

## **Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Scott Cowen, Tulane University President and member of the Talloires Network steering committee.**

by Lorlene Hoyt



June signals the twelfth installment of our Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement series. This issue features President Scott Cowen, Tulane University President and member of the Talloires Network steering committee.

“Since my high school days, where I upon graduation was honored as the student who had done the most for the school, I have been engaged in any community I have belonged to,” President Cowen explained. A New Jersey native, President Cowen found his feet as a leader serving as class president for his high school for three years and later president of the student council and captain of the football team. He believes his sense of involvement and leadership stems from his religious background, his experiences as an athlete and his service in the military. After being recruited to play football for the University of Connecticut where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in business, he served his country for three years as an infantry officer in the U.S. Army. With a Master of Business Administration and doctoral degrees from George Washington University, President Cowen moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he worked his way up from assistant professor to Dean of the School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. “Finally,” President Cowen added, “my commitment to public service and desire to make a difference in my community were shaped by my experiences in the revitalization of Cleveland in the 1980s and 90s, and New Orleans, especially after Katrina.”

Scott S. Cowen is Tulane University’s 14th President, arriving to fill the post in 1998. Seven years into his presidency, Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, and nearly destroyed Tulane University. With “70 percent of Tulane’s main campus and all of the buildings of its downtown health sciences campus flooded, Tulane became the first major American research university in the last century to close its doors for an entire semester.” The hurricane resulted in “damages and losses to Tulane in excess of \$650 million.”

President Cowen, however, chose to transform the crisis into an opportunity, viewing Katrina as “a catalytic experience that marked the beginning of our transition to a more deeply engaged university.” He understood Tulane University to be “an anchor institution” with a “responsibility for identifying ways to positively impact the community in which we exist.” Immediately, President Cowen and his team began the “strenuous, necessary, and, most of all, instructive process of rebuilding and re-envisioning the university. We had to ask—and answer—some tough fundamental questions that would define post-Katrina Tulane.” Under his leadership, the Board of Tulane approved his Renewal Plan less than four months after the destructive storm. Today, Tulane is frequently recognized for its outstanding civic engagement programs as well as its consistent ranking among top tier national research universities.

President Cowen continued, “We have dismantled the image of the remote ivory tower and replaced it with that of an engaged and dynamic community of learners and doers.” Since 2006, too many initiatives to describe in this short article have been successfully launched, among them Tulane’s Center for Public Service and Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching. Public service is “integral to the collegiate experience” at Tulane. Students “fulfill their public service commitment by completing service-learning courses in their first two years and by participating in a program approved by the Center for Public Service during their junior or senior year.” They have a lot of choices and the “integration of service and scholarship” creates influential experiences for students, staff and faculty at Tulane, while positively impacting the local community.

The Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane aims to reinforce efforts to rebuild New Orleans’ K–12 public education system. It is an “action-oriented think tank” that meaningfully contributes to public education by providing “access to the myriad experts and resources” available at Tulane. Additionally, in 2009, Tulane began university-wide initiatives in social innovation “to create new models for social change.” Recently, the university introduced an interdisciplinary Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship undergraduate minor. To further “help students realize their intellectual, social, and ethical potential to actively shape the world in which they live,” Tulane started the Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching (CELT) in the spring of 2011. CELT, President Cowen emphasized, has been “a driving force behind a cultural shift in the way faculty and students interact inside the classroom.” Though he noted, “I would be the last one to say we have figured it all out,” President Cowen and his team are proud of the progress made to date, highlighting that “both data and anecdotal measures suggest that our students are more academically accomplished, engaged, and committed than before Katrina.”

Asked about future directions and potential challenges of the global movement of civic engagement in higher education, President Cowen noted, “I want the higher education community to be known for developing the next generation of engaged citizens and leaders.” To accomplish this, he believes civic engagement needs to be effectively integrated in a university’s mission of discovery and learning. He explained, “All of these different but complimentary missions should be closely aligned with the idea of building healthy and sustainable communities around the world. The opportunities are unlimited given the needs of the world.” Realizing this vision won’t be an easy feat. He added, “The biggest challenge lies in affecting the necessary changes in the culture and focus of many colleges and universities.” To that end, President Cowen hopes the Talloires Network will expand its outreach to higher education institutions across the globe and help them to truly recognize their civic potential. President Cowen concluded, “By assisting universities and colleges in developing engaged citizens, promoting social innovation and entrepreneurship, and enhancing economic prosperity and social mobility, the Talloires Network can have a tremendous impact.”

*TIME* magazine has named President Cowen one of the nation’s Top 10 Best College Presidents and he was one of only four university leaders nationwide to receive the 2009 Carnegie Corporation Academic Leadership Award. In 2010 President Cowen was elected to the

American Academy of Arts and Sciences and was appointed by President Barack Obama to the White House Council for Community Solutions. In 2012 President Cowen was named chair of the Association of American Universities. He is the recipient of several national awards and honorary degrees from institutions such as Brown University, Yeshiva University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Notre Dame and Case Western Reserve University. He is also the recipient of The *Times-Picayune's* Loving Cup, which each year honors a New Orleanian who has worked unselfishly for the community without expectation of recognition or material reward. He has been honored by *New Orleans CityBusiness* as one of the 30 "Driving Forces" in New Orleans in the last 30 years, and by *Gambit* as New Orleanian of the Year for 2011.