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Riley Institute Moves South Carolina Forward

By **Josephine McMullen**
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The offices of the Riley Institute are unassuming and so is its Executive Director Don Gordon. But don't let that fool you. The Riley Institute is making a big impact in South Carolina.

The Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership is a non-partisan institute affiliated with the Department of Political Science at Furman University. Named for former Governor of South Carolina and United States Secretary of Education Richard Riley, the Institute's 26 programs are multi-faceted. But they all have one goal in common: They all strive to make South Carolina a better place in which to live, learn, and do business.

The Riley Institute developed out of a conversation in Charleston on a rainy afternoon in 1999 between several people from Furman University, including Political Science Professor Dr. Don Gordon, and then Secretary of Education Richard Riley. During that conversation, Riley recognized that South Carolina was a small state with some big issues that needed addressing. The creation of an institute at Furman, Riley's alma mater, was discussed. The institute's goal would be to get Furman students, as well as people all throughout the state, involved in addressing some of South Carolina's pressing issues.

"I have loved Furman since I was old enough to walk," says Riley who graduated from Furman in 1954. "I really wanted to try to use all of the experience I had, all the information I had acquired, and the feeling I had for helping people (especially in education). I wanted to tie that to Furman in some way."

Dr. David Shi, who was then president of Furman University, gave the Institute his full support. Shi, who championed a university-wide emphasis on engaged learning, saw the creation of the Riley Institute as a way to enhance such learning opportunities for Furman Students. The Riley Institute could provide new ways for students to put their classroom skills and knowledge into practice, often by having them work on projects with partners from outside the University. This kind of "engaged" learning would go on to become an integral component of Riley Institute initiatives.

As the parameters for the Institute continued to be hashed out, it became very clear early on that one of the primary focuses would be education. "[Riley], of course, is always interested in public education so we knew one of the legs of the stool would be public education," says Gordon.

Another one of the legs of the stool would be non-partisanship. According to Gordon, "When we started [the Riley Institute], the first thing that Dick Riley says was 'Don, this has to be a non-partisan institute because we're not going to be able to do anything unless we've got everybody involved.' And that resonated with me because I totally believe that."

"We're too small of a state with too few resources to be fighting amongst ourselves either regionally or locally," says Gordon. "The only way we're ever going to get things done is to pull together. So we have embraced [non-partisanship] from 1999 onward. It comes across in a whole series of our programs."

Programs

Fast forward 15 years into the future. The Riley Institute has blossomed from an idea into 26 non-partisan, education-oriented programs that embrace engaged learning strategies.

It's hard to sum up what the Riley Center does in just a few sentences because it has so many programs, but Gordon tried nonetheless. "Within the Riley Institute there are three centers: the Center for Critical Issues where we're looking at things that have an impact on the state and bringing in people to talk about them. There's the Center for Education Policy and Leadership which is where we're working on education around the state. And then there's the Center for Diversity Strategies," says Gordon. "They're all interrelated but to try to put them together in an 'elevator speech' is pretty hard."

What each of these three centers has in common is that they each engage people all over South Carolina in addressing the critical issues that affect our state, such as education and diversity.

Diversity Leaders Initiative

Perhaps the Riley Institute's most far reaching program, the Diversity Leaders Initiative (DLI), has graduated over 1300 leaders across the state.

In 2003, the Riley Institute was approached by Michelin. Michelin had been in touch with what they characterized as a remarkable diversity leadership program out of Atlanta that Coca-Cola had started. The program was so impressive to Michelin they asked the Riley Institute to bring it to South Carolina. The first Riley Institute DLI class graduated later that year.

Program participants are chosen from nominees who have been asked to apply. They come from four sectors: faith-based, non-profit, corporate, and governmental. And each class mirrors the demographics of the state in terms of gender, race, and cultural background.

Class members then meet over the course of five months. The format is driven by case studies and other experiential learning tools designed to



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maximize interactions and create productive relationships among program participants.

Engaged learning is an important part of DLI as well. Participants work in groups to design and then implement community action or “capstone” projects. Throughout the implementation of their projects, participants acquire diversity leadership skills.

Rabbi Marc Wilson, Founder and Director of the Year of Altruism (YOA), is a graduate of Upstate Class XV (Spring 2013). He reflected on his DLI experience when he says, “The people that they chose were absolutely great. They were in themselves diverse, not only racially and ethnically diverse, but diverse in opinion as well. The facilitator was excellent. The material was good. It was provocative. It made you think. It made you argue. And at the same time, there was a tremendous spirit of camaraderie.”

He went on to note how DLI had affected his own leadership of the Year of Altruism. “[DLI] dovetailed with the Year of Altruism... Coming into [YOA] with a clearer notion of diversity and also some of its landmines and the pitfalls really made it more compelling for me to always think about diversity as an element of what we’re doing.”

New Tech High Schools

Talk to Don Gordon about the Riley Institute for any length of time and you’ll quickly learn that the programs the Institute pursues are predicated on meticulous research. The New Tech High School initiative is no different.

New Tech high schools are the answer to a question asked by the Riley Institute: How can South Carolina effectively redesign public schools to prepare a larger number of students to graduate, succeed in college or career training, and compete in the global marketplace? With the help of two successive grants from the Hewlett Foundation, the Center for Education Policy and Leadership of the Riley Institute sought answers to this question through a comprehensive, non-partisan study involving residents throughout the state.

“It was the largest systematic study of South Carolina education ever done with 106 meetings around the state of South Carolina involving every school district and every county,” according to Gordon.

Once it was established what reforms the stakeholders in South Carolina public education wanted to see implemented, the next phase began, which was to find corresponding education programs that were achieving results and then replicate them.

“We went and did a hard look at every one of the [engaged learning high school] models that seemed to be more effective in keeping kids in school. New Tech, in our opinion, is the best. The metrics are fantastic, they’re continuing, and they’re sustainable,” says Gordon.

So the Riley Institute successfully procured an Investing in Innovation (i3) Grant from the federal government to bring the New Tech method to schools located in high poverty, historically low-performing school districts along the I-95 corridor, the so-called “Corridor of Shame,” which is dominated by such school districts.

New Tech high schools engage students through project-based learning. For example, students are assigned to project groups. Instead of lecturing, teachers work as coaches and facilitators.

Gordon explained, “One of these groups might get a project that says, ‘Build an amusement park in a part of Japan subject to tectonic shifts. Write a book about it and market it.’ So what happens is all of the sudden, these kids are actually having to learn algebraic equations that are useful in understanding what happens in terms of earthquakes.”

“Kids become highly engaged” Gordon continued. “They want to do this. At the end of the day they have to present, to articulate, both in writing and orally, their project to their peers, to business people, and to parents in the community.”

There are 127 New Tech high schools around the country with graduation rates of 98-99 percent and roughly the same percentage going on to four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and military service. According to Gordon, “The reason we picked New Tech high schools is because we don’t do anything that’s not metrically based. If we don’t have the data, we don’t get involved with it.”

Business-Education Partnerships

Fostering business-education partnerships is a key focus of the Riley Institute. Not only because “The Riley Institute is... dedicated to the belief that education and economic development are inextricably linked” (according to one Riley Institute publication), but also because such partnerships are the most expedient way to bring about education reform and renewal.

“In a time of huge division in the national legislative community and in the state, it’s very, very difficult to get things done,” says Gordon. “So we think the way to get things done [in South Carolina] is to create these grass root linkages between non-profit public institutions (such as education institutions) and the business community.”

“The business community understands that you have to have an educated workforce. But they understand much more than that: They’re not just looking for an educated workforce. They understand that if South Carolina is going to be competitive in the 21st Century, you’ve got to have people graduating from college [who are] going to create innovation, entrepreneurial activities, and synergies that you didn’t have before. You’re going to create a bigger tax base. The more tax base you have, the more possibility you have of even lowering taxes. The more people are educated, the less likely they’ll need to have social services involved. [South Carolina businesses] get that.”

This is why the Riley Institute concentrates on creating ways to help people scale up innovative education programs that are showing real, measurable results. Many of these successful programs are the product of business-education partnerships. “We don’t specifically always do these [public-private partnerships] ourselves,” says Gordon. “But we have an ability to make sure that other people know about them in ways that most other organizations can’t. And, so we’re doing that. We think this is the way to be most effective.”

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