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In His Own Words

Furman University

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Furman University

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You didn’t have a great deal of administrative experience prior to being named president in 1994. What was the learning curve like?

It was an eye-opening whirlwind. Nothing can really prepare someone for the array of demands and responsibilities associated with being a college president. Within a year (1993-94) I went from being chair of the history department at Davidson College to being Furman’s vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty (succeeding John Crabtree) to being named president upon John Johns’ retirement. Every day I encountered new people, new activities, new projects, new challenges and new opportunities.

Yet I discovered that common sense, open communication, engaged listening and incredible support from the Furman community, as well as many early mornings and late nights in the office, carried me through a first year that literally raced by. I believe my earlier experience in athletics and the military prepared me for serving and leading the university — and made up for my inexperience as an academic administrator. While developing a strong administrative team and benefiting from faculty, staff and student contributions, I found that placing people with the right projects was crucial for Furman’s success. I quickly saw that what worked to motivate one staff member did not necessarily work for another.

And I learned to ask lots of people for lots of money. (I now have palms on both sides of my hands.) I’ll never forget the first time I asked an alumnus for a million dollars. He almost choked on his lunch before regaining his composure and saying yes.

Perhaps because I lacked experience, I erred on the side of openness. This included making the university’s budget available to all, encouraging everyone to feel comfortable suggesting new ideas, and pushing everyone to exert even more effort on behalf of a university that had just experienced a traumatic (and expensive) separation from its parent, the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

One of the veteran vice presidents commented after my first few years that we were moving Furman forward “at warp speed” with a management philosophy of “best new idea wins.” I wish I had come up with that slogan, for it conveyed the sense of urgency I had for Furman to raise its sights and fulfill its potential by being less hierarchical in its culture and more innovative and national in its ambitions.
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In your inaugural address, you stated that your hopes for Furman included becoming “more cosmopolitan in outlook, more diverse in its composition, more international in its interests and more sophisticated about the implications of technology.” How has the university progressed in those areas?

Perhaps the single most important benefit provided by the separation of the university and the South Carolina Baptist Convention was the opportunity for Furman to elect its own trustees. Prior to 1992, all trustees had to be resident South Carolina Baptists. So the chance to recruit alumni and friends from across the nation with tremendous expertise and resources may well be the most important factor in the development of modern Furman. For 16 years I have had the good fortune of working with a distinguished group of dedicated trustees who have tolerated my penchant for new initiatives and for pursuing audacious goals. They have been incredibly supportive, even when they may not have had complete confidence in what I was proposing.

Like most new presidents, I initiated a comprehensive planning process. It was invigorating to solicit everyone’s dreams for Furman and then to consolidate those dreams into our first comprehensive strategic plan in 1997. Called “Furman 2003,” it adopted goals such as making campus green, as a means of elevating Furman’s stature as a national liberal arts college. As a result of “Furman 2003,” we began recruiting students from a broader geographic and we bolstered an already strong study away program. We also focused attention and resources on the fast-developing field of information technology.

Furman today is much more cosmopolitan and diverse in its composition. The profiles of our student body from 1993 and 2009 reveal significant increases in geographic and racial diversity. In 1993 only 5 percent were students of color; that number is now 15 percent. In 1993 we had students from 20 countries and 25 states; today we have students from 47 nations and 46 states. The percentage of faculty members of color has quadrupled, and we now offer many more study away programs, both abroad and across the United States. So Furman continues to prepare young people for leadership roles in a truly global society.

We are certainly more sophisticated technologically today than we were in 1993. We have invested millions of dollars and lots of “thinking time” trying to ensure that the Furman community has state-of-the-art learning technologies and the most efficient communication systems. Our alumni have become more informed and receive more substantive information as a result of our efforts to incorporate sophisticated social networking tools.

What events stand out as highlights of your presidency?

As a historian, I know that it will take the passage of time to determine which initiatives during my tenure will prove to be the most significant. But several possibilities spring to mind.

When I arrived in 1993, Furman had the lowest nodal density of any of the top 50 national liberal arts colleges. Only 60 percent of the students lived on campus. So we set about designing what was called North Village, a 1,000-bed on-campus apartment complex that opened in the late 1990s. It has been remarkably successful. Now almost 90 percent of our students live on campus, and our residential character is bearing fruit in many ways, among them higher retention and graduation rates, higher degrees of student involvement in campus life, and higher rates of alumni giving.

As a result of “Furman 2001,” we began recruiting students from a broader geography and we bolstered an already strong study away program. We also focused attention and resources on the fast-developing field of information technology.

Of course, I have also taken keen personal and professional interest in making sustainability a priority at Furman. For the university to flourish in coming decades and to reduce the rates of annual tuition increases, we must operate more efficiently. Through energy conservation and the installation of renewable energy systems, we are moving toward energy independence and reducing annual operating expenses.

Equally important is the process of raising awareness among the Furman community about the need to use energy and natural resources more responsibly. Furman has become justly recognized as a national leader in the effort to influence the principles and practices of sustainability within the curriculum and in the way the campus operates. Our efforts related to energy efficiency and environmental stewardship came together in the fall of 2009 through the creation of the university’s first sustainability master plan, titled “Sustainable Furman.” It provides a blueprint for Furman to become carbon neutral in its operations by 2026, our 2006 anniversary.

Renovating and expanding the library, the student center, the science facilities and Furman Hall have also had a dramatic affect on the learning/living environment. The Charles E. Daniel Chapel has invigorated spiritual life on campus, and the acquisition of Cherrylake has given our alumni a handsome campus home. Helping to make the Furman community more diverse has brought substantial benefits, as have our efforts to forge even stronger ties to the greater Greenville community. Quadrupling the value of Furman’s endowment has given the university much greater financial strength and flexibility, and has enabled us to make faculty salaries competitive with our peer schools.

Working with the faculty in recent years to revamp the curriculum and adopt a new academic calendar was an important development in the life of the university, and the benefits of such innovations will reverberate for years to come. The animating goal of the curricular revision was to create a more robust intellectual climate, inside and outside of the classroom. The curricular transformation included the creation of a five-year summer program, a three-week “May Experience” as a laboratory for curricular transformation, and revised General Education Requirements that focus on broad ways of thinking. These changes have helped to promote greater academic creativity and intellectual engagement across the campus.

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I have had the good fortune of working with development of modern Furman. For 16 years, I was the opportunity for Furman to elect its own nation with tremendous expertise and resources. Perhaps the single most important benefit of "Furman 2001," we began recruiting students from a broader geography and we bol- stered an already strong study away program. We also focused attention and resources on the fast-developing field of information technology. Furman today is much more cosmopolitan and diverse in its composition. The profiles of our student body from 1993 and 2009 reveal significant increases in geographic and racial diversity. In 1993, only 5 percent were students of color; that number is now 15 percent. In 1993, we had students from 20 countries and 25 states today we have students from 47 nations and 46 states. The percentage of faculty mem- bers of color has quadrupled, and we now offer many more study away programs, both abroad and across the United States. So Furman continues to prepare young people for leadership roles in a truly global society.

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In your inaugural address, you stated that your hopes for Furman included becoming “more cosmopolitan in outlook, more diverse in its composition, more international in its interests and more sophisticated about the implications of technology.” How has the university progressed in these areas?

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As for specific events are concerned, the most significant was the public announce- ment of the magnetic bequest by John D. Hollingsworth, Jr [see page 2]. I was at home on the Sunday afternoon in December of 2000 when I learned that M. Hollingsworth had died. Within minutes the calls started flooding in: The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, Forbes magazine, and the local media. All of them wanted to know about the potential impact of the Hollingsworth Fund on Furman. And there was great speculation about the dollar value of his bequest, ranging from $100 million to $500 million. That Hollingsworth was such a generous donor, and the public curiosity ever greater. Although it will take many more years for the Hollingsworth bequest to mature, it will eventually become as important as The Duke Endowment to Furman’s financial future.

The Shi years have included visits from a host of national and international leaders, among them John Glenn, former astronaut and senator in 2000; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia, who was awarded an honorary degree in 2009; and Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2010 (and again during the 2008 presidential campaign).
Has the culture of the student body and the faculty changed during your 16 years? Today’s students are more sophisticated and more engaged. When I arrived there was considerable tension between the students and faculty and the administration, in part because of the prolonged dispute between the university and the S.C. Baptist Convention and the financial pressures created by the loss of support from the convention. I believe the relationships among students, faculty and administration have improved dramatically. The faculty is much larger than in 1991, much younger on average, and more diverse in its backgrounds and interests. They have played a key role in many innovations related to the academic program and our sustainability efforts, and they remain extraordinarily dedicated to the institution and to the mission of teaching and scholarship.

On occasion, a university’s decisions in regard to policies or speakers upset people both on and off campus. Discuss some of the challenges you faced in this regard.

Great universities are often crossroads of controversy — as they should be. True, controversies can be unpleasant. They unleash passions, and they should be. True, controversies are often most deserving of discussion and reaction rather than measured responses. Yet it is precisely these sorts of incendiary issues that are often most deserving of discussion and examination. The mandate of a national liberal arts college such as Furman is not to insulate students but to expose them to competing ideas.

Controversy, in other words, can be one of our most pressing issues are confronted, and different opinions are heard. You’ve worked to build stronger bonds between Furman and the Greenville community. How important is that relationship to Furman’s future?

I often tell people that Furman and Greenville’s futures are yoked together — and that’s a good thing. Both the city and the campus radiate energy, and we have developed an array of partnerships and a culture of collaboration.

The most striking change since my student days at Furman has been the revitalization of downtown Greenville. It is a tremendous asset now to the university and will continue to be so. When we market Furman to prospective students, professors and staff members, we highlight Greenville as one of our primary assets.

During my presidency, we have been lambasted from all sides for hosting speakers such as Newt Gingrich, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Dr. Ralph James Oliver, Robert Kennedy, Madeleine Albright and President George W. Bush. But how well a university balances the competing claims of intellectual and cultural diversity is an index to its health, and how well it channels controversy into learning is a measure of its maturity.

Four decades ago, in 1970, Furman alumni and trustee Clement Haynsworth, a graduate of Harvard Law School and a distinguished federal judge deemed too conservative by the U.S. Senate to sit on the Supreme Court, said that “no one has a right to shout down a speaker whom others wish to hear.” He told Furman students that there would inevitably be “occurrences on this campus you deplore. There will be attacks in the campus pages you do not like.” But he concluded that such controversial ideas and the student responses that they engendered were crucial aspects of higher education. I hope that Furman will continue to be a place where the hardest questions are engaged, where the most pressing issues are confronted, and different opinions are heard.

How do you believe Furman is perceived today by the higher education community?

Furman’s national stature is growing and improving. Reputation is built upon the accomplishments of your faculty and students and the national exposure generated by your programs and research.

We have succeeded in increasing Furman’s national exposure on numerous fronts. Furman is garnering more grants from prestigious national philanthropies, such as the Andrew Mellon, Howard Hughes and Guggenheim foundations. More and more higher education leaders list Furman among the best liberal arts colleges in the nation, in large part because as many of our students go on to attend the finest graduate and professional schools, in part because of our success in emphasizing undergraduate research, in-depth internships, exposure to new opportunities, living/learning communities whereby students with similar academic interests live together, and the strengthening of academic majors and concentrations in Asian studies, environmental studies, poverty studies, women’s and gender studies, Latin American studies, communication and neuroscience. We are also known for our academic innovations and leadership development programs.

If you had one chance for a “do-over,” is there anything you would have done differently — or wish might have turned out differently?

I had a “do-over” word for the last 16 years. I’m sure I would have used it often. On a very serious note, I wish that we had not lost so many of our students to accidents and disease during my presidency. Student funerals are the worst duty imaginable for a college president.

In terms of my presidential decisions, I have made many mistakes, most of them involving personnel issues or communication lapses. As Dan Quayle once said, “I stand by my mistakes.” I also would have made my speeches shorter.

Sti demonstrated his singing talents in 1998 when he joined folk group Peter, Paul and Mary on the Timmon’s Arena stage. He could frequently be seen chatting up students while walking across campus. President George W. Bush’s appearance at the 2008 Commencement was among the most controversial events of the 16 years.

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Controversy, in other words, can be one of our primary amenities. It is critical to have a healthy mix of opinions and outlooks on campus. In fact, Furman’s official statement of its character and institutional values declares that the university promotes “free exchange of inquiry ... in an atmosphere free from provincial restrictions upon it.”

The most striking change since my student days at Furman has been the revitalization of downtown Greenville. It is a tremendous asset now to the university and will continue to be so. When we marketed Furman to prospective students, professors and staff members, we highlight Greenville as one of our primary amenities.

The Hollins Service Corps continues to enable hundreds of students to work as volunteers in Greenville’s many social service agencies and schools, and Furman’s new facility on Main Street, called FYI, is a hive of programs and events. The Toms Conference Center on the Furman campus has also become a popular venue for many community activities.

Our burgeoning continuing education programs involve thousands of people from the community in the life of the campus, and Bridges to a Brighter Future, which helps Greenville-area high school students fulfill their potential and go on to college, has been named the best summer enrichment program in the nation. Furman is also in the process of working with Greenville social agencies and municipal departments to organize a Community Conservation Corps, whereby Furman volunteers help “weatherize” low-income homes in the community. We worked on our first houses this spring.

We have made a conscious effort to identify Furman as “a private university with a public mission.” The cornerstone of this statewide effort has been the public policy and educational programs offered through the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership. Created 10 years ago, it has far surpassed our expectations and become our primary portal to statewide, regional and even national exposure.

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In terms of my presidential decisions, I have made many mistakes, most of them involving personnel issues or communication lapses. As Dan Quayle once said, “I lived by my mistakes.” I also would have made my speeches shorter.
I would say, to myself or anyone assuming this position, “Enjoy yourself.” Being Furman’s president is the best job in the world. It is a complex, varied and rewarding calling that allows you to make a difference in the lives of talented young people and in the quality of life for society at large. Be prepared to talk with, listen to and work with an incredible variety of people from many different backgrounds with a multitude of perspectives. Be patient yet decisive, be cool under pressure, cherish the people you work with, and get used to chicken and green beans on the speaking circuit. Spend as much time as possible with the students, for they reinvigorate you. Smile a lot, even when you would rather frown, and get used to chicken and green beans on the speaking circuit. Spend as much time as possible with the students, for they reinvigorate you. Smile a lot, even when you would rather frown, and remember the cheer that Dr. Johns made famous: FU all the time! 

Photos illustrating this article by Charlie Register.

Full partner
As Furman’s First Lady, Susan Shi has made lasting contributions that extend far beyond the university.