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Reimagining A Furman Education

Furman University

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Furman University announced on Oct. 5 an ambitious effort to transform

the student experience and address critical community issues. The new strategic plan called The Furman Advantage will guarantee every incoming student the opportunity for an engaged learning experience that is tracked and integrated with their academic and professional goals.

Launched with \$47 million from The Duke Endowment, The Furman Advantage combines a liberal arts education with an immersive experience outside the classroom, preparing students for lives of purpose, successful careers, and community benefit.

"Furman pioneered the concept of engaged learning in the late 1990s, an idea which has since been emulated by many other universities," says President Elizabeth Davis. "Today we're taking another step to reimagine a Furman education—one that adds value and addresses community needs."

Today's global uncertainties and disruptions reveal more

Reimagining A Furman Education

*Engaged learning, the core of the
Furman Experience*

than ever the need to produce educated and thoughtful leaders who have broad-based knowledge and practical expertise to address real issues.

"We will guarantee every student the opportunity to engage in real-world experiences that connect back to classroom learning," says Davis. The Duke Endowment's October commitment of \$25 million will be used to significantly increase global experiences, research opportunities, internships, and community-centered projects at Furman. The Endowment's earlier gift of \$22 million, announced in November 2015, fully funded the James B.

Duke Scholarships, providing additional support for students to benefit from Furman's dynamic education model.

"The Duke Endowment fully supports Furman's strategy for providing life-changing experiences for its students," said Minor Shaw, chair of the Endowment's Board. "The grants announced today illustrate our continued commitment to the university and its ambitious vision for the future."

In addition to guaranteeing and increasing the breadth of experiences available to students, Furman will partner with students to construct a four-year pathway that

integrates co-curricular experiences with classroom work, helping them chart a course from their interests and skills to life after college.

For many years universities have offered engaged learning opportunities—internships, mentored research, and study abroad, for example—but few, if any, have guaranteed them for all students and integrated them fully with the learning experience.

A 2014 Gallup-Purdue University study found that students whose college experience included faculty mentorship and relevant professional practice connected to classroom and project-based learning were the most likely to be positively engaged at work and thrive in all aspects of their lives. Yet only 3 percent of those surveyed strongly agreed that they had experienced all of these elements during college.

"Furman has the ability to actually do this," says George C. Shields, vice president for academic affairs and provost. "Working in our favor is Furman's size and a faculty that is devoted to the success of our students. It's going to be hard work, but we are absolutely committed to this."

Many of these opportunities will be coordinated through a community-centered infrastructure and a growing set of public-facing institutes, including the Richard W. Riley Institute, the David E. Shi Center, and the newly formed Institute for the Advancement of Community Health (a partnership with the Greenville Health System). These structures will launch project teams focused on areas of community need identified by communities and aligned with Furman's expertise that will allow students to explore and address real-world problems.

Ken Peterson, the John D. Hollingsworth Professor of Economics and interim dean of the faculty, and Connie Carson, vice president for student life, co-chair a campus-wide group of faculty and staff who are charged with implementing the vision.

Peterson says The Furman Advantage enables students to be immersed in diverse communities beyond campus, better preparing them to live and lead in a complex, global world. He also notes that Furman faculty members have long been dedicated mentors to their students. The Furman Advantage will expand this notion to build a community of mentors—giving students access to a team of advisors and an expanded network of faculty, staff, alumni, and community members who will provide a broader array of professional and academic opportunities.

Carson says one very distinctive aspect of the Furman experience has been the use of self-reflection, helping students to discover their strengths, aspirations, and sense of purpose. The Furman Advantage will expand on this notion, creating for every student a guided journey of self-discovery. This will

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allow students to design a pathway that achieves their goals and will document the skills they are gaining from their experiences.

Peterson praises The Duke Endowment for supporting another key component of the plan: best-in-class tools that allow the university to track the student experience in real time, giving each student—as well as parents, graduate programs, and prospective employers—proof of progress and outcomes.

“We are so grateful for the tremendous support and confidence from The Duke Endowment, a partner that has been by Furman's side for all of its most strategic moves over the last century,” President Davis says. “For The Furman Advantage to achieve sustained success, though, there is so much more that needs to be done. We need our alumni, parents, and friends to engage the university like never before,

through their philanthropy, hosting internships or research projects, mentoring students, hiring young graduates, networking with fellow alumni, and helping us raise Furman's profile all over the world.” ●

For more information, see thefurmanadvantage.com. The website includes student and alumni profiles, a vision document and more.

