

James B. Duke



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Driving Social and Economic Progress

Since launching in 1999, The Riley Institute at Furman University has worked to get young people engaged in politics, public policy and leadership.

The non-partisan institute – named for the former governor of South Carolina and U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, a 1954 Furman graduate

The Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership

Affiliated with the Department of Political Science at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., The Riley Institute offers an array of programs and conferences.

Through the Center for Critical Issues, The Riley Institute has sponsored conferences on women in politics, the

– has South Carolina’s social and economic future at its heart.

“South Carolina is a small state with many opportunities and challenges,” says Don Gordon, The Riley Institute’s executive director. “We have some of the brightest students in the world at Furman, and connecting them to the public conversation is a passion of mine.”

In January 2014, The Duke Endowment awarded Furman a \$1 million grant to help the

Institute establish a permanent endowment. Gordon says the grant will further the goal of “involving a broad spectrum of people in civil, thoughtful and common sense discussions around critical issues that impact South Carolina.”

He talks more about the Institute’s mission in the following interview.

What does it mean for the Institute to be named after Dick Riley?

It’s both a joy and an obligation. His drive to make things better permeates everything that we do.

Because of that association, will the focus always be on education?

Yes. And what better place for our home than an academic institution like Furman, where education is centered not only on the faculty and students, but on the whole state.

When the Institute opened, what was the goal?

Much of the conversation was focused on three questions. How do we create conditions in which the lives of Furman students are enriched? How do we bring the world to Furman? How do we create ways to enrich our students’ academic lives?

Has the Institute changed much since its early days?

We’ve grown. We work through three centers: The Center for Critical Issues, the Center for Education Policy and Leadership, and the Center for Diversity Strategies. Through each of them, we’re trying to create conditions in which we’re making this state and, frankly, this country, a better place to live. We’re still heavily student oriented, but the outreach beyond campus is huge.

Could you give some examples of that outreach?

The Emerging Public Leaders program is for rising seniors from across the state. For one week, they have sessions with government leaders and Furman faculty. Each participant develops a plan for a student-led project addressing a need in their community.

The Teachers of Government summer program allows high school and middle school government teachers to spend a week in Washington, D.C., meeting with elected officials and policymakers.

environment, politics and the media, the American Congress, China and the European Union.

Through the Center for Diversity Strategies, the Institute offers the Diversity Leaders Initiative for state leaders.

Through the Center for Education Policy and Leadership, the Institute has partnered with KnowledgeWorks Foundation to open two New Tech high schools in South Carolina. The partners are now working to expand the network across the state as part of an economic development strategy focused on preparing students for the 21st century.

Learn more about [The Riley Institute](#)

The Diversity Leaders Initiative is one of your flagship efforts. Tell us about that program.

It's intended to leverage leadership across the state and to use diversity as an asset – to create conditions in which we can take our heavily diverse population and use these varied experiences and backgrounds as frames of reference to make South Carolina a better place.

Who participates?

We have university presidents, CEOs, mayors, school superintendents, pastors, rabbis, chamber of commerce directors. We've had 1,400 graduates. Each class is a reflection of the state's demographics.

What makes The Riley Institute unique?

The fact that we have so many programs makes us a bit unique. I do not know of another institute in the country associated with a liberal arts college that does what we do.

Why is it important to be nonpartisan?

There are all kinds of people in the state. The idea of this is to create common understandings to link people together in networks that can move us forward. As Dick Riley says, you cannot create conditions to make this a better place if you don't have everybody in the ballgame.

How is the Institute involved in research and evaluation?

In 2005, we began a groundbreaking study on how public education can best prepare South Carolina's students for success in the global marketplace. With support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, we conducted 106 meetings with nine stakeholder groups across the state to learn what South Carolinians at the grassroots level think about issues and problems in education.

What did you find?

We found that what people really wanted in South Carolina was for their kids to graduate. They wanted high quality teachers in every classroom. They wanted schools that serve the community.

The next question was, 'How do we get there?' So we did a second study about what works. We decided that if you are going to make progress, you actually have to model these things on the ground so people can see them work.

What did that lead to?

We got together with two school districts and applied for an Investing in Innovation grant from the federal government to bring two **New Tech** high schools to South Carolina. There are more than 100 New Tech high schools nationally and they are having an astounding graduation rate.

This year, we have six more opening. The year after that, five or six more are coming on.

Where does the Institute's funding come from?

A lot comes from businesses or business foundations. Eighty percent of our budget comes from fundraising through grants or sponsorships.

Are you trying to raise more money for the permanent endowment?

We're almost to the \$5 million mark on the way to our \$10 million goal.

The annual Riley National Conference has brought many interesting people to campus: Bill Clinton, John Glenn, Newt Gingrich, Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright and others. Which speaker stands out in your memory?

John Glenn. He talked about taking what we did with the space program and doing it on other frontiers. It might be as small as creating a better battery. If we can have a spaceship land in a certain way and at a certain time in space, we can do anything we want.

Sitting close to him and watching the intelligence and passion on his face was unforgettable.

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