

# Tulane School of Science and Engineering Announces Three New Department Chairs Beginning January 1, 2026

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Aidan Feulner [afeulner@tulane.edu](mailto:afeulner@tulane.edu)

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The Tulane University School of Science and Engineering (SSE) is pleased to announce three new department chair appointments taking effect January 1, 2026. Dr. Hank Ashbaugh will lead the Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering (CBE), Dr. Sunshine Van Bael will chair the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (EEB), and Dr. Ryan Glasser will head the Department of Physics and Engineering Physics (PEP).

Each appointee brings a track record of excellence and a clear vision for building stronger, more collaborative, and more innovative academic communities across SSE.

## **Dr. Hank Ashbaugh: Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering**

Dr. Hank Ashbaugh, a Tulane faculty member since 2004, becomes the permanent chair of CBE after serving as interim chair beginning in 2024. Dr. Ashbaugh brings decades of experience in molecular theory, complex systems, and scientific leadership—combined with a deep commitment to making the department more visible, connected, and community-focused.

Dr. Ashbaugh's academic path spans institutions from North Carolina State to the University of Delaware, Lund University in Sweden, Princeton University, and Los Alamos National Laboratory. "I've been a chemical engineer my entire college life, and I've never left college," he joked during his interview, reflecting on a career shaped by curiosity and resilience.

He emphasized that becoming chair was not something he planned, but a challenge he was ultimately ready to embrace. "Your perspective changes with time... when I got that [offer], it's like, well, this is actually a new opportunity." After consulting with colleagues nationwide, he accepted the role "to highlight the department, because the people are the department."

Dr. Ashbaugh has already made visibility and storytelling central to his leadership. “There wasn’t a huge social media footprint... I said, we do have this thing called the visibility committee—let’s take visibility directly for what it means.” Since then, he’s helped energize departmental communication, from student projects to faculty profiles to lighthearted lab-side selfies. “My job, in part, is to highlight the department,” he said. “I just want to talk about people.”

His vision also emphasizes communicating the relevance of chemical engineering to the public. “Chemical engineering is everywhere... I cannot look at a single direction in this room and not see something that chemical engineers have impacted.” He hopes that through increased outreach and engagement, more students will see the discipline as vibrant, creative, and socially impactful.

## **Dr. Sunshine Van Bael: Ecology and Evolutionary Biology**

New EEB Chair Dr. Sunshine Van Bael, a faculty member since 2012, steps into the role after years of intentional leadership development—and a career dedicated to understanding the ecological relationships shaping both tropical and coastal environments.

Before joining Tulane, Dr. Van Bael worked at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, where she studied plant-fungal interactions in tropical forests. At Tulane, she expanded her work into Louisiana’s coastal ecosystems. “Living in Louisiana... everything is about the coast,” she explained, noting that the challenges facing the state make ecological research profoundly relevant to global climate concerns.

Dr. Van Bael has embraced leadership preparation throughout her career, participating in a year-long professional development program under the previous SSE dean as well as Tulane’s Leadership Institute. More recently, she was trained by the Center for Restorative Approaches. “It was really fabulous... "...there was a lot of great content that can be used in the conflict/resolution realm that comes with university leadership,” she said. These programs provided a foundation for stepping into the position with confidence: “I’ve known for a while that it was coming... now

it's my turn."

She is especially motivated by the strength and camaraderie within EEB. "I really like the people that I work with in my department," she said. "I'm excited about figuring out the best ways to build the best and most resilient community."

One of her immediate goals is expanding funding for graduate student fieldwork. "I would like to improve the number of opportunities we have for our PhD students to have grant money to do their field research," she explained. She also highlighted a major facility challenge: relocating the university's fish museum. "It is one of the largest collections of freshwater fish species in the world, yet it is currently difficult for students and visitors to access." Ensuring a safe, modern home for this collection will be a major initiative.

Dr. Van Bael also urged the university to consider broader support for climate-related research at a time when federal funding has declined. "The university needs to think really carefully about issues like climate change... those two fields, climate and public health, are really struggling." Still, she remains focused on what the department can do internally: fostering resilience, supporting students experiencing climate anxiety, and strengthening collaboration across SSE. "Its small size makes it a very collaborative environment," she said. "There's a lot of departmental crosstalk."

## **Dr. Ryan Glasser: Physics and Engineering Physics**

Dr. Ryan Glasser, who joined Tulane in 2014 after an NRC postdoctoral fellowship at NIST and the University of Maryland, becomes the new chair of the Department of Physics and Engineering Physics. Known for his collaborative approach and enthusiasm for student research, Dr. Glasser enters the role at a moment of significant growth for the department.

"I was definitely excited," Dr. Glasser said of his appointment. "Our department is very collegial. Everyone gets along really well... our colleagues are all great." He emphasized that this supportive culture will be a cornerstone of his leadership.

A major initiative for the department is the launch of two new master's programs—one in electrical engineering and another in mechanical

engineering—beginning in fall 2026. “It would be nice to get a lot of students interested and enrolled in those programs,” Dr. Glasser said. He sees the expansion as a meaningful opportunity to broaden engineering pathways at Tulane while strengthening research infrastructure.

Undergraduates remain central to his vision. “Our undergraduate students are heavily involved in research... and I would hope to encourage more students to get involved,” he said. “The Tulane undergraduate students are outstanding... every single one that I’ve worked with has truly impressed me.”

He emphasized that research experience is transformative: “Doing research as an undergraduate really helps you stand out... everybody wins.”

Dr. Glasser also noted the unique qualities of SSE: “One big thing that stands out is the collegiality... we have relatively strong collaborations with folks both inside and outside of Tulane... and I’d like to see more of that.” Looking ahead, he hopes to help the department maintain its upward momentum: “I’m really looking forward to helping our department thrive.”

## **A Shared Path Forward**

While Dr. Ashbaugh, Dr. Van Bael, and Dr. Glasser lead departments with very different missions, their appointments highlight the shared strengths of the School of Science and Engineering: small, collaborative communities; strong faculty-student relationships; and a commitment to research with global impact.

Together, they will guide their departments into the next chapter of SSE’s growth—expanding visibility, supporting students, strengthening interdisciplinary research, and building the resilient scientific communities needed to confront a rapidly changing world.