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The Furman Advantage —What an Experience

BY ELIZABETH DAVIS

As you read this, we are one full year into The Furman Advantage, our promise to provide every student an individualized pathway integrating academic excellence with the support (advising and mentoring) and engaged learning experiences (internships, research, study away) that will launch them into lives of purpose and community impact. Because of what I know about Furman and the Furman family, I know we can deliver on this promise.

I have experienced Furman from many angles—as a president and as a parent of

a junior. And I have experienced it through your inspiring and heartwarming stories. But nothing is quite the same as experiencing Furman, up close and in person. This past May, I did just that.

Between the spring semester and summer, students have the opportunity to go on a May Experience—or MayX—a shorter version of a semester-long study away program. One of our current MayX programs, “Slow Food, Italian Style,” is led by professors Sarah Worth and Lloyd Benson. The course introduces students to the study of contemporary food

production and consumption, as well as the principles and practices of the Slow Food movement (think “opposite of fast food”). The students spent the first two weeks on a farm and then the last week in Rome, which is where Charles and I met them.

Lest you think this was merely an excuse for my husband and me to eat our way through Rome, or for our students to have a three-week vacation before starting an internship in June, let me set the record straight. As with any class, the MayX students on this trip read articles, made presentations and wrote papers. Charles presented on the Roman Forum. (I was asked to do it, but like a good president, I delegated.)

But it was the support and experiential learning that Sarah and Lloyd provided every step of the way that gave me an up close and personal view of The Furman Advantage in action.

From the Gallup-Purdue study, we know that graduates who report being engaged at work and thriving in all aspects of their lives have six types of experiences in college that can be grouped into “emotional support” and “deep and experiential learning.” Two of the three emotional support factors are “faculty who cared about me as a person” and “at least one professor who made me excited about learning.” I saw this level of support throughout our trip, whether it was caring for a student who broke her foot, Lloyd’s uncanny knowledge of every historical site we passed, or

Sarah’s delight in posing with Raphael’s philosophers in the Vatican Museum followed by an impromptu discussion of the painting.

Study away trips provide the opportunity for “deep and experiential learning.” The key is linking those experiences to classroom learning. Sarah and Lloyd were deliberate about asking the students to reflect on the various sites we visited, connecting back to the farm experience or to the articles they read. The students, in choosing those articles, selected topics that connected to the MayX and their majors. For example, **Meredith Wettach ’18**, an accounting and Spanish major, taught the class about olive oil fraud in Italy. On one of our tours, the tour guide mentioned the fraud and Meredith stepped in to share her depth of knowledge on the subject. She and I spent time walking through the streets of Rome talking about fraud and what else she might encounter in a career in accounting—where I got my start.

What a trip. I saw our faculty in action—faculty who care about students, who are willing to challenge them to consider ideas outside their comfort zone, and who encourage them to be more reflective about what matters most in their lives. I saw our students—smart, curious, kind—accept those challenges and grow. This is The Furman Advantage.

Elizabeth Davis