

CancerConnect events bring multidisciplinary researchers together to fight cancer

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Stephen Ostertag, associate professor of sociology in the School of Liberal Arts, and Loren Gragert, assistant professor of biomedical informatics and genomics in the School of Medicine, were among the faculty members who attended the most recent CancerConnect event on Tulane's uptown campus. (Photo by Melanie Cross)

How do researchers begin collaborations with each other when they work in different fields? At the CancerConnect events co-hosted by the Tulane Cancer Center, it looks a lot like speed dating.

At an October event between the Cancer Center and the School of Liberal Arts, philosophers talked with health policy experts, sociologists had conversations with pharmacologists and epidemiologists and anthropologists found common ground.

"All of us have a shared goal of finding better treatment options and ultimately cures for cancer," said Dr. Stefan Grant, director of the Tulane Cancer Center.

"Collaboration is paramount to achieving these goals. By bringing together researchers from different fields and backgrounds, we can explore how new ideas and perspectives can drive progress in cancer research and care."

It was the third such iteration of CancerConnect, a series of events that is designed to connect members of the Cancer Center, which is housed within the School of Medicine, with researchers across all schools.

The School of Liberal Arts might at first appear to be an unlikely partner for cancer research, but philosophers in the school study medical ethics, a sociologist examines trust in healthcare providers and an anthropologist is researching how social contexts impact health.

"The humanities and social sciences offer new ways of thinking about some of the most complex problems, and when scholars from the liberal arts engage with medical researchers, unexpected discoveries emerge along the way," said School of Liberal Arts Dean Brian T. Edwards. "Whether this opens up new approaches to treatment and care, or deeper understanding of how doctors and their patients approach their interactions around cancer — or many other possibilities raised in our meetings — this partnership offers an exciting new avenue for future cross-disciplinary work."

To get conversations started, the organizers highlighted three topics that represent the type of interdisciplinary research the Cancer Center facilitates: sex differences in health outcomes; cancer communication and health literacy; and economics, ethics, AI and health policy. Each of these complex topics is better understood when multiple researchers look at them from a variety of perspectives across academic disciplines.

The Cancer Center previously hosted successful events in collaboration with the Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and the School of Science and Engineering. The collaborations that began at those events have already borne fruit. Researchers are initiating projects, including research into

head and neck cancer, and applying for joint grants, with one paper already submitted for publication. Ten faculty members from those schools have applied for membership in the Cancer Center, which comes with access to projects and resources related to cancer research.

The collaborations that began in conversations at CancerConnect could bring the next phase of cancer research to Tulane, building on work like the bipartisan-funded MAGIC-SCAN project led by Cancer Center members Quincy Brown, professor of biomedical engineering, and Brian Summa, associate professor of computer science.