

From Bench to Bedside

Interdisciplinary approach prepares students in Tulane University School of Medicine's Biomedical Science Graduate Program

BY MICHELLE LEMIEUX



▲ Dr. Diane Blake

JUST TWO MONTHS AGO, NEW ORLEANS WAS breaking through from Hurricane Ida. Dealing with massive power outages, Tulane University School of Medicine was back on its feet within a couple of weeks, and the rest of the city soon followed.

Described as “small but mighty” by Dr. Diane Blake, co-director of the Biomedical Science Graduate Program and professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at the university, rising to the occasion is a symbol of the commitment, dedication and resilience Tulane brings to its students.

The Biomedical Science Graduate Program (BMS), which Blake has run for the last six years, takes an interdisciplinary approach to graduate education and research, allowing students to customize their experiences as they move forward in their careers. Offering 18 different master’s de-

grees and a Ph.D. in biomedical sciences, the program offers candidates the ability to not just be collaborative and innovative, but creative.

“At Tulane, we have made the Ph.D. accessible for any student willing to put in the work,” says Blake. “You don’t just take courses here, you perform original, creative research and are matched with expert mentors to help take your career to the next level.”

Dropping the GRE requirement and providing all Ph.D. students with a full tuition waiver, paid health insurance and a stipend of

approximately \$30,000 per year for the entire duration of the program are some of the ways that Tulane BMS is setting itself apart from other graduate programs. These incentives are helping to bring in more underrepresented students to the program, as the need for more diverse scientists is accelerating.

“Our country’s demographics are changing and if we don’t have more and more diverse students in this industry, 10 years from now, we could run out of scientists,” Blake states. “Getting a Ph.D. is hard work, but at Tulane, students know we have their back.”

Blake has helped create and build change while bringing in more students to the BMS program since she’s been the co-director. Beyond just running the department, she has expanded the program and serves as an important resource and voice for students throughout their graduate experience.

The program’s nearly 1:1 student to faculty ratio, 90% retention rate, dedicated mentorships, and enhanced career development opportunities attract students locally, nationally and globally. Students also have full access to the university’s School of Science and Engineering and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, as well as the Tulane National Primate Research Center.

Blake says the Primate Center is a game-changer, as not many other universities have this type of facility for infectious disease research. “In addition, one-third of our Ph.D. mentors work in clinical departments, which helps transition our students’ research from bench to bedside,” she says. “Whether you decide to take your career post-doctorate, direct to industry, or elsewhere, we are committed to helping you get there. At Tulane, we are family.”

PHOTO COURTESY DIANE BLAKE/TULANE UNIVERSITY

Tulane University

Campus location: New Orleans, Louisiana (Downtown, Medical School Campus)

Total student enrollment: 321 in Biomedical Sciences Program; 13,600 total at Tulane University

Types of degrees offered: Certificates (3 programs); MS (18 programs); Ph.D.; MD/Ph.D.; MD/MS Bioethics

Ways to matriculate: Certificates can be part-time and online; MS, Ph.D. and Dual degrees are full time in person only

Website: medicine.tulane.edu/education/biomedical-sciences-graduate-program

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Antoinette Bell always wanted to be a scientist, and when she graduates in the fall of 2022 from Tulane University's Biomedical Science Graduate Program, she will become the first doctor in her family. She then plans to bring her rigor and interdisciplinary skill set back to the classroom, using her doctorate to ensure underrepresented students pursue careers in STEM.

Bell graduated from Xavier University in Louisiana with a bachelor's of science in biology and a master's in interdisciplinary health science from Drexel University before she returned home and saw how much Tulane's Ph.D. program had to offer.

The nurturing support she received from students and faculty, as well as the curriculum, which gave her the chance to

branch out and explore different sciences before finding her niche, were all factors in her choosing Tulane. The Ph.D. program incentives, well-known professors and regard for research were also a draw. "I love that we are not siloed here, it's such a collaborative environment full of students from all backgrounds," Bell says. "Being able to take multiple classes in all types of disciplines has given me the opportunity to brush up on all my skills and make me a more competitive candidate in the workforce."

In her current research, Bell works on the implications of co-infection or prior infections of West African viruses, specifically the Arenaviridae family, on the diagnostic tools utilized in the field. She's

traveled to Sierra Leone through her studies in an effort to find out if current surveillance tools are specific in testing for a hemorrhagic virus of the area called Lassa virus.

After graduating, Bell hopes to use her passion for science and diversity and inclusion to increase STEM careers and programs for students like herself.

"I want to try and close the wealth gap," she says. "In order to help students themselves, we need to help those coming from behind." ■



Antoinette Bell

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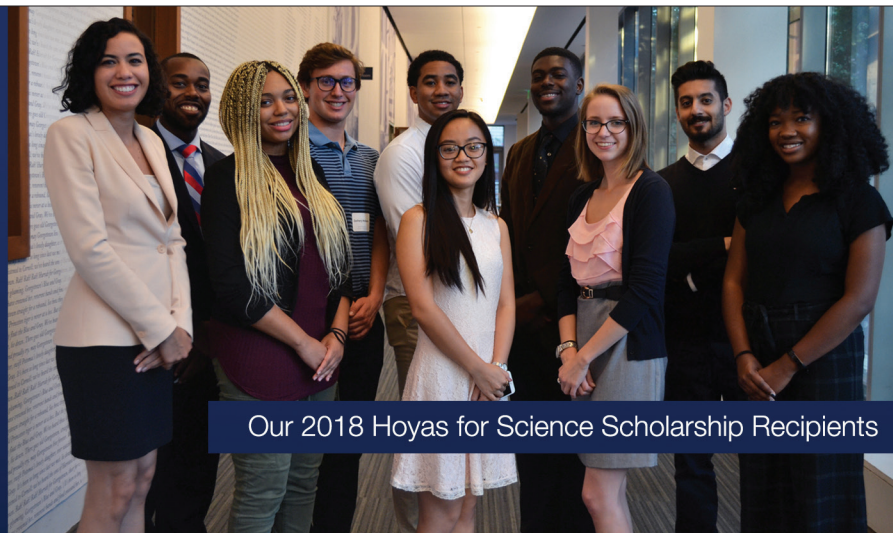
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