Raising up Riley: An endowment for the Riley Institute

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Raising up Riley: An endowment for the Riley Institute

“I am continually honored, humbled and proud of this remarkable organization for giving young people at Furman the opportunity to develop civic leadership and public service — all to the wonderful benefit of our state and our nation.”
— RICHARD W. RILEY

YOU CAN’T GO FAR in South Carolina without hearing the name Dick Riley, a two-term governor and former U.S. Secretary of Education. The 1954 Furman graduate is also the immediate past chair of the university’s board of trustees, and his name graces Furman’s mathematics and computer science building.

Since 1999, the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership at Furman has sponsored an array of programs, symposia and conferences about important public policy issues. The institute, whose work brings top names and major attention to Furman, is dedicated to the belief that education and economic development are inextricably linked.

In addition to the international leaders the institute hosts and its central place in public discussions about important topics, it involves students in all of its activities, which include opportunities to meet such prominent leaders as John Glenn, Newt Gingrich, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Tom Brokaw and Marian Wright Edelman. Furman alumni such as Mike McConnell ’66 (former Director of National Intelligence) and Alexander Stubb ’93 (Minister for European Affairs and Foreign Trade of Finland) have also participated in Riley-sponsored events.

These programs are strong recruiting tools for Furman, as is the institute’s Emerging Public Leaders program, which brings high school seniors to campus during the summer for a week of in-depth sessions and conversations with local, state and national leaders in public life.

The institute is working to build a $5 million endowment to sustain its work in four critical areas: refining strategies for public education, expanding a network of innovative high schools, expanding the Diversity Leaders Initiative, and strengthening economic and social change. “We hope it will become the premier small institute for education and diversity policy in the country,” says Jacki Martin, the Riley Institute’s associate director.

To date more than $2 million has been raised. Says institute director Don Gordon, professor of political science, “Dick Riley’s focus on people-centered public policy, his vision for bringing everyone into the social and economic mainstream, and his attention to common sense and practical ways for making the state and country a better place are of great importance. With the endowment’s help, the Riley Institute will sustain and build upon this remarkable legacy.”

Part of that legacy is the Diversity Leaders Initiative, which over the years has brought together 1,100 leaders from the corporate, public and nonprofit sectors of South Carolina. Participants have engaged in 120 service projects across the state, addressing such needs as housing, education and the environment. The graduates remain in touch through the One Carolina organization and often become some of the university’s most avid advocates.

The institute has also spearheaded a public-private education partnership, resulting in a $3 million grant in 2011 that has established two science-technology-engineering-mathematics high schools in South Carolina’s impoverished 1-95 corridor. They are part of a nationwide network that transforms schools into innovative learning environments through powerful teaching and an emphasis on technology. In so doing they help to create intellectual capital and new opportunities for students.

Fundraising for the endowment kicked off with a $500,000 lead gift from David Trone ’77 and his wife, June (page 4). Trone, who served on the Furman board with Riley, says, “Dick Riley is that rare man who has made tremendous achievements in policymaking and earned the affection and admiration of everyone his life has touched. He is one of Furman’s most prominent alumni, and his work to change the lives of children and others in South Carolina and across the nation will long reflect positively on the university.

“It is an honor for Furman to continue his work through the Riley Institute. June and I wanted to set in motion the fundraising necessary to sustain that work — and his legacy.”

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