

# A Successful Departmental Model: Furman University

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*Furman University*

Located in Greenville, South Carolina, Furman University was founded in 1826. In the late 1950s, the university moved about eight miles from downtown Greenville to a beautiful 750-acre campus at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Until 1992, Furman was closely associated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention. The university is now an independent, coeducational liberal arts college that is listed under the category called “Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences” in the Carnegie Foundation classificatory scheme, and it ranks among the leading such colleges in the country. (Furman is called a university only because it has small Master’s-degree programs in chemistry and education that enrolled a total of 49 students during the fall term of 2006-2007.) We have about 2,600 students who can major or minor in 28 academic departments. Of the 228 full-time and 46 part-time faculty members, 178 have attained tenure. Most students live on campus and are of traditional college age. “Furman emphasizes engaged learning, a problem-solving, project-oriented and research-based educational philosophy that encourages students to put into practice the theories and methods learned from texts and lectures” (Furman University Catalog 2006-2007, p. 4). The Department of Psychology embraces and practices this philosophy. With 10 full-time faculty members and 2 adjuncts, our department graduates about 37 majors each year. Many of our graduates pursue advanced work in highly respected universities throughout the country, and many of them have distinguished themselves in a wide variety of vocations.

## **Independent Research, Summer Research, and Special Topics Courses**

Research has been an important component of our curriculum since the 1960s. We believe that involving undergraduates in the process of inquiry and discovery is the essence of liberal arts education. We accomplish this goal in two key ways. About 12 years ago, during one of our annual retreats,

psychology faculty members committed themselves to providing top-quality research experiences for all interested students. Toward that end, we began to encourage more students to take our elective 4-hour Independent Research course that requires them to propose and conduct an original research project. Also, we enriched our summer research program. Students chosen for the summer program spend 10 weeks of full-time collaboration with a faculty member on a project of mutual interest. In addition to students who conduct summer research at Furman, several students have worked with highly respected research psychologists at other institutions in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan. Both the Independent Research course and the summer program allow students to participate fully in the research—conceptualization, design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. Because we do not permit students in the summer program to take academic courses or have other jobs, this 10-week period provides undistracted time for students and less distracted time for their faculty collaborators. Another benefit of the summer program is that no grades are given, so students are more likely to learn for the sheer joy of knowing. These characteristics foster a climate that promotes excitement, creativity, critical thinking, diligence, and independence.

Several years ago, we began to develop a series of seminars called Special Topics courses, each of which provides 4 hours of academic credit. In a typical seminar, a small number of advanced students read and discuss primary literature in a particular area (e.g., Self, Language Development, Psychoneuro-immunology, and Psychopathic Personality). Modeled after graduate-school seminars, these courses encourage students to develop a familiarity with the literature in a particular area that sometimes leads to an Independent Research project for credit or to a summer research project.

These Independent Research projects, summer research projects, and Special Topics courses help to foster and maintain enthusiasm for learning that is

unusual in traditional classroom instruction. Sometimes a faculty member will have three or more summer research students who become a highly productive research group. These academic approaches increase students' confidence in their ability to learn and work independently and collaboratively, and they promote the development of specific skills. Students learn to apply methods and theories from the classroom to their own projects. We consider these activities to be ideal capstone experiences, as recommended by the St. Mary's Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology (see Brewer et al., 1993) and in the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (American Psychological Association, 2007). We believe that problem-solving skills learned in these settings provide ideal preparation for lifelong learning. Hence, we encourage research for all of our students and not just for those who are thinking about going to graduate school or pursuing careers in psychology. Of approximately 37 psychology majors who graduate each year, about 20 of them are involved in summer research. Regardless of the nature of the project, students contribute to all phases of the research, and they usually have significant ownership of the project. Most of these research experiences result in conference presentations, and some lead to publications in prestigious journals.

### **Funding the Summer Program**

Through the competitive Furman Advantage Program, we pay nearly all of our summer research students \$3,000 for the 10-week period, whether they conduct research on campus or elsewhere. Students who go to other universities receive additional money to cover travel expenses. The rest of the funding comes through the creativity and resourcefulness of students and faculty. Several faculty members have research grants, and we are aggressive in seeking funds from organizations that support undergraduate research. Finding funding is a major challenge every year, but we always manage to do so.

### **Internship Program**

In addition to the research activities discussed earlier, our department has an extensive internship program that encourages students to secure internships that match their interests and career goals. For instance, many students intern in the mental health field, but many others obtain positions in organizations concerned with advertising, business, human resources, assessment, and so on. Students have several options for internships. They may take a

regular course (Internship) for 2- or 4-hours credit, and they may arrange noncredit internships during the regular academic year or in the summer. Our summer program provides a strong incentive for employers. Working in this program, a student can offer to work for half of the normal wages, because Furman will pay the other half. As a result, students obtain outstanding internships with agencies in South Carolina, in numerous other states, and in other countries such as Africa, Scotland, and Switzerland. We require students who take Internship for credit to write a major manuscript, and that is why we mention these experiences in this chapter on research in our department.

## **Psychology Research and Internship Forum**

Considering the number of students involved as well as the high quality of their research and internships, we wanted to create an occasion for students to share their experiences with each other, faculty members, administrators, and the broader Furman community. In the spring of 2003, our department organized the first Psychology Research and Internship Forum. Modeled after a professional research conference and comprised only of student participants, the 3-hour afternoon program included research talks, a poster session, and an internship panel. In concurrent talk sessions, six students presented research they had conducted as an Independent Research project or as part of our summer research program. These talks were similar in level and type to what you would expect to find at a professional conference. Twelve students presented their research in a 1-hour poster session, and six students discussed their internships as panelists in one session.

To underscore the importance of this event and to encourage student attendance, the psychology faculty suspended afternoon classes for that day and required their students to attend the Forum. Furthermore, we sent individual invitations to Furman administrators and local alumni to encourage attendance. Consequently, each talk session had at least 40 attendees, and many of them generated lively discussion with the student presenters. The poster session was also crowded, and student presenters had the opportunity to talk more informally about their research. Internship panelists spoke about how internships allowed them to see firsthand how concepts and principles from the classroom apply in the real world, as well as provided them with career-related guidance. The first Forum was a smashing success. Student participants were excited about

sharing their accomplishments and experiences with peers and faculty, and they were delighted and reinforced by the enthusiasm of Forum attendees.

The Forum has grown dramatically since its first year. Recognizing the value of our Forum, the Sociology and Political Science Departments participated in the third annual conference. Last year (the fourth year of the conference), what was initially the Psychology Research and Internship Forum became the Social Science Research and Internship Conference that included student participants from seven departments. The program consisted of 19 symposia in which 102 students presented their research, 4 panel discussions that featured 19 students sharing their internship experiences, and 3 separate poster sessions that highlighted the research of 74 students. Several hundred people attended the Conference, including students, faculty, administrators, and community members.

This Conference has become an important tradition in Furman's Psychology Department, and students look forward to participating. The Conference provides them an opportunity to hone their presentation skills while sharing the products of their hard work. Finally, and perhaps most important, the Conference shows new and prospective psychology majors the number and diversity of extraordinary opportunities available to them.

We are proud of our department's long tradition of research and internships, and we cherish the benefits that students derive from these important aspects of their undergraduate education. We hope that this venerable tradition will live long and prosper.

## References

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