A special thank you to the efforts of the University of Miami Alumni Board of Directors for their leadership in developing this publication.
What Does it Mean to Be a ‘Cane? Here Is the Story of the U...

Serving others for the betterment of society is our rallying cry. It’s why we chose to come to UM, and it lives on when we graduate. Like our beloved mascot Sebastian the Ibis—the ibis bird being the first to return after a major hurricane—UM students and alumni are the first to take a stand and make the world a better place.

The University of Miami has demonstrated true excellence and character during critical times in history that have made the institution a pillar of strength and the embodiment of a compassionate spirit.

• World War II: UM offered special classes to pilots, navigators, and aviation personnel from the United States and Great Britain. More than 8,000 war personnel, including members of the British Royal Air Force, received training at the University.

• Civil Rights Era: Martin Luther King Jr. came to campus to address students and faculty to provide hope for an unsegregated America. The visit was controversial for its time, but helped to bring the conversation of equality to the forefront.

• Hurricane Andrew: Relief efforts on campus transformed the library into a makeshift home for many, complete with cot beds and clothing. Exams were canceled for the fall 1992 semester as students and faculty focused on rebuilding after the devastation.

• Earthquake in Haiti: From in-the-trenches medical responses to grassroots initiatives, community outreach, and fundraising efforts yielding $4.4 million, the University of Miami responded to the 2010 disaster in many ways. Alumna Elizabeth Greig, M.D. ’10, created a plan to get doctors into Haiti after the disaster and served as director of the UM field hospital in Port-au-Prince. UM furnished the first medical team on the ground, providing essential support to help the survival and recovery of the Haitian people. They treated more than 250 critically injured patients within 48 hours of arriving in Haiti; nearly 300 UM doctors, nurses, and other personnel served in Haiti in a 240-bed tent hospital with operating rooms and advanced technologies.

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A Bold, Remarkable History

Since its inception, the University of Miami has pursued a lofty vision of greatness. Born in the 20th century during a time of ceaseless change in a community at a geographic crossroad, UM was not constrained by precedents or traditions. It pursued a unique path distinguished by boundless innovation, savvy, and optimistic forward thinking.

The Early Years (1925-1945)

Founded in 1925 as South Florida’s first university, UM owes its origin to Coral Gables founder George Merrick, who donated 160 acres of land and more than $1 million for a planned Mediterranean Revival-style campus. Those dreams were nearly dashed when a devastating Category 4 hurricane blew through Miami on September 18, 1926. The University still opened on schedule on October 15—a sign of the optimistic, scrappy attitude of the U. On opening day, 125 prospective students showed up to enroll. An unfinished Merrick Building was abandoned for 20 years as the struggling University leased or purchased hotels and apartments two miles north of the campus, hastily converting them into classrooms and housing, giving the school the nickname: “Cardboard College.”

Over the next two decades, the University built key leadership, faculty, and infrastructure, establishing key academic units including the School of Law, School of Business Administration, School of Education, Graduate School, and School of Engineering.

Let us take a look at our institution’s humble beginnings in the 1920s.

Army and Navy cadets parade in front of the Anastasia Building, which housed the University prior to construction on the main campus.
Realizing Its Promise: Post-War Decades (1946-1979)

The GI Bill, which funded returning soldiers' tuition and expenses, shaped the post-World War II years. When the 1946 fall semester commenced, more than 5,000 students enrolled. To accommodate everyone, the University opened in South Campus for 500 freshmen and 10 faculty. In 1948 the Memorial Building was dedicated, becoming the first permanent building on the campus. Thanks to a $5 million Federal Housing Administration loan, 530 apartments were built on campus. The Merrick Building was finally completed in 1948. Subsequently, academic programs were on the upswing; the Marine Institute opened, and in 1948 a long-term lease was signed for property on Virginia Key. In 1952 the medical school opened at the Veterans’ Hospital (the former and future Biltmore Hotel)—Florida’s first medical school.

A great social change took place in 1961 when the Board of Trustees voted to admit qualified students without regard to race and color, ending the segregation that had been in place at the U since its opening. UM’s integration led other Florida institutions to make the same move.

Approaching the Millennium (1980-2000)

The 1980s began with tremendous upheaval as the Miami community experienced the Mariel Boatlift and inner-city riots. This hurt the local economy and community morale. More than 1,000 students withdrew, causing a $5 million budget shortfall. In response, the University introduced a strategic plan, “Strategy for Excellence,” with the intent of propelling UM into the circle of prestigious private research institutions. There was reduced enrollment and increased student selectivity; average SAT scores of incoming freshmen increased by nearly 100 points; and a stronger emphasis on academics, research, teaching excellence, and sponsored research funding. A major change in student life was the transformation of the dormitories into residential colleges. Hurricane athletics excelled with nine national championships—four in football, three in baseball, one in women’s golf, and one in men’s crew. The football team compiled the longest home winning streak in NCAA history—58 games at the Orange Bowl.

In 1967 the organization United Black Students was founded, and the first black faculty member was hired in 1979. Although construction began in 1926, due to financial challenges the Merrick Building remained a “skeleton” until it was finally completed and opened in 1948.

America’s Next Great Research University (2001 to present)

The 2000s have been marked by accelerated progress in all key areas—teaching and learning, the discovery of new knowledge, the delivery of cutting-edge medical care, and service to the region and beyond. The University is ranked among the nation’s top universities in U.S. News & World Report’s “America’s Best Colleges.” It was ranked No. 1 for 12 consecutive years by U.S. News.

The Launch Pad, a novel and successful entrepreneurship initiative developed at the U, has proven to be a successful model that other institutions are emulating. The program enables students and alumni to start new ventures, providing them with coaching, workshops, and access to a network of experienced entrepreneurs. The spirit of experiential learning translates well into the real world upon graduation, as students take their experiences to impact the organizations they join.

The University’s landscape has been completely transformed with major centers of excellence opening on all three campuses. On the Coral Gables campus, 11 new buildings have been erected including the state-of-the-art student center, alumni center, athletic center, on-campus housing for upperclassmen, facilities for the architecture, music, communication, and nursing schools, and College of Arts and Sciences, and the BankUnited Center, which moved Commencement ceremonies from the University Green indoors for the first time in decades. The Miller School of Medicine opened the Clinical Research Building, Biomedical Research Building, University of Miami Hospital, Life Science and Technology Park, and Wellness Center, as well as satellite campuses: Bascom Palmer Palm Beach Gardens and Sylvester at Deerfield Beach. The Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science opened the cutting-edge...
The Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science offers various programs for students to conduct cutting-edge scientific research and participate in innovative hands-on experiences in marine biology, including coral reef restoration projects, underwater aquatic surveys, and shark tagging.

The School of Nursing and Health Studies offers a world-class program that integrates curriculum with evidence-based practice and cutting-edge simulated learning.

Future Unlimited

As one of the nation’s top research universities, whose extraordinary momentum makes it one of the great success stories in U.S. higher education, the University of Miami is already on a trajectory toward global greatness. The advancement of the University of Miami, in just 90 years of existence, is undeniable and demonstrates that the U is a force to be reckoned with.

“As the University launches into its tenth decade, I believe this is a perfect opportunity to look back at where we have been, to make a close assessment of where we are today, and to use these vantage points to define a roadmap toward our second century. The University of Miami’s story—past, present, and future—is a collective narrative told by the thousands of individuals who have developed the education, research, service, and spirit of community that are our hallmark.”

- Julio Frenk, who became the University of Miami’s sixth president on August 16, 2015