

Commitment to community: Public administration program celebrates 5 years

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Graduates of the John Lewis Public Administration Program carry forward a legacy of transformative service leadership. (Photo | Tulane University)

Since August 2020, the Tulane School of Professional Advancement's (SoPA's) [John Lewis Public Administration Program](#) (JLPA) has strengthened the future of public service leadership in New Orleans and beyond.

Named in 2022 to honor the late U.S. Congressman John Lewis, the program has awarded 71 Master of Public Administration (MPA) degrees and 76 graduate certificates as of spring 2025.

The program was first envisioned in 2016 to expand Tulane SoPA's impact by cultivating civic leadership in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf South. Degrees were conferred upon the first class of graduates in the spring of 2022.

“While developing the curriculum for this program we paid close attention to the knowledge, skills and abilities expected of roles that our students may pursue,” said Ilianna Kwaske, senior associate dean for academic affairs. “We sought to design a program that prepares students to be future public leaders who understand how to use data to inform decisions and policy, lead organizations with integrity, manage public resources responsibly, and uphold high standards of ethics and accountability to their communities.”

Halima Leak Francis, who joined Tulane SoPA in 2019 as founding director of the program, led efforts to develop the curriculum and shape the student experience. Since then, the program team has grown to include MPA alum Jason Fujinaga, core faculty members, Tihara Sommers, PhD, and Brian McNamara, PhD, and nearly 30 nationally recognized instructors. Today, the program boasts a wide range of expertise in practice areas including economic development, environmental policy and advocacy, maritime-related industries, higher education administration, philanthropy, and nonprofit leadership.

“The program is a mosaic of thumbprints and fingerprints,” said Leak Francis. “You don't just see one person reflected in it. You see all of us — including our students, faculty, partners, and the New Orleans community. One of the things I appreciate most about the JLP program is how we bring our skills and knowledge together to innovate and make a positive difference in our society.”

Using the unique challenges and opportunities of the Gulf South as a case study, students explore public policy, infrastructure, technology, education, emergency management, and climate resilience in ways that reflect both local needs and national relevance.

Accessibility and responsiveness have been central to the program's mission. Evening classes, mentorship, and academic support ensure students from varied backgrounds and regions thrive, regardless of their prerequisites or prior experience.

The curriculum bridges classroom and community through annual on-campus residencies, capstones, and partnerships, preparing graduates to lead through uncertainty and change.

Students hear from pioneers in public service, like civil rights activist Leona Tate, who spoke during the 2024 residency about her experience as one of the first Black students to integrate a New Orleans public school.

In 2023, the [Center for Applied Research](#) was developed with a goal of connecting student and faculty researchers with community partners to work on strategic projects. The partnerships have resulted in mutually beneficial opportunities where students have strengthened their ability to analyze and interpret data while engaging with faculty and being a valuable resource for local nonprofits, foundations, and other agencies.

“As the program enters its next chapter, the student experience will remain grounded in collaboration and service,” said Leak Francis. “The John Lewis Public Administration Program will continue to prepare leaders who serve with purpose and strengthen their communities.”