

President Fitts celebrates TNBRC breakthroughs and growth, delivers State of the University address

December 15, 2025 9:00 AM Barri Bronston
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On Friday, President Michael A. Fitts highlighted Director and Chief Academic Officer Jay Rappaport, who was named a senior member of the National Academy of Inventors for his pioneering HIV studies, and Post-Award Manager Maria Fredericks, who received a Staff Excellence Award. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

Tulane University President Michael A. Fitts visited the faculty, staff and students of the Tulane National Biomedical Research Center (TNBRC) in Covington Friday, Dec. 12, and reflected on a year of extraordinary scientific achievement and momentum in biomedical research.

“Every day, Tulane researchers are discovering new breakthroughs in prevention and treatment for diseases from tuberculosis to HIV to cancer,” Fitts told the crowd at the center. “And many of these breakthroughs simply would not be possible without the Biomedical Research Center.”

Fitts noted TNBRC plays a major role in the current, historic upward trajectory of the state of the university, accounting for nearly a quarter of Tulane’s federal research portfolio and bringing in about \$35 million annually in NIH funding, including a recent \$4 million award to upgrade vitally important facilities.

Fitts also highlighted the standout achievements of TNBRC faculty who are shaping the future of infectious disease research. Those faculty members include its Director and Chief Academic Officer, Jay Rappaport, PhD, who was named a senior member of the National Academy of Inventors for his pioneering HIV studies; Dr. Miti Kaur, who published new insights into congenital CMV infection, the leading infectious cause of birth defects worldwide; Amir Ardeshir, DVM, PhD, whose study showed that a single shot at birth could offer years of protection against HIV; and Robert Blair, DVM, PhD, who co-authored a groundbreaking paper on how HIV spreads through the body.

He also noted several TNBRC scientists who were recognized at Tulane’s Research, Scholarship and Artistic Achievement Awards earlier this year, including Monica Embers, PhD; Nicholas Maness, PhD; and Chad Roy, PhD. During that ceremony, Fitts also presented the Hall of Fame Award to Professor Emeritus Preston Marx, PhD, for his decades of pioneering AIDS and vaccine research, much of it conducted at TNBRC.

In addition to his remarks, Fitts presented the President's Staff Excellence Award to TNBRC Post-Award Manager Maria Fredericks, who was nominated by colleagues for her proactive leadership, generous mentorship and instrumental support for a number of vitally important research grants. As post-award manager, Fredericks and her staff ensure compliance for TNBRC’s research portfolio that exceeds \$40 million annually.

In addition to celebrating Tulane’s rise as a research powerhouse, Fitts highlighted major university-wide milestones, including increased admissions, notable athletic achievements such as Tulane's historic participation in the College Football Playoffs

and transformative capital projects such as The Village, the renovation of Richardson Memorial Hall and major upgrades at TNBRC. Those upgrades include a new administrative building and a new laboratory.

Fitts emphasized Tulane's commitment to academic excellence and noted that Tulane's research enterprise is growing at one of the fastest rates in the country. Over the past decade, federal funding has nearly doubled, and faculty citations have surged, with Tulane ranking 20th among the 80 universities in the Association of American Universities (AAU), which is composed of the nation's leading research universities.

"As a university, we are continuing to achieve levels of success that seemed unimaginable a decade ago, from admissions, to research, to athletics, to the transformation of our campuses," he said. "Together, we're not just making progress. We're redefining what's possible."

Looking to the future, Fitts outlined the next chapter in Tulane's physical and academic evolution: the expansion of the downtown campus and the creation of a world-class destination for medical research and innovation.

"This is the largest initiative in the history of Tulane," he said. "Our footprint will grow dramatically." The project will add 2,500 more employees, generating over \$400 million in research impact and adding over \$1 billion to Tulane's economic impact.

Fitts closed his address by celebrating the passion and dedication that continue to move the university forward. "The takeaway is how well the university is doing in so many different areas," Fitts said. "We have more momentum than any other university in the country. In the end, it's all about you — the staff and the faculty — and everything you do."