort in student affairs and enrollment management, and if it's a strategic enrollment management kind of approach.

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, I think all that's true. And then I do think that a lot of our quality assurance efforts really are in support of keeping our students. I really do, but I think you're right. Unless there's a really... Here, we've been talking a lot about retention and under the broader heading of student success and so forth, but yeah, I think the spotlight is stolen quite often by recruitment, marketing, enrollment, those kinds of things. And I like to say, well, unless you're at a hundred percent,

there's a hole in your bucket. Better to plug the hole than to pour more water into it. [Chuckles] Both were important.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And something that I know you highlighted as we were preparing for this episode is Dr. Neria, this concept, her treatment of relational marketing, which is framed as centering on, and adding value to the student as a customer. But it's got this concept of the quality of the product is a retention strategy.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, the quality of the online courses that students are taking, if it's better, students will stay and retain. And I would also argue that they'll also, kind of to the relational part of this, they'll use word of mouth, and tell their friends, and others that this has been a good experience, and that's free advertising, and the best kind of advertising that you can get. And I've never really thought of course quality in that context, if I can be transparent. I mean, we spend a lot of time talking about course quality, and it's something we care a lot about. But I haven't thought about it as a retention strategy per se, which I think is a really interesting concept.

Kelvin: It's definitely something I've been trying to socialize a lot here, as an aspiration, and as a reason to focus evidence-based practices in course design and teaching because we want to do right by our students. It's not just make things pretty, or make ourselves feel good by checking off boxes. It's toward an end. But yeah, I think it's understandable what you said. Our attention goes other places sometimes, I think.

If you'll indulge me, I was thinking just to anchor this down a little bit, broadly, a couple of literature citations here. One, I've mentioned multiple times in the past, because it's a study that's one of my favorite to cite, Tanya Joosten and Rachel Cusatis' 2019 study, speaks to course design and impacts on students. And one of my favorite quotes is, "Design is the most influential measure of instructional characteristics that potentially increases student outcomes. Specifically, efforts should be made to determine the types of learning objectives, align activities with learning objectives, and organize the overall course by instructors and instructional designers."

And it's a very robust study, looks at all kinds of stuff, but it's the design element that they articulate making that impact. And then, less of a study and more of a literature review, Bawa, in a 2016 article, notes the importance of online course design in affecting student retention specifically. While a number of specific factors are discussed, Bawa states, "A key reason for high attrition rates in online courses is related to ineffective course designs that are created based on assumptions about the online learner." So, just to ground us a little bit, I think those are excellent points.

Tom: Yeah, I totally agree. And of course, it's completely consistent with what we hear directly from students, and have always heard. I don't know if students have that language to articulate it the way it's said there, but we hear things like, "If the course structure is consistent, and I know what the expectations are from a week to week, and they don't change on me, then I will be more successful in the course." And in some ways that's another way of saying maybe a more simplified, reductive way of saying the same thing that these scholars are saying. Things as simple, I wouldn't even classify this as instructional design, but things as simple as having a consistent amount of work from week to week in the modules...

Kevin: [Laughs]

TomP: ...having all of the assignments always do at the same time on the same day in the week, so that they can plan their week around it. Just things like that, that if you don't do completely frustrates, and I think adds to the lack of student success.

Kelvin: Yeah, totally agree. I mean, I think of that as predictability. And who doesn't want predictability? Because you've got to plan your life. And I think we've heard this theme increasingly, I think. Do I see myself fundamentally as a student who has other kinds of things? Or am I a whatever, who happens to be taking classes, even as a full-time student? I think increasingly what Carmen Chan refers to as post-traditional learners, that includes what you've called as "Modern Digital 21st Century Learners."

Anything from this chapter that you want to hit on that lines up with that, that stood out to you?

Tom: Well, I mean, if we kind of go back to this concept of relational marketing, she says things like, "Decisions aimed at creating value for customers." I think that's really interesting, because it implies that this is not happening by chance, or by accident, it's intentional. And how many times have you and I talked about on this podcast? Intentional course design. Especially as we were differentiating it from emergency remote instruction of the pandemic. This is consistent with that. Design and organization of processes, communication, technology, and people in support of the generation of value for the client, it's very business-centric sort of language that she's using there, which is fine with me, I'm actually very comfortable with that, but I know a lot of academics are not. So, I think it's kind of spicy that she's framed it in this way.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Yeah, I was thinking of that. The student as customer metaphor does not work for everybody. But I don't know, please suspend your... Have some willing suspension of your disbelief for a moment, because I think there's something to this. I was looking a little bit beyond what Dr. Neria wrote looking into relational marketing a little bit more, or sometimes you see relationship marketing. The common thread I found across a bunch of sources is, it's really about trust. And I thought, that is so human centric. Forget somebody's trying to

sell me something bit. I think why Dr. Neria homed in on this concept in this chapter is relational as in people, as in connection. And as in, "If you pay attention to my needs, I'm more likely to trust you. [Chuckles] You have shown yourself to be trustworthy." Relational marketing broadly is like brands that you trust and come back to. There's something that's going to pull you back, that you're loyal, because it's not just transactional. There's something substantive there. And, oh my goodness, don't we need more of that in our educational work?

Tom: Yeah. So, do you want to maybe turn to some recommendations that she had in her chapter?

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, I think they build on those phrases that you used. I don't know that I'd call these rocket science, but nevertheless, they're articulated. And Dr. Neria makes a good case here. For instance, she says, "The curricular design of the programs offered in online modalities should not be an adaptation of the programs for face-to-face on-site education. They must be built based on the characteristics of the students who access these," what she calls study options, these modalities. Yeah. Student centric.

Tom: Well, I mean, again, we've talked about, let's just look at synchronous online instruction. That's an example of, well, I lecture, I can just do that online without any recognition of the fact that the students who are taking your class actually work during the time when you want to give that online lecture. "Yeah, but it's online." Well, it doesn't matter. They got to shift schedule, and they can't take it. We've talked about the fact that it adds geographic flexibility for the student, but eliminates temporal flexibility for the student. It's almost as inaccessible as it would be if they had to drive to campus. So, that's I think a very concrete example. That's not even design-based, that's just kind of modality-based. But I think it's similar.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, I think that's right. Another one, "The design of the instruction must be characterized by including relevant, up to date, engaging content, as well as challenging active learning activities related to the current situation in which the students live, and considering the limited time available to them." Yeah, there's a lot.

Tom: Yeah. Well, related to the current situation in which the students live. Isn't there a concept called "teach naked," where you're being very transparent about how this is relevant to the students, this thing that we're learning? Here's why you need to know algebra, right? Because the example is always, "I'll never use this again." Well, here's why you will. And here's some examples of that, or whatever. So, I mean, to me, that's the thing that stands out in that recommendation is more to it than that. And that's the one that kind of got a spotlight on it for me, that the fact that it needs to be relevant related to the student's current situation, I think that's really important. Otherwise, why should they care?

Kelvin: More on the... I mean, I guess you could argue that all of these are faculty and instructional designer implications, but specifically calling out the faculty, Dr. Neria says, "Teachers who participate in online modalities must develop the relevant skills that these study modalities require, both in the design of courses, and in their teaching, as well as in the use of educational technologies that enhance their work." Doesn't just happen.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And you don't want to be that professor that the students are all like, "Oh, he can't even know how to use email."

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: Understand the technologies that are at your disposal, so that you can most effectively leverage them to help students learn. Yeah. It seems basic, but I'm sure all of us, anybody listening to this can think of an example of a faculty member that they know, or maybe have worked with who struggled with the technology. And some of it is just because they didn't want to learn it.

Kelvin: But I like the broader skills. I mean, the course design and the teaching skills; it's a message we've addressed, spoken to many, many, many times through the years on this podcast. Just the importance of faculty preparation for success in online course design and teaching, and blended course design and teaching. [Chuckles] And really, well, any course design and teaching. Just being equipped, as she says. Do you want to tackle this last one?

Tom: Sure. [Clears throat] Pardon. "The affective connection must be intentional... affective with an a, connection must be intentional, planned, consistent, and demonstrate a genuine interest in the student, generating an environment that contributes to developing a sense of belonging to a community that shares common interests and goals." What does that expression go that they won't care about you know until they know they care about you? Something like that.

Kelvin: Yeah, I've heard it. "They don't care what you know until they know that you care."

Tom: That's it.

Kelvin: Yeah. I think this one may be my favorite, right? Because it talks about affect, and genuine interest, is that human-centered thing. And that phrase, "A sense of belonging." We know that belongingness is really so key to student success and well-being broadly. And how much more so in our technology-mediated contexts, where we're missing some of the variables. So, we've got to humanize them all the more. Yeah, very important.

Tom: So, I have a provocative question based on all of this. How much do we think AI will be able to help actually facilitate some of this? When you think about

embedding good instructional design into courses, I can see a role for AI in accomplishing that.

Kelvin: Yeah. I don't disagree with that. As we've said many times, we need to let the AI do what the AI does well, and we need to let the humans do what the humans do well, and not get the two confused, though. I think Dr. Neria elsewhere in her chapter speaks about, for instance, personalization. And so, I think we've spoken before, you've talked before about how AI can help personalize learning, and tutoring, and practice. That I think makes a lot of sense. But not abdicating, not humans like, "Okay, well, good, the AI can do that. I'm going to sit over here and do something else." Do the human part. That part still, how do we do that?

Tom: Well, and certainly that last one we talked about, that affective one where knowing that your professor cares about you and your success; you're not going to get that from AI. Not authentically, anyway.

Kelvin: No, no. Yeah, and I mean, that's a real... I think it's a temptation. True story. I have heard indirectly of...

Tom: I have a friend.

Kelvin: Yes. It wasn't me. But somebody told me about somebody else's thing that they were told that this person had a reputation as a curmudgeon, and didn't always come across well in email. And then started adopting a practice of running their emails through one of the generative AI tools with a prompt to make it a little warmer and friendlier. And actually, said that having done that for a while, people responded much more positively to that. [Laughs]

Tom: [Chuckles] Wow. Well, good for him. If it's a him, I assume, for recognizing that and doing something about it.

Kelvin: I guess. But that one challenges me a little bit. I chuckle every time I think about it. But on the one hand, AI supports this human interaction thing. On the other hand, you're like, "Huh."

Tom: Well, I bet though that this person maybe needs the AI less now that he has seen... Yeah, let's hope that he's seen the results of that prompt changing what he's written, to maybe he would reach a point where he wouldn't need it anymore, and he'd be self-aware enough to just write him the way he should. It's almost like just taking a class and learning how to do something better. If you use it in that way, yeah, if you're just using it as a crutch to pretend to be something you're not, maybe it gets gray.

Kelvin: Yeah. I got two books on sale recently that I'm really, I swear, true confession, I feel like I don't successfully read a book unless I get a group of people to read it with me, and we talk about it. But two of them, it was interesting. They were both



on sale. But they're both sort of a kind. One is more about the individual level, it had something like developing skill at really seeing the other person, and really being seen. So, this dyadic human connection thing. Okay, that's important. And this other one was about human gatherings. How to really gather people in a meaningful way. And I thought, that has got such broad applicability, including in our educational context, but all the more now I think we need to really give some reflective thought to that human connection, whatever that is.

And then let AI into bolster where it can be. I saw on I think LinkedIn recently, someone, back to your question, suggesting that maybe instructional design would either be obsolete, the role of instructional designers, or radically changed as a result of artificial intelligence. And I'm like, "Well, I certainly hope not." The first part radically changed, perhaps.

Tom: Yeah, that would've been my guess. I mean, certainly changed, but instructional design isn't the only profession being radically changed by AI. They're in good company.

Kelvin: Well, yeah, but I think it's the relationship, right? At least in the higher ed context of instructional design, the relationship between an instructional designer and a client faculty member, that has power. It's not that the instructional designer, let me cookie cutter stamp out some course objectives, or module objectives, or feedback on assessment strategies. There's more to it than that. AI may be very efficient at doing those kinds of tasks, but there's more to the human connection, I think, in that dyadic relationship.

Tom: Yeah. All right. Well, I see that the clock winds down to the bottom of the hour. You want to try and put a bow on our plane and land it?

Kelvin: Yes. I will come in for a landing blindfolded, backwards, and in the dark.

Tom: All right.

Kelvin: You might want to double up on your insurance.

Tom: Please, fasten your seatbelt.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Put up your tray tables. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: That's right. And kiss something goodbye. Well, so we might say by way of summary, that while student marketing and retention gets a lot of attention in online circles. So much of our quality assurance efforts in online education are manifested in positive student impact, such as retention. Keeping our students, as you noted, Tom, is even more important than attracting them. How's that?

Tom: Yeah, totally agree. Amen.

*(Musical Outro)*

Well, thank you for the suggestion for this chapter from the *Sage Handbook*, which you edited, co-edited.

Kelvin: Co-edited.

Tom: Yeah. And so, it's a great resource. If folks have not checked it out, I highly recommend that they do. It's huge. There's a lot in there. So, it's a wealth of information for anybody working in this space.

All right. Until next time, for TOPcast. I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.