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Kelley Bruss

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# AN UPDATE: FURMAN'S COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

BY KELLEY BRUSS

In its first year, Furman's Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) has completed an extensive review of current and potential community partnerships and launched two pilot programs that are putting university students and faculty to work in the community.

Like the new Institute for the Advancement of Community Health, the CEI is energizing and providing more focus to partnerships that are improving lives in the community and producing meaningful student experiences.

**Angela Halfacre '92**, a political science professor and former director of the Shi Center for Sustainability, was appointed special advisor to the president for community engagement in February 2016. The Community Engagement Initiative was formalized in May, when the university made a public commitment to strengthen existing community partnerships and establish new ones.

Building on the pillars of Furman's new vision, The Furman Advantage, the university hired two 2016 graduates last year—Victoria Wornom and Hannah Wheeler—to guide the planning process and collect data. As CEI post-baccalaureate fellows, the pair have conducted surveys, interviewed more than 100 faculty and staff and guided the work of three on-campus project teams and two outside consulting groups.

Wornom and Wheeler have worked closely with the project teams and consultants to explore community engagement on campus, inventory past and current community engagement activities and identify potential and active community partnerships. The groups have also developed training modules for those engaging in the community, analyzed Greenville's perceptions of Furman and assisted with creating recommendations for furthering community engagement at Furman.

This past fall, the CEI launched two pilot community projects.

In partnership with the Greenville Homeless Alliance, Furman students

and faculty are working to compile a snapshot data report on the state of homelessness in and around Greenville. The study will inform nonprofit agencies that serve the homeless as they seek to coordinate, streamline and improve offerings.

The second project, made possible through a \$50,000 grant from the United Way of Greenville County, will assess the educational needs and available resources in several low-income neighborhoods that feed into Carolina and Berea high schools. The findings will be presented to members of the affected communities, school officials and the United Way with a long-term goal of developing a system to improve educational outcomes.

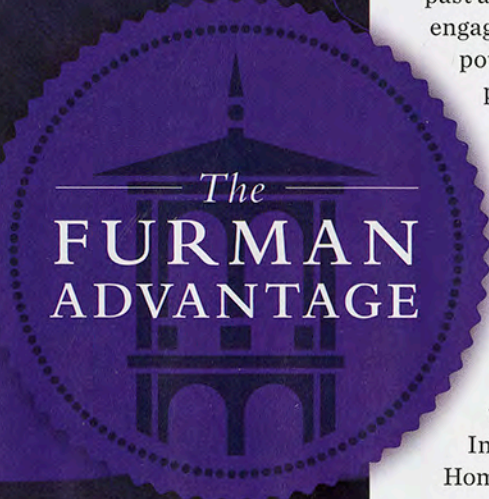

"My work over the past 11 months has really opened my eyes," says Wornom, a native of Richmond, Virginia. "Now I can see and understand the social issues and challenges facing Greenville. And I see opportunities for Furman to become more involved and how we can help through objective research and data collection."

Wornom and Wheeler, who grew up in Detroit, also worked with Halfacre to produce *Engaged Furman*, a 356-page report that details the group's findings and makes recommendations for the road ahead. The draft document was made available to faculty and staff in February. Forums are being held this spring and summer to solicit feedback.

"This is very much a dynamic plan," says Wornom. "We are still refining and reworking. It is not a closed document."

The final document will help guide the work of a new community engagement executive director. After completing the draft plan and report, Halfacre will take a leave of absence June 30 to conduct research in sustainability science and environmental policy.

"We have a lot of ideas," Wheeler said. "Community engagement is an under-utilized part of Furman's expertise. Our initiative is showing that we have a lot of potential in that arena, and the horizon is wide open for great success and more opportunities for students to experience The Furman Advantage through community networks." ●



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