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Department of Asian Studies makes major strides

Last February, when Furman's Department of Asian Studies was awarded a State Department grant through the Associated Colleges of the South to conduct a nine-week Chinese language course for U.S. students at Soochow University in China, many institutions with long-established Asian Studies programs took notice.

"I think it woke up a lot of people when we received that grant," says Jan Kiely, a professor of history and Asian Studies who is currently directing the Hopkins Nanjing Center at China's Nanjing University. Moreover, three Furman students were among the 20 selected from more than 400 applicants for the tuition-free course.

Furman professor Harry Kuoshu directed the summer program, which featured eight weeks of language instruction and one week of travel. The crash course was equivalent to a full year of study.

The grant was also an indication of how, since its establishment in 1988, Furman's Department of Asian Studies has grown to the point that it now approaches the status of the country's leading liberal arts programs, such as those at Middlebury, Wesleyan and Williams.

"What Furman has accomplished would be impressive at any college. Their people have been able to take their program to a new level," says John Berninghausen, Truscott Professor of Chinese Studies at Middlebury. Berninghausen, who visited Furman last year, says, "I could sense the excitement and growth. There are innovative teachers and scholars with vision. And there has been administrative leadership."

Much of the Furman program's strength can be traced to a \$1 million gift made in 2004 by Beth and Ravenel Curry '63. The funds were used to hire two full-time faculty members and to establish several programs that have given Chinese Studies a higher profile.

In 2005 Furman established the Summer China Experience, which funds a two-week trip to China for up to 15 incoming freshmen and two faculty members. The students join a group of their Chinese counterparts at Soochow University for a weeklong comparative cultures seminar, followed by a tour of the country. Furman professors from communication studies, sociology, political science and history have chaperoned the trip — and upon their return added an Asian component to an existing course.

Furman has also sponsored high-profile events in recent years to address economic and political issues in Asia. Among the lecturers have been James Lilley, a former U.S. ambassador to China and South Korea, and several prominent Chinese labor and human-rights activists.

The results? Over the last five years, the number of Asian Studies faculty and majors has doubled. Majors focus on one of three cultures — China, India or Japan.

This September the university became one of just a handful of liberal arts institutions to offer four years of Chinese language instruction. Department chair Kate Kaup says this is a necessary step if the program is to continue to grow.

"We're attracting students who want to come to Furman to major in Asian Studies," she says. "Student interest will only continue to grow as we now offer four full years of Chinese language and expand our course offerings. We can now offer an outstanding curriculum with authority."

The "Because Furman Matters" campaign is targeting support for travel opportunities in the Asian Studies program. This winter, 18 students participated in the university's first travel-study program in India, co-sponsored by the departments of Asian Studies, economics and history. Accompanied by professors Savita Nair (history) and Kailash Khandke (assistant



MATT ALEXANDER

dean for international education), the students visited Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Bangalore, Mysore and Cochin, and studied at Madras Christian College in Chennai.

For 2008-09, Furman will add tenure track positions in Chinese philosophy and Chinese language instruction and will host visiting scholar Peng Qian, an authority on ethnic law from Central Nationalities University in Beijing.

The growing focus on Asia comes as China and India begin to play a larger role in the global economy. China's economy, for example, grew more than 10 percent last year and is now the fourth largest in the world behind the United States, Japan and Germany. China will also host the 2008 Summer Olympics.

Given the growing impact of the Pan-Pacific region on the world stage, college graduates who understand the culture are in great demand.

"I remember when parents would come to me and say, 'What is my kid going to do as a Chinese major?'" says Berninghausen, who founded the Middlebury Chinese Studies program in 1976. "They don't ask that anymore."

— JOHN ROBERTS