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## Blackwell's creative, well-rounded approach earns accolades

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## Blackwell's creative, well-rounded approach earns accolades

When Christopher Blackwell's name was called at the 2009 Commencement as a winner of the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching, it marked the first time in Furman history that the child of a previous recipient had earned the award.

Chris' father Albert Blackwell, Reuben B. Pitts Professor Emeritus of Religion, won the honor in 1977. The family joke at the time, says Chris, was that Dad had earned the "Notorious Teaching Award."

"Notorious" may actually not be such a bad term when describing either Dr. Blackwell. Try notorious as in popular. Noted. Well-known.

Those are just a few of the compliments students eagerly dole out when talking about Chris Blackwell, who has taught classics at Furman since 1996.

Andrew Cannon '11 has taken five classes with Blackwell and says, "His enthusiasm is always contagious and inspiring. He often incorporates various disciplines into his teaching, from literary criticism to computer programming, presenting classics as the quintessence of a liberal arts education. I always leave class wanting to study even more."

Blackwell also earns plaudits for his innovative approach in the classroom. Students point out that translating Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* or sections of the New Testament from the original Greek not only improves their language skills but expands their knowledge of mathematics and religion.

It's no wonder, then, that Blackwell's introductory Greek courses enroll as many as 25 to 30 students — an impressive number for a school Furman's size.

Nor should it come as a surprise that his faculty colleagues have taken note of his

creativity. John Armstrong of communication studies, which shares a departmental suite with classics, says, "One of the qualities that I find striking about Chris is his readiness to experiment in the classroom."

Armstrong goes on to say, "At first glance, a book on geometry might seem an odd choice for a language class. However, Chris recognized that the limited vocabulary of the book would create a process in which students could rapidly master the vocabulary and thus spend more time reading and less time looking up words. They could also test the mathematical principles of Euclid, thereby also testing their understanding of the Greek text."

In addition, Blackwell eagerly involves students in cutting-edge research. He is a national leader in efforts to establish a digital library of ancient manuscripts, and for a number of years his students have been part of an ongoing project (with other universities) of reviewing, analyzing and translating the great works of antiquity. Blackwell and a colleague at the University of Kentucky recently received a three-year, \$250,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to help develop new imaging technologies to further their efforts, which include making their work available to the public.

As he has said, "We can best preserve these treasures of human culture by putting them in as many hands as possible."

Blackwell, a graduate of Marlboro College in Vermont who earned his advanced degrees at Duke, acknowledges that in teaching a subject like Greek, he often benefits from small classes, especially in upper-level courses. "Small classes make it easier to customize," he says. "We can all work together, for example, to translate the scholarly notes from a Byzantine manuscript."



JEREMY FLEMING

No matter the size of the class, though, students say that Blackwell's patience, compassion, broad range of knowledge and fair but exacting standards help them persevere.

"I tell my Greek students not to get discouraged, because the subject really is hard," he says. "That's why it's worth doing. And this is literature that's been sitting around for a thousand years waiting to be read, so it's OK to take your time with it. If you stick with it, the vocabulary and grammar will come.

"It was hard for me to learn. It helps to remember that, because I understand the struggle."

— JIM STEWART