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FEATURE: President Isiaah Crawford on COVID-19.
By Alex Dyson

University President Isiaah Crawford discusses how his administration is dealing with COVID-19 and the uncertainty that surrounds it. This interview was conducted April 20, 2020 and has been edited for length and clarity.

AD: What has your job as president been like before COVID-19, and how is it different now?

IC: Different Alex, since the advent of the pandemic, is that I’m not out and about spreading the gospel and the good word of the University of Puget Sound... So the fundraising part of it, you know, that’s all been really kind of shut down with the public health restrictions that we’re having to undertake to stem the tide... I’ve been doing a few things along those lines via videoconference like you and I are doing, but not having those in person meetings where you really get to relate to people in a different and I’ll argue a better way.
AD: Can you remember the moment when it hit you that COVID-19 was going to make this really serious effect?

IC: Well, for sure, when the governor indicated, I think on March 9... that we were going to have to engage in social distancing. And it was going to require transitioning our students out of the residence halls, and really pivoting our curriculum, our business operations and student support services to a virtual format. So I would say right around March 9, when that proclamation came from the governor, that’s when it truly hit home.

AD: Take me through receiving that notice from the governor. What were some of the early challenges in responding? When did things start to shape up?

IC: We had been in touch with the governor’s office and with members of the state public health department, so we had a clue that he was likely going to move in that direction. So we weren’t fully caught off guard...

Really, we created the world’s longest to-do list of all the procedures, policies, and accounting practices so that we can make sure that we weren’t forgetting about something that was important.

To try to be in control of those things that we can, and try to be positioned to respond to what may come around the corner that we just don’t know.

AD: What’s most uncertain now for you as an executive?

IC: What’s most uncertain? Well, I guess I really would want to focus my response around the sense of what I feel is certain, which is that we will get through this. We will come out on the other side. This will not destroy us. We will work our way through it. It’s going to be a challenge. It’s uncertain how the novel coronavirus will have its course of abatement over this period of time. You can’t necessarily predict that exactly.

But what we have been able to recognize is that we can respond appropriately to it. That we can be necessarily flexible and adapt. I would hope over these years we’ve been together, you’ve come to experience me as a glass half full guy. Yeah, I’m the glass half full guy. And I have not wavered...
from that. As a team, as the members of the Cabinet and other leadership, both faculty and staff, our focus has been on what we can do to best look after our students, to be able to honor the promises that we have made to all of you, and try to look at this one day at a time. To try to be in control of those things that we can, and try to be positioned to respond to what may come around the corner that we just don’t know.

**AD:** What are some possible contingencies with the COVID-19? How do you plan each for each?

**IC:** We are taking what we’re calling sort of a dual track approach. So preparing with a hope — see my fingers crossed — with a hope that we’ll be able to resume our normal operation for the start of the fall semester. We believe that we will have public health restrictions in place, social distancing elements in place, and we’re going to have to figure out what that will be like for us on campus. But we are planning with the hope that our students will be able to return to our residence halls, and we’ll launch the fall semester, as normatively as we can.

We’re also planning though for the possibility that maybe the virus doesn’t abate. And we might have to start the academic year from a virtual or remote fashion. I would hope that’s not the case, but we’re going to plan for that possibility. And we’re also going to plan for the possibility that we might be able to start face-to-face, more normal, but sometime during the academic year 2020-2021, you might have some period of time where we might have to go back to virtual, because there could be another way of infection. And we might have to step back into that.

So we are putting together an organizational planning group, that’s going to consist of administrators, faculty, staff, and students, to look at all of those myriad elements to that, particularly in terms of, if we have to be in some sort of social distancing framework, how do we make that work? So for example, we likely will need to have schedules for people to go to the dining hall. Right? And then being able to make sure we clean the dining hall after that group goes through. Or what do we do with regard to the residence halls? And how do we structure that? And so you can imagine the various permutations of what social distancing would mean for a residential campus. We need to figure out how that can work. And we feel that we can do that. But we want to bring our best and brightest minds together to kind of think about in a very nitty-gritty way, we’re going to have to do that in a way that’s going to satisfy the state health department.
AD: Absolutely. What do you expect might be on the agenda in some of these planning meetings? What are the challenges?

IC: Yeah, again, the residence hall, what the living situation and conditions need to be like, how many students can we have on a floor? Really concrete stuff, like how many people to a bathroom? I mean, really that kind of level of consideration. Then, again, a dining schedule, what does that look like? Use of our facilities broadly across the university. For example, our musicians and the use of their instruments, the laboratories that students use to do their experiments. What are the structures that we need to have in place with regard to access and use of the library? How many people can we have in the library any given time? Access to Diversions, access to the campus store? And we haven’t even talked about the athletic component of this. What does this mean for athletics programs and our athletic facilities? We have to develop all sorts of policies and plans and procedures that would relate to any of that, as well.

AD: What about possibly beyond the next year. How does COVID-19 change the way that you think about the longer term future of Puget Sound, if at all?

IC: My hope is, you know, some of the science that we are attending suggests it’s possible that we could have a vaccine for the novel coronavirus by the first or second quarter, more likely second and third quarter, of 2021. That would hopefully allow us to be able to resume truly more normative activity. So you know, we need a vaccine, and we need to have an effective treatment for COVID-19, and once those can come on the scene, then we can see ourselves moving to a more normative environment. Until that happens, I think we’re going to have to be ready for whatever comes our way, to respond as the virus requires. So I’m thinking we might be in this mode of operating for maybe a good year and a half or two, hopefully not more than that.

This is a notable moment in history, and you’re going to see how you, as a group of young people, met that challenge and worked your way through it.

AD: We spoke a bit before this interview, but how are you personally getting along?
IC: I'm doing well, managing this as best as anyone else can. We're living restricted lives, but we're doing this for the benefit of our various communities and the people that we love, so I'm doing fine. As I shared with you earlier, I missed all of you terribly. It is lonely here on campus without the students, faculty and staff, and so I just really miss all of you. Certainly for our graduating seniors, I'm just feeling so heartbroken for you that you're not able to have the type of spring semester you should have had, that you could savor this time with your classmates and your friends. We're going to look to try to do all that we can to celebrate you in a virtual way on what would have been commencement day and look forward to having you back on campus next year and doing it right and treating you very, very well.

I'm very proud of this institution. I'm proud of the way that my faculty and staff colleagues have responded to this crisis, how we've been able to pivot to continue to offer a good educational and social experience for students. We've even learned how to do a lot of university business in a virtual format.

Most of all, I'm proud of our students, because you're demonstrating to us that you're as resilient as we knew that you were and could be, and we're hopeful that this is really helping to prepare you for whatever may come your way in the rest of your life. This is a notable moment in history, and you're going to see how you, as a group of young people, met that challenge and worked your way through it. You managed your disappointments, and you came out on the other side and triumphed. We wanted to help position you and support you in being able to step into that as you move beyond this moment in time.

AD: I appreciate that. Thank you for speaking with me. What does the rest of your week have in store?

IC: Man, I got so many of these Zoom meetings it's driving me nuts! I can just say I'm learning a lot about technology, so I don't feel quite like the Luddite that I do sometimes. But yeah, I'm doing meetings — meetings, meetings, and meetings. But it's all good.
Studies Abroad Abruptly Cancelled due to Covid-19

Remote instruction mandated, with mixed results.