Year in One

with Elizabeth Davis

written by Jordana Megonigal
photography by Wayne Culpepper
On July 1, 2014, Furman University elected its first female president in Elizabeth Davis. Most recently from Baylor University in Texas, Davis boasted a long history of education and educating, a background in finance and accounting, and a start in music, sports and everything New Orleans.

Early this fall, only a little over a year after her beginnings at Furman, Davis sat down with our Publisher, Jordana Megenigal, to chat. From her background, to her views on the cost and value of education and her vision for Furman and its surrounding community, all of it is here, in her own words.

Q: Ok, so let’s start easy. Where did you grow up, and what was growing up like?

A: Well, I was born in Texas but I actually grew up in Metairie, which is right outside New Orleans. And so we got to experience the fun of being in New Orleans, with great food and Mardi Gras and the culture. I went to an all-girls public high school, which was very unusual to find; in fact, we were the only parish in Louisiana that segregated high schools on gender. But as I look back, that was probably one of the most formative times in my life, because girls did everything. There was no competition with boys—you know, sometimes girls can be silly and not show who they really are because of what they think boys will think about them, and that wasn’t anything we ever had to deal with. So I got to be student conductor of the band, and I was drum major of the band, which meant I got to lead the band in Mardi Gras parades, and that was a ton of fun.

It was a pretty traditional Southern upbringing. Both of my parents went to college; my dad was a dentist, but actually when we moved to Louisiana, he went to work for LSU Dental School. So father worked, mother stayed home, I had a younger brother…just pretty stereotypical. We played a lot of sports in the street; I got to be all-time quarterback and make the boys run so I could just stand and throw, and I enjoyed doing the same thing when I got to college, playing intermurals, although I was never good enough to play officially organized sports. I was always with the band.

I went to Baylor, which at that time there were about 10,000 undergraduates—it’s grown now to about 14,000—so I was in the band and of course, that was co-ed. I played the trombone in the band. There were two girls out of 20 trombone players, so it was just an interesting switch. In my freshman year, Baylor won the Southwest conference, so I got to march in the Cotton Bowl Parade.

It seems like marching in parades seems to be a theme that follows me around.

Baylor was a great experience. We had family and friends who went to Baylor, and I had visited my junior and senior years at homecoming. Baylor’s homecoming is just remarkable—a lot of alumni come back, and it’s arguably one of the best in the country, but surely there’s someone else out there who will say theirs is better. But that school spirit was very attractive and we just had some great times... even though I left an all-girls high school and went to a co-ed institution, I never felt like I was ever told there was anything I couldn’t do.

I started in computer science. It was too picky for me, so I switched to accounting. Again, what would be considered male-dominated professions, but no one suggested that I should think about doing something different. It was a great experience after I graduated from Baylor and moved back to New Orleans to work downtown. And, it just happened to be that year, 1984, that the World’s Fair was in New Orleans. So we could walk down the street to the World’s Fair, or walk down for lunch in the French Quarter. That was fun—to be single in New Orleans. But my New Orleans claim to fame goes back to my high school years, when I played with Wynton Marsalis.

Q: So you ended up in accounting...?

A: I was an auditor with Arthur Anderson and company, and I decided that I enjoyed my Baylor experience so much that I wanted to teach. So I decided to go to grad school. I started at Duke in August of 1987 and was done by December of ‘91, but my graduation date was ‘92.

I met my husband while I was in grad school, and he was getting his PhD in accounting at UNC Chapel Hill. I was at Duke, but the programs were such that we could take courses at both places. We met our first semester in a Behavioral Decision class. We started hanging out, and it turned out he was playing the organ for a small church in Durham, and they needed a pianist, so I started playing the piano. So for three years he and I played for a church in Durham, so we would play duets. It was a lot of fun, but he was way better—and still is—than I am. They just tolerated how I played.

When we were looking to get employed after graduation, trying to find two accounting professors positions at that time was pretty tough; add to that that many schools don’t like to hire married couples. Baylor ended up having three accounting positions open, and so Charles and I got two of them. Charles had told a friend of his, years before, that he’d never live in Texas. We lived there for 23 years.
But then you ended up moving here, as once again, the first woman in a typically male-dominated position.

Right.

I read in one of your interviews that you said, about being the first female president of Furman, “the best thing about being the first is that it means that there will be more.”

Yes. You know, one of the things that has been interesting as I’ve been on the road is that I’ll meet alumni from years past who can’t imagine that Furman would have ever had a female president in their lifetime.

You know, with the Baptist roots, and tending to be sort of “stereotypically” Southern Baptist. Of course, Furman separated from the Baptist convention, but still I think it was hard for some of the women to imagine a female president. Really, it's hard to know if I've noticed anything other than just surprise.

I was in Columbia for the USC game, and we had a luncheon for some of the parents. They asked me to sit in the middle of the table and the host asked the waiter to serve the president first. Well, she was looking at all the different men, and finally he said 'No, it's the woman in the middle of the table.' So that still tends to throw people off, but not in a bad way.

It’s interesting... You’re now here at Furman, and you came from a liberal arts education.

I actually have a business degree, but of course the liberal arts were a required core leading up to the accounting degree. I think there are people who will argue with you about how many liberal arts I have in my degree.

That’s something that comes up a lot: the argument between the value of a standard university versus a liberal arts education. What is your take on that... on liberal arts learning?

If I didn’t believe that it was critical education, I wouldn’t be here. In particular, seeing how Furman takes liberal arts, and lets students shape how their thinking progresses and how they are able to deal with ambiguity to find solutions, has really been very impressive to me.

I read something not too long ago that said that the half-life of most jobs right now is about 10 years, and soon it will be five years. So if people are going to be looking for new jobs every five years, or needing to reinvent themselves, they’re going to have to approach that from a place of knowing how to learn, knowing how to bring a lot of disparate ideas together to find themes that emerge and then to be creative with solutions.

Training for a particular job today is not going to help our students in the long run. I also think that at a liberal arts institution where students are required to take courses across disciplines, they are encouraged to find different ways of thinking, which means that even if they don’t necessarily follow a particular career path, that they know and understand how someone different from them thinks about an issue. That is incredibly important today when it comes to collaboration.

None of the real challenges that our country faces can be solved in a uni-dimensional way, so the real leaders and the real strategic thinkers in the country are going to have to know how to approach issues from multiple points of view, or at least know how to bring the right kinds of teams together to think through providing solutions. That's what I think the beauty of a liberal arts college is.

But the term "Liberal arts" also throws people off, because they don’t know that sciences are one of the liberal arts, so in fact, our science programs are some of our strongest programs. We have a relationship now with Greenville Health Systems as the undergraduate program, and Clemson as the research provider and MUSC as the medical school.

Why would you have a liberal arts college? Because we have strong students who are prepared in the sciences and the humanities and the social sciences who are in a perfect position to go on to advanced learning in the health profession.

So really, there’s no dichotomy between STEM and humanities. We believe all students need some of all of it to be well-rounded. I think the bigger conflict arises when people say from a liberal arts education, you’re not prepared for “a” job; that there’s no skill that someone can particularly see, when in fact, if you match up what employers say they want in employees, it’s exactly what a liberal arts education develops. Excellent communication skills; excellent ability to think through ambiguity to be self-starters; those who know how to use information appropriately.

A lot of colleges, with the advent of so many educational options, have been hit hard financially. On the other side of that are students having to pay upwards of...
$60,000 a year to go to school. So what are your thoughts on the value of the price of tuition, and really being able to provide them with something they can use without drowning in debt five to 10 years following?

A: First of all, thank goodness we have so many options in this country for students to find the right post-secondary education—if that’s what they want—that fits with their desires, their skill sets and their ability to pay. I don’t think anybody should get into a situation where they’re coming out with $100,000 of debt.

However, I don’t think that it’s unreasonable for students to have some debt, when you consider that a college degree can alter their life. It’s an inflection point in their life’s trajectory that will actually help them in terms of what they can accomplish. But absolutely, unwieldy debt that is going to make it difficult to live is really not appropriate.

So some of the things that students have to consider is: what is the track record of an institution in terms of not just students getting that first job but their ability to have continued employment and be able to adapt to changes?

How strong are those networks that are there for students? They’re alumni for forever, so do they feel that connection to the university to help them as they continue to need that support?

There’s a study that came out—a Gallup-Perdue study—that talks about the employees who are most satisfied in their jobs, who can actually trace it back to college experiences where there was a faculty member who encouraged the student to pursue her passions, or had an experience—whether it was internship or research—that helped them develop more fully their academic interests.

I think, when students have to look at the way the value of the education or the cost, there’s a lot to consider: not just the degree, but the support that goes along with it. How fast do students get out? Some of the things you read in the press talk about six-year graduation rates being under 50 percent for some institutions. Okay, well, that’s probably two more years of tuition that people aren’t counting on; that’s two years of lost income that people weren’t counting on.

All those factors need to be weighed, because that is a significant investment that could have really a lifelong payoff.

Because a Furman education is not for everyone, and that’s okay. But for the students who would thrive here, we want them to be able to afford it. So the first point is that we have to be clear about who we are and what we do.

A second point is to find ways to be sure that the financial aid dollars we have are being used the most appropriate way, and to continue to raise those dollars or to underwrite programs that, while they may look like ancillary programs, actually create the fullness of what a Furman education is.

So when I go out and talk to alumni I ask them what their favorite parts of Furman are, and then ask them to help us make sure that those favorite parts don’t go away.

For example, the Study Away program. When our students Study Away during the fall or spring semester, they don’t have to pay anything different than if they were coming here; at a lot of institutions it’s not that way. We’re trying to find ways to underwrite those programs that we believe are transformative. We want as many students as possible to have that experience.

So, part of its tuition. Part of it is philanthropy—getting people to underwrite and support what it is that we do because they believe in what we do.

Q: What about the ancillary programs? What priority are programs that focus on the business community itself, to the bottom line here and to the vision?

A: You know there are certain programs—let’s take Riley, or the OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) program—that bring real value to the community, but we’re not necessarily making money off of them—in terms of returning it to the bottom line to underwrite other programs. And I think that’s an important part of what we can do for the community—what we should do and what we’ve shown we have strength in.

So for something like Riley and DLI, what we don’t want to do is put a burden on undergraduate tuition. We need for the tuition dollars that we charge for DLI and the philanthropy that comes in to cover the cost. But we believe that what we are doing is so significant for the state of South Carolina that we’re satisfied if we can break even.

It’s the same thing with OLLI, which is the lifelong learning for Senior Adults. Its job is to bring culture and intellectual stimulation to the community; that otherwise, this group of 1,700 OLLI members might not have.

Yesterday, I went and greeted Senior Leaders Greenville, which is a program that is patterned after Leadership Greenville, but for senior adults, because senior adults want to be engaged. They want to be developed and they want to give back and they want to continue to

Q: Is that something that is a concern to you, for your own students?

A: Absolutely. In fact, one thing that I’ve done early on is to be sure that we are being very clear about the nature of a Furman education and the value of a Furman education.
learn, and so to me, that is a very important piece of what we do as an institution.

Now there’s other things—we have corporate professional development programs that I think have an opportunity to help bring education to that sector, that might actually end up dropping some money to the bottom line that might help us reduce overall costs to operate Furman university. The University has tons of fixed costs, so to the extent that we can find revenue sources to contribute to those fixed costs, all the better; like the camps we run in the summer—we are using our facilities to help meet an educational need.

Q: One thing you keep mentioning is connection to the community. You’ve talked about engaged learning, noting that younger generations prefer to be more hands-on, with volunteering and problem solving. What is your vision for that relationship, and how does that relationship get deeper?

A: That’s a great question and in fact, I posed that at the fall faculty retreat just last week. We are so engaged in the community—we are engaged in terms of the education we deliver, the DLI and OLLI programs, and we are celebrating this year 50 years for the Heller Service Corps. We have faculty and students who are doing significant research making a difference in the quality of life; for example, we are one of the participants in LiveWell Greenville.

We could continue to do all this stuff, but what if we were more coordinated in our efforts? What if we were seen truly as a partner in the community, where we were at the table when issues affecting the quality of life in Greenville and the Upstate came up, where our connections were so close that we were in constant conversation, and where the work that we did went beyond a boundary by semester?

You know, when students get to the end of a semester, they’re done. But that’s not how problems and issues occur—they don’t occur according to an academic calendar. But if we were engaged in a way where there was continuity...where we said, “We’re in here, and we’re going to create research programs or curricular programs and they could hand off from one semester to a next...and students over two or three years could see the development?”

If we truly believe that liberal arts prepare students in the best way to solve problems, let’s give them some practice identifying issues and workable solutions. Workable solutions in a textbook are quite different from workable solutions when you’re sitting around a table with people who are all on a different schedules;

who think very differently; who have realities that are different from the 20-year-olds on campus.

Certainly, I see this as a way for Furman as an institution to be a part of the community. But I also think about this being part of our students’ education, that they otherwise would not get. And if we want to prepare the next generation of citizens, we better practice some citizenship, you know? I think Greenville in particular is a great place to do this, because we have a history of working together to make things better, so it demonstrates to students what collaboration can look like. And Greenville’s not so big that students’ can’t get their hands around it.

Q: So what is your vision for the school, for Greenville? What is that vision the next five or 10 years?

A: My vision for Furman nationally to become known for the breadth and depth of the education we provide and the kinds of students we graduate. And locally, for innovation, collaboration and partnership, to make this community a better place for all who live here.

It’s how were’ understood...my vision is that we are understood differently than we are now. Furman is regarded as a great liberal arts institution that serves 18- to 22-year-olds. But we do more than that, and that’s how I want to be known. I tell people we educate from ages three to 93, and I think that demonstrates the enduring value of a liberal arts education: you’re never too old or too young to benefit.