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Charting a New Course

By Mark Kelly

A clear affirmation that academics must continue to hold center stage, a desire to strengthen the overall student experience, and a more entrepreneurial approach to recruitment and curriculum are the threads tying together a preliminary strategic planning report issued in early April, the result of perhaps the most extensive conversation between Furman and its chief constituencies in the institution's recent history.

"Over the course of the past several months, the Strategic Planning Steering Committee has come to believe that we have reached a crossroads of sorts," the document states, "where one direction leads us to a path often chosen, and the other to rarer opportunities that may make all the difference."

The 16-page document outlines potential strategic planning initiatives under two broad categories: "Culture and Identity" and "Finance, Facilities and Administration."

"In my conversations over the past year I began to sense that while people were clearly proud of their affiliation with Furman and its academic reputation, the university was somewhat unmoored, a little unsure of its identity and perhaps not wholly comfortable with its culture," said President Rod Smolla, who chaired the 16-member steering committee composed of faculty, students and staff. "I also was convinced — and I remain so — that the financial model for recruiting and retaining students was unsustainable at a time when many of our families are feeling the effects of a struggling economy."

Central to the preliminary strategic plan is a proposed new approach to student recruitment that will place less emphasis on standardized test scores and grades and more emphasis on indicators such as drive, persistence, passion and intellectual curiosity.

"How we measure those will be one of the great challenges of this plan," Smolla said. "There is ample literature in the field to indicate it can be done, if we are creative and willing to risk establishing a new paradigm in which Furman would be a national leader."

Charged last October by the board of trustees with developing a strategic plan that would produce a focused set of priorities, Smolla led a four-month effort that featured discussions with 80 groups of alumni, students, faculty, staff, parents and community members, and a research survey of those same groups and of 14,000 prospective students.

As the committee sifted through the findings and weighed impressions, the broad outlines of a plan emerged. Highlights include:

- A reaffirmation of Furman's commitment to academic excellence, notably in the application of engaged learning.
- The encouragement of a more entrepreneurial, less centralized approach to planning and improvement among academic departments.
- The application of a holistic approach to the student experience to strengthen intellect, character and physical well-being, including the growth of mind and spirit, the encouragement of reflection and introspection, a commitment to advancing the human condition, and the establishment of habits of civil discourse.
- A commitment to remain a fully residential campus, and to the renovation and reconfiguration of residence halls and the University Center. This includes possibly developing a "residential college" or "freshman village" to integrate housing with academic spaces for new students.

With the help and advice of 80 groups affiliated with the university, Furman is designing a strategic framework for the future.



- Strengthening counseling, mentoring, advising and academic assistance programs.
- A rededication to intercollegiate, intramural, club and recreational sports.
- Adopting a broader approach to recruiting that includes development of a wide range of dependable indicators for potential success that are not principally focused on standardized test scores, grade-point averages and Advanced Placement courses.
- Shaping financial aid awards to match mission and recruit a diverse student body representing a range of ethnic backgrounds, talents, interests, worldviews, and socio-economic status.
- Embracing diversity and equality as an implicit value and explicit practice.
- Greater integration with the Greenville community.
- Strategic enrollment management to strengthen net revenue (tuition revenue less institutional contributions to financial aid) through new approaches to financial aid and modest increases in the size of the student body (while maintaining Furman's essential character and size), and also providing "appropriate commensurate increases in faculty and staff positions."
- Continued emphasis on maintaining the campus grounds and on sustainability.

In the coming months Furman will refine these broad objectives into more specific initiatives. To learn more about the strategic plan, visit www.furman.edu and click on the "About" tab. |F|

The author is vice president for marketing and public relations at Furman. Photo by Bob Handelman.

Campaign enters final phase

BUILDING ON THE BROAD objectives of the university's emerging strategic plan, the "Because Furman Matters" comprehensive campaign is gaining momentum as it moves into the final phase of the \$400 million fundraising drive.

The goals for the campaign's final \$100 million focus on four areas: academic support and scholarships (\$45 million), the student experience and character education (\$20 million), intercollegiate athletics (\$20 million) and community-related programs (\$15 million). Specific needs are envisioned within these areas, ranging from support for faculty enrichment (see page 24) and scholarships to special academic programs and upgrades in residential and athletic facilities. A more detailed agenda of needs and rationale for support related to the strategic plan will be circulated in late summer.

"We are energized by the fresh directions for Furman resulting from recent strategic planning efforts and are committed to providing the necessary resources to fuel these aspirations," says Ron Malone '81, who, with Doug Freeman '72, is co-chair of the campaign. "From the university administration to the campaign leadership, there is a definite sense of shared purpose and momentum, and we are confident that our alumni, parents and friends will respond positively."

At press time, the campaign had raised a total of \$323 million. It is scheduled for completion by 2013.