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## University Introduces Dr. Elizabeth Davis as Furman's 12th President

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Davis spoke at a reception for faculty and staff

**By Courtney Such and Bryan Betts, News Editor and Editor-in-Chief**

The Presidential Search Committee and Board of Trustees announced last week that they had unanimously selected Dr. Elizabeth Davis, a longtime professor and administrator at Baylor University, to serve as the 12th President of Furman University, making her the first female president in the university's more than 187-year history.

Davis currently serves as the Executive Vice President and Provost of Baylor University, a private Baptist university in Waco, Texas, and will step into her role as Furman's president on July 1.

The university introduced Davis at a press conference last Thursday, ending an extensive presidential search that began last summer after President Rod Smolla resigned for personal reasons.

In her remarks at Thursday's press conference, Davis singled out the efforts of her presidential predecessors and praised Furman as "a gem in the liberal arts tradition" and "an unparalleled intellectual and cultural resource." She also drew comparisons between the educational ideals and Baptist heritages of Furman and Baylor and characterized the current state of higher education as one filled with challenges and opportunities.

"The realities of finite resources are creating what I think is the most exciting era in higher education of our time," she said.

In interviews, Davis emphasized the value of liberal arts education and residential learning and drew attention to the opportunities for student-faculty interaction and internships at Furman. She was hesitant to offer specifics about her vision for Furman, though, saying that for now she wants to focus on listening and asking questions in order to learn more about the university.

"All I am going to do first is listen," she said. "I want to be sure to understand what the marketing strategies, what the enrollment strategies, what the curriculum strategies are before I make any decisions."

Davis is a graduate of Baylor and received her doctorate in accounting from Duke University. She has served as an administrator and professor of accounting at Baylor for more than two decades, first joining the faculty in 1992.

In addition to serving as Baylor's chief academic officer, Davis has served as Baylor's vice provost for financial and academic administration and as an associate dean for undergraduate business programs.

As Baylor's chief academic officer, Davis has managed an Academic Affairs budget of \$235 million and a faculty of more than 935 members. She also oversees Baylor's 11 schools and colleges and is the first woman to serve as provost in the university's history, according to her biography on Baylor's website.

Davis is married to Dr. Charles Davis, the Walter Plumhoff Professor of Accounting at Baylor, and the couple have two children: Chad, a student at Wake Forest University, and Claire, who is in high school.

Davis said that it would be bittersweet to leave Baylor, noting that she has spent more than half her life at the university, but she argued that her time at Baylor has prepared her for her new role.

"I think my experience will form how I ask questions," she said.

## Furman's First Female President

Brian Boda, the student representative on the Presidential Search Committee, broke the news of Davis's presidency in an email sent to students at midnight on Thursday, and many students quickly took to social media to celebrate the announcement of Furman's first female president.



President-Elect Dr. Elizabeth Davis addressed the Furman community for the first time during her press conference Thurs. Feb. 6

"We're making history in one of the best ways possible.

Beyond excited to welcome the first female #furmanpres," tweeted senior Allison Davey, using the designated hashtag for the announcement.

Faculty also praised Davis's selection as a sign of progress for Furman. Biology professor Alison Roark said she was pleased that Furman had demonstrated leadership in appointing a woman to a position of authority, particularly in light of the challenges women face in higher education.

"The academic pipeline is very leaky for women, meaning that as you go from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor to department chair to dean, the percentage of women in those ranks declines quite precipitously," she said. "This is an issue I take very seriously because I feel like women deserve the exact same opportunities that men have,

especially in positions of academic leadership, so I for one am thrilled that Furman was willing to be a visionary in this respect.”

Davis said she understands the significance of being Furman's first female president but also sought to situate her presidency within the context of the university's future.

“I think anybody, man or woman, would be excited to be president of Furman,” she said. “You know what I like about the phrase, ‘First woman president?’ First implies there will be others, and eventually, we won't have to say, ‘This is the 17th woman president.’ After a while we will just drop that.”

Richard Cullen, a member of the Board of Trustees who served as chair of the Presidential Search Committee, said he is delighted that Davis will be Furman's first female president, calling her a role model to both women and men, but said that the search committee did not consider gender when evaluating candidates.

“That really didn't become an issue,” he said. “We really wanted the best person, male or female.”

“She's a real professional. I'm real proud that we'll have a woman as president, but I'm prouder that we'll have her as president.”

### **An Extensive Search**

Davis's selection as president brought an end to an extended search process that began last spring and considered more than 60 candidates for the position.

The 16-member Presidential Search Committee — which included nine trustees, three faculty members, and one student representative — began by soliciting input from students, faculty, and staff on what characteristics they wanted in



Davis answered questions of curious Furman students.

Furman's next president at a series of listening sessions held last fall.

Throughout the process, the search committee worked with representatives from the executive search firm Russell Reynolds Associates, who identified potential candidates and presented them to the committee for consideration.

The committee narrowed an initial field of more than 60 candidates down to 13 candidates, who were invited for preliminary interviews. Seven of those candidates were invited back for more intensive interviews, and committee members made phone calls to check candidates' references.

Eventually the search committee identified two finalists, and committee members visited the candidates' homes to conduct final interviews. The university offered the position to Davis on Friday, Jan. 31, and her public introduction coincided with an on-campus meeting of the Board of Trustees, at which she made a presentation on Friday.

In his remarks at the faculty and staff reception welcoming President-elect Davis, Biology Professor and Faculty Chair Joseph Pollard, a member of the search committee, explained the search process and sought to reassure faculty that the committee considered and valued the input of the three faculty representatives.

"In my opinion and that of my colleagues, the search committee was asking the right questions. My colleagues and I did not in any way feel that the trustees on the committee had strongly different priorities from our own or from the faculty and staff across the institution," Pollard said.

"In other words, in my genuine belief, we, all of us, were on the same page."

Committee member and Student Government Association President Brian Boda emphasized the importance of student input for the committee and said that Davis stood out as the clear choice among all the candidates.

"The first time we had the opportunity to talk to her, she just blew away the entire room," he said.

### **Preparing for Transition**

Interim President Carl Korht will remain in his role until Davis takes office this summer. He said that he and Davis will work together until then as the university prepares for the transition, saying his role is "to make sure the wheels don't come off."

Korht said he and his wife have not made plans for after they leave Furman, though he will continue to serve on the Board of Trustees for at least another year to complete his term.

"You'll see a lot of us," he said, "but I have no plans for another gig."

Davis flew back to Baylor on Friday but said she expects to return to campus several times during the spring semester. She said her husband and daughter Claire may remain in Waco for a year so she can complete her senior year of high school before leaving for college, but Davis said her husband would eventually be joining her at Furman.

"We aren't into commuter relationships, so he'll be here," she said.

Her husband Dr. Charles Davis said he would love to join the faculty at Furman but recognized that faculty spots are difficult to find, adding that it would be something to look into in the future.



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