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Harris helps students combat math anxiety

At the end of John Harris' Math 15 (Ideas in Mathematics) final, students find a message from their teacher: "Never again can you say that you are bad at math."

The course is for non-majors, and the message addresses a common script delivered by so many non-math people determined subconsciously to keep it that way: "I'm no good with numbers."

Harris, who comes from a family of teachers (his dad is a religion professor at Mercer University and his mother teaches elementary school), knows differently. He realizes that, for the non-major, his course is most likely the last opportunity to encounter math in a formal way — and the last chance for students to gain a little better perception of what math is and is not.

"Having success in math is more than having right answers," says Harris. "It's a process that is often far more important than that." He goes on to explain that it is about struggle and persistence. Conveying these larger lessons to students helped Harris earn the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching for 2005-06.

"Math is more than endless formulas and rules that you memorize," says Harris, who has traced his academic influences as far back as 17th-century Germany. "It's a language to describe patterns, a language that can inspire people to discover new patterns. And anytime you have that inspiration, that's using your mind to its fullest potential."



A native of Atlanta and 1991 Furman graduate, Harris can relate to the struggle. He remembers his freshman year and the realization that what "cut it" in high school would not work at Furman. He sorted things out, though, and eventually earned his Ph.D. from Emory University. He taught at Appalachian State for five years before joining the Furman faculty in 2000.

Students enjoy Harris' classes for their creative flair. As an example, he assigns a project to students at the end of his Ideas in Mathematics course, then watches as they turn math into an interdisciplinary study. Their presentations often marry drama, music, poetry, creative writing and the visual arts to mathematical themes.

For one project, Harris even guest-starred on an "episode" of the popular TV show "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody," during which he went on sabbatical to teach math to identical twins in middle school. At least, that's how a student envisioned things.

Students also appreciate Harris' openness and accessibility. For his part, he enjoys working with students one-on-one or in small groups.

"I remember approaching certain professors in graduate school during office hours and immediately feeling like I was bothering them," says Harris. "I don't think this was a conscious intention on the professor's part, but I'm committed to making myself available."

— JASON STRAND '04

Profiles of Bill Pierce and Sandra Roberson, the 2005-06 advising award winners, will appear in the winter issue.

Furman recognized for green building efforts

The South Carolina chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council has awarded Furman its Leadership Award in the Private Sector for the university's commitment to sustainability and green building design and construction.

The honor was one of four leadership awards given to recognize outstanding individuals and organizations that have shown vision, leadership and commitment to the advancement of green building and construction in South Carolina.

The U.S. Green Building Council is the nation's leading non-profit coalition for advancing buildings that are environmentally responsible and profitable and that are healthy places to live and work.

According to the organization, Furman's efforts have been a model not only for private institutions and organizations, but for the state's public and non-governmental institutions. It said that the university's Herman N. Hipp Hall, which was completed in 2002 and is the first building in South Carolina to receive LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, "remains the benchmark for future green buildings in the state."

LEED promotes a whole-building approach to sustainability by recognizing performance in five key areas of environmental health: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality.