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The Furman Advantage

Furman's vision reimagines the student experience.

BY ELIZABETH DAVIS

Shaking 600 hands in a single hour is one of my job requirements, and every year I do it gladly. Standing on the Commencement platform last May inside Paladin Stadium under cloud-streaked twilight skies, I was struck by the thought that this moment marked at least the 50th time I've been a part of a graduation ceremony as a student, faculty member, and now president. I've become accustomed to this annual ritual. In fact, I look forward to it: There are few rewards more satisfying than witnessing hundreds of students walking across the stage, each of whom is a unique story of hard work, perseverance, and success.

What awaits these graduates we cannot fully know, but we can look to those who already have made this passage for some instruction. The success of Furman alumni in all walks of life is a source of pride and confidence and, we hope, a sign to a new generation that a degree from Furman University carries immense and enduring value. This is especially important at a time when people are questioning the value of a college degree, and wondering if the existing model is up to the challenges of the new realities in our society.

I take these concerns in our national conversation seriously. It is tempting

to dismiss them and hope the issues go away. They're not likely to, nor should we wish for it. Rather, we need to be attentive to making a college education relevant in an era when the economic dislocations are real, when new careers and fields of study are born moment by moment, and when the world is shrinking rapidly and at the same time creating new barriers. Now, more than ever, we have an obligation to produce educated and thoughtful leaders who have both broad-based knowledge and the practical expertise to address real issues.

This is why Furman—with input from our trustees, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members—has spent the better part of two years developing an ambitious vision for the university's future. We have, as I suggested in my last essay in *Furman* magazine, imagined "on a grand scale and scope."

We are calling it "The Furman Advantage," and we are bold enough to believe that it is a new model for what a university can and should be. The Furman Advantage guarantees every student an unparalleled education that combines classroom learning with immersive out-of-classroom experiences. These experiences, which build on our pioneering model of engaged learning, will include deep and lasting

partnerships between faculty members, students, and community organizations, allowing students the chance to tackle pressing community issues and expanding the network of mentors who guide our students through college and into the rest of their lives. Through The Furman Advantage, we are demonstrating the value of a Furman education, both for students and for communities in South Carolina and beyond.

Our story about The Furman Advantage begins on p. 20, and includes details of the vision and profiles of students and alumni who have benefited from the kinds of experiences we have long provided. We intend to expand, unify, and provide these opportunities to each and every student so that they are prepared by Furman, like no other university, for life beyond their time on campus.

As we have shared our preliminary thoughts about The Furman Advantage, we have been pleased to find important partners who share our vision, most notably The Duke Endowment. In this past year the endowment has provided the largest set of grants in Furman's history—\$47 million—to make possible our guarantee to every student. The Oct. 5 announcement that the endowment has committed \$25 million to significantly increase both the number and quality of global experiences, research opportunities, internships, and community-centered projects at Furman followed last fall's announcement of \$22 million to fully fund the James B. Duke Scholarships, our premier merit-based scholarship. I am enormously grateful to the endowment's board for this vote of confidence in our vision.

I also am gratified by the enthusiasm with which The

Furman Advantage is being met by civic and community leaders in Greenville and the surrounding community. It is no secret that the place Furman has called home for over 160 years is a confident and progressive region, anchored by a city that is unified in its desire to be one of America's best small urban centers. The kind of growth the area has seen in the past two decades inevitably leads to the kinds of challenges that other American cities are seeing, and the need for scholars and planners, politicians and business leaders alike to work together has never been more important. We think Furman has a vital role to play, and one that will provide benefits to the area but also to our students and faculty. And we believe The Furman Advantage is going to take us there.

In the coming months we will be working full steam ahead to implement this vision. Work is underway on several fronts, including exciting new community engagement, career networking, and mentoring initiatives for students. I plan to visit alumni around the country in the next few months to meet with you and talk about the vision. I hope that you will follow our progress closely and ask the tough questions. And, if you are inclined, I ask that you step forward as a partner in this ambitious vision for Furman University.

The moment has arrived to emerge among the top ranks of America's best universities. There has never been a better time for the courage, conviction, and persistence that characterize Furman.

Warmly,

