Given its location seven miles outside Greenville, SC, Furman University could easily distance itself from the city’s inhabitants and urban challenges. Rather than remain insular, however, the university has launched several programs that affect local citizens as well as the entire state.

“We like to focus our community commitments in areas we’re either good at or really believe in, such as sustainability,” says Mary Lou Merkt, Furman’s vice president for finance and administration. The university’s Shi Center for Sustainability, for example, not only coordinates on-campus efforts to operate efficiently but also sponsors a student conservation corps.

“Over the last six years, those students were able to winterize 100 homes in our city by installing insulation that brought a 30 percent savings in utility costs,” Merkt explains.

At the county level, Furman offers Bridges to a Brighter Future, a program for high-potential high school students from households tending to have annual incomes below $25,000. Administered by the university’s continuing education department, the seven-year program brings 75 students to Furman’s campus each summer for four weeks, augmented by a one-day academic program each month throughout the school year. Of the 335 students who have completed the Bridges program, 69 percent have graduated from college, compared to 11 percent of South Carolina residents who are also first-generation/low-income students.

Another campus entity, the Riley Institute, underscores Furman’s institutional commitments to public education and diversity. Several years ago, the institute conducted 100 meetings around the state to ask parents, students, community leaders, and company presidents for ideas on improving South Carolina’s public schools. As a result, says Merkt, “Ten high schools were infused with a new curriculum that not only focuses on STEM but also the arts. The graduation and college placement rates for those schools soared to more than 90 percent.”