New deans, new directions

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The schools of Science and Engineering, Liberal Arts, Public Health and Tropical Medicine, and Architecture welcome new leaders. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

They are an academic quartet, this new group of incoming deans, and they are all happy to have shown up on campus this fall within a few months of each other.

They've never heard of it happening at any other university: four new deans at four of the nine academic schools.

It's a rather unique infusion of new academic leadership at Tulane. "We're always dreaming up new ways to work together, said Kimberly Foster, the new dean of the School of Science and Engineering.

Besides Foster, the new deans are Iñaki Alday of the School of Architecture, Thomas LaVeist of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, and Brian Edwards of the School of Liberal Arts.

They all come to Tulane with distinguished records as designers, innovators, scholars, teachers, mentors, writers, researchers, a patent holder — and even a documentary filmmaker. As they take the reins as the top administrators of their respective schools, they each said they are excited to lead Tulane in new, interdisciplinary directions — and to collaborate with each other.

“To be able to collaborate and think about collaborating together makes this truly an exciting moment,” Edwards said. “I think it’s why we are so enthusiastic.”

“Being part of a cohort has been great,” LaVeist said. “We learn from each other and commiserate with each other. I hope I’m speaking for the others. I think it’s making all of us a little bit better that we have each other.”

As for Alday, he said of Tulane, “I think this is the best place and the best moment and the most important, most relevant moment to take over.”

The newcomers also are eager to collaborate with longer-serving deans including Ira Solomon of the A. B. Freeman School of Business, David Meyer of the School of Law, Lee Hamm of the School of Medicine, Patrick Bordnick of the School of Social Work, Suri Duitch of the School of Professional Advancement and Kelly Grant, interim dean of Newcomb-Tulane College.

During the fall semester, we talked to each of the new deans about their ambitions and goals. What stands out is that they all are pleased to be part of Tulane and eager to contribute to the university’s research mission and tradition of educational excellence.

Thomas LaVeist, School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine
Thomas LaVeist is the new dean of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, and he also holds the new position of Weatherhead Presidential Chair in Health Equity.

Since he was in graduate school at the University of Michigan, where he earned his PhD, and discovered a 1985 government report on “The Secretary’s Task Force on Black and Minority Health,” LaVeist has been fascinated by why and how and what

can be done about health inequities among different races and ethnicities.

“I didn’t know that racial disparities exist,” said LaVeist. “It was a revelation to me. I started thinking, how could this be?”

The explanations he was given were not satisfactory — or scientific. Things like, biological differences. It’s the way things are.

LaVeist set out to find answers based on scientific facts. And now, after decades of diligent research with 100 articles published in scientific journals and a book, Legacy of the Crossing: Life, Death, and Triumphs Among the Descendants of the World’s Largest Forced Migration (2017), he has shown that differential health outcomes occur by race because “while we are a racially diverse country, we are also a racially [and economically] segregated country.”

Living in communities that are underfunded for health-protective resources and having greater exposure to environmental and social risks that are harmful to health are all factors in health disparities by race.

LaVeist spent 25 years at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health where he was the Richardson Professor of Health Policy and founding director of the Hopkins Center for Health Disparities Solutions. In 2016, he joined George Washington University as professor and chair of health policy and management at the Milken Institute School of Public Health.

Now he wants to make a bigger impact. He is the executive producer of a documentary series, “The Skin You’re In,” that explores disparities between black and white health in America.

He took the job as dean at Tulane because he said, “I saw opportunity” at a school that is one of the founding educational institutions in the field of public health. “That’s a unique legacy,” said LaVeist.

Under LaVeist’s leadership, the school will not pivot completely away from the global work for which it is highly respected. “But we’re also going to be focused on New Orleans and Louisiana and the southern United States. We’re going to have an impact here at home.”

He sees an opportunity to make a difference in a region that most needs a difference. “We’re in a city that has all of the urban health problems of every other

big city in this country. We're in a state that has all of the rural health problems of every other part of rural America. And we're in the Southeast United States, which is the epicenter for inequities, both historically as well as today."

Iñaki Alday, School of Architecture

"The big question mark is how we are going to inhabit the planet 20, 30 years from now," said Iñaki Alday, dean of the School of Architecture.

He cites these statistics: "Half the population in the world is within a fringe of 60 miles along coasts. Ninety percent of the population is living in areas 3 kilometers from a fresh body of water, and 95 percent is 10 kilometers from a fresh body of water."

With issues of climate change and sea-level rise looming, "the School of Architecture has a responsibility to propose new models of how we are designing our cities, our public spaces, our infrastructure — our streets, our parks — and how this can improve equity in the city, so environmental injustice becomes environmental justice."

Alday holds a degree from Polytechnic University of Catalonia in Barcelona, Spain. He and his partner, Margarita Jover, are the founders and principals of the design firm aldayjover architecture, designing notable public architecture and landscape architecture projects in Spain, including Aranzadi Park, the Water Park and the Recovering of the Gallego River Waterfronts.

In 2011, Alday went to the University of Virginia to be chair of its School of Architecture. In 2016, he was appointed the founding director of the Yamuna River Project, a long-term interdisciplinary program in which Tulane now is collaborating. The Yamuna River Project brought international acclaim to Alday. A book he co-authored on the project was recently named one of the world's top 10 best architecture books of 2018 by the Frankfurt Book Fair and Deutsches Architekturmuseum.

From his extensive work designing public projects on riverbanks in Spain to addressing the ecology of the Yamuna River that flows through India's capital city, New Delhi, Alday has gained a profound appreciation and respect for rivers. "Rivers are living elements," he said. As architects design built environments that interact with rivers and other bodies of water, they need to understand the complexities of rivers: "Rivers have their own dynamics. They go up. They go down. They flood.

They have their own logics.”

The Mississippi River and its delta, including swamps and marshes, is “our place,” said Alday, “but at the same time it is a paradigm for multiple situations.” The Mississippi River is the major world river in the Northern Hemisphere, and the research and projects undertaken by the Tulane School of Architecture can be of use globally—for rivers and the built environment in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe as well as the United States.

While understanding the physical environment is essential for the architect of the 21st century, it’s equally important to learn about complex cultural contexts, Alday said. “Students and faculty can help and be helped by the learning and understanding of different cultures, different situations. Global engagement is important for the future of any relevant research university,” he said.

Brian Edwards, School of Liberal Arts

Brian Edwards, the new dean of the School of Liberal Arts, likes to build things.

After earning a PhD from Yale University, Edwards spent 18 years at Northwestern University, becoming a full professor of English, comparative literary studies and American studies. At Northwestern, he founded — and built — the highly regarded Middle East and North African (MENA) Studies program.

Edwards is an interdisciplinary scholar, fluent in four languages — Arabic, French, Spanish and, of course, English. His first book, Morocco Bound, is “a cultural history of how Americans came to think about the Arab world, during the period when the U.S. emerged as a global superpower,” he said, roughly from the beginning of World War II through the Vietnam era. His most recent book, After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East, moves to the present era, examining the 21st century and the impact of digital technology on American relations with the Middle East. “In this book, I address the apparent paradox that U.S. culture — from Hollywood and hip-hop to YouTube and Facebook — became increasingly popular in the region while the political reputation of the U.S. plummeted,” Edwards said. The book was based on extensive field research in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and Iran over a decade and was published in 2016.

Tulane’s commitment to interdisciplinary education and its focus on the research mission are big reasons why Edwards decided to join the university. “I think of the connection between Tulane and New Orleans as vital. Though it is well known and

runs through the history of the university, I think the relationship between the city and the institution is still under-imagined," he said. "There's a lot of potential for another generation of thinking about what it means for Tulane to be in New Orleans and what New Orleans means to both the university and the nation and world at large."

New Orleans and Tulane are global ports, said Edwards. That Tulane is located in New Orleans, a multilingual city with both major urban challenges and innovative approaches to solutions to those challenges, is "what makes Tulane arguably the most important and exciting university to be at right now."

A passionate advocate for the liberal arts, Edwards said that the humanities, social sciences, and fine and performing arts have a major role to play "in an era in which truth itself has been put into question."

"A liberal arts education is, to my mind, the greatest training for an increasingly and ever complex world," he said.
At the School of Liberal Arts, "we're teaching complex thinking. We're teaching creativity. We're teaching how to think.

"Teaching complex thinking is great training for all students, whether they'll pursue technology, medicine, finance or the fields that more immediately emerge from our disciplines: policy, government, the arts, entertainment, etc."

He expects that a new generation of students who are "technologically savvy, creative, both frustrated with the world they have inherited and optimistic at the same time," will think anew about questions of inequality, poverty, education and environmental challenges.

"Great research universities have always had the major liberal arts disciplines at their heart," he said. "The School of Liberal Arts contains disciplines that are among the oldest ways we've organized human knowledge and experience such as philosophy, history, literature and interdisciplinary programs at the forefront of thinking."

The social sciences like economics, sociology, anthropology and political science are vital for understanding human experience and society and offer "models and alternatives to the accepted or inherited ways of doing things." The cultural expression and beauty of the fine and performing arts are also at the heart of the

university, said Edwards. “They are part of what makes life worth living.”

His vision for Tulane is that it will become, nationally and internationally, further recognized as a place “where you come to study and where you look for expertise and comment.”

Kimberly Foster, School of Science and Engineering

Kimberly Foster, the new dean of the School of Science and Engineering, is a tool builder. For years, she’s explored the field of micromechanical systems. The thing is, the tiny machines that she builds are so small that they can barely be seen with the naked eye.

In her career, she’s obtained 12 patents and written over 150 publications ranging from design of accelerometers for cell phone sensors to what she says is her favorite current project to talk about: a tiny hammer to hammer 20,000 cells in 10 to 15 minutes, which may be of use in understanding, and possibly treating or diagnosing traumatic brain injuries. Among her gamut of inventions, there is also a reversible adhesive that is modeled on the gecko’s amazing ability to stick to surfaces with its tiny hairs and leave no mark. Developing this phenomenon in the lab could lead to commercialization of new manufacturing techniques to move and place things — and better ways to hang a TV on a wall.

“The creativity and invention side is fun,” said Foster.

She trained as an engineer at Cornell University, where she earned her PhD in theoretical and applied mechanics. She was part of many interdisciplinary collaborations at the University of California–Santa Barbara from 1999 up until she joined Tulane this summer.

She mentored over 20 PhD students as she rose up through the ranks at UCSB from assistant professor to professor of mechanical engineering, also serving as chair of the department, and later associate director of the Center for Bioengineering and co-chair of UCSB’s Brain Initiative.

“I’ve been working on the boundary between engineering and science for many years,” Foster said. “All of my most exciting projects fall on the boundary between fields where one has to work with engineers and scientists and creative people from all over — many different fields to get to work on the fun stuff.”

The opportunity “to connect to the rest of the university to do the most impactful interdisciplinary research” at Tulane with its combined science and engineering school drew Foster to the university. She sees a chance “to develop interesting programming at the undergraduate level as well as providing graduate students with unique training experiences and building the research profile of the university.” In her role as dean, she’ll oversee the building and design of Steven and Jann Paul Hall (See “New Spaces, New Places,” on page 22.) However, there’s more in store for science facilities at Tulane with plans in the works for an uptown science district right at the center of campus.

“We’re trying to take the time to do it thoughtfully and design the research spaces of the future,” said Foster.
Foster’s ambition is to build national and international prominence for Tulane in key areas where science, engineering, and global challenges converge. The Brain Institute, biomedical innovation and river and coastal studies are some of the areas of research that jump out at her.

“All these big, hard-core science problems — I want this to be the place where everyone comes to tackle that stuff.”
Foster said that one measure of science and engineering success is: “Are you doing things that increase fundamental understanding and solve important problems facing global society?”

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