A College Education Provides a Lifetime of Value

Presenting Opportunities to Lead

Alyssa Richardson grew up in Dillon, SC, a small town near Interstate 95 in the northeast corner of the state, where lack of economic opportunity has spanned generations and created extensive poverty and social challenges, including public schools that consistently rank near the bottom of the state’s systems. Alyssa wasn’t raised in poverty, but neither did she have certain advantages others might take for granted. Her father was a public school teacher and administrator, and her mother worked as an administrative office assistant. Alyssa attended public schools in Dillon and the state’s capital, Columbia, where her family moved while she was in high school.

Between her junior and senior years of high school, Alyssa attended a South Carolina Governor’s School summer program where she came to the attention of guest lecturer Don Gordon, a professor of political science at Furman University, Greenville, SC. He recognized something in Alyssa and recommended her for the Riley Institute’s Emerging Public Leaders (EPL) Program, an initiative targeting promising high school students, which was being held at Furman later that summer. By the following March, Alyssa had earned an honorable mention in the EPL’s public service project competition for her work in developing a program to improve community life in her hometown by encouraging carpooling and public transportation.

Encouraged by her EPL experience, Alyssa applied to Furman, where she enrolled in fall 2008. She took on internships with Riley’s Diversity Leadership Initiative, and another as a counselor with the Bridges to a Brighter Future Program, a comprehensive college access and precollege enrichment program for promising high school students whose family income is below the poverty level.

She also participated in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation program through Riley, which each year sends about 15 students to an international business and economic conference in the Far East. And, she became involved in Furman’s Mock Trial Team, leading to an internship at a law firm in Atlanta. Outside of her academic pursuits, Alyssa joined a sorority and participated in the NAACP and the Student League for Black Culture. When she graduated from Furman, Alyssa continued her studies at the Harvard School of Law, from which she graduated in 2015.

Although Alyssa had other choices for her undergraduate experience, she came to see that Furman’s size and opportunities would be a place where she could be a leader. As she would recall years later: “I needed Furman, and Furman needed me.”

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