

Students toil at historic cemetery

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“It was wet, messy and muddy, but it was a bonding experience that I think they ultimately enjoyed, especially since they were able to see an immediate impact of their efforts,” says Rhonda Coignet, who led 28 students in her More Than Just Business course working at Chalmette National Cemetery. (Photo by Rhonda Coignet)

The past, the present and the future intersected for 28 first-year Tulane University students in a [TIDES](#) (Tulane InterDisciplinary Experience Seminars) course, More Than Just Business, during a recent Saturday trip to the [Chalmette National Cemetery](#).

The purpose of the field trip was to realign, clean and document some of the timeworn headstones in the cemetery as part of a project of the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#).

Established in 1864 as a final resting place for Union soldiers who died in Louisiana during the Civil War, Chalmette National Cemetery’s more than 14,000 headstones also mark the gravesites of veterans of the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, and the Vietnam War. The national cemetery is located on the site of the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, next to [Chalmette Battlefield](#).

Working alongside staff from the National Trust for Historical Preservation, Tulane students realigned 19 headstones during their three-hour shift on March 12, and cleaned and documented several others with their cellphone cameras, says Rhonda Coignet, who received an MBA from Tulane and has taught the TIDES course for seven years. Coignet is executive director of development administration and special assistant to the executive vice president at Tulane.

The point of the field trip was to “make the students aware of servant leadership, benefiting others above self,” and to teach social responsibility through the public service component of the course.

“I think the experience helped connect the students to a part of the local community outside of uptown New Orleans that they most likely would not ever have experienced,” Coignet says. “Because New Orleans has such a rich history and is a tourism-based economy, it’s important that our local historic treasures are maintained and presented in the best possible light.

“While they are here at Tulane, they are part of our community, and are linked to this area’s past, present, and future.”