

Tulane shapes the conversation around the future of energy

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Global thought leaders and experts across academia, industry, government and nonprofits convened with faculty, students, alumni, local community members and attendees from across the country on Tulane's uptown campus last week for the inaugural Future of Energy Forum. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

Global thought leaders and experts across academia, industry, government and nonprofits convened with faculty, students, alumni, local community members and attendees from across the country on Tulane's uptown campus last week to answer a central question, "Can Energy Pragmatism Secure Our Energy Future?"

This was the theme of Tulane's inaugural [Future of Energy Forum](#), held Nov. 13-15, 2024, at the Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life.

"Energy demand worldwide is skyrocketing, driven by forces all the way from global industrialization to artificial intelligence," President Michael A. Fitts said during the event's opening remarks. "As a world-class research university located, as we all know, in one of the world's most significant regions for energy production, Tulane is uniquely positioned to address this complex issue. Our home state of Louisiana is a major energy producer that also faces significant environmental challenges."

Tulane's ability to foster interdisciplinary conversations was reflected in the packed schedule of 30+ panels, keynote sessions and networking roundtables. The varied range of energy topics covered offshore wind, oil and gas, hydrogen, LNG, fusion and others; and the diversity of perspectives crossed engineering, law, technology, business, architecture, social sciences and more.

There were up-close conversations with speakers such as author and presidential and energy historian Jay Hakes along with Aniket Shah, Global Head of Sustainability at Jefferies. There were hyperlocal topics around place-based energy solutions, as well as deeper dives into energy solutions for Latin America, with a panel moderated by A. B. Freeman School of Business Dean Paulo B. Goes. All three days drove home that Tulane is at the forefront of energy studies and research.

"Addressing how to secure a sustainable energy future is one of the vital challenges that research universities are uniquely equipped to tackle," said Marcilynn Burke, dean of the Law School, as she set the tone for the forum in her opening remarks.

A remarkable example of finding pragmatic solutions across disciplines at the state level was highlighted during the opening keynote session on the [Future Use of Energy in Louisiana \(FUEL\) initiative](#).

This statewide effort, funded by the National Science Foundation, brings together Louisiana universities with industry leaders, nonprofits and government partners to position Louisiana as a global energy transition leader. FUEL has created a statewide innovation ecosystem that allows for a feedback loop between researchers and industry and streamlines the process of going from science to an invention to innovation.

“No state is better positioned to lead the future use of energy than Louisiana,” said panel moderator Kimberly Gramm, the David and Marion Mussafer Chief Innovation and Entrepreneurship Officer at the Tulane University Innovation Institute.

Energy pragmatism was a key part of the conversation around energy transition, balancing newer energy solutions with traditional forms of energy like oil and gas.

“Louisiana is just one of the best places to do business, for traditional energy and for the energy transition,” said Stephen Swiber, Chief Resilience Officer in the Office of the Louisiana Governor and a Tulane alumnus.

During a Thursday session, Hon. Mark Menezes, president and CEO of the United States Energy Association and former deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy, and Hon. Dan Brouillette, president and CEO of Edison Electric Institute and former secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy, spoke on the importance of Louisiana’s oil production industry as well as its place in the energy transition.

“Energy transitions are nothing new,” said Brouillette, pointing out that our current energy transition is the most recent in a long line from wood to coal to steam and onward.

Hydrogen also factored into the transition conversation and was the main theme of a session featuring Hon. John Bel Edwards, former governor of Louisiana. “Louisiana is ideally suited and situated for these hydrogen efforts,” he said.

The crux of these pragmatic solutions will require all hands on deck, not just among people in different sectors but also leaning on AI technology to aid the human-led effort, panelists noted. Speakers discussed both the potential benefits of using AI to increase efficiency of energy systems and the challenges of providing energy for the massive data centers that AI needs to operate.

At a panel on the role of AI and analytics in the future of energy, Hridesh Rajan, dean of the School of Science and Engineering, said that he was an “AI for energy and energy for AI guy,” emphasizing that the future role of AI in energy goes both ways.

The answers to the questions about AI and energy will not come from a single place, however, according to Rajan. “Students, industry and faculty working together — that’s where the magic will happen,” he said.

That statement was indicative of one of the other consistent themes of the forum: the importance of students and how they can be supported to do the most for the future of energy.

“There’s the pedagogy, the curriculum, all of the important things, but it’s also really important to make sure students are exposed to events like this,” said Rodney Sampson, chairman and CEO of Opportunity Hub and a Tulane alumnus.

From Career Services roundtables to socializing hours, the forum dedicated time to ensuring students could speak with panelists and industry leaders. Sophie Strobl, a student who said she had been attending panels all day on Thursday, said she appreciated the variety of each panel. “It’s not everyone in the same position,” she said.

Another student, Emma De Leon, was able to trace the panel topics back to what they actively discuss in class, speaking specifically of a panel that included her professor, Joshua Basseches, the David and Jane Flowerree Assistant Professor in Environmental Studies and Public Policy in the School of Liberal Arts.

The panel on updating policy and infrastructure to aid in the energy transition brought Basseches together with Hon. Davante Lewis, Louisiana Public Service Commissioner for District 3, and Drew Story, the policy director at the MIT Climate Policy Center. The panel considered, in part, how researchers can be of most help to local communities and policymakers.

“These kinds of questions are the ones we’re asking here as deans at Tulane as we’re evaluating faculty,” said Brian Edwards, dean of the School of Liberal Arts, who moderated that panel. “We’re really pushing on publicly meaningful, community-engaged scholarship.”

The conversations that began at the inaugural forum will continue at Tulane and beyond. “It’s our hope that the collision of ideas from different people, different sectors, different areas, will literally lead to real-world applications with a positive and lasting impact, both here in Louisiana and across the globe,” Fitts said.

To view more photos from the Future of Energy Forum, see our [photo recap](#).