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Furman grads set the bar for civil discourse

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Thomas Hydrick, left, chairman of the Furman University College Republicans, and Ben Saul, right, president of the Furman University College Democrats, are friends and roommates at Furman. Monday, February 25, 2013 / Heidi Heilbrunn

Written by **Lillia Callum-Penso**
Staff Writer

As they walk across the stage to receive their [diplomas](#) from Furman University today, Ben Saul and Thomas Hydrick mark the beginning of the end of a journey.

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The 22-year-olds leave behind a greater legacy than student leadership and good grades — they leave a model for cooperation and civil discourse that will stand for years to come.

Hydrick is chairman of the College Republicans, Saul is president of the College Democrats, and they're roommates and close [friends](#).

In Furman President Rod Smolla's view, the two could impart a worthy lesson to Congress when it comes to budget negotiations.

Send them to Washington, D.C., he says, and "we'd have the cuts avoided by Friday."

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Thomas Hydrick, right, chairman of the Furman University College Republicans, and Ben Saul, left, president of the Furman University College Democrats, are friends and roommates at Furman. Monday, February 25, 2013 / Heidi Heilbrunn

Hydrick and Saul met their sophomore year when both pledged Pi Kappa Phi fraternity. Each soon discovered the other had a passion for politics, though on the opposite side of the debate.

That summer they became friends when both were on campus taking classes. The friendship grew the following year when Hydrick was elected to head the Republicans, and Saul, the Democrats.

The mood on campus was tense that year, 2010, and the divide was palpable. The student group, Conservative Students for a Better Tomorrow, attracted attention for programs and guest speakers.

“It was intellectually interesting, but it did cause polarization,” Hydrick says.

So he and Saul set out to re-frame politics on campus.

“What we said is, can we have a strong voice on campus but can we do it in a cooperative relationship?” Saul says.

That year, they worked hard to shift the tide.

They joined forces to bring informative programming to promote understanding over opinion. One program on the debt ceiling attracted a mixed group of students with a discussion on the pros and cons of proposed spending cuts and tax breaks.

They’ve also worked on programming with other groups across campus, setting a precedent for [collaboration](#) in the future.

Last year they worked with the local NAACP chapter on a program on the voter-identification law. But by far, their most prized accomplishment is their collaboration on bringing Mexican President Vicente Fox to campus, the first visit by a head of state to the university since 2008.

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