

National Academy of Science member Joan Bennett returns to Tulane as Ida A. Richardson Chair of Botany

August 15, 2025 9:00 AM Matthew Deinhardt
mdeinhardt@tulane.edu



After spending the early years of her career at Tulane, Joan Bennett is returning to the university as a professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. (Photo by Nick Romanenko)

As the new academic year begins, Tulane University School of Science and Engineering will welcome back renowned microbiologist Joan Wennstrom Bennett, who has been appointed the Ida A. Richardson Chair of Botany. A leading expert in fungal genetics and microbiology, Bennett will rejoin Tulane as a professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology starting Aug. 15, 2025.

“Dr. Bennett’s return is a landmark moment for Tulane,” Dean Hridesh Rajan said. “Her groundbreaking research and visionary leadership perfectly align with our mission as an interdisciplinary-first, translational school of science and engineering focused on better lives. I’m especially grateful to Provost Robin Forman for his steadfast support in bringing Dr. Bennett back to Tulane, where her impact will be felt across generations of scholars. We’re thrilled to welcome back a scientist of such global impact and deep institutional loyalty.”

Bennett, formerly a distinguished professor of biochemistry and microbiology at Rutgers University, spent more than three decades at Tulane earlier in her career, where she rose to the rank of professor of cell and molecular biology. She was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2005 for research conducted in collaboration with the Southern Regional Research Center and several gifted Tulane honors students.

Her departure from Tulane later that year was prompted by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, including severe mold contamination in her home. That experience sparked a new research focus on fungal volatile organic compounds, ultimately leading to her 2021 election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

“Some of my reasons for returning are personal: I want to be closer to my family and my old friends,” Bennett said. “Some of my reasons are curiously sentimental: I want to be in New Orleans to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. But my main objectives are practical.”

Her current research explores how biogenic volatiles — gases emitted by fungi — affect mycotoxin production and human health. She is also launching a new study on volatile organic compounds produced by mold aboard crewed spacecraft, an emerging concern for astronaut safety. Proximity to NASA’s Stennis Space Center will be key to advancing this space-focused research.

Bennett’s scientific career is marked by breakthrough discoveries, including the finding that a compound known as “mushroom alcohol” (1-octen-3-ol) acts as both a neurotoxin and a plant growth inhibitor. Her work has opened new frontiers in microbiology and plant science.

She is a past president of both the American Society for Microbiology and the Society for Industrial Microbiology & Biotechnology and has held leadership roles in the British Mycological Society and the International Union of Microbiological Societies. She has received numerous accolades, including the 2024 Distinguished Mycologist Award and multiple teaching honors such as Honors Professor of the Year at Tulane in 1991.

“I have a lot of institutional loyalty,” Bennett said. “Tulane hired me at a time when women scientists were often overlooked. I owe Tulane a lot for giving me the opportunity to thrive as a scientist.”

Her appointment as the Ida A. Richardson Chair of Botany reflects Tulane’s continued investment in botanical and microbiological research. Over the next five years, Bennett will help lead efforts to advance scientific discovery, train the next generation of researchers and explore the impact of fungal volatiles in environments ranging from Louisiana’s wetlands to outer space.