

Diplomat Turned Educator will Head Local University

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Cleary University

Alan Drimmer is thinking through plans to accelerate programming that realistically prepares students for the job market and expands the community served by the Cleary University.

Approaches to higher education alternatives as affected by COVID-19 confront Alan Drimmer as he moves into the presidency of Cleary University July 1. Cleary is a nonprofit Michigan school established in 1883.

Drimmer, whose career has placed him in Midwest educational posts after Mideast diplomatic assignments, is thinking through plans to accelerate programming that realistically prepares students for the job market and expands the community served by the university, which is based in Howell and has a Detroit center.

“I’m very excited to join the Cleary community and help build awareness for the good things Cleary is doing with the Cleary Mind, a trademarked program that needs more visibility,” Drimmer said of the university centered in business arts.

“Cleary came to my attention because several years ago they developed a framework [the Cleary Mind] for the kinds of skills and competencies that people need in the workforce, and they used data to find out what people need to be successful. A lot of that was not in the curriculum earlier, but they made a conscious effort to encapsulate that.”

Besides the knowledge specific to certain jobs, Cleary research found eight skill factors necessary for students to master regardless of the job direction each is pursuing: critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communications, persuasion, entrepreneurship, leadership and ethics.

“I thought this was really innovative,” said Drimmer, 60, whose work as a higher education consultant included an affiliation with the Boston Consulting Group, which has a Detroit office. “Cleary rewired the whole curriculum to map it to these eight. These are not just things that we think are important. They’re important to employers.”

Cleary, founded in Ypsilanti, offers associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees while focusing on personalized experiences that encompass sports and other programs of community interest. The school is able to serve nearly 1,000 students in person and online — a number administrators are aiming to increase — and has a capacity of housing about 200 students.

Drimmer, raised in a Cleveland Jewish family committed to the Civil Rights Movement, understands the importance of accommodating personal interests as he looks back on his own educational and career choices. Interested in the Mideast as a teenager, he was allowed to live on a kibbutz during his 16th year. At the University of Chicago, political science was at the center of his bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees.



Alan Drimmer

“My focus was on the Arab-Israeli wars, and that was the subject of my dissertation,” said Drimmer, who became a Raoul Wallenberg Scholar at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a Research Fellow at the Center for Arabic Study Abroad at the American University in Cairo. “I joined the foreign service and was a diplomat in Jordan representing the State Department between the two Gulf Wars, and there was excitement and intrigue.”

Back in the United States, he served as an international economics sanctions officer for the Treasury Department before deciding to alter his professional direction.

Pivot to Education

“I decided to pivot to education because I wanted to make a change in the world,” said Drimmer, whose father had taught history at Spelman College in Atlanta and Cleveland State University. “I believed — rightly or wrongly — that my ability to impact foreign policy was

very limited. However, I did think I could make an impact in education.

“My teachers at the University of Chicago made a strong impression, and my dream became to improve the quality of student-faculty relationships. At the University of Chicago, the faculty cared about me as a person and challenged my assumptions about building a meaningful life, inspiring me to dedicate my professional life to improving access to education.”

To achieve his revised career goals, Drimmer earned a master’s degree in business administration from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He went on to positions that included provost and executive vice president at the University of Phoenix, chief academic officer and senior vice president at the University of Maryland Global Campus in College Park and provost at the National Defense University in Chicago.

“When I decided to work in education about 20 years ago, I made a conscious decision to focus on helping students move into the labor market,” Drimmer said. “I also made a conscious decision to focus on institutions, probably the vast majority of institutions in this country, that are not elite and highly selective. They are institutions that help people find a path.

“One of the reasons I wanted to come to Cleary was that I really think they’re on the right path. They want to help people develop and position themselves to be successful in the job market, and they have some very sophisticated ways of doing that.”

Drimmer, married to an attorney (Jacki) and the father of two university and two high school students, envisions an important part of his job as motivating current students to stay in college and motivating former students to complete their degree requirements.

“The first critical issue facing college students is to find flexibility,” said Drimmer, who points out that half the students starting college do not finish and so he wants Cleary to offer adaptability for students in various age groups, whether working or not and whether comfortable with different kinds of technology or not.

Flexible Program

“Cleary tries to maximize the classes students already have taken and the skills that they have. Students can go fast or slow. They can go online or face-to-face or a mix. They can get a degree or a certificate.”

Addressing the rising costs of higher education, Drimmer will be looking into diverse ways Cleary students can get financial aid and allow credit for accomplishments at other schools and on-the-job experiences.

“At Cleary, we really want to have an impact on students to deepen their experiences and help them reflect,” Drimmer said. “We want to help people launch either into new careers or into milestones in their existing careers, but it’s not just about learning skills. It’s also about

developing as a person.”