

After 25 years, Tulane Engineering Forum still going strong

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President Michael A. Fitts welcomed attendees to the 25th Tulane Engineering Forum this May. (Photo by Bruce France)

In September 2000, the inaugural Tulane Engineering Forum was held in New Orleans. Twenty-five years later, the forum continues to host engineering professionals from across the country for learning, networking and career development.

On Friday, May 9, attendees came together for the 25th iteration of the popular forum held at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

President Michael A. Fitts welcomed participants, saying, "From infrastructure, to energy, to space, today's forum gathers some of the leading voices in academia and industry to discuss some of the most critical issues we face as a society. This is what we do best at Tulane."

Leaders and organizers say the gathering has become a "can't miss" opportunity for many in the engineering world.

"The Tulane Engineering Forum is where the Gulf South's engineering talent comes together to tackle the Gulf South's toughest challenges," said Hridesh Rajan, dean of the School of Science and Engineering at Tulane.

"It's great to see a long legacy, where we've had support and engagement from not only the engineers and the community but also sponsoring companies," said Chuck Mart, the chairperson of the planning committee and a Tulane alumnus. "Companies see value, organizations see value, and the engineers see value."

He pointed out the crowd of attendees networking between sessions. "You can hear the noise of the crowd, and that's just invigorating."

For much of the day, middle and high school students from the New Orleans area had the opportunity to present winning science fair projects to the professional engineers at the forum.

"Kids don't get to just meet real engineers every day. I think the fact that this brings together local engineers, Tulane students and middle and high school students is something you can't really find in a lot of places," said Michelle Hewlett Sanchez, associate dean for Community Engagement and Academic Partnerships and senior professor of practice in the School of Science and Engineering.

Hewlett Sanchez also runs the Center for K-12 STEM Education at Tulane and invited the youngsters to the forum.

During lunch, attendees heard from a panel of Tulane deans past and present, including Nick Altiero, who was dean of the School of Science and Engineering from 2000 until 2017; Kimberly Foster, who was dean of the school from 2018 until 2023; and Rajan, the current SSE dean. The trio spoke on the progress of the forum over

the past 25 years, growing from a conference with fewer than a hundred attendees in 2000, through the challenges of rescheduling for hurricanes and going virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The forum has continued to grow, moving from its original location at the Hilton to its current home at the Morial Convention Center. More than 370 attendees participated in this year's forum in person, with an additional 130 registering to watch the sessions online. The education tracks offered at the forum have also been expanded as interests have changed over the years, though there is always a great turnout for the Louisiana favorites of structural engineering, aerospace and oil and gas.

The forum is a joint venture between alumni of Tulane's engineering programs and the school and has been since the beginning. The Society of Tulane Engineers was founded as the alumni organization for Tulane engineering in 1951 and is now associated with the Tulane Alumni Association. They have worked closely with the school in organizing the forum since the planning of the first event in 2000.

"About half of the committee are professors at Tulane, and about half are alumni," said David Gereighty, committee member and current vice president of the Society of Tulane Engineers. "All the alumni volunteer their time."

Though some alumni on the committee are retired, others, like Gereighty, took time off work to attend the forum.

The organizers also welcome current Tulane students to the event, encouraging them to work as volunteers.

Chaekyung Kang, a rising senior studying chemical engineering, decided to volunteer at the forum on the advice of some older students who had volunteered in the past. She was excited not only for the opportunity to network but also to get a glimpse into what being an engineer will actually be like.

"You get to see your future here, a little bit," she said.

Amanda Reusch, who is now a member of the planning committee, started as a student volunteer while studying for her PhD in chemical engineering. "After [volunteering] for three or four years, eventually they let me be on the committee, and I actually started helping put it together because I had learned enough that they

let me hop in,” she said.

In just a few months, the planning committee will be back to work getting ready for next year’s forum. As Tulane’s engineering programs continue to grow stronger, all eyes are on what the next 25 years have in store.