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Ron Wagner '93

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HOW DO YOU MEASURE SUCCESS?

BY RON WAGNER '93

Quantifying the value of a liberal arts education has long been vexing for higher education. It used to be enough for outstanding private liberal arts institutions to point to their well-rounded and multi-talented graduates. Along with the usual questions about cost and debt, concerns about the job market have caused a growing number of people to question the very worth of college.

"The value proposition in higher education has never been tougher, and it's tough in a liberal arts college," says Ken Peterson, the John D. Hollingsworth Professor of Economics and Interim Dean of the Faculty. "The irony, of course, is that a liberal arts education has never been more valuable in terms of the kinds of things that you can do when you leave college and enter a rapidly changing world."

Furman leaders believe they will be better able to answer these questions through The Furman Advantage.

Beginning this fall, the university will take the first step in an ambitious attempt to collect student data—with the goal of delivering an unprecedented understanding of both student experiences and outcomes. The data systems to support this work are being funded by \$5 million of The Duke Endowment's total grants of \$47 million to transform the student experience through The Furman Advantage.


When fully implemented, the program will allow Furman to use a scientific approach to track students' academic progress, along with their out-of-classroom experiences such as study away, internships, and community-centered projects. More than that, it will ultimately

be able to make connections between these experiences and outcomes.

Peterson is excited by the potential to achieve something that many universities are grappling with, but none has fully figured out. "We would be able to make statements about what percentage of the student body, for example, has participated in a high-impact engaged learning experience," he says. "We would be able to connect post-Furman outcomes like employment rates, graduate-school placement rates, or job satisfaction back to a student's experiences here on the Furman campus."

One rich vein of insight will be the self-reflections that students produce as part of their classroom and co-curricular experiences. Faculty and students alike find reflection to be a valuable learning tool, but mining it more rigorously to identify broader patterns and benefits will not be easy. Figuring out how to do this is at the heart of the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) that is required as part of Furman's re-accreditation.

"What we're producing is a relatively holistic outcome, and the only way that you can really assess those holistic outcomes is through the narratives of the students who have experienced them," Peterson says. "If we can show the world what it was like to be a Furman student and what the outcomes are after students graduate, it's going to be very compelling to a prospective student and a parent."



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The
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Gathering a rich, new set of data on the student experience also opens up the possibility for faculty research that will be useful for higher education broadly. Psychology Department Chair Beth Pontari can see the possibilities already in work she and her colleagues are doing in collaboration with Davidson College, Duke University, and Johnson C. Smith University through a separate grant from The Duke Endowment. The Resiliency Study is following 800 students, 200 of whom are Furman undergraduates, to track their ability to thrive in the face of adversity. The results should prove valuable, both standing alone and as part of the goals of The Furman Advantage.

"When we're finished, the Resiliency Study will give us four years of data on at least one class of students. We have baseline data on everything from personality to self-esteem to coping mechanisms," Pontari says. "That could easily be connected with the elements of The Furman Advantage. We'll be able to mine those data to inform the four-year student experience program."

Data from the Resiliency Study has already allowed for potentially important insights. There won't just be more mentors for Furman students with The Furman Advantage, there will be a team of different kinds of mentors—including alumni and peers. Conventional campus wisdom views peer mentoring through a wary lens, but Pontari has numbers to support embracing the practice.

"A lot of people are very hesitant about peer advising because of the way it's been done before, but I will tell you in students' freshman year the people they are going to the most when they have a question or an issue is their FRAD (first year advisor), and their RA (resident advisor)," Pontari says. "As we're thinking about advising broadly, we can use this knowledge to design a more effective system."

Dave Eubanks, Furman's assistant vice president for assessment and institutional effectiveness, is responsible for the work needed for reaccreditation, including the QEP. One aspect of the QEP is to use the narrative and data about student experiences to help design a personalized educational pathway for each student.

It will also enable students to create an electronic portfolio, which will help them demonstrate to future employers and graduate schools the skills they have gained as a result of their experiences. Eubanks and Peterson envision that student narratives will glide seamlessly into professional platforms like LinkedIn to create an organic resume, which will give Furman graduates a head start.

This continued tracking of students after graduation will be critical, asserts Political Science Professor Brent Nelsen, for meaningful research.

"I've been very much involved in study-away programs, so I'd just like to know if they have a big impact on your students or whether there's no discernable impact in comparison with other control groups," he says. "We think that our students will benefit from them tremendously, but we don't know. We don't have any hard data. Someday in the future, you can quantify that portfolio and you can say these students took advantage of these programs—study away, Heller Service Corps, etc.—and then by statistical analysis you can figure out what things successful people do when they're in college."


Liz Smith, chair of the political science department, is excited about the opportunity to document the effects of international trips on the level of responsibility students feel toward the political system after they engage in internships and interact with other political systems.

"I'm especially interested in reaffirming what I have seen to be true throughout my interactions with students, that those experiences really make them feel more politically ethical," she says.

The Furman Advantage approach, Eubanks asserts, will be groundbreaking.

"I think our approach will be an exemplar for other institutions. The traditional way to look at education is more like a factory with standard inputs and standard outputs. A program consists of students taking specified courses and earning a particular degree—but the students are individuals, and they come in with all kinds of different goals and aspirations," Eubanks says.

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"In school after school, students get to the end of their college career and they cannot translate the skills that they possess into skills that the real world demands," Peterson says. "With this habit of reflection and articulation that The Furman Advantage is going to produce, I think we can argue that a Furman student could do that more effectively than almost anybody else."

Furman's Vice President for Student Life Connie Carson is thinking about what she told a group of incoming freshmen and their parents during orientation:

"You're going to hear this a lot in the media: What's the first job and who gets hired and how much money do they make in their first job? Those are important questions, but that's not what your education is



fully about," she says. "If your education doesn't prepare you for a life trajectory, careers beyond a first job, then you don't have an advantage."

The reality, she adds, is that 96 percent of Furman students are employed within six months of graduation, but those metrics don't get at the heart of what a Furman education truly provides.

"What is going to be so apparent through The Furman Advantage is our students will have access to contacts and mentors, and we're going to show it in the numbers about where our graduates ended up going as a result of their experiences," Carson says. "We're going to be able to paint a picture of an education that prepares students to be nimble and adjust their vocation and career trajectories over time, not just in their first job."

The Duke Endowment's funding is a key factor in being able to deliver on the

promise for every Furman student. "All students at Furman are smart and good, but not all students come in at the same level of maturity to know how to access these resources. We want to figure out what that level of maturity is and how do we move that dial for them individually," Carson says.

"Our goal is every single student will have that advantage—the ones who seek it and the ones who don't. That's our vision, and if we can do it we know we'll be in a different class. Because we know this is so hard for schools to do."

High-achievers have always taken advantage of everything Furman has to offer, of course, and a cynic might wonder if their aspirations will suffer as the university directs so many resources to pulling everyone along. Not so, Pontari says.

In fact, improved guidance will likely help them focus their considerable ener-

gies and talents even more effectively.

"Don't just over-achieve. Think about why you're doing this," she says. "Don't just grab at something because it's a resume builder. Does this resonate with you because you like it? Because it's interesting? Because it is what you want to do? Most institutions are able to provide these experiences for a subset. Our goal is to do it for every student."

Peterson said the program will set Furman apart from other like-minded institutions, helping it to stand apart among a crowded field.

"This sounds like this big, messy, difficult, life-changing experience that would be very hard to build from the ground up, but the beautiful thing about this particular project at this particular time at Furman is that we have all of the pieces of the puzzle in place," Peterson says. ●