

TOPcast Episode #156: Reframing the Data That Tell the Stories About Online Students

Narrator: University of Louisville understands that their students come from diverse backgrounds with aspirations, drives, and needs to match. With more than 50 online programs in areas like business, education, social work, engineering, and more, UofL provides students with a multitude of career advanced options and flexible coursework. Students can complete their coursework from the comfort of their home or on the go via mobile apps. Learn more at louisville.edu/online. That's 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 am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the world-famous, world-renowned Teaching Online Podcast. I added that bit, Kelvin.

Kelvin: I noticed that. That's how we know you're not AI.

Tom: [Chuckles] That's right.

Kelvin: Or maybe it's how we doubt that possibly you are AI. Because you're hallucinating. [Laughter]

Tom: Yeah. It could be one of those famous hallucinations. Yeah. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: It makes me think of, I was in the marching band at Florida State, don't hate me. And it was like, [Announcer voice] "the world-renowned Florida State University Marching Chiefs," and they're world-renowned because way before my time they had a tour in Saudi Arabia or somewhere. So, you can say it because... So, we can say it, I think.

Tom: Well, we have listeners in other countries.

Kelvin: Around the world. That's right.

Tom: So that is true.

Kelvin: I think it's legit-ish.

Tom: All we need is one in a couple of different countries and that counts.

Kelvin: Okay. All right. Yeah, that's kind of like, I speak a little, insert foreign language here, because I heard one of those words once.

Tom: [Laughter] Yeah, croissant. Yeah.

Kelvin: I speak a little French. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Maybe not. It's a very American take. [Laughter]

Tom: French toast, French fries. Yeah.

Kelvin: Well, speaking of global emphasis, if you don't mind, another super shameless plug, I think we mentioned this in our previous episode. There is a global Online Higher Education Summit coming up. If you're listening to this episode anywhere close to the time that it releases on February 19th, 2024, you can register for free, you can participate in real time. And you know what, if you register, you could even go back and catch the recording after the fact. So, maybe even if you're listening to this way in the future, wouldn't it be interesting to find out if the recording still exists archeologically? You can go to this website that I'm about to give you and you can see if it's still there. And that website is onlinehighered.net. Online higher ed dot N-E-T. It's free. You should go check it out. From the people who brought you the SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education.

Tom: That is cool. Free. And yeah, it should be a great event. And it is kind of related to the discussion about world and online education in different countries, and yeah, I think that's cool.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's good.

Tom: Be there or be square. So, Kelvin, I saw you just taking a sip.

Kelvin: I did.

Tom: Out of your mug. That is a big mug. What is in... [Sipping] Well, that was maybe forced perspective I just saw on the camera. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: It's like, oh, that's huge. [Chuckles]

Tom: What is in the thermos today or the mug?

Kelvin: Well, in both today, Tom, is a single-origin Columbia, but it is from a slightly different area in Columbia and based on a slightly different coffee varietal than we typically associate with fine Columbian coffees. Quite often, and we've talked about this in the podcast before, Huila is kind of the dominant area in Columbia where a lot of the coffees come from. And there's usually some kind of one of the Bourbon varietals. But this one is from an entrepreneurial coffee farmer named Daniel Hernandez in... I'm apologizing in advance, but I think it's Urrao, Antioquia as an area and he has a farm called El Tigre. So, this is a coffee variety called, "Caturra Chiroso." And so, you have some Caturras, but this particular one is not super widely known and yet it's a Colombian coffee, too. And it's a little different than you'd expect, but it's really, really tasty. I like it. I wonder what you're drinking, and I wonder if you can find a connection in either one of our cups to today's topic?

Tom: Well, mine is not thematically connected at all. I'm having almost the last Pumpkin Spice K-Cup. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: It's going to be almost time for the next pumpkin spice season by the time you finish those. [Chuckles]

Tom: Almost close, they're almost gone. I think there's one or two left. So yeah, that's not thematically selected. Yours, keeping with this unplanned global theme that we had here, that's a lot of Spanish pronunciation you just worked your way through.

Kelvin: Butchered. Butchered. [Chuckles]

Tom: I'll admit, I am not quite sure I'm getting the connection today, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Well, what I was going for, I was thinking of Columbia... You'd say, oh yeah, sure, coffee. But this coffee from Columbia may be a little different than expected. It's kind of reframed expectations. A little new amidst the old and the usual. And I thought, well, there's a little of that in today's

interview guest topic. We have a little of that, so that's what I was going for.

Tom: All right. I buy it. I get it. So, you did mention a guest, and I think today we're going to discuss the importance of reframing the institutional data expectations, and we're going to focus on student priorities, and the student aspect of it. And to get that, Kelvin, you, I would say recently interviewed, but it wasn't quite as recent as maybe we would've preferred our colleague, Dr. Carmin Chan, who has changed jobs since you interviewed her. [Chuckles] So, she is now serving as Vice Provost for Northern Arizona University Online. And at the time you interviewed her, she was Senior Director of Online Student Success Initiatives at the University of Arizona. So, she's still in the State of Arizona. She's just gone a little further up the highway.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's exactly right. Yeah, she was, I thought a very good colleague to interview. I mean, as you'll hear. I mean, it's densely packed with thoughtful insights and analysis. So, good stuff for sure. And Carmin, friend of the podcast, Carmin's been in one of our end-of-the-year community events before. Carmin's been on the show. So, now she's here as a formal guest. So, welcome Carmin. Glad you're here.

Tom: Yeah. All right, so through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Carmin Chan.

(Transition music)

Kelvin: Hey, Carmin. So good to have you on TOPcast today.

Carmin Chan: Thanks so much for having me, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Yeah, happy to. As we were talking about a while back, I was fascinated seeing this conference presentation that you were doing related to kind of rethinking the way that we conceptualize... I guess sort of two things fascinated me. The way that we conceptualize our "online students," quote, unquote, within the total student body of our institutions, especially online program enrolled students, and then how we use data to tell a story about those students in a way that's even handed. So, I wondered if you might first just talk a little bit about the importance of holistically viewing our students, you might say.

Carmin:

Yeah, so thanks so much again for having me. And yeah, this is a topic that's near and dear to my heart. And I think particularly because in my current role at the University of Arizona, we're a large land grant institution with a very residential student experience. And then being the online division within that otherwise residential community, it often requires a lot of reframing with our campus colleagues about who we serve and how our online and adult learners student populations have unique needs and different journeys throughout their time as a student with us at our institution. And so, some of the work that I've done in that space, and that we talked about in this recent presentation, is really this kind of reframing of retention and making it into a more inclusive metric that actually reflects the enrollment patterns and behaviors of what we see for adult students.

And again, particularly within a residential setting where folks are often accustomed to talking about retention, looking at First Time in College students, traditional residential freshmen, and a college-going experience, and looking at freshmen to sophomore transition, the IPEDS retention numbers, or what our campus calls FTFT, some campuses call First Time in College. And that's an important metric that certainly all of us in higher education have to pay attention to and that we're accountable to for institutional reporting.

But the challenge is that with a very dynamic fluid population like we have in Arizona Online and many other online institutions, our students don't come in only in fall semester, and they don't necessarily come in and be a full-time student. And they often are not the... Sometimes when they arrive to our institutions, this may be their second or third institution that they are attending before coming to our doorstep, and so they're not First Time in College, they're a transfer student, or somebody who brings other prior experiences and college credits.

And so, if our institutional metrics are only focused on that First Time in College population when we're defining success, but that metric doesn't really encompass who we serve and how we serve them, then it really kind of forces us to have to press the conversation and think in a more holistic way. And so, within our institution, we look at reframing our student body and talking about our online, and other student populations with similar characteristics, as post-traditional students. So, rather than non-traditional, I strongly prefer this terminology of post-traditional. I think it's a much more asset focused and forward-facing view of our college student body.

We know when we look across higher education as a whole, that, quote, unquote, "non-traditional" student populations like adult students, online students, transfer students, commuter students, those who are paying their way through college and funding their own education, this is actually the experience of the vast majority of students in higher education. That is not an anomaly, that is the new normal. And particularly in a post-pandemic world where almost every learner of all ages and stages have been exposed to online learning in some form or fashion over the last few years. It's really about reframing what is the normal now and making sure that we're thinking about the ways that are accessible and encompassing of all of these different student experiences.

And so, within the University of Arizona, when we talk about post-traditional student experiences, we really look at measuring our success and student's progression really based on the student journey rather than that one time, once a year, 21st day census snapshot that institutions use to measure their institutional success. Instead, we look at what are the students' goals that they're trying to achieve? How are we helping them to continue to make progress towards their goals and make progression and persist towards their goals, rather than measuring our entire success based off of that one single day snapshot that we know doesn't really encompass the journeys of our students who have to stop in and out, or who have to attend part-time, or who are transfer students that otherwise wouldn't have been captured in those metrics the same way.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's great. So, given that you've had some success in offering a bit of a counter narrative, underscored with sort of reframed data, and yet there is still in wide use and institution to institution comparison of more traditional framing of data, how do you balance those things? How do you keep your approach front and center as a real viable message?

Carmin: I think it's often about framing the traditional metrics, IPEDS metrics, alongside the other alternative metrics and being able to help folks understand the benefits and challenges of both ways of measuring a student outcome. Which is true for all populations, not just online. What I often remind folks is that we have post-traditional students in all of our campuses and all of our modalities. This is not an online only problem, it's just that those enrollment patterns are more commonly seen for our student populations.

But within the University of Arizona, I have the opportunity to sit on a number of different committees that are focused on retention and student success. And I often am there to beat the drum and remind folks that there are other ways of looking and measuring this. Helping to gently critique or press my colleagues about ways that if the conversation tends to circle on this First Time in College or FTFT population, pulling the gaze back to a wider lens and reminding them again that we have these other students that we also need to be thinking about.

And the good thing about IPEDS, there's pros and cons, again with each of these measures. IPEDS, it offers you that first year to second year snapshot. But they also pay attention to four year and six-year graduation rates as well. And so, while our online students who may have these other student journeys may not necessarily be captured as well in that First Time in College, first year snapshot, they do certainly count and impact the four year and six-year graduation rates. They do certainly impact the transfer graduation rates. And where we actually can have a really great impact on helping to support our campus-based populations as well, who may campus change or switch, and choose to focus more on an online modality as they progress through their student journey because the residential experience for whatever reasons may not be viable for them anymore compared to when they originally started.

And so again, pulling colleagues' gaze back a little bit wider, so that they're not so focused on that kind of particular part of the IPEDS metrics and thinking about the longer-term game or longer-term play that we're ultimately here to help make sure the students get across the finish line, not just that they made it to that first year. That's just a steppingstone on the journey of ultimately what they came here to accomplish.

And so, part of it is being at the table and being that reminder and helping to make sure that they're thinking in those holistic ways. And my colleagues, they humor me in that regard. And having built that rapport over many years, I think we all collectively understand we're coming at it from the right place and trying to do what's right to help support students. But when it comes to our persistence measures, where we're able to look at our online students in a little bit more of a laser focused way, where we can look at their enrollment patterns from session to session, from term to term and year to year, but condensing or expanding the timeframes. We're able to use that as a tool to help predict enrollments as we're working with campus partners when they're trying to anticipate seat demands and things

like that. We're able to use that to help modernize some of our systems within the institution that had historically been often built, focused on census snapshots as the end all be all of predicting enrollments.

But when we have rolling admissions where we admit students for weeks, even a month or more later after those snapshots happened at our institution. And so that was a problem originally, but it became an opportunity. That challenge was a chance to update and modernize some of our systems, and our student information system working with our colleagues in the office of the registrar so that their reporting was able to capture this other enrollment behavior that we're able to facilitate and offer it online. And so, it ultimately makes the institution more nimble at looking at student behavior on all of our campuses because we were able to help reframe the way that we look at and track the enrollment patterns that were driven based off of behaviors that we saw in online, but are true for student populations across the board. So, I think it's about being at the table, and it's about using that challenge as an opportunity to help to reinforce ways of modernizing the way that we think about the student experience in our case within the institution.

Kelvin: Yeah, thanks for that. Speaking of journeys, so you've kind of indicated that it's taken a little while. You're metaphorically at the table or even physically at the table, and reframing, reminding, kind of reiterating that messaging about this one view of data is not the be all and end all don't forget and all that. What's that journey been like? I mean, over how long a period of time has this played out and what were some of the initial forays? Was that a little bit like, whoa, hold on. Was it a bit more insistent at the beginning and then reminding as you go? Can you just paint a little bit of a picture, especially if some of us are just beginning to undertake that, how can your journey inform other people's?

Carmin: Yeah. So, the University of Arizona's online campus was launched in 2015, and so I would peg us as a relatively later player in the online space compared to other institutions around the country. And I think that there were some benefits that came with that, and of course challenges, too. But I think it allowed us to be able to learn from other institutions and really come in with an intentionality to building a fully online student experience, and working together with colleagues across the institution in order to stand up this operation from within, as I mentioned, this large residential and matrixed university setting.

And so, as far as that opportunity at being at the table and being able shift the thinking about our online students, I've been at the University of Arizona since 2009, and I've built my career for quite a long time in academic advising and student affairs work. So, I'm fortunate to have deep connections across our campus and university. I think a lot of times when it comes to helping modernize from within, helping to press and push boundaries, and helping our institutions think about new ways of doing things, we know higher ed tends to be a bit of a slow-moving behemoth sometimes, especially at large institutions like this. And so much of the work happens through the relationships, the trust, the rapport that we build with colleagues across the institution, and as well as with colleagues at other institutions. Again, learning from what others are doing and how they were able to accomplish what worked on their campuses, and picking and choosing the pieces that make the most sense based off of our institutional settings.

And so when it came to starting to shift the conversations about retention and shifting the conversations about who the student body is within the University of Arizona as a whole, as our online division grew, I think a lot of it really, it came down to intentionally ensuring that our online team and team members were plugged into relevant counterparts, or committee work, and working groups, and where the work happens within the university or where those conversations and relationships are built. Helping to ensure that we had a voice at those tables so that when institutional decisions are being made, we ensure that the voice of our online student populations, some of the unique challenges that they undertake are there and represented and we have an opportunity to push back if the direction that the conversation is going isn't going to be inclusive of the needs of our student body. Or at least we can voice those concerns, or have an opportunity to be engaged in the decision-making as it's happening.

And so that happens across all the different parts of our division. I sit in our online student success team, and so that often means I'm very plugged in with academic advising, and student affairs, and the registrar, and some of these other units that directly impact the student experience from matriculation to graduation. But my colleagues that work with our recruitment and enrollment team are similarly plugged in with the central admissions and recruitment teams. And same thing with curricular affairs and with all these other sorts of facets of the university, helping to ensure that our online student body accounts for around 20% of the student body

of the University of Arizona, we need to have a seat at the table. We need to ensure that this institution is able to help reflect the needs and the experiences of our students at all stages of their academic journey. And that really happens through that campus engagement and that investment in time and relationships.

Kelvin: That's great. Thank you so much for that. And thanks so much for joining us today, Carmin. Can't wait to see you again at some professional development event in the future, but I guess I'll say for Tom who will join us in the wraparound and for myself, it's a pleasure having you on TOPcast.

Carmin: Thanks so much for having me, Kelvin. It was a pleasure to speak with you.

(Transition music)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Carmin Chan. I really, really enjoyed listening to that.

Kelvin: Yeah, good stuff there. I mean, you can tell she knows her stuff, has thought deeply about these issues. So many practical pieces of advice and conceptual pieces of advice, I thought really good.

Tom: Yeah. Just maybe this is my own personal bias. It feels like so often the people I talk to who are in leadership positions within online organizations have kind of come up either through faculty or kind of instructional design ranks. And I just really appreciated her sort of student centered, student services perspective because that is so important. And I thought that was a nice fresh way of approaching these topics.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah, I agree. Maybe as a way of processing this conversation a little bit, as I think back to it, I think there's bigger ideas and then more zoomed in ideas. It would be easy to skip past some of the bigger ideas, institution types vary. Carmin said right at the beginning, she framed up her former institution as being primarily a residential experience and online kind of sits within that, hence the importance of the reframing and kind of remembering, hey, everybody, remember the quote, unquote "traditional" view that's ignoring a lot of other folks and so forth. That might not be the case at some other institution, but I think there's a lot of institutions where Carmin's description probably rings true.

Tom: Yeah. Well, I think for you and me in the kinds of schools that we're sitting in...

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

Tom: ...Large public universities that have a big footprint. So, I definitely related to that. And the way she sort of described navigating through that kind of a context where despite the big bureaucratic nature of an institution like that, the relationships that are formed are essential to the kind of getting the work done because you got to work through people. And so having the goodwill and the trust that may not even be people that report to you, but colleagues in the registrar's office or in some other place. And you're all going to have to work together, and you've got to build this coalition. Especially when you're doing big change or implementing something new that may add work to somebody else that's not even in your unit or your reporting line. How do you navigate that? And it's all based on human being relationships, and you need to be reminded of that once in a while. It's not all just about systems, or spreadsheets, and things like that. It's like pick up the phone, or go have coffee with somebody, and let's get to know each other.

Kelvin: Yeah, I like that. I think that's right. There's maybe two sides of a coin. She said, to your point, many institutions can be, quote, "slow moving behemoths," unquote, at least as far as change and system implementation goes. But then to your point, exactly right. I love that tip of if you're talking about admissions, then the people who touch online explicitly ought to be there at the physical or metaphorical table with the other admissions people, and so forth. I think of that Velcro, all the little multiple points of connection. I like that a lot. I think a lot about systems versus people, and there is an interesting dynamic, as you point out. You need both.

Tom: You do, yeah.

Kelvin: But if you just have the people, I mean that's important, it humanizes, but I don't think you scale.

Tom: No, yeah.

Kelvin: Systems allow for scale.

Tom: Nor do you meet sort of the bare business needs of we have to have our revenue exceed our expenses, or this isn't going to continue. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: That's right. But if all you had was systems without the people and the attention and the humanizing, it starts feeling like commoditization, billions and billions served and not... So, both of those things. I mean, I thought that was good that she talked about both of those things.

Tom: Yeah. And another thing that kind of resonated with me, because I feel like I get asked this question a lot, too. It's sort of like, who are the students? What does it mean to call somebody an online student? So sometimes I'm asked, I am at a party or I'm meeting somebody and, "Oh, you work in online learning at UCF. Oh, how many online students do you have?" I go, "Okay, what do you mean by that?" [Chuckles] Because there's five different ways, I can answer that question. Students who take one or more online, students who are only online, students who are only online this semester, but maybe not in every semester, students who are blended. I could go down the list. But I think the thing that maybe is common among all of them is this need for flexibility. So, even a traditional student often needs non-traditional flexibility. We know at UCF, a huge percentage of our undergraduates work more than 20 hours a week, they work. And so that requires a certain amount of non-traditional flexibility that online learning serves.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. Even here, an institution like UofL that has a deep history and can tilt a little residential, I mean 65% of undergraduates work at least part-time, a little sliver work more than full-time, and that's undergraduates, so to your point. I liked Carmin's framing of post-traditional, I mean, you can get kind of like, okay, are we buzz speak or whatever. But I think words matter and post-traditional versus non-traditional, because these days that's more the case than it is not the case. And I think we have to reflect reality. We talked a little bit about post-traditional student framing back in Episode #149, and I went and looked, and we do have several good post-traditional student resources, research and practice literature that are in the show notes for that episode. So, that's worth a look.

Tom: Cool. Well, I mean, there's so much more we could comment on. It was, as you said before that we listened to it, it was deep and rich had a lot of goodness in there, but the coffee is running out. [Chuckles] And I'm

thinking maybe you want to put a bow on this plane and land it in the box, or whatever our metaphor is of the day.

Kelvin: [Laughs] Sure, yeah. Okay. Yeah, I'll be like Amazon Prime, I'll deliver you an exit. I don't know. Something like that. Perhaps by way of wrapping up, we might say the way we frame data, language, and messaging all matter. By our actions, we validate the experience of post-traditional students, and orient our institutions to better serve them with online learning or not. We either do that, or we don't do that. So, let's do that.

Tom: Let's do that, yes. Let's help our students. What a concept.

Kelvin: What a concept. [Chuckles]

Tom: Awesome. Well, thank you, Kelvin, and thank you, Carmin. Enjoyed listening to the conversation. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

(Musical Outro)

Tom: See ya.