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What We Know Now: Conclusions from a Yearlong Study Help Point the Way to a Stronger Future

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What We Know Now

Conclusions from a yearlong study help point the way to a stronger future.

BY ELIZABETH DAVIS

The way of progress is rarely a straight line. More often, it's a winding path that leads forward, but only if we are both disciplined and open to the unexpected detour.

Last fall, shortly after I wrote in this space about a restlessness for renewal and our emerging strategic priorities, we received the results of a positioning study conducted by the firm Art & Science. Their report is at once sobering in some of its findings and exhilarating in illuminating the great opportunities before us.

First, the sobering news: Art & Science showed us that Furman appears to suffer from a lack of differentiation and distinctive appeal in the market. As a result, many prospective students perceive that our competitors will provide more of what they are looking for in an educational experience—at greater affordability. This is true even though Furman has stronger academics, is ranked more highly, and provides more meaningful engagement opportunities than many of the schools to which students compare us. The report clarified for us that the notion of affordability is not simply

a reflection of our tuition, but more importantly of the value survey respondents ascribed to Furman.

For example, far too many prospective students consider us a second or third choice. As a result, Furman has a low conversion rate of inquirers to applicants, and relatively low yield rates, which is the ratio of students we accept to those who enroll. These trends, the data show, have characterized our enrollment since the economic recession in 2008.

Interestingly, students who chose to matriculate this past fall said they were enthusiastic about their choice and showed less concern with affordability. This suggests that matriculants have a greater understanding of, and regard for, Furman's value. How do we make sense of these findings?

The answer leads us to the good news. Furman has always had an outstanding and scholarly faculty dedicated to teaching and mentoring students. Our alumni are models of success and service. More than two decades ago, Furman pioneered the concept of engaged learning, a model that has been co-opted in some form by institutions across

the country. And Furman's campus is one of the most beautiful and nurturing places to study and live and take risks that help students attain their goals. The students who come here see and feel these things. They boast about them; they succeed because of them.

The problem, we've learned, is that being a pacesetter forces others to catch up. Our competitors have done so. In some instances they have surpassed us. If we want to distinguish ourselves anew, we must forge new ground.

This will not be merely a matter of admission recruitment or marketing. Along with promoting Furman's excellence, we must work together to define what Furman can offer to students that they cannot find anywhere else. We must imagine on a grand scale and scope.

There is, fortunately, a good foundation on which to build. Art & Science tested a variety of potential initiatives that could contribute to strengthening Furman's institutional character and appeal—substantial and relevant experiences that would emanate from Furman's core educational values and historic mission. They found that Furman might be uniquely suited to combine the best of a close-knit liberal arts experience with the resources of a much larger university to create a new type of university experience.

There is an emerging consensus on campus that this new type of university would entail an education rooted in the liberal arts and sciences, reimagined to focus more intentionally on experiences that prepare students for lives of purpose and accelerated career and community impact. Self-reflection and mentorship—coupled with

project-based learning, career exploration, faculty research collaborations, and external partnerships—would take place within a community of experts. Faculty, staff, alumni, students, and community partners would ultimately work side-by-side to address society's pressing issues in Greenville, South Carolina, and beyond.

In the coming months, we will consider how such an experience-based educational model might be developed as a complement to the core curriculum. Already, a working group from Academic Affairs, Student Life, and Alumni Relations is devising an expanded program for professional exploration and alumni mentoring for undergraduates. Dr. Angela Halfacre, who has graciously accepted my offer to become a special advisor for community engagement, will lead the development of a comprehensive plan to catalyze community partnerships.

It will also be important for our alumni and friends to contribute both ideas and philanthropic support, and I have been heartened by the efforts of many who, independent of the research findings, recognize the same issues we are finding in the marketplace.

I am optimistic about the path ahead, and from my many discussions with faculty, alumni, parents, and others, I believe the Furman community is as well. Indeed, when I think of Furman's mission and its history of courage, conviction, and persistence, I am confident that this galvanizing moment is one that will find us once more setting the pace as a university to emulate and follow.

Warmly,

Elizabeth Davis