

Tulane SoPA confers first MPA degrees during Commencement 2022

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From top left, Kristen Marx, Mia Blom, Bridget Roche, Roy Williams, Claire Tramontozzi, Duke Carter II, and Ke'Ryne Smith are among the first graduates to complete the requirements for the Tulane School of Professional Advancement's Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. Seated from left is Professor of Practice Brian McNamara, Dean Suri Duitch, Program Director Halima Leak Francis, and Associate Dean Ilianna Kwaske. (Photo by Jacob Cochran)

The Tulane School of Professional Advancement (SoPA) conferred degrees upon the first cohort of graduate students from its public administration program on Saturday,

May 21, during the university's 2022 commencement ceremony. The program opened for enrollment in the fall of 2020.

Public Administration Program Director [Halima Leak Francis](#), said there were 18 graduates in the Class of 2022 who completed the requirements for a [Master of Public Administration](#) (MPA) degree. For many, it was their first time in New Orleans and on the Tulane campus.

“We are providing our students with the tools they need to affect the change they want to see.”

— Suri Duitch, dean of Tulane SoPA

“One of the best parts of this graduation was seeing the sense of community that our online students have built,” said Leak Francis. “It was great to hear about how lessons learned in our program have led to new accomplishments and helped some advance their careers in real-time.”

Not long after [Suri Duitch](#) became dean of Tulane SoPA in 2016, she initiated the development of the new public administration program — a first for Tulane University. Duitch said she wanted to establish a program that would help build civic sector capacity in New Orleans and the Gulf South region while guiding the growing number of individuals with an interest in creating change in and beyond their communities.

This spring, Tulane SoPA celebrated the first of many MPA alumni to come.

“Having graduates of the program is a rewarding payback for the work that's gone into the design of this program,” said Duitch. “We were able to create a program from the ground up to address the exact challenges leaders are facing, especially in areas such as racial equity and uses of data and technology. We are providing our students with the tools they need to affect the change they want to see.”

Leak Francis was hired in April 2019 to lead the creation and launch of the new program. She steered the development of its curriculum and the recruitment of a nationally accomplished faculty. She worked with the program's faculty and advisors to shape coursework and experiences that would help students to build the skills they would need to create sustainable solutions to complex societal

challenges, focusing on areas such as nonprofit and strategic philanthropy leadership, education leadership, environmental management, and economic development. Under Leak Francis' leadership, the program was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) in late 2019.

As part of the online program, students attend a short [residency](#) in New Orleans designed to build community amongst them and the faculty and community stakeholders. Leak Francis said that the program emphasizes cross-sector networking and community engagement.

"We are so excited to host our first residency after canceling last year's event, due to COVID," said Leak Francis. "Our residency is an important part of helping students to continue building valuable connections that can help throughout their careers. Students can't wait to see one another, and to meet with faculty and experts from the field who have traveled to New Orleans for this event, along with our site visits and social engagements."

Among the many benefits of the online program are its diverse students and faculty. In addition to having many students from Louisiana, Leak Francis says students hail from Minnesota, California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, Mexico, and Texas. The student body, which is 60 percent BIPOC, includes individuals who range in experience from early to advanced in their careers.

Learn more about the [Master of Public Administration](#) degree at the [Tulane School of Professional Advancement](#).