

9-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Elizabeth (2018) "A Search for Truth and Correction in the Light," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 61 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol61/iss2/5>

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A Search for Truth and Correction in the Light

An examination of Furman's history is an opportunity to include all.

BY ELIZABETH DAVIS

Furman University “maintains its commitment to freedom of inquiry and excellence in the quest for truth. The university is a community that encourages and nurtures individuals as they search for truth with passion, integrity, and rigorous intellectual discipline. Furthermore, the university understands its mission to be not only the transmission of knowledge, attitudes, and values, but also their examination and correction in the light of continuing discovery and integration of knowledge.”

– excerpt from Furman’s Statement on Character and Values

I opened our Convocation ceremony this past August by quoting from our Character and Values statement, and I repeated its imperative that we “search for truth with passion, integrity, and rigorous intellectual discipline.” It was with this principle in mind that Furman formed the Task Force on Slavery and Justice more than a year ago. We wanted to better understand our history and use this knowledge to inform how we deliver The Furman Advantage today.

Furman students, faculty, staff and alumni – including those who served on the task force – have a deep respect for our founders and their roles in establishing and sustaining our university. Our hope is that we can learn from their strengths and shortcomings and bridge such knowledge with our renewed commitment to diversity and inclusion and our promise to prepare Furman students for meaningful lives of purpose and even greater community impact.

While a number of alumni have lauded this examination, some have shared concerns and others have asked, “Why now?” Our response is, “Why not now?” We challenge our students daily to push beyond their comfort levels, academically and socially. That is how they grow. And as they grow, we support them in those challenges. Why shouldn’t the university do the same?

This study has revealed, in part, that we have a subset of students and alumni who don’t feel fully embraced in the life of the university. This breaks my heart, and I’m not willing to ignore such feelings. Our clear commitment to ensuring that all students who come to Furman receive the

full benefit of our educational experience is more reason why we cannot be satisfied with this reality.

In this spirit, the task force researched the university’s ties to slavery [see story on page 23], held numerous related conversations, and consulted with descendants of Richard Furman’s family as well as a consortium of colleges and universities studying similar pasts. They produced a thoughtful and thorough report, which includes our history and a number of recommendations the university will consider as we acknowledge our past and seek to learn from it.

This process will allow us to become an even stronger institution. We can’t be afraid to develop a deeper understanding of our past and the circumstances that allowed us to be the institution we are today. As a university, we are committed to teaching our students to search for truth, to reflect on what they learn, and to make changes for the better, even when it is difficult.

And it’s important that we, as a Furman community, discuss and take this on together. We have made the report available online and shared it with students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, our Board of Trustees, and many others, and are holding several forums this fall to discuss it. We will continue the discussion into the spring as our board considers the report’s recommendations.

I’m looking forward to the conversations we will have in the coming months, however difficult they might be. This is our opportunity, as an institution, to practice, advocate for, and model courageous inquiry and civil discourse. The one thing I feel certain about and on which I believe we all can agree: Not everyone will agree about the right course of action. We should anticipate debate and disagreement. How we respond in light of those discussions will be a sure signal to the entire Furman community whether we are truly prepared to be an inclusive university. ●

Elizabeth Davis