

Interview with Ronald Crutcher, President of the University of Richmond

Dr. Ronald Crutcher is President of the University of Richmond and a founding member and co-chair of Liberal Education & America's Promise (LEAP), the American Association of Colleges & Universities' Centennial Campus Action, Advocacy, and Research Initiative. He is also a world-renown musician and was the first cellist to earn a Doctorate in the Musical Arts from Yale University. He has held numerous teaching and administrative positions, including the office of President of Wheaton College, Massachusetts and before that Provost at Miami University of Ohio.

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Thank you very much, Dr. Crutcher, for taking the time to do this interview, especially while on sabbatical in Germany. I'm sure our readers will really appreciate it. So, maybe to start, could you say a little bit about what led you into academia and the liberal arts? You're multi-talented, you're a successful musician and a successful academic, and I'm sure you could have gone in a number of different directions. Why the liberal arts?

Ronald Crutcher: Well, it's really that the person who influenced me most, other than my parents, as a young man, was my cello professor, Elizabeth Potteiger, who was a professor at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. She started teaching me when I was fourteen years old, and I would travel from Cincinnati to Oxford to study with her. And it was really her model that presented an option—a profession that I had not even considered. I thought about becoming a lawyer or an architect, or perhaps a teacher, but never a university professor. And so over the time that I studied with her, I decided that a life in academia would be a way for me to do a number of things. To begin with, to have an impact on the lives of young people the way she had an impact on my life. But secondly, to perform chamber music—she played in a string quartet there. And then thirdly to teach classes, because I had always enjoyed teaching, working with folks. So that was really the overall impetus. When I was at Miami—Miami happens to be a liberal arts university; it's a large university, but it's unusual in that it requires all the students, no matter what their major, to take a liberal arts core. It's called the "Miami Plan for Liberal Education" right now—I was one

of those students who wanted to learn everything. To professor Potteiger's consternation, actually, because I would load up lots of courses. I would take more courses than I really needed to, and she, of course, wanted me to practice the cello more. And I was interested in German, and Psychology, and Mathematics, because I just wanted to learn as much as I possibly could. And that was supported by my other professors there. I was in the Honors Program at Miami University. That really was my grounding. It started in High School, yes, but really I honed the interests that I had and that zeal to want to learn everything, which is of course impossible. But I didn't know that at the time.

But it's worthwhile to try, anyway, right?

It's worthwhile to try, yes.

What you said about Miami University is interesting, because here in Russia there's a movement toward American style liberal arts education or some aspects of it. But there's also an emphasis on publishing internationally, because Russia right now is really interested in increasing its universities' standings in the various world rankings. So could you speak about how a large research university can integrate parts of the liberal arts style education without having to completely rebuild itself or change its identity?

Yes. I think that, in the United States, if you look at Harvard and Yale, on the undergraduate level, or Princeton—your alma mater—they provide for their undergraduates a first class liberal arts education. Yet they are also first class research institutions. So I think the key is to ensure that there are opportunities for the younger students... In Russia I imagine they don't have what we consider undergraduates, if it's based more on the European system...

It is, but because of the Bologna Process they're shifting to the Bachelor's—Master's degree sequence.

Yes, of course, the Bologna Process will change that. But my point is that there are opportunities for professors who are doing a lot of research to have an impact on younger students as well, with the assistance of graduate assistants. The other thing I might add, is that I think technology can be of assistance here as well, in the following way... Obviously, what I'm about to say doesn't work to a massive scale, so if you have a hundred thousand students at the university it might not work... But you can utilize technology to deliver some of the content to students, so the professor is not required to lecture constantly, but rather can spend his or her time with smaller groups of students, basically ensuring that they learn the content. Interrogating them, if you will, about the content.

The Socratic method...

It really forces them to think beyond what they've read.

I think that sounds very feasible, actually. There are some universities here with around a hundred thousand students, but there are plenty that aren't that big, or have multiple campuses, so the effect is different.

I think the key, at least in my own experience both as a student as well as a professor, is that professors should never underestimate the power that they have to transform the life of the student or to change that student's thinking. Such that... let's say you have a student with very, very narrow interests... to open that student up, so suddenly he or she has this zeal for Psychology, or Biology, or Music... so that students realize that being more broadly educated is going to help them to succeed in life.

Do you think that a sort of liberal arts education at the undergraduate stage will have a long-term, positive impact on the research output of universities when the students... of course a small portion of them will become academics... but when they do, do you think they'll be more adept at research, just because of the liberal arts foundation?

I think so. I don't have any way to prove that, but I would say that my intuitive response is "yes," because those who really embrace the liberal arts approach are the individuals who will become lifelong learners earlier. Some people do it accidentally, or eventually. They get into a job, then they realize they want to do something else, and they start reading on their own. But that process will begin sooner, and my experience has been that when opportunities are presented for those students to be engaged in research early on they really do well with it and they want to do more of it. So, hypothetically, "yes," but I don't really have any evidence to prove it.

I don't know if anyone has tried to come up with quantifiable evidence for that or not, but it would be interesting.

Actually, as I was responding to you I was thinking about that. I don't know that they have. It would be interesting to find out.

Yes. It would be a pretty large research project, but it sure would be interesting. What about the role that students play? I feel like my students sometimes learn more from each other than from me. I set the context, and they talk. If they're friends with each other, then they learn more. I've noticed that.

That's why I said what I did before, about the content being delivered in a way other than having the professor be "a sage on the stage," because, to answer your question directly, students can learn a lot from each other. And in fact, we as professors can learn from them as well.

Most certainly.

I think, the idea is to model the notion that there's not one person in the room—the professor—who has all the knowledge, per se. He is, or she is, very knowledgeable and experienced, but that doesn't mean that he or she can't learn something from you, or that you as a student can't learn something from your colleagues and friends, even more than what you learn from the professor. Again, I think it sets up this model of learning as being holistic and being lifelong but still grounded in facts and content.

What about civic engagement, speaking of students learning in different environments, students learning from each other. I don't know what the general opinions about civic engagement are in Russia, but could you maybe talk a little bit about it?

Sure. I think that civic engagement and social responsibility are critically important. I'm going to share with you my view of higher education, in the United States, at least, and that is, I feel that we ought to be producing citizens who are prepared to lead in a very, very complex world, an incredibly complex and global world. Therefore, they're going to be the ones called on to solve problems. And in order to solve those problems, they have not only to think through the problems, to connect learning across disciplinary boundaries, to think critically in order to solve the problems, they also have to be able to put that knowledge into action. And that's where the civic engagement comes in, I believe. And, to me, being able to put that knowledge into action is going to provide them with the right tools, so that they are indeed not only impassioned and empowered about promoting change, but when they graduate, they will also have the tools to do it.

Could we talk a little bit about your time studying in Germany?

Yes, oh yes.

You mentioned the European system a little earlier in this conversation, and it's true that the Russian system was based on the German system. So how did your experience in Bonn inform your philosophy of education and administration?

My first response would be to say that my experience in Germany confirmed to me that the liberal arts approach to undergraduate educa-

tion is the best way to prepare citizens or graduates who are going to be able to promote positive change in the world. I found the German system to be incredibly narrow, although really excellent in a narrow way. When I came to Germany, because I studied musicology in the United States, I studied at the Cologne Conservatory of Music as well as at the University of Bonn. And I must say that the research experience I had at the University of Bonn was superb, really, really superb. Had I gone on to study musicology to finish my Ph.D., I would have had a great background. But that's a much higher level, leading to a Ph.D.

Were you already in graduate school at that point?

I was already in graduate school. I had already completed my pre-doctoral studies at Yale when I went to Germany. Because I was interested in what it was like, I took a first year course in musicology, just out of curiosity. What I experienced was quite interesting. This was, remember, in 1972. Things could be very different now. But in Germany at that time the professor was really revered. When the professor walked into the room, the students stood up and knocked on the desk to recognize the professor. But the interesting thing was that the professor didn't show up for three weeks. So we went to class for three weeks, and there was nobody there. Literally. No one.

So the point I'm getting to is that in Germany there is much more emphasis on learning on your own. That is, just because the professor wasn't there did not mean that you weren't expected to do the reading, even though there was no discussion in the class. You didn't get tested on your work until the very end of the semester. What I would say about this system is that it does make for independent learners. You have to be very independent if you're going to survive, but what it doesn't take into consideration is that people learn differently. And some of those people who learn differently are just as intelligent as those who learn in the way that the system is set up to support. And therefore, it means that a lot of people get left behind in the system, and that's just not something that I am a proponent of.

Yes... I couldn't imagine not showing up for my own classes for three weeks. I'd wonder if I still had a job at the end of it.

Well, you know, as I said, this was 1972. I hope it's different now, but at that time no one seemed to care. He just wasn't there, and so you left.

I've heard jokes about how in Germany the amount of time you had to wait for somebody depended on whether it was another a student, a graduate student, a professor...

That's correct. I was about to comment on this. I don't remember what the numbers were, and I think this was word of mouth—I don't think it

was in writing—but if it were a full professor you had to wait longer than if it was just a graduate assistant.

It's pretty funny, but I can kind of understand. I guess it's the teacher-oriented learning model.

Yes, and that was the university experience. The conservatory experience was not that different from conservatories in the United States, except that the exams were quite different. In the United States you generally do a set of recitals for your exams, even for doctoral exams. In Germany, you're given a list of items that you and your teacher decide on specific items you're going to play, and then you have several items that are required of everyone, maybe three: one that you have to learn within a week, they give you a piece, and you have to learn that piece and perform it within a week, and then there's one that they give you on the day of your exam that you have to go away and learn within an hour.

So that's quite different. Most American conservatories don't require that, and it certainly makes you agile.

Yes, you have to respond fast when you just get an hour to learn something.

That's correct.

Speaking of learning differently—I'm partial to this question, because I have my own beliefs about the answer to it—do you think it's possible for a person to study one thing, and then exercise the brain in such a way as to at least develop the potential for aptitude in something completely different? For example, I have a friend who's a theoretical physicist and another who's an economist, and so they both use a lot of math, and they both studied the violin from an early age. And they both said they were able to go further in math because of music. I believe Goethe said something similar about drawing from observation, that it exercises your mind in such a way that makes you better at writing or better at something else. Of course, this is all anecdotal, but do you think that's possible?

I do think it's possible. There's a book called *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. It was written by an art teacher who set out to show that everybody can draw, and that engaging in that process of drawing can help you in many other ways intellectually.

I need to read that book. That sound's great.

RC: It's called *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, by Betty Edwards. I was at a meeting with her one time. It's really fascinating. If you don't find it, I'll look for the citation and send it to you.

Okay, thank you.

But there are people who will tell you that there's a correlation between aptitude in music and scientific aptitude. I was, for instance, really good in math, and I was pushed by my teachers to consider engineering. And this was in the fourth grade, so it was not a serious consideration, particularly when I went to the library and found out what engineers did. It did not appeal to me.

You had time to make up your mind, luckily.

Architecture seemed much more appealing, because I could draw. I was a fairly good artist. So, I haven't done the research there, but I do think there's something to be said for that. I'm not a proponent of... you'll hear a lot of people say things like "if your child plays in an orchestra it will help your child do better on the SAT," but I'm not convinced of that. One of the reasons I don't like that argument is that I would like primary schools and secondary schools to provide music and arts instruction for the enduring benefits they bring to the children.

Right, rather than having it be extracurricular. That's where I was going with this. I mean, if you have a curriculum that includes it for everybody. As you know, we have writing for everybody at universities in the U.S., but we don't have music for everyone, and we don't have drawing for everyone. Those could somehow be beneficial in the long term.

You know, Ivan, there is some discussion and some research on the so-called—and I'm going to use the term although I abhor the term—the "soft skills." You know, the hard skills being math, science, and the STEM¹ subjects and the "soft" being "touchy-feely." What I've come to learn in the last few years is that engineering firms, software and hardware firms, are now looking for people who have both the hard skills and the soft skills. Because what they're looking for, what they've learned finally, is that people, that is customers, respond to you in the way that you treat them. It shouldn't be rocket science, but this is what they're learning now. Some people will ignore unpleasant interactions, and they may not like you, but they'll begrudge the interaction. But if you have "people skills"—and there has been some research done here—then sales go way up. And so, therefore I think that

¹ STEM is an acronym for: Science Technology Engineering Mathematics.

your point about how everyone could have music, drama, art, dance, or at least access to one of those is well taken, because it would help to cultivate that side of the personality. There is a famous quote from Dr. Maya Angelou that I have used, which I like very much. It's related to this, and it goes something like, "I've come to learn that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

That's a good one.

Isn't that a good one? And it's so obvious, it's really very obvious. In fact, my wife and I were talking about it the other day. We've had a great experience here in Berlin. My wife doesn't speak German at all, and we live very close to the Kurfuerstendamm, one block, and she knows a lot of the people, she loves to go shopping there. And there was a woman at one of the shops that she had visited, before we had gone to the United States a couple of weeks ago, who was very helpful. And then, when my wife went back because there was a mistake that was made on the receipt, the owner of the shop was there. And she was not very helpful. In fact, she was just not a very nice person. And I thought my wife was exaggerating, and she said "I want you to go back and speak German to her, because she says that they didn't make a mistake on my receipt." This was to get back the taxes, you know the rebate you can get. So I went back with her, and walking into the store... I can tell you this woman's countenance was just very negative. Very negative. And finally, speaking to her, I convinced her, but I think she already knew there was a mistake because she turned around and took out another form and filled it out and gave us the right form to take with us. But my wife was saying that of all the experiences here, that one left a really bitter taste in her mouth, because of the way she made her feel.

That makes sense. So, in the context of education, you're saying that if people learn how to communicate and interact, regardless of the discipline they go into or the type of job they have, then it's going to make for more success.

Precisely. Do you know Daniel Goleman's work? He's done a lot of work on emotional intelligence. That was for his first book. And since then there have been lots of other books, including a workbook for employers, to help them. And those are the so-called "soft skills," but they are the important ones in terms of relating to human beings. So I think that there could be benefits, this is my point.

Sure. I can't think of any type of industry or discipline that doesn't involve some form of human interaction. All the products people make are for other people.

Exactly.

I was in Germany, in Berlin, last summer, and we rented a house. And the owner's son was there one evening, and he was studying "Interface Design." I don't remember which school. But I was trying to explain to him how we have general education courses in America, and [I asked] if they had anything like that, and he said "No, why would I study anything other than interface design?" So I said, "Well, did you ever take anatomy?" And he said "No, why?" I said "Because you're learning how to design things people can use, so you should learn something about how the body's constructed, so you don't give someone carpal tunnel syndrome when you invent a new keyboard." He never thought of it. His curriculum didn't include anything outside of that [narrow topic]. He's going to specialize fast and be an expert in four or five years, but he won't know much about anatomy or how to make the products he designs work well with people.

That's an excellent example, and it's a real reason why, when I went to Germany in 1972, I lived with a German-American family. She was American and he was German. They had four boys, they were seven, eight, nine, and eleven when I moved in with them. And I lived with them for three years. And their father was an *Oberstudienrat*, which is the highest rank you can have as a schoolteacher there. He taught in the private *gymnasium*. I was amazed at how soon they, in high school, had to start focusing their interests on certain subjects they would be tested in. The same as in England. England does the same thing when they do the "A Levels," "O Levels," "GCSEs." That, to me, is problematic.

Getting locked into a track while pretty young...

Yes, and I guess it would be a massive study to find out how many people change their paths because they chose the wrong area when they were younger.

It would be interesting to see that for Europe or other parts of the world. I've read, and I don't know how rigorous the studies were, but I've read that in America people change actual career paths—not just jobs, but professions—three or four times on average.

That's correct. Actually, in one of the articles I wrote I quoted something from the U. S. Department of Labor that said that by the time today's graduates—and this is going back to 2010 or 2009—by the time they were thirty eight years old they would have had from ten to thirteen, fourteen different jobs. And they'd be working in areas that don't even exist yet. When I initially read that, I thought "Oh, my God, that seems preposterous." And then I thought about my own daughter.

Now, this was 2010. By 2010 she had been graduated for four years. And already by 2010 she'd had five, six different jobs.

A new job every year, basically.

And it didn't really phase her to go to a new place. And they were all good jobs, progressively good jobs. And now, today, this is 2015... I haven't counted them up, but I would bet you... she graduated nine years ago, and she's had at least eight or nine jobs. She's had three different jobs in the last three years. Two different jobs, actually, but she's about to start a new one right now.

So the idea is there are jobs that don't exist yet, and that's what we have to prepare students for.

Yes. There was a quote from, I believe it was Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, who said that "We're preparing young people today to work in jobs that don't exist, using tools that have not been developed yet, solving problems that we're not even aware of yet," which I thought was a good way of phrasing it.

I like that. It's a moving target.

It's true, it's very, very true, because if you think about the past... Well, you're younger than I am, but if you think about the change that's come along in the last thirty, forty years, and now, with information being ubiquitous, things are just changing more quickly. Just think about this thing [an iPhone]. It's not that old, and yet, how many iterations have there been?

We're on iPhone 6 now, is that right?

Yes, so you have to be prepared. The term I use to describe what liberal arts and sciences education does is that it helps students to become agile learners, very flexible learners. And that's what employers are looking for. As I say to my students—once you get a job, if on Friday your employer says, "Okay, Joe, the operations have changed for this machine from Friday to Monday," and they give you the manual, they're not going to test you on it that Monday. They're going to assume that you've figured it out. You just have to implement it.

With that in mind, especially as things are changing so quickly, what do you think the most effective way to structure a liberal arts and sciences education is? What makes a good liberal arts and sciences education in this context, when we're aiming at a moving target—trying to teach students how to solve problems we don't know about, using tools that don't exist?

To begin with, at a college or university you have to be sure that you start everyone on a level playing field. So, in order to do that, I believe first-year seminars can be very helpful, because in a first-year seminar, where you have a full-time professor teaching a small group of students—fifteen to sixteen students—that professor can model the kind of intellectual behavior and habits of mind that will be required in order for students to become a lifelong learners, to be able to think critically, to be able to connect knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. It also will provide a laboratory, if you will—fifteen students is small enough a group—a laboratory for the students to work with each other and really learn how to read a text, regardless of the subject, and then, rather than just reciting back the text or regurgitating it, interrogating the text, coming up with further questions based on a reading of the text. That's what critical thinking is all about.

So that's the foundation. You have that as a foundation. I do think, then, that the educational experience has to include quantitative skills, some humanities courses, some social sciences courses, and students can choose what they want to take. But there should also be opportunities for civic engagement, which I mentioned, so that you can apply some of what you've learned in the classroom to real world situations and problem solving. And there should also be an opportunity, once you've gotten into your major—because no matter what the liberal arts and sciences education is, you have to have a major—where you really take a deep dive in a particular subject. But again, that dive is not taken from the perspective of one who is only going to be looking this way at that subject, but rather, who is looking at that subject in the context of how it compares to the subject you took over here or over there. Again, what is it E. O. Wilson said? It's fluency across the boundaries, that is, trying to connect across disciplinary boundaries. I think that's key.

And then, finally, in the last year, bringing it all together in some kind of a senior project, where you have a problem-based issue to solve or resolve, and you hopefully are using everything you've learned—the skills, as well as the knowledge you've learned before—to solve that problem or to comment on that problem or situation.

I like that. I think that it will be interesting for our readers to contemplate that model. Could you talk a little bit about LEAP?²

Yes, that's actually a nice lead-in to LEAP, because what I just outlined in a broad way represents what we in LEAP feel should be the essential learning outcomes for all undergraduate students. That is, some coursework from the quantitative areas, from the humanities, from the

² Liberal Education & America's Promise, the American Association of Colleges and Universities' Centennial Campus Action, Advocacy, and Research Initiative (<https://www.aacu.org/leap>).

social sciences, as well as civic engagement and social responsibility, the first-year seminar, and the capstone experience. But let me tell you how LEAP got started.

This is our eleventh year, and it really was an effort on the part of AAC&U [the American Association of Colleges & Universities] to respond to a phenomenon that we discovered in doing some other work. That phenomenon was that employers, and people in the business world, and those of us in higher education, had similar outcomes in mind when it came to answering the question, “What is a college education for?” Employers expressed those outcomes in different ways than we in higher education did, but they were still similar. And so we did some focus groups with students and families. What we learned was that there was a disconnect between what students and families perceived a college or university education outcome should be and what we in higher education and business thought.

For instance, the business people said they want employees who can communicate well, can write well, can think critically—they often use that term, “thinking critically”—can work well in diverse groups, can be independent, etc., whereas the families and the students felt that you needed to be educated in a specific area, like business, in order to get a job. But a lot of business people said, “I don’t care what you’re educated in as long as you have these other attributes, because I can teach you the specifics of my business.” That’s generally how LEAP got started.

The purpose—once we did these first focus groups, and we’ve done several focus groups since that time—is to bring into better alignment, if you will, the perceptions or the expectations that educators and employers have for an education with those of the students and their families. This is the eleventh year, and we’ve been able to engage a lot of employers to help us with the message, because we in higher education thought that if we’re the ones going out, talking about how important liberal arts and sciences education is, it might not be as compelling or it might not be as convincing as it is when we have someone like the former CEO of Proctor & Gamble or Northrop Grumman making the case for us. We’ve developed several talking points for presidents and trustees on this matter. So what’s the goal? It was an advocacy campaign to make the case for liberal arts and sciences education being the best approach to higher education for the 21st century, given the challenges that we face.

I’m not sure if Russia has any organization like that. It’s interesting, because it addresses the most common critique that I hear, which is that, as the liberal arts and sciences model spreads, the critics say “Well, we want job training!”

Exactly, precisely! I can send you some links. There’s a lot of good research that we’ve done. And I can share with you links to the in-

terviews we've done even as recently as last December with CEOs³ and COOs⁴ of corporations, where we asked them whether they had a choice between a person of this kind of education versus a person with that kind—where we describe a specific skill, like critical thinking, etc. — what would you want? And overwhelmingly they say “I want the person who can think critically, who can work independently, who can work well in groups, who can connect problems and issues across disciplinary boundaries.”

Let me put it another way... I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but the current administration of the Federal Government has been making the case that certain young people may be better off going to a two-year community college, because they can get a job more easily after that. So you can go get computer training, then get a computer job. You can get training as an automobile mechanic, then get an automotive job. This is probably true. However, what is also true is that such an education is only preparing you for that first, entry-level job. It's not preparing you for a lifelong career, where you advance in a particular job.

There are many ways one can parse it. If you want to become an auto mechanic, and you want to do nothing but work on automobiles the rest of your life, one could say “Well, that's okay.” But I would come back and say it's okay if all you want to do is continue to be an auto mechanic, but what if you might like, someday, to run the whole business, be the manager? If you don't have skills like being able to read well or write well, or to treat people well, you're not going to be successful. I think you might be able to use some of the data, some of the quotes we have from these CEOs as you talk to people over there, because they're CEOs from companies that they will recognize.

I would love to see those links, so please do send them. So, moving from LEAP, is there anything about a liberal arts and sciences education that we haven't discussed that you would like to share with an international audience who may have been educated in a different system?

I kind of alluded to this when I talked about civic engagement, but I didn't talk about it directly. It's that the other thing a good liberal arts and sciences education provides for people is a way of thinking that is much more broad-minded and open, such that there is room for understanding of difference—people who look differently from you, who act differently, who eat differently, who speak a different language—and therefore, one could make the case that, perhaps, liberal arts and sciences education, or having more people with a liberal arts and

³ Chief Executive Officers.

⁴ Chief Operations Officers.

scienceseducation, could perhaps promote world peace. I'm not prepared to go quite that far, but certainly it contributes to a better understanding of differences, more open-mindedness, and more openness to being ready to understand.

Definitely, I agree that it can enhance efforts to solve differences diplomatically, at the very least.

Yes. Again, that's the old Maya Angelou quote once more. A lot of times problems can be resolved first by making people feel good about being with you, and that leads to trust. And that trust can lead to a level of dialogue and engagement that you don't have if there's confrontational engagement going on.

Dr. Crutcher, I would really like to thank you again for this interview. I'm excited about seeing it in print.

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