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## O&A: Alec '75 and Susan Taylor

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So many causes cry out for help. Why poverty?

**ST:** Alec and I have been involved with multiple nonprofits, and the underlying thing with most of them would be poverty. Whether it's housing, childcare, families—it influences so many other charities.

**AT:** I'm not sure there is any bigger issue in America today. When I see this massive wage gap, the haves-have nots, 25 percent or more of people in America living in poverty, people who are underemployed—the need gets bigger and bigger.

What do you think people most misunderstand about poverty?

**AT:** The sheer number of people who live right on or beneath the poverty line. Many of us are lucky to live in a world with a safety net: some money in the bank, someone who will catch you when you fall. These people are one missed paycheck from being in real trouble, not having a meal, [not being able] to take care of their kids.

There are a lot of statistics about poverty, but here's one that caught my attention. According to the Economic Policy Institute, annual wage growth for the bottom 70 percent has grown less than 11 percent between 1979 and 2013, even though worker productivity has skyrocketed. Incidentally, that wage-productivity ratio kept pace in the 30 years before 1968. But had minimum

## Alec '75 and Susan Taylor

*Advocates and philanthropists, the Taylors help support Furman's Poverty Studies program, the most popular minor at the university*

BY BRENDAN TAPLEY



wage risen along with productivity, it would now be \$18 per hour. It's currently \$7.25.

**AT:** Look, I'm a raging capitalist, but we've got something we've got to fix and it's pretty bad, and the net result of that is this poverty gap. It's frightening. It's not a political issue in my mind. People ask me why there is not more GDP growth, and I tell them it's because people are making less money than they were 25 years ago. They're being asked to pay more for gasoline; employers are pushing more of the burden of insurance back on employees. It's incumbent on people who have some means to step up and try to do what they can in their own little way to help.

So, then, how much of poverty is merely a matter of selfish economics?

**AT:** The people at the very top—either they don't need to be making quite as much money as they are or they need to share the heck out of it. I'm going to get this statistic wrong, but it used to be a CEO of a company would make 25 times more than the lowest paid hourly guy—

It was 20 times the amount in 1965. In 2013, it was just under 300 times.

**AT:** That's just out of whack. You sit there and say, how much is enough? The steak doesn't taste any better whether you make \$2 million or \$20 million. We gotta watch it as a country or we're going to end up with the French Revolution if we're not careful.

David Gandolfo, who chairs the Poverty Studies program, wrote in a recent editorial that the true purpose of a university is to develop the intellect of the student,

*“Look, I’m a raging capitalist, but we’ve got something we’ve got to fix and it’s pretty bad, and the net result of that is this poverty gap.”*

which, he said, “exists to analyze and solve the problems with which we are confronted.” What kind of analysis and solutions do you hope to have come out of the Poverty Studies program?

**ST:** The young people in this minor are going out and touching a lot of other people. They have also [developed] an awareness of poverty, and they will make choices that will look different because of that awareness. Whether they become teachers or bankers—if they have an understanding of [poverty]—that’s going to color how they approach other people and make decisions.

Do you think the foundational problems of poverty can be altered by this type of awareness?

**ST:** Alec and I have children, and I think they live what they have learned. This is an amazing generation coming out of school right now. They’re much more creative, much more open to an entrepreneurial way of approaching things, so I think it’s a perfect time to embed in their learning the issue of poverty and their responsibility. I feel hopeful.

The Poverty Studies minor at Furman has become larger than all other minors at the university

put together. Were the program a major, it would be larger than all but a handful of majors. Why do you think Furman is an ideal home for this work?

**AT:** It’s one of the most modest places there is. I graduated 40 years ago. Furman was a regional Baptist college then and I look at where it is now. It has this wonderful confluence of natural beauty, motivated kids, good faculty and administrators. It’s not perfect, we don’t get everything right, but I think it’s a special place. Sometimes I wish we were a little less modest [laughter].

**ST:** I didn’t go to Furman, but I think it’s a place that has encouraged young people to be proactive. There’s also a joyfulness there about doing work like this. It’s hard work—depressing work when you look at the numbers—but when you talk to these young people, you’re not depressed as you’re talking to them. I love that Furman has been this breeding ground for young people who are modest and bright and thoughtful and want to take this next step.

You mentioned your own kids. Is it important to pass down a sense of service?

**ST:** In our family, it was assumed that you would participate and help others. Alec and I, what’s been as impactful as anything we did was fostering children. It’s involvement, and it means you’re interacting with a world you wouldn’t unless you made that choice to step in. It was living it every day.

Interaction is key to the Poverty Studies program. In addition to coursework, students complete a summer internship. What was important to you about the internship requirement?



## NEXT

### Reflection on the Importance of Furman Going Forward

**Had I been an international student at Furman a decade ago, my name would have been placed on a roster that a few now-retired folks affectionately called the “Funny Names List.”** When I first heard that phrase, I was horrified but did not have the courage to say anything. Perhaps I’m being overly sensitive and critical, I assured myself. I’ll get over it.

A decade later—even though the list no longer exists in that form—I regret not opening the door to that struggle and countless others about how we see (or don’t), treat, listen, imagine, and understand each other at Furman. To struggle over difference matters if we still aspire to “meaningful diversity and equality,” as articulated in Furman’s Vision 2020.

Debates about difference are debates about equity, power, and justice; these now divide us in new and not-so-new ways with this past year’s petitions, reports, and protests dealing with difference and equity at Furman. Demographic shifts on campus parallel changes in the county and the state: Furman, Greenville, and South Carolina aren’t what they were 15 years ago. For Furman, these shifts were part of active recruiting efforts to create a more diverse community. This has been successful from an impersonal numerical standpoint, but now we must humanize who we are and what we care about.

And that might involve some struggle. It will take not only the vocal ones at Furman, but also those who daily and silently endure oppression, invisibility, and “death” by a thousand cuts. It will take the people who think issues of gender aren’t relevant to the work they do, those who believe that Furman’s racial environment is better now than it used to be, those who ridicule talk of micro-aggression, and those who enjoy such a degree of privilege that they don’t see what’s wrong with the “Funny Names List.”

Only a few people on campus correctly pronounce my first name. It’s been like that since I started kindergarten, so I’m used to it. I have my favorite mispronunciations and even introduce myself with one to make it easier for others. Mispronounce my name; just don’t put it on lists that devalue and divide.

Furman’s struggle for the future is about far more than the acceptance, accounting, and acknowledgement of difference; it is about a new Furman that is willing to struggle as we speak truthfully, listen openly, get uncomfortable, empathize, disagree, and eventually understand and learn.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Savita Nair, James B. Duke associate professor of Asian studies and history, joined Furman in 2003. She received her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania.*

**ST:** Well, you're hands-on and things become personal. You bring it more into your heart and head, and the lasting effects on you are huge. Without it being personal, it's just another story you've read or course you've studied.

**A cynical person might feel that kids from privilege dipping into poverty for course credit is disingenuous. What do you say to those people?**

**AT:** I'd say go meet the kids. I was a lawyer for 20 years and can be the biggest cynic, but if you go meet the kids you'll get over that really fast. You know, where you come from doesn't matter as much as where you go.

**ST:** I'd also say, isn't that who you most want to learn? I mean, if poverty hasn't touched you personally, if it hasn't been a factor in your

life, then you need the opportunity to learn [about it].

**Do you believe, though, that the most critical element of the American dream—that it's possible for everyone—has created a permanent blind spot in us when it comes to poverty?**

**ST:** Part of the issue with the American dream is that we still believe if people work hard enough, they'll be able to

realize it. I think that's less so now. There are a lot of people who are working really, really hard who have less ability to assume their kids are going to do better.

**AT:** I still think America is unbelievable, though, and it's salvageable. It's getting harder to grab the next rung, but I go back to saying I have a lot of optimism about this generation. They don't take no for an answer. **F**

## FUmerical

# FUmerical

*Facts and figures about Furman*



**Much has been in the news** lately about how effective a college education is at finding students jobs once college is over. While the debate continues as to whether that is the sole purpose of four years of higher education, we asked Furman's Career Center to give us some numbers on the university's role in helping students make that transition. **F**



**96**

Percentage of students who report that they are employed or in graduate school six months after graduation



**80**

The national average percentage of students employed or in graduate school six months after graduation



**180**

Total number of online career resources available on the Career Center website



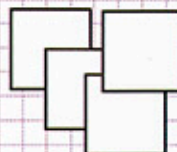
**99.1**

Percentage of students that report career counseling sessions as either "effective" or "very effective"



**2,000**

Average number of student contacts with the Career Center staff per year



**300**

Number of jobs posted each week to the Paladin Job Board



**1,100**

Average Career Center Facebook page views per week



**5,404**

Current number of members belonging to Furman's LinkedIn alumni networking group