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The Research Factor

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The Research Factor

"In an ever changing environment, the riches will go to those who have learned how to learn."

— Roger E. Herman, strategic business futurist and author

Visit Furman any day during the summer and you'll find as many as 150 students busily engaged in research with their professors.

On the north side of campus, an aspiring sculptor is working with a ceramicist to develop new glazing techniques. In Furman Hall, an English major and a professor are exploring the motivations of a 19th-century poet. Across the way in Johns Hall, a student who is unsure about whether she wants to pursue a research career is testing her interests by assisting a neuroscientist with a study of the biochemical basis of alcohol addiction.

Twenty-five years ago, undergraduates at any college, let alone Furman, rarely participated in this sort of broad-based research activity. The conventional wisdom was that research simply could not be done by undergraduates, especially in areas outside of the sciences.

With time, though, we have come to realize that undergraduates are fully capable of serious research — and that research creates valuable educational opportunities for these students.

At Furman, research is considered a major component of undergraduate education and is a key element in the university's strategic commitment to engaged learning. With the research program established years ago by the chemistry department as a model, we have developed one of the strongest summer undergraduate research programs in the country, with 100 to 150 students annually conducting serious, novel research across the curriculum. Students are paid for their work, and because they don't take courses, the research is the primary focus of their intellectual energy.

Our program is so extensive that, in surveys conducted five years ago and again last year, Furman was second only to Williams among national liberal arts colleges in the number and percentage of undergraduates involved in summer research.

But research at Furman is not limited to the summer. During the academic year, many students conduct independent research projects for credit, and others simply volunteer their time to work in a professor's laboratory, studio or professional area of interest.

This wide-ranging program would not be possible without the support and commitment of

an administration and faculty who firmly believe that involving undergraduates in the process of inquiry and discovery strikes at the heart of a liberal arts education. Working one-on-one with a faculty member or with a research team on a novel problem — a problem that has the potential to advance our knowledge — instills excitement and passion for learning.

Research increases students' confidence in their ability to work independently and helps them realize that they can make important contributions. It also helps students clarify career goals while developing and applying skills that they have learned in the classroom. In addition, although many students discover that they love research, others realize that it is sometimes lonely and difficult work and that they would prefer not to pursue it.

Research experience makes students more competitive for the best graduate programs, fellowships and jobs. And because a student works closely with a professor over an extended period of time, the professor gets to know the student well and can write a very detailed and meaningful letter of recommendation. The close interaction between student and faculty research teams often creates strong bonds and leads to deep, lifelong friendships.

Students need problem-solving skills to succeed in the ever fluid conditions of the modern workplace. Research projects require that students seek new knowledge and creatively apply this knowledge to new problems. Through research, students learn to define and develop approaches to a problem, collect and evaluate information, develop and organize conclusions, and present their findings either orally or in writing.

It's the best preparation possible for lifelong learning.

— Gil Einstein

The author, chair of the psychology department, received the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching in 1985. He has taught at Furman since 1977.

