

Office Hours: Miami U

President Gregory Crawford discusses value of liberal arts education

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EDUCATION DIVE: Miami U has a particular emphasis and infusion of liberal arts, especially in the STEM disciplines. Why is that so important, and how did you begin this journey of incorporating a field of study the country is kind of pushing away from?

In a climate that is increasingly dismissive of liberal arts disciplines in favor of a shift to science and innovation, Miami University President Gregory Crawford has found a model in which they can coexist. We sat down with Crawford to get his insight into how focusing on liberal arts impacts not just student success, but promotes greater diversity in staff and faculty hires, and even fundraising.

CRAWFORD: I'm a physicist by training, and ever since high school, that's all I ever wanted to be. I was kind of the gear head who was trying to fix things and build things at home and just overall very passionate about physics. When I went to college and started doing other classes, I found that the liberal arts education, particularly the humanities, really made me think about what it is to be a human being. It was a telling moment in my career and I cherished those courses like philosophy, English, and foreign language that I took that really broadened my perspective in a big way.

I think of it in terms of a Venn diagram, with the first aspect of it really teaching people intellectual and moral virtue on an individual level, and that scales up to how we are servant leaders and we actually adhere to and lead towards a mission. The second part that overlaps that is the critical thinking aspect. The world is very complex and not everything falls into one category, so having the ability to think through not only the direction you're going but to be the devil's advocate and how to find complete solutions and understanding our own assumptions is very important.

Finally, I think that liberal arts helps a student to become an adaptable, flexible thinker and to learn independently.

When you look at the need for higher education to understand diversity in recruitment and faculty development, how do the liberal arts fit in that equation?

CRAWFORD: When I look at student success I think it comes down to two areas; first is the intellectual intelligence and secondary is the emotional intelligence. When students are exposed to the liberal arts they become more self-aware, more self-disciplined and develop other virtues like empathy and courage. And so the diversity and inclusion aspects of our curriculum instills these aspects, but it starts with the empathy, compassion, and care that comes out of liberal arts, without question.

Do you tend to look for your academic divisions to find the best connections with certain liberal arts? Do you tell your engineering or physics students that being a good writer and speaker to present research is important? How do you approach that melding?

CRAWFORD: First and foremost, if you are in the professional disciplines, there are extraordinary skill sets to learn from the liberal arts, like communication, analytical skills, writing, global awareness; can you tell a story in a world of data and analytics? But we encourage students to explore through many options that can fulfill requirements, but there may be something that resonates with them on a personal level that takes them to that course, but it does include those other kinds of higher level skills that liberal arts education brings. We kind of let it ebb and flow in term of how students pick their electives within [the Miami Plan core](#).

How is that developed and what are you most proud of with the Miami Plan?

CRAWFORD: The Miami Plan is the core set of experiences that we go through as a liberal arts core, and it involves all of the typical liberal arts disciplines. I think what makes Miami very unique is that we have a core for everybody. Whether you are in the professional disciplines you can still be engaged in the arts, if you are in STEM, you can pick those humanities and if you are in the liberal arts you can pick up the science and math skill sets you need.

In many ways, it helps our students with leadership and enables one to become a servant leader who wants to help to see others grow. Second, it teaches our graduates

how to be participatory leaders and that inclusion and a breadth of opinion matters in a big way in the decision-making process. Miami is on a list of having the most Fortune 500 corporate leaders in the country and that translates the tangibles and intangibles that you receive when you take this liberal arts core.

Have you found there to be a benefit in presenting this kind of plan to donors? When you think in terms of high-earning donors, is it just as easy to present a case for this as it is for STEM disciplines?

CRAWFORD: Many of our alumni and donors understand deeply the education they received here, and in many ways they love what we do with the Miami Plan. And what is interesting for me is that they don't expect a physicist to be so passionate about the liberal arts, but it had such a big impact in my life and on my career, and the way I think about and solve problems, I couldn't be more enthusiastic about how it helped me to learn about human flourishing and just the solutions you need to arrive with that are very interdisciplinary.

What advice would you give to a new president about why growing the liberal arts imprint on their campus?

CRAWFORD: We all want our students to go out and take on leadership roles in the future, and leadership is all about people. It's about having people flourish in their jobs and pursue their passions, and the liberal arts benefits you by developing and understanding the skills necessary to work with and to help lead people.