



## Lifelong Learning Through COVID with Chris McLeod

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 357

**Chris McLeod:** [00:00:00] We're starting to think about OLLI in a two-campus concept. We have online classes and in-person, and we've divided up the team to support those learners and that campus, if you will, accordingly.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:00:18] I'm Celisa Steele.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:00:19] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. COVID permanently altered the operations and offerings of many learning businesses, and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke University is one such example. In this episode, number 357, we talk with Chris McLeod about the pandemic-driven changes her group made and the short-term and long-term implications. Chris directs OLLI at Duke, and she's a return guest to the Leading Learning Podcast. When I spoke with Chris in June 2019, OLLI at Duke was focused solely on classroom courses, and Chris didn't think her learners were interested in online options. In this conversation with Celisa, Chris shares how the pandemic proved members were able to learn online. Celisa and Chris talk about how the move online both broadened their reach and meant they lost some learners who didn't have access to the necessary technology, how COVID got them to rethink the competitive environment and the importance of social offerings as a key differentiator, and trying to figure out what remains online and what the return to campus looks like.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:01:33] They also discuss how Chris and her small team worked together during the early days of COVID, balancing a member-driven approach to the course catalog with staff oversight, and the enduring appeal of the humanities. OLLI at Duke is clearly focused on nonprofessional lifelong learning, but the experiences Chris shares can offer insight for learning businesses of all types, including those focused more on professional development and continuing education. Celisa and Chris spoke in April 2023.

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available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode357](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode357).*

**Celisa Steele:** [00:02:11] Tell us about the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke University, a little bit more about what it does, and also the work done by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes in general.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:02:23] There are about 400 learning and retirement communities or organizations in the country. A hundred and twenty-five have been endowed by the Bernard Osher Foundation out of San Francisco. Mr. Osher was very prescient and forward-thinking in recognizing the role of lifelong learning to living a long and healthy life, and he has invested over \$300 million in endowing many of these institutes. It gives us a tremendous amount of flexibility and freedom in terms of programming. We offer, primarily, courses, both online and in-person, but we also offer a variety of social activities, outings, and local field trips. Our real focus is just fostering connections among members with each other and with the instructors. There are no tests or grades. The only thing that's required is a real appetite for learning and curiosity. The majority of our members are from North Carolina, specifically the Durham-Chapel Hill area. There are a handful from Raleigh and the Triad. Several hundred, I would say, from across the state and about the same amount from other states in the country. Ever since the pandemic, we have been broadcasting online, and so we're engaging a lot more Duke alumni through our marketing efforts.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:03:46] Well, great. And I definitely want to talk about the pandemic a little bit more. I want to acknowledge, too, that you're a return guest. You spoke with Jeff in June of 2019, and, at that point, you were still pretty new in your role at OLLI at Duke. I think you were just about a year in at that point.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:04:03] Yes.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:04:04] And so now here we are talking almost four years later. It's probably an understatement to say that a lot has changed in that time span. Let's just go ahead and talk about how has the COVID pandemic impacted OLLI at Duke?

**Chris McLeod:** [00:04:19] Well, I remember talking to Jeff and him asking me about online learning, and I said, "Our members are not interested." And I remember thinking to myself, "And neither am I." But COVID has really been a catalyst for creativity and innovation for our team and for our community. We moved 100 percent of our programming online within three weeks of our shutdown. We hosted our first short term—it was a four-week term. We invited four of our most popular instructors to learn with us and jump on and teach Zoom. One couple in particular, who teach a lot of history courses, had been teaching for us for more than 20 years,

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and we really wanted them to be models in terms of jumping in the deep end. And, I think, even today, they would say it was quite an adventure. One of the things we were really fortunate with was that we had a number of volunteers who were dedicated to figuring this out with us. I also had a young woman who I had just hired, who was previously part-time and just had a real appetite for technology, and she has led our program in some really exciting ways and taught the rest of us how to use Zoom. Within the first three months of being online, we trained over 1,500 older adults just how to use Zoom.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:05:40] We were having these open Zoom basic sessions early on because we felt like we wanted everybody to just learn how to get on it. We were probably ten days ahead of most people when we started doing this. So every single time we did a session, we learned something new. I remember one of our volunteers, Howard Koslow, who helped us initially with Zoom and throughout the first two years, but he trained us how to use Zoom on a desktop. And then, when it was over, he said, “Now we need to develop directions for how to use Zoom on your iPad, on your iPhone, and on an Android.” Some were even showing up on Kindles. And I just thought I was going to lose it. Here we are three years later, and it’s just amazing how much the world has changed. One of the things I think I’m most proud of is that we’ve really developed an online protocol for how we run our courses. Every single one of our courses has an OLLI staff person that provides technical support for the instructor, and most of our courses have a moderator that supports the instructor by reading questions in chat or calling on people in the order in which they raise their hands.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:06:58] We’re really recognized by our members and by other OLLIs for our courses are very orderly. There are not a lot of disruptions, not a lot of dog barking or husbands or wives yelling in the background. We had lots of that early on, and so I’m really proud of our team. The other real big change for us is that, before COVID, we were offering in-person classes in 23 different classroom locations across four counties, and now we’re only offering classes in one main classroom facility and two—I would call them—sponsor sites. But, as a result, we’re now able to serve a much broader spectrum of the older adult community. It always troubled me that, even with as many locations as we had, we could still only serve those who could get in their cars and drive. We knew there were caregivers at home. We knew there were people who had issues with sight or hearing that we had difficulty accommodating. And now, with Zoom, many of our members who had hearing issues, some have come back because they’ve learned that Zoom makes the class much more accessible for them.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:08:15] I know when you and Jeff spoke, you had cited both space and, I think, staffing as two of the challenges that you were dealing with, and I think you were going to be

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raising funds for a facility, and I think you were just two full-time staff at that point. So just catch us up a little bit. Do you have more staff at this point? Is that focus on a physical facility still as important as it was?

**Chris McLeod:** [00:08:40] Well, I will say we have doubled our full-time staff and tripled our part-time staff. We now have four full-time individuals, the fourth just starting this past fall, and we've added four or five part-time staff to help support our online courses and our in-person. We are not focused right now on getting a larger facility. We aren't using now the full capacity of our classroom at the Judea Reform Congregation. I think until demand for in-person classes rebounds in a significant way, which I expect will happen given the demographic trends and the large percentage of older adults moving to North Carolina, particularly the Triangle, I'm not worried about it rebounding, but we're still trying to understand what the slow return to campus means for us.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:09:39] We're grateful to Thinkific for sponsoring the Leading Learning Podcast. At Leading Learning, we believe reach, revenue, and impact are essential for all learning businesses. Thinkific Plus is a new-generation platform purpose-built to help growing businesses scale revenue. With Thinkific Plus, you can generate monthly recurring revenue through course subscriptions and membership programs, sell multiple seats for your learning products to a single buyer, suggest additional products in the learning flow to increase sales, and go global with 0 percent transaction fees and payments accepted in over 100 countries. Coastal Drone Co. uses Thinkific Plus to sell online courses, memberships, and certifications to those looking to fly drones in Canada. Since converting its training materials into online courses on Thinkific Plus, Coastal Drone Co. has scaled its business, earning more income, training more people, and positioning itself as a leading educator in the Canadian drone industry. Right now, as a Leading Learning listener, you can get a free month of Thinkific Plus by going to our special URL: [thinkific.com/learning](https://thinkific.com/learning). Start your free month today at [think-i-f-i-c.com/learning](https://think-i-f-i-c.com/learning).

**Celisa Steele:** [00:10:56] And so you talked about some of the changes that COVID brought about, most especially, obviously, that big shift to online and doing it so quickly and really supporting the learners along the way. So it wasn't just about getting the content online. It was also about making sure that the learners were comfortable in that environment and able to access those classes. When you look at what changes you made related to COVID, which of those pandemic changes are you rolling back, and which ones are keepers that you're going to maintain as you move forward?

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**Chris McLeod:** [00:11:30] I would say we're rolling back almost nothing. Right now, two-thirds of our enrollment is online every term, and that's been pretty consistent for at least the last year or so. We feel like we've all developed a great deal more confidence technically, in general. We're starting to think about OLLI in a two-campus concept. We have online classes and in-person, and we've divided up the team to support those learners and that campus, if you will, accordingly. I think that we will probably add another staff person within the next year to focus more on resuming and supporting some of the social activities and in-person activities that we're trying to rebuild, which we think will also make a difference in terms of getting people to return. But some of the hesitations I hear from folks are concerns around COVID. The other is, "Wow, it's just so convenient to be able to walk downstairs in my bathrobe and take the class." And the other challenge is that our most popular instructors have stayed online. Pre-COVID, we had as many as 20 percent of our membership on a wait list. We're talking about 500 people on a wait list every term because, even with 23 locations, we didn't have enough space. Now that's less of the case. We still allow instructors to teach the size class they want to teach, so we still have wait lists, but they're not as extensive.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:12:58] When I think about COVID, I think, obviously, about how so many organizations had to shift online and online exclusively for a period of time, including groups that hadn't ever done online learning before. And so it seems to me that even as OLLI was making that shift to move online, others were doing it too. And then, by going online, you potentially had competition that you didn't have in the past. I'm just curious to know how you feel COVID has impacted the competitive landscape, the other options that your learners have, and think about when they're comparing: "Should I be doing this with OLLI at Duke or going somewhere else for it?"

**Chris McLeod:** [00:13:41] It's an excellent question. From the very beginning, that was on my mind because I had taken a Coursera course. I'd been a part of other online communities—a meditation community and others. And so I was familiar with, at least, in some cases, some of the higher-production values. Many of our members have taken the Great Courses, which are not live. They were asynchronous, as they say. But we really tried to focus on engaging our members in conversation before class, getting them used to speaking up, that type of thing. What we did last spring was invest a lot of time in putting together a very extensive member survey and a series of focus groups to look at what do they value and appreciate most about OLLI classes. Are they taking courses elsewhere? What are the differences? What are they like and not like? And so it was really helpful to understand that our courses are known for being more intimate. They love that they can ask the question of the instructor in real time. They appreciate that we're still doing recordings. They're not as high-production-value as many of

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the others, but they feel like they don't miss out when they have a medical appointment or something that might interfere. And they really feel some of our smaller classes are almost like graduate seminars, and that isn't something that's very available in other settings.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:15:09] And, again, we work really hard to make sure they proceed smoothly and there are not a lot of technical glitches. There were a handful of folks—I would say 20 or 25 percent—who were taking courses on at least one other platform. We had several folks who were members of more than one OLLI since there are 125. We had several who had moved out of the area and decided, “Oh, wow, now I can rejoin OLLI at Duke even though I've moved to Texas.” I think recognizing what they appreciated made me feel more comfortable about offering smaller classes. Particularly poetry and literature seem to be really popular. And I think I've heard from a caregiver or two who just say, “I organize everything around my Tuesday poetry class. It's what's keeping me alive right now, keeping me going.” I think none of us really appreciated how meaningful OLLI was to folks 'til this fall when we hosted a series of in-person socials, and people came up to my staff with tears in their eyes, and they just said, “Thank you for everything you've done.” It was really a moving experience. And I think none of us will ever forget who we went through the pandemic with. I'm sure many of your listeners can appreciate that, as much as colleagues, as well as our members.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:16:25] One thing that was particularly, I think, poignant to me was how important it was for my staff and I to really be completely honest about what was going on in each other's lives at that point because we were online and meeting and trying to organize things 10 or 12 hours a day, and we needed to know when the other person either wasn't going to be around, needed a break, or had a family crisis. And I think it made me wonder how my career might have been different had I not drawn such bright lines. But, as a result, we're a very tight team. I'm really proud of the fact that we've had zero turnover in the last three years. I can tell you I have a lot of colleagues who lost their entire team, and probably anywhere from a quarter to a third of OLLI directors nationally have retired in the last three years. I can tell you that, at a different point in my career, I might just say the same thing. But truly, this has been one of the most exciting, exhilarating, and exhausting periods of my career. But I never knew it could be so much fun and require so much creativity.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:17:33] There's so much in what you shared there. I think that idea of both exhilaration and exhaustion, in some ways, characterized the pandemic for a lot of people—when you were able, if you were able, to pick up and see some of the opportunities, which you were fortunate to be able to do and work with your team on. You also mentioned just how much the classes meant to some of the learners and how they shared that with your staff—the

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poetry class that kept the caregiver going. And I did relisten to your conversation with Jeff before you and I spoke today, just to refresh my memory about what you guys had covered. I noted that you had said that the humanities made for really popular options—typically, poetry, music, and history, those were the things that folks really seemed to be excited about, maybe because they hadn't had time when they were getting their original academic degree. And so this was their chance to go back either to what they loved or hadn't had a chance to explore. Anyhow, in listening to that, it really struck me, given all of the recent upheavals and cutting back on the humanities in higher ed, I'd just be curious what comments or thoughts you might have on what those current higher ed cutbacks in humanities might mean in terms of what lifelong learning looks like in the future.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:18:55] I think the reason humanities are so popular among our demographic is because many of them went to college when you were supposed to do the sciences. My father did not take a single humanities class. That was back when you could do that because he was pre-med. And I think of those who either were afraid to take them because of grades or because they had so many core requirements—humanities still remained very popular among our members. The other thing that's been interesting, as I was listening to the Coursera CEO speak the other day on the Coursera conference, ChatGPT is all the rage. I remember as recently as three weeks ago, "Okay, I'm drawing the line there. I am not learning about that." And then I'm listening to him talk about how he uses ChatGPT as a thought partner in his writing and how he uses it to organize concepts and ideas. And he said, no matter what we do online, it's still important for people to be able to think critically, that there's a huge potential, and it's already happening that this type of thing will be used to manipulate in some really evil ways, but that the importance of thinking, writing, and communicating is going to always be important in terms of leadership and connection with each other. The other thing that was really interesting too, and that I think may not have happened but for COVID, was that during this racial reckoning with the George Floyd murder and several of the other protests that were erupting all across the country, our members had a tremendous curiosity and interest in learning more about that.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:20:40] We were fortunate to have recruited some amazing instructors who had friends and family members share first-person narratives of their encounters with law enforcement in their careers and of growing up in the Jim Crow South. The first woman PhD. Different experiences. We had one particular program where there were three African American men who were interviewed, and they were among the first at UNC, Duke, and NC State. I'm not sure our members would have enrolled and shown up and sat through some difficult conversations had they not been able to do so from their own homes, where they felt a

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degree of safety and protection, if you will, a little bit more, from the discomfort. I will say we didn't do a very good job of giving them time to process what they were hearing. There was a tremendous amount of information. But what we heard from folks was, "Wow, we really needed to debrief and talk with each other afterwards." So too much of the conversation was one-way, but/and it was very powerful. And I'm really proud of the work that our curriculum committee and board did to make sure we had material that was relevant and spoke to what was happening currently.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:22:05] Well, that makes me want to ask a question about how do you typically approach making determinations about what goes into your portfolio of offerings? And then what stays, what gets cut, or what gets modified, as you're saying, to potentially add time for more of that debriefing and processing?

**Chris McLeod:** [00:22:22] OLLI at Duke, we're among the oldest and actually among the 10 or 12 largest OLLIs in the country. But we have a history of our curriculum being curated by a group of volunteers. When I joined as director, that was really uncomfortable for me, but I tried to respect the process, and I would put new instructors in the pipeline to be considered. And, of course, many were considered, engaged, and taught during those first couple of years, and that practice continues. We do have a curriculum committee of 12 area chairs that oversee courses in different subject areas. We've had an amazing volunteer, Beth Anderson, who's been our curriculum chair for the past five years and who's stepping down at the end of June. During COVID, I felt like we needed to have a little more staff time and focus on developing our curriculum. We were inadvertently finding some gaps. I think there are certain courses we need to teach every term: memoir; we have a couple of courses on legacy—writing a legacy letter; end-of-life courses that speak about how to manage and be a healthcare advocate for yourself or a loved one.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:23:40] I think just because of supply and demand, we didn't always have those courses. I think, given that we're broadcasting from Duke's campus to across the country, in fact, across the world, we need to make sure all of our courses reflect the values and brand of Duke University, and I think that will be best done by a staff person in partnership with our volunteer committee. It's very important to have a member voice in curriculum. But what I began to appreciate was that we were only teaching courses that reflected the instructors who showed up and wanted to teach. And now we need to make sure there are certain courses that are covered every term.

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:24:21] So whether you want to take the view of history going back since you talked to Jeff roughly four years ago or going back to COVID, but, in those last three or four years, a lot's changed. There's been the pandemic. There's been ChatGPT, as you just mentioned. There's been the racial reckoning in this country. Maybe there are other events that will pop to mind for you when you're thinking about your learners. But, given that time span and what's happened there, do you think anything is fundamentally different about what your learners need and want now than it was in the past?

**Chris McLeod:** [00:24:57] There's an enormous shift going on right now. Sadly, with the transition online, we lost hundreds of members who couldn't make the transition. They either didn't have the equipment. They didn't have a camera on their laptop. I was shocked to find out how many people were registering for courses on their phones. We have a number of people who take OLLI courses on their phones. They may be relatively technically competent, but they may not be able to go out, buy a laptop, have it all set up and run, or have a son or daughter around who could help them do that. I lost a lot of sleep over that initially, but we had no choice but to press forward. I think our members are younger and more tech-savvy. We used to get a lot of complaints about our registration process, and now I get none. So I think there is a shift to younger members. But I think the biggest shift that I'm noticing is what our members are looking for. Early on, most of our courses were a more traditional lecture of the expert and the sage on the stage, so to speak. I think our members are expecting more interaction. They have always had a tremendous amount of expertise and life experience that they bring to the classroom, but there's a much higher expectation that that will be acknowledged and incorporated and invited to add to the class discussion. Our members, right now, there's a 50-year span between folks in their late 40s, I would say, all the way to their early 90s.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:26:32] I talked to a couple of folks who were getting Zoom set up for their parents in their late 80s, and one woman who was 94, her daughter registered for her but would get it set up for her. And so that's a pretty broad range to try to figure out what are they interested in learning? I think we feel really challenged by that demographic spread. And, frankly, my staff ranges from the mid-30s to the late 70s, so we're our own experiment. I would say that we all communicate really well and get along, and I think there's a lot of two-way mentoring going on. But I never really thought about it as an issue until you start reading all these articles about "okay boomer" and the rivalries between generations. That's just not been my experience at Duke or within our membership. But this shift from more the instructor-centric type of teaching, where the instructor is thinking about their experience teaching and how the information is coming across, versus the conversation around how can we make this a good experience for the learner? What are the different learning styles? And being more

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respectful of that, that's something that we're also grappling with. I think we have a little bit better mixture, but, still, at least half of our classes are taught by faculty who retired within the last 10 or 15 years, and so they teach often in a more traditional way. Not all, but many do.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:28:01] And that harkens back to what you were saying about competition. I think you have acknowledged and recognized that one of the strengths of OLLI at Duke is this personal connection. It's this chance to talk with the others in the classroom, to ask questions of that teacher, that instructor, who is that expert. But it sounds like you're recognizing that where you particularly excel is when it's not just that lecture. It's the other aspects and other pieces of it as well. When you think about the future of lifelong learning, what is it that interests you? Are there trends or developments that you are keeping an eye on?

**Chris McLeod:** [00:28:47] To me, one of the things that's really exciting is the degree to which we're engaging Duke alumni. We've been able to basically, through e-mail, e-mail 25,000-30,000 Duke alumni every term. When we first did it, I was literally terrified because I had no idea: "Are we going to get 20 members or 200?" Honestly, we started out with a much smaller list because I just wasn't sure what the conversion rate might be, and I couldn't afford to overwhelm my staff. When we first started doing it, we would get anywhere from 50 to 75 new members. So it was a pretty strong yield. I haven't been able to look at the data long enough to see are these folks transactional? Were they just around during COVID, or have they stuck it out? Because, for our in-person members, the average tenure can be anywhere from 5 to 20 years. But my bet is that it will become more of a transactional type of membership for folks. We're going to be working really hard to foster a sense of community and belonging. I hope down the road to be able to do some in-person events with some of our online instructors, to put them on tour, if you will, let them meet some people in other communities, particularly in North Carolina, and then see if we might engage folks online.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:30:03] I think I'm really interested in how our courses are taught. I think that's something that will evolve over time. I think, to me, one of the things that's most exciting is that our division has just joined with another division on Duke's campus called Duke Learning and Innovation, and they have been helping faculty teach more technology-enabled, learner-centric courses, and I think we can learn a lot from them and then begin to share some of those practices with our instructors. There's a lot going on at Duke, and we're just beginning to talk about, "Gosh, how could Coursera work with OLLI? Is there a possibility?" Because Duke faculty are using it in their courses, and there are a lot of opportunities to experiment.

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:30:46] This is the Leading Learning Podcast, which means one of our questions that we like to ask of all guests has to do with your own approach to lifelong learning. Would you share with us a little bit about what habits, practices, or sources you might use for your own ongoing learning, whether that's professionally or personally?

**Chris McLeod:** [00:31:06] One of the benefits of the last couple of years is that, early on, before we could add part-time staff, all of us were doing tech support for our classes. So I sat in more OLLI classes than the first two years of the pandemic than I had. I had only sat in two classes one time here and there before because things were just so busy. But I believe a lot in storytelling, and I think hearing the power of the first-person narrative is really very compelling. I really enjoy the TED Talks, listening to people who've done amazing things, courageous things, and talk about their experiences. I did take some LinkedIn Learning on a few things, on managing a remote team. I think we fumbled through it. Usually, when I watched those things, I'd always learn something, but I always ended up feeling like, "We did pretty well for not knowing what we were doing." I'm a big reader, but I would say one of the big challenges is, during COVID, I've found that being on screen so much, mostly through meetings in the last year, I just find it really hard to read at the level and the pace I used to.

**Chris McLeod:** [00:32:19] I'm more likely now to listen to a book on tape, a podcast, or watch a YouTube interview. It doesn't mean my book collection has gotten any smaller or that I've stopped ordering books. You know how that goes. But it's really a variety. And I think it's one of the ways this job is so exhilarating is that we're all surrounded by such interesting people who move here from all over the country. And, again, we've been able to bring in speakers from all over the country. So that part is fun. And they often have, not surprisingly, a real passion for what they do. And that's contagious.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:33:07] Chris McLeod is director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke University. In the show notes for this episode at [leadinglearning.com/episode357](http://leadinglearning.com/episode357), you'll find a link to the OLLI at Duke Web presence, where you can learn more about what they do and offer.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:33:24] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:33:37] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in one-on-one conversations with colleagues or personal notes or on social media. In the show notes at

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:33:53] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*

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