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## Q&A: George Shields, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost

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**A**n award-winning scientist, professor and administrator, Shields joined Furman July 1 as Furman's chief academic officer. He has worked at Lake Forest College, Hamilton College, Armstrong State University, and Bucknell University.

**You were raised in Upstate New York and were the oldest of five. Were you a typical oldest child?**

**GS:** Absolutely, in that I am a high achiever. I think I was lucky in the sense that it was ingrained in me early to not settle for anything other than trying to do my best to make a difference with my life.

**How did you come to select Georgia Tech for your undergraduate education?**

**GS:** I thought I was going to college at Case Western to become an engineer, the same professions as my father and grandfather. I grew up in Marcellus, NY, just outside of Syracuse. Although it is a beautiful part of the country, it gets 180 to 200 inches of snow a year. I was tired of that by the time I finished high school. One of my friends was going to Georgia Tech. I thought, well it's 1,000 miles away, no snow. I applied late and got in, and I went down. I hadn't even visited the campus, much to the horror of my mother.

**What was your experience like there?**

**GS:** I struggled at first because I had not taken calculus and some other courses in high school. When I was a sophomore I took my first chemical engineering course and hated

## George Shields

Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost

BY JOHN ROBERTS



it. But I liked chemistry so I changed my major to chemistry. I felt like I was largely self-taught, and that the professors were just providing us with information. Then you had to go and figure it out. I was in study groups with some of my friends, and we taught each other.

**Obviously your undergraduate experiences were starkly different than the hands-on, personal education that Furman provides. How did you come to appreciate liberal learning?**

**GS:** When I was doing my postdoctoral work at Yale, my research partner was Steve Schultz. He had gone to Carleton College, and he worked with a professor there and published a couple of papers because he had a great undergraduate research experience. He would tell me about his education, and I couldn't believe that he talked to his professors outside of class and, moreover, that they'd have them over to their houses for dinner sometimes. I thought this was unbelievable, and I wanted to be part of that. Then I started looking around at liberal arts colleges for a job. Everything took off from there.

**How did you decide to enter education?**

**GS:** It started during my senior year at Georgia Tech when the department needed a TA (teaching assistant) for a chemistry lab, and they hired me. I was the only undergraduate who was a TA in the freshman chemistry lab. Years later in my first teaching job, I became chair at Lake Forest, where I started to learn how to work with people. But, one of my most influential pieces of insight came from my work at Ham-

ilton. During my eight years as chair there, I really figured out how transformative an excellent strategic planning process could be.

**Sometime later, though, you began to take on more administrative duties. Why?**

**GS:** At Hamilton (where he served as chair of the chemistry department for eight years), I really learned how to work with faculty by helping to come up with a shared vision. It really paved the way for me thinking about being a dean. I enjoyed the process of strategic thinking and strategic planning. Working together we wrote a white paper about how we wanted to be better; and then we instituted it. We accomplished all of our goals from our first five-year plan in

two years, and then we wrote another. We went through three five-year plans in eight years. We just kept getting better and better.

Armstrong (in Savannah, GA) really stood out to me because they never had a full undergraduate research program in the summer, and that was a big goal for everybody down there. I went down there in 2008, and of course the economy fell apart, and we had to cut our budget by 30 percent, it was horrible. But we did it, we figured out how to get the money for it, and we created an undergraduate research program that's still growing strong today.

I learned a lot about public higher education. It was good for me in the long run, and I also learned a really important lesson about diversity, which

allowed me, when I went to Bucknell, to help them to diversify the faculty.

I've always gone to a place with the intent of trying to make it better just like my grandparents and my parents taught me: Make the world a better place. It is motivating.

**When you were benchmarking for Hamilton, I understand Furman came up.**

**GS:** The university wanted me to choose four schools to benchmark and I said the first place I wanted to see was the chemistry department at Furman. Years before I had read about Lon Knight (who served 33 years as chemistry department chair), and I knew that he had helped develop one of the best undergraduate chemistry departments in the

US. So, back in 2003 or so, I brought some of my faculty down to see how you guys do what you do.

**What opportunities do you see at Furman?**

**GS:** Furman's got so many good things going for it—the faculty provide an education that is as good or better as any I've ever seen. I think it's going to be a lot of fun working with so many talented people. There are so many excellent things going on here and there are a lot of outstanding people here.

We need to make Furman better known. More prospective students and parents need to recognize the value of this place. ●

## FUmerical

*Facts and figures about Furman's Study Away & International Education*

**500**

Furman students study away each year



**Round-Trip Airfare Included**

In the cost of semester faculty-led programs

**Scholarships**

Available if financial need is demonstrated

**50**

Faculty-led programs to 30 countries on five continents in the last two years



**Cost of Semester = Furman Tuition**

Faculty-led programs

Room & board



Credit-bearing May Experience Study Away programs

**Quadrupled**

In # of May Experience Study Away programs since 2009

**Number 1 Regret**

Of college grads: not studying away