



Research Article

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# Teaching Excellence in Online Education: Dr. Shelia Lewis, Provost of Touro University Worldwide, Shares Insights on the Come Teach it Podcast

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## Abstract

In this podcast discussion, Dr. Shelia Lewis, Provost of Touro University Worldwide (TUW) takes us on an inside journey of the philosophy that guides her academic leadership, and how that philosophy is implemented with the goal of engaging students in a manner that leads to student success [1]. We follow her progression from a 22-year military career coupled with her own higher education pursuit, all of which contributed to her preparation as Provost of TUW. She shares the virtues of online learning and the importance of interactive engagement between the student and teacher, which is vital in the teaching and learning experience. Of course, teaching is the foundation upon which all future academic endeavors rest. Dr. Lewis conveys how accelerated student learning in an online environment illuminates the value of committed professors who teach in their disciplines of expertise and serve as motivators who support and encourage students through personalized feedback that contributes to overall student success. She concludes her comments with how continuously pushing forward is both an act of faith and a direct vision, which should be embraced by both faculty and students toward success in higher education, especially in the online environment. Notes, Citations, and References by the authors are added here to give further insight into the academic enterprise envisioned by Dr. Lewis and explicated in this podcast conversation/interview.

**Keywords:** Education, On-line, Synchronous, Asynchronous, ChatGPT

## Introduction to the Come Teach it Podcast

Come Teach It is a program about the rewarding and fulfilling experiences of the teaching lifestyle [1]. We hope it serves as a vehicle to spread positive messages about the field of education, which too often suffers from purely negative PR. In this episode, we have the privilege of engaging in an enlightening conversation with Dr. Shelia Lewis, an esteemed leader in the field of online education and the distinguished Provost of Touro University Worldwide (TUW). Driven by her exceptional journey, which includes serving in the US Army and pursuing her own higher education at TUW, Dr. Lewis brings a wealth of experience to her current role. She initial

ly joined TUW as the Director of the School of Business and Management, later assuming the vital position of Associate Provost of Quality Assurance. Today, as the revered Provost, she continues to shape the university's trajectory with her unwavering dedication and visionary leadership.

**Note\*:** The following transcript, notes, and conclusions are based on the conversation that took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the significance of online education has only grown, making it an increasingly important topic for reflection and study, particularly in the context of university-level education. The

speakers involved in the conversation, including Jacob Larsen, Dr. Shelia Lewis, and Dr. Michael Berger, along with comments by the authors of this article, provide valuable insights into the perceptions and challenges associated with online education - from which a vast proportion of future researchers will emerge. The following is roughly based on that conversation/interview with clarifications and updates to cover the intervening time period.

## The Conversation/Interview

### Speaker 1: Michael Berger, JD, MA

Welcome to Come Teach It, a show about the rewarding and fulfilling experiences of the teaching lifestyle. I'm Michael Berger.

### Speaker 2: Jacob Larsen, MA

And I'm Jake Larsen. Our guest on this episode of Come Teach It is Dr. Shelia Lewis. She is a professor. She was the Director of the School of Business and Management and the Associate Provost of Quality Assurance at Touro University Worldwide, where she is now the Provost. Dr. Lewis, a product of the Touro culture, earned both her MBA and Ph.D. from Touro University International. She began teaching in the Touro System in 2007.

**Jacob Larsen (continuing):** Dr. Lewis is a distinguished 22-year veteran of the US Army who served in the Signal Corps and retired as a First Sergeant. She has significant experience teaching and developing courses for Touro University Worldwide, Touro University International, and Fort Hood's Noncommissioned Officers Leadership and Development program, part of the Central Texas College. Her tremendous background and leadership in online education has been an asset to the students, faculty members, and staff at Touro University Worldwide. She will be a fantastic guest for us today. So, welcome, Dr. Shelia.

### Speaker 3 Interviewee - Dr. Shelia Lewis, Ph.D

Thank you.

**Jacob Larsen:** We just wanted to start off with your professional arc, and I guess if you want to go back from the army to where you are today as Provost at the University, how did you get to where you are today?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Well, with the army, basically we did a lot of military training, but you had to have civilian training in order to be promoted [2]. So it took me about 12 years just to get the bachelor's because I moved around a lot. Once I completed 22 years of active duty, I went back for a Master's in Business Administration at Touro University International, and then from there decided to continue with the Ph.D. I met the TUI CEO, and he became my Chair for my research and that relationship continued. Then I started teaching classes for TUI, and later moved to California, and moved up and got to where I am today under the mentorship of the Provost at that time.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** That's a fascinating arc, but I'm drawn to a little bit of the beginning of your life story, because the military and academia and the general perspective may not necessarily overlap. So you spent a lot of time in the military. What drew you to the military to begin with?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** The Bay Area in Richmond, California, growing up there, I guess my education started with Dr. Seuss. My mom used to buy me Dr. Seuss books when I was a child.

**Jacob Larsen:** Right.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Mine too.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yeah.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Green Eggs and Ham.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** She also bought me the Highlights magazine. My mom used to clean houses, and she would buy books for me with the money that she made from that. And so she always had something to keep me inspired. Then I had older brothers and sisters who taught me how to spell, and I'd always forget the letter I. My sister would point to her eye, and that's how I did "got" it in the end. So growing up in Richmond, there wasn't always a lot to do, but with a family who didn't have a lot of background in higher education, especially my mother and my father, they pushed education.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** As someone who teaches psychology and as someone who comes from a psychological background, I immediately want to start to analyze your blockage of the letter "I". I know that you're such a giving person, outgoing, and all the work that we've done together, and I know that you're always thinking about students and placing them first. So probably from an early age, you were less concerned about your own personal well-being that you were physically blocking out the letter "I".

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Okay. So "I" is the middle letter of sin. So perhaps that's what it was. I'll leave it right there, yes, giving is in my cultural background.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Well, that was just my own unprofessional psychoanalysis.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Thank you.

**Jacob Larsen:** What was it that drew you to the online education platform?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Well, once upon a time there was something called distance education, and what that meant to me in the military was where I really started. Distance education mostly meant that you had to drive a long ways, in sit in a classroom on a Saturday or something like that. So for me, being able to study and do what I needed to do at the same time, that's pretty much what drew me to it. Once the system changed and became fully online, asynchronous style, then that just seemed to fit better for me as a working adult. Most of my higher education, as far as the MBA and the Ph.D. came

after I retired from the military in a fully asynchronous environment.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** This phrase, asynchronous, I think it's an important phrase that we probably shouldn't just brush over. What can you tell us about that and why it's such a meaningful concept? [3,4]

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** In the online environment, asynchronous means that you may be in a classroom and there are some discussions that's going on between the faculty and the student or the students and other students, but they don't necessarily see each other. Synchronous means there may be a live chat where the students have to do a Zoom conference or some type of video teleconference where it's live and in real time. Where asynchronous could be, I can participate on a Monday and the faculty could participate on a Wednesday, so not necessarily live interaction at the same time [5].

**Dr. Michael Berger:** It's really an interesting approach to education from the teaching perspective because you have time to digest what a student is saying, as opposed to in an environment where you say, "Does anyone have any questions?" and there are no questions. Even though one technique I've learned about the live environment, instead of saying, "Does anyone have any questions?" I have changed that to, "What questions do you have?" and just that simple twist leads to a couple of questions. It doesn't improve the quality of the questions per se, but still it leads to at least some. But in the asynchronous environment, you as the teacher have time to think through what the student is saying, and that gives you more opportunity to help them develop their own thoughts.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Right. Also, as you know, on our platform, our asynchronous delivery looks more like a blog. So the students see the teacher as a blue background, and everybody gets engaged. The teacher technically can see at everybody's responses before participating in the classroom and then say, "Okay, you got this right and you hit that point, but what about this?" So I think the asynchronous part of what you're talking about, you're not just viewing one student's discussion, but you get to see what everybody said.

## Discussions

### Authors' Comment

Touro University Worldwide utilizes the 'Sea of Blue' technique, which is a visual representation of high interaction and engagement in online education. In this approach, the background color of discussion posts differentiates between student responses (grey) and professor responses (blue), creating a sea of blue when there is a significant presence of professor engagement. This technique allows teachers to thoroughly review and respond to students' contributions, fostering meaningful discussions and promoting student development. It serves as an effective visual guide for measuring educator participation and the overall quality of interaction in asynchronous learning environments.

**Jacob Larsen:** What about this is new to education? I mean, if I can look back probably prior to online education, was there an ability for teachers to really do this? Is this like a new door the 21st century has really opened up to learners? Because I do feel like online education does cater to the modern lifestyle, right? We're all so busy. We're trying to do 10,000 things. So being able to learn in online environment is great for the students, but I feel like it does also open doors for teachers as well. Does online education offer new opportunities?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yes and no. It depends on the teacher. Some teachers may look at it like, "Well, I do it online for the money." It's a way to stay at home and facilitate. But when we're looking at this theme of teaching, if it's truly a teacher who's teaching with the give and take of teaching and learning, and engaging the students to make sure that students achieve the desired outcomes that they want them to do, then those teachers seem to do very well. So it's not really new. In fact, I've seen resumes from teachers, because there are a lot of them who want this type of online job, will have on the resume, "I teach from here to present, here to present, here to present, here to present." So they're teaching at five to six different schools at one time [6].

### Authors' Comment

Online education has opened new doors and opportunities for both learners and teachers in the 21st century. It caters to the modern lifestyle by providing flexibility and accessibility to busy individuals. According to recent data, online colleges and universities enroll nearly 2.79 million students, which accounts for almost 15% of all U.S. postsecondary learners. Additionally, around 60% of postsecondary degree seekers in the U.S. took at least some online classes in 2021, with approximately 30% studying exclusively online. It is worth noting that online schools enroll more racially diverse student bodies compared to conventional schools. The growth of online education has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 14 million learners, representing 75% of postsecondary students, taking online classes in fall 2020. Although some students have returned to in-person learning, the percentage of students enrolled in distance learning courses remains high at about 60%.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** There are many motives for those who want to be a part of this asynchronous academic style, but the real task is to find teachers who can relate to students without having to be live with face-to-face contact, a format in which some teachers cannot thrive. For some, remote teaching lets them teach for a number of institutions simultaneously. However, that type of motivation is not what is most critical. What is critical is the ability to motivate, stimulate and relate to students in an interactive and engaging online environment. There is a certain skill set the online or asynchronous teacher must have that includes being able to differentiate their students based on writing style and identifying traits of each individual student very quickly.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Wow.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** For those who teach for multiple universities, I ask, "Well, will you have time for our students?" A common response may be, "Well, I only teach from here to present once a year and from there to present in the fall." So, if that is the case then that's all right.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Well, I want to drill down into that a little bit, because one of the things that I think Touro University Worldwide is doing that is so unique in the field of online education is advanced online higher education. I know that Touro University Worldwide now has one of the first online doctorates, and I'm forgetting what program it is. So if you could talk about the advanced level of online instruction.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Oh, you mean with the ones we just started?

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Yeah.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yes. We have the doctorates right now in psychology and we also have one in management. So the delivery is pretty much the same, but it has to be commensurate with the level of degree. You're in psychology. You guys use Bloom's taxonomy verbs levels 3, 4, 5, that include analyze, synthesize, etc., as opposed to verbs such as , discuss, describe, list and or recall, which are probably used at the high school or junior college level.

#### Authors' Comment

Dr. Michael Berger and Jacob Larsen also teach at a public high school in addition to their roles at Touro University Worldwide. While they reference Bloom's taxonomy verbs such as "analyze," "integrate," and "synthesize," it should be noted that these terms represent higher-order thinking skills typically associated with advanced levels of education, such as doctoral programs [7].

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Well, we try to move into the highest category there.

**Jacob Larsen:** Right, such as "Analyze."

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Well, I don't think you guys are using, "Integrate or synthesize."

**Jacob Larsen:** "Integrate," yes.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** You should come into my class and you should hear what I'm saying.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Well, I don't

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Maybe

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** know about all that at the high school level. Yeah, but you're probably right since you teach at all levels now. . So when you teach at the higher levels, especially with us, in particular the doctoral phase, with part of that is also done in an asynchronous manner. However, at that level, when it's time for the dissertation, we actually do the live synchronous piece where students can

communicate their chair, via the online platform, zoom conference or telephone. Even an online methodology does/can incorporate some in-person teacher-student interaction, especially when it is a at the doctoral level that involves dissertation work. For example, one can learn a lot from reading Plato, but there is a time when truly applying Plato to the real world requires a live discussion, if not with Plato, but at least with someone whose understanding of Plato is at the highest level. Like live discussion is required to understand what one read in Plato, the same goes for a doctoral student requiring a doctoral qualified teacher to help with understanding the nuances of doctoral research.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** One of the differences as a teacher professor that I personally went through when I first started to teach and develop some courses for Touro University Worldwide, as you might remember this, Dr. Lewis, you kept referring to me as Dr. Berger, and I was very uncomfortable with that. I think it was about the fifth time you called me Dr. Berger, I said, "Dr. Lewis, I have to let you know, although I have a Juris Doctorate, I'm an attorney. As attorneys, we don't really feel comfortable being called Doctor." And you just said to me, "Well, here at Touro University Worldwide when you're teaching with a terminal degree, you are Doctor." And you know what? I immediately was comfortable being called Doctor.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yeah, it's because it's the terminal degree, and you and I are colleagues, we're both doctors. So if it's just you and I, and we're just talking amongst each other and other colleagues, then it's okay to be on a first name basis. But someone once taught me that a doctor is what you become. It's not necessarily what you earn. So you earn a bachelor's, you earn a master's. You become a doctor. No one can take that from you. You put in all those hours, and you did the research, and you did everything you had to do. So you are still Dr. Berger, and that's what you're going to be in Touro University Worldwide with your JD.

#### Authors' Comment

The conversation between Dr. M. Berger and Dr. Lewis highlights an interesting perspective on the concept of becoming a "Doctor." Dr. Lewis emphasizes that earning a doctoral degree signifies more than just acquiring additional knowledge or education beyond a Master's degree; it represents a transformative journey that shapes an individual's identity. This notion aligns with the research conducted by Hramiak on the impact of doctoral studies on personal and professional lives. Hramiak's study explores how pursuing a Doctorate of Education (EdD) affects participants on a deep level, blurring the boundaries between their personal and professional lives. The research findings suggest that doctoral studies bring about significant changes in participants' beliefs, attitudes, and professional practices [8].

**Dr. Michael Berger:** And I'm comfortable. Oh, yes.

**Jacob Larsen:** Oh.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** I'm comfortable with that. So, Jake, you can call me Dr. Berger too.

**Jacob Larsen:** Oh, I think we got it on your school jersey, didn't we?

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Yeah.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yeah.

**Jacob Larsen:** One thing I know about, I guess, more traditional like brick and mortar style programs is that students have opportunities to really connect with teachers, I don't know, go out to coffee with them, things like that. Do you feel like on the online platform, students are still able to make those deep connections that I think are really important too, especially the higher levels of learning?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yeah. One of the things that I do when I'm traveling, and also encourage our our directors and our faculty to do, when going to a certain location such as New York and I know I have students out there, I'll let them know, "I'm coming to New York," and I get an opportunity to meet the students.

**Jacob Larsen:** Cool.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** I attended a separate Touro University graduation last night, and there were some students who participated in our TUW graduation a couple of weeks ago and reminded me that, "I saw you on the stage and you're the one (Provost) that I talked to and or received emails from in the past." When students finally put a face to the virtual me, I know that connection through engagement works. There's sort of what I label as a virtual voice. I think you know that voice when you notice something in writing that's not their own. You go, "That's not how you wrote all the other times in this discussion threads, and now you just changed on me." So you learn their virtual voice.

#### Authors' Comment

The notion of developing a student's "virtual voice" and gaining a sense of their identity extends beyond the online platform and can be observed in traditional face-to-face instruction as well. This concept highlights the importance of establishing a meaningful connection with students, whether it is through personal interactions in a physical setting or through engaging with their written contributions in an online environment. Recognizing a shift or inconsistency in a student's virtual voice can serve as a valuable indicator for educators, signaling a potential deviation from their usual patterns of expression. Therefore, this notion of perceiving a student's virtual voice is a fundamental educational concept that transcends the boundaries of instructional modalities, applying to both in-person and online teaching methodologies.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Oh, when my students do that, there's always quotes around that part of their work.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yes, but more so, we want student engagement with the faculty, as well as faculty initiated engagement with the students. We want faculty to bring their real-world experience

and their expertise into the classroom, as well as feed off of the students' contributions within the discussions. So it's not just a multiple choice answer, "Do you, A, do this, or B?" Faculty engages the student and that's what we call high touch. Fully engaged is more than a student participating in the course and then the faculty merely stating, "Good job, Billy. Good job, Susie." However, it faculty engagement should state what was done well and what could be done better, e.g., "Good job on X. You got X right and you did very well, but I want you to dig deeper and state more about Z?"

#### Authors' Comment

Dr. Lewis is saying that the key to quality education is the teacher being fully engaged with a student, and thus, whether we are talking about synchronous, in-person education or on-line education, it is the ability of the teacher to go beyond the grading of a student's work, but using the work product as the basis for engaging with the student on a personal level with prompts, motivations, encouragement to think more deeply about the "right" answers, thus making the learning more personal - that is the kind of teachers Dr. Lewis desires for Touro University Worldwide.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** So, I think for online education, a lot of our faculty are putting in more time than probably the traditional brick and mortar. If I come to class on Monday, I can engage you and answer all your questions, but I'm not going to see you again until Wednesday. Well, once faculty enter the door to online education, they're plugged in throughout that whole session because they have to respond to students within 24 hours, and they have to engage them with substantive and meaningful feedback. So, I believe online education requires a lot more sometimes than traditional brick and mortar actually does.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** One of the other aspects of Touro that is so appealing-

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Touro University Worldwide.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Worldwide, TUW.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** We have many campuses in the Touro College University System.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Right and precision is very important for not only students, but teachers too. I learned that as a lawyer because you have to file your briefs and they have to be precise. But one of the things that I think is unique is the structure of the terms. So it's active. Touro Worldwide is active. There are six eight-week terms. How and why is that the schedule?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** At one time, we were 16 weeks, then 12, but now we're eight. It's an accelerated pace, and it allows an opportunity to complete the degree much sooner. Students can take two classes or more, case by case, but at least a minimum of two classes for those eight weeks. So when they're working on a master's or they got a lot of credits for a bachelor's, they can finish in about a year, or year and a half, depending on if they take breaks or not.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** The other thing is when students take too much time, and you guys know this, if they take too much time between sessions, they're less likely to continue their education. So when they have back-to-back sessions with no breaks except for, I like to say, between seasons (there's a break between spring and summer and fall but not necessarily between the two eight-week sessions), the students finish a lot faster, they're engaged, and they're less likely to go and party with all their friends and forget about going to school. So the accelerated continuous session keeps them engaged in their educational journey.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** From a teaching perspective, one of the things I enjoy is you're finishing up scoring final papers, you're wrapping that up, and at the same time, you're sending out, "Welcome to your new course." And so that's a really, really unique thing because in high school, you say your farewells, you say your good-byes, and then summer comes and you are away for a long time.

#### Authors' Comment

Dr. Lewis's explanation of the accelerated pace and structure of the eight-week terms highlights the benefits of this format for student success and engagement. Additionally, this approach addresses the issue of learning loss that is often observed during extended breaks between sessions or over the summer, as mentioned by Dr. M. Berger. It is worth noting that year-long schooling has been suggested for public schools to combat this very problem, as the retention of specific knowledge tends to decline during extended periods without educational activities. By maintaining a continuous and condensed schedule, Touro University Worldwide ensures that students stay actively involved in their studies, minimizing the risk of educational gaps and promoting a more efficient and effective learning experience.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Right, right.

**Jacob Larsen:** Now, I see for students, and I understand why Touro University Worldwide an appealing program is You said earlier that a lot of people, a lot of teachers, want to apply too, for your program, to teach as well. What type of teacher are you looking for? What do you look for on, I don't know, their resume?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Resume?

**Jacob Larsen:** Yeah.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Okay. So we call them CVs, you call them resumes, but it's all the same. Because of the doctoral level programs we have, we want to make sure we have a doctoral level culture, so we try to find faculty who are published with some kind of scholarly publications within the last four to five years. We want faculty who maybe has some type of practical experience in what they're teaching because we want to bring the experience into the classroom. In addition to that, we want them to have terminal degrees, and we already talked about the definition of a terminal degree, because we want somebody who can maybe teach across various degree level.

#### Authors' Comment

Dr. Lewis graciously acknowledges the common usage of the term "Resume," but her insightful perspective delves deeper into the distinction between a Resume and a CV (Curriculum Vitae). While a Resume serves as a concise summary of one's experience and achievements, outlining future aspirations, a CV encompasses a comprehensive record of scholarly activities and accomplishments—a testament to one's academic and scholarly journey. In essence, the CV encapsulates one's academic and scholarly life, highlighting the breadth and depth of their contributions in the academic realm.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** So for example, Dr. Berger who has a JD might teach a Master's in Dispute Resolution course. He might also Co-chair a student at the doctoral level who has a research area of interest that involves law. At the same time, he might teach one of the general elective courses like philosophy. He might teach business law in an undergraduate course. So we try to find teachers who are not one-size-fits-all, but the main thing are teachers who can bring more than just the academic experience. I don't want a professor who's just a check the block professor who states something like "This is what you do," and, "Put this 36 letter word there," or whatever. I want somebody who engages with comments such as, "Yeah, I went through the same thing, and in my law practice, this is what we do. Oh, and by the way, did you see on CNN last night just what we were talking about last week? This is a great example of what's happening in what we discussed."

#### Authors' Comment

Dr. Lewis's emphasis on finding faculty members who bring real-world experiences and perspectives adds a valuable dimension to the academic environment. By seeking educators who not only possess academic expertise but also have practical knowledge and connections to current events, Touro University Worldwide ensures that students benefit from a more dynamic and relevant learning experience. This approach goes beyond the traditional stereotype of an Ivory Tower professor and instead prioritizes faculty members who can bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter and its application in the real world. Such engagement with contemporary issues and the ability to relate course concepts to real-life examples contribute to a more comprehensive and meaningful education for students.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** And so I think when you have faculty that think and teach creatively, the engagement and the learning experience is not just for the students. The faculty are learning at the same time because the students are also bringing things into the classroom. If the faculty is humble enough, a faculty will say, "Hey, I didn't know that. Thanks for bringing that to my attention." So it's teaching and learning on both sides.

**Jacob Larsen:** I think it's important to talk about online education because I know a lot of teachers, especially at our level, who

wonder where online education is going. Is brick and mortar replaceable, I guess? Is online education where we're going in the future? Or, what do you see as the future of the online education landscape?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Well, if you look at some of the larger name schools, they all have online programs now. They don't publish them, but you'll hear about them if you go on the internet. I think I looked at Purdue. They have Purdue Global now. USC has an online component. Online is here to stay because when you look at demographics of our students, it's primed for online. I always tell faculty, "You think you're virtually seeing an 18 to 21 year old student in your class, but you're not. You're seeing a grandmother. You're seeing grandparents. You're seeing somebody who maybe lost their pension and they have to go back work. You're seeing people who already have jobs who want to move up the career ladder, but they need a certain degree in order to do that." Most of our student are between the ages of 35 to 60. Some of them are on second careers, and some of them are in it just because they want to do something just for personal enhancement.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** But as far as replacing brick and mortar, I don't think so because online education is not for everybody. There's always a student that needs to see the whites of the teacher's eyes. But I don't ever see it totally replacing it. That's why I think we see a lot of hybrid programs in higher education. But I do think online education is here to stay because some people need to have two to three jobs to survive. Let's face it. There was a time when the men were the breadwinners and the women stayed home. Now both must have a job, and the kids too, to survive, especially here in Southern California.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Yeah. So, Dr. Lewis, one of the things that I think is important from a managerial perspective is having a boss who motivates you, and you are incredible at it. We don't have meetings where we're sitting around a brick-and-mortar table. Has that ever been said before, the brick-and-mortar table? Maybe.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** No, I think you made that up.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** But you have such a way of motivating and presenting. Is that your army background or have you figured out how to succeed by challenging teachers, professors in this realm?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Well, I'm the youngest of 13 children, so I've learned a lot from all of my brothers and sisters, and actually, that carried over into the military. So when I see you, I see a family member. We'll talk later about which one I see in you, okay? But I believe that I should not ask anybody to do anything that I haven't done or will not do. So the motivation comes from a place on the inside that pushes me to want to draw the best out of you. Because if I draw the best out of you, in turn, you're going to be the best and draw the best out of our students. With me being a product (student and faculty) of the Touro College University System, I'm looking at it from a different perspective, probably, because I know how I was trained and I know what motivated me.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** Now, there's not much difference between teaching and training, okay? Teaching (in higher education) or training (in the military), the only difference is really in just how you spell it. But the bottom line is that you still have to motivate people to get things done. I still had to encourage soldiers to, "Let's go out and set up this tent in the rain." All right? And so some of the things that I'm asking you guys to do is continue to work with students even though you know that some work is not their own, but find a way to give them a chance, find a way to motivate them.

#### Authors' Comment

Teaching and training are equivalencies in many ways. This notion is particularly relevant in educational contexts where practical application is crucial, such as in the case of sending students to practicums or clinical settings. By recognizing the inherent connection between teaching and training, Touro University Worldwide acknowledges that true learning extends beyond the classroom. It involves applying knowledge and refining skills through hands-on experiences. This perspective underscores the importance of bridging theory with practice and provides a framework for fostering a comprehensive and effective educational environment. By integrating real-life applications and experiential learning opportunities, students are better equipped to navigate the challenges they will face in their future careers.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** But an even larger issue regarding external motivation is that we know what it means to owe money to the government in the sense of financial aid. We have a lot of those students who receive financial aid. Some receive it because they truly want an education, while for some it may be a pseudo form of employment. So I believe that no matter what the motives are with funding, if we help them to become better students and they learn and they finish, not only do they leave with debt that could follow them to the grave, but they also leave with a degree they can use to help them pay off the accrued debt.

#### Authors' Comment

Dr. Lewis raises a critical issue that many students face: the burden of student debt. The financial implications of pursuing higher education can be daunting, with repercussions that can extend well into adulthood. According to recent statistics, the total student loan debt in the United States has surpassed trillions of dollars, exerting a significant economic impact on individuals and society as a whole. This situation calls for attention and action, as the weight of debt can hinder individuals' financial well-being and limit their opportunities for future growth and prosperity. Dr. Lewis's emphasis on supporting students, regardless of their financial circumstances, reflects a commitment to empowering them to overcome these challenges. By providing accessible education and fostering an environment conducive to success, Dr. Lewis shows how Touro University Worldwide strives to equip students with the tools and knowledge necessary to thrive in their chosen fields [9].

**Jacob Larsen:** You are a product of the Touro System. Obviously, you're the Provost as well. How do you feel, what's the public perception of online education today?

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** I can't really speak for all of the public, but I can pretty much tell you the things I hear. Sometimes I hear, "Oh, you can't learn in that environment because you don't have a teacher." But that's not true with us because Dr. Berger could tell you he must be engaged or his name comes up on a report that shows he's not participating. All right? I have heard, "You don't learn anything from that delivery mode." But I think a lot of it may be pushback sometimes, also from faculty who are in traditional brick and mortar. It could be they feel like there's nothing to the online delivery mode of education, or it could be they feel threatened by online and fear being replaced by online delivery mode.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** Nevertheless, in hiring faculty I'd rather hire those with less online experience. Because if you can teach on campus, you can teach online. If you can teach online, you can teach on campus. So I think once we get past that and they understand that teaching is what I am looking for, then they sort of open up. By the way, the way we teach in the online mode is what I previously stated about faculty engagement. So to those who are used to teaching and engaging students, our pedagogy feels more like a brick-and-mortar because students have deadlines, faculty have to engage them, and faculty have 24 hours to respond if a student has a question and or inquiry. Also, there are two major written assignments; one at the mid-point and the other at the end of the session. So, similar to brick and mortar, it's like if I come to class on Monday, then I have to have my homework due on Wednesday. If I do that for four weeks straight, then I should be okay for my midterm. If I do the same thing for the next four weeks, then I should be okay for my final written assignment.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** So the students participate in the discussions twice a week and then they have a midterm, and then they do that again for the next four weeks, and then they have a final. But all are written assignments, so it's not necessarily tests or exam based. It's a case based approach. So I think the public perception is based upon what they're used to seeing in the past and associated stigma regarding online education. But with TUW (that's the acronym to make your life easy), we structure courses/programs in a way that once teachers are with us for a session, their perceptions change of what they thought we were because we have a user-friendly proprietary system that undergirds the pedagogy. During onboarding, I always tell them, "Throw everything out the window that you learned in all these other systems."

#### Authors' Comment

In a widely shared fictional anecdote, a CEO shared his perspective on what he values in an employee, illustrating the importance of unlearning academic teachings and prioritizing real-life experiences. According to the story, the CEO suggests that good employees should set aside what they were taught in school and

focus on the practical knowledge gained through hands-on experiences. The anecdote highlights the tendency for individuals to rely on their academic training when faced with challenging situations, instead of leveraging the valuable lessons learned through on-the-job learning. Conversely, the story emphasizes that those who have successfully unlearned the rigid frameworks imparted in graduate school or early in their careers are more equipped to provide effective guidance and support. Although the CEO's story is fictional, it serves as a popular illustration of the value of applying practical knowledge in various contexts [10].

**Dr. Shelia Lewis (continuing):** Likewise, it's the same thing with the students. That is, they enjoy the structure and know what to expect from the first session with us forward. So that's probably why we're growing. Every session we're growing tremendously. Dr. Berger, used to say, "When am I going to have students?" Now I hear from him, "Oh, I'm doing just fine."

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Right. I don't think I've had that concern recently.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** I know you don't.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** No. There are students, and what's so amazing about the students that we have is just how impressive they are as individuals and people and what they're accomplishing. It's almost like the opportunities to learn from them are infinite as well, even at the undergraduate level.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** You get a lot of practitioners, students already doing their own thing in their own businesses and stuff.

**Jacob Larsen:** You've had some pretty interesting students, haven't you?

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Yeah. I have had one particular student who comes to mind who was enrolled in the Master's in Dispute Resolution program, who is certainly moving on to engage with the United Nations and addressing global issues. Our pedagogy better be good if we're going to be releasing people into the world stage.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** That's right. We have had people, teachers and students, and I get a little leery sometimes, but FBI, Department of Education students, and parents who state, "Okay, my kids are grown, and I just want to do this for myself now."

**Jacob Larsen:** Wow.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Then it opens up a whole world to them, and then they're down a rabbit hole of success that they never thought about when they initiated their pursuit.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Exactly. Military students who don't think they can do online education, and I state, "You already have the experience. You just have to exchange those military words for civilian words and you'll be fine."

**Jacob Larsen:** Well, and if you're participating in a seminar where the ideas you're learning from each other, how much better



to be in that type of an environment, learning from other students? My experience has been typically that a lot of us have the exact same background or pretty similar, right? So while the seminars are interesting and it's about who got what from the actual information, it's always nice when people bring in real-world experiences.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Yeah. One thing we do to assist both students and faculty, which triggered this when Dr. Berger mentioned earlier about ending one session on a Sunday and starting a new session on the following Monday, is a staycation. It's similar to going to class on the first day and the teacher stating, "Here's your syllabus. Okay. Anybody have any questions?" and then everyone goes home. So our very first discussion at the beginning of the session is just an introduction. The introduction serves as a staycation to give both students and faculty a break while starting a new session as well as faculty finalizing grades from the previous session. Also, I enjoy reading through those introductions sometimes, and just look at the background of the students that are introducing themselves, and it's just amazing to see their diverse backgrounds.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** For sure. So, Dr. Lewis, thank you so much for coming in and introducing us to the world of online education. But I'd like to mention something before we wrap up. It's almost like you have a catchphrase, (from the world of comedy I use the phrase catchphrase), but it's more than that, and it's a phrase you use frequently. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about it. When you sign emails, you're always signing, "Keep pushing forward." It's such a great outlook.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** Because I believe you should always be moving forward. From a spiritual background, it's from an acrostic of FAITH, Forward Action in Trusting Him. Faith is always moving forward as you look ahead for what you are believing will be next, whatever that may be in life. So the things that you do in TUW should always be moving forward, even if you made a mistake. The Lion King is one of my favorite movies when the monkey smacks Simba on the head, and then follows up and said, "That's the past" in reference to the smack on the head. Right? So we always keep pushing forward, putting our best effort forward. By doing that, we never think about what we just did in the past, so we're always reaching for higher ground. So there you go for higher education, and especially in TUW as we always push forward for what is best for our students. All right?

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Wonderful

**Jacob Larsen:** What a fantastic way to end. So, Dr. Lewis, thank you very much for being here. It was very nice to meet you as well.

**Dr. Shelia Lewis:** ou're welcome. Nice meeting you too.

**Jacob Larsen:** Wow, that's great. Maybe that'll go in the show notes.

**Dr. Michael Berger:** Yeah.

## Summary and Conclusions

Throughout the conversation, Dr. Shelia Lewis, the Provost of Touro University Worldwide, shed light on the public perception of online education. She acknowledged the skepticism that exists, with some believing that learning cannot effectively occur without traditional classroom settings and face-to-face interactions. However, Dr. Lewis emphasized that her institution has implemented an engaging and structured online platform that promotes active participation and accountability. The faculty members are required to be highly engaged, ensuring a level of interaction and support comparable to traditional university settings. One significant point highlighted by Dr. Lewis was the misconception that online teaching is vastly different from traditional methods. She stressed the importance of hiring faculty who possess both online and on-campus teaching abilities, emphasizing that effective teaching and learning principles apply regardless of the mode of delivery. By adopting a case-based approach and setting clear expectations, TUW provides a sense of structure and engagement akin to traditional educational models (recently, in light of the growing popularity of AI platforms such as ChatGPT, the importance of case-based assignments has been heightened) [11]. The results have been promising, as reflected in the university's consistent growth. Ultimately, Dr. Shelia Lewis and the speakers highlighted the transformative potential of online education, dispelling misconceptions and demonstrating that, with effective pedagogical strategies and faculty engagement, it can offer a comparable level of structure, engagement, and growth to traditional brick-and-mortar institutions.

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## Conflict of Interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest.

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