

# New dean seeks to create a culture of inclusion

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*Dr. Erica Whitiker, Assistant Dean for Student Experience, works at her desk in the newly rebranded Office of Student Experience (Photo by Rebecca Gipson)*

In September, the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine welcomed [Dr. Erica Whitiker](#) as the assistant dean for student experience. Whitiker has a long history as a passionate advocate for students from a wide array of backgrounds, and she intends to dramatically shift the culture at the school to be more focused on student needs and to support them throughout their time at SPHTM.

“The main goal for me is to fully enhance the student experience from start to finish,” she says.

Whitiker earned her doctorate in education administration and leadership from the University of South Dakota, but she originally hails from New Jersey where she earned her bachelor and master’s degrees. She says that moving to South Dakota gave her a new vantage point in working with people from different cultures. Although New Jersey had a lot of diversity, that definition widened for her in the Midwest, where she was in a rural community with students from farming and ranching backgrounds.

“My East Coast ways didn’t just fly in South Dakota,” she laughs. She’s grateful for the experience, which taught her to give respect and space for where students are coming from. Armed with that kind of knowledge, she knows she can then effectively plan for student needs.

Whitiker’s first task has been to rebrand the office from Student Affairs to the [Office of Student Experience](#). “I view my part in this as really being the catalyst in a culture shift, taking us away from the business of it and focusing on the experience of it.”

Along with that rebranding, Whitiker has worked with her team to develop a mission to guide their efforts. The new mission highlights the office’s role in cultivating “an environment of student success, inclusion, support, engagement, and innovation.” According to the mission, the Office of Student experience will “foster a diverse community of leaders and problem solvers.”

Whitiker sees the students themselves as the guiding force behind the all that she and her team does. She wants to have the “student voice lead the direction of our office in a really productive way.” To do that she will be meeting with the Student Government Association and the other recognized student organizations.

“We’ll be letting them know that the Office of Student Experience is here to be an advocate, to champion for our students, and to fully support them through graduation and beyond.”

Making the connection from admissions through graduation is critical to her. It’s admissions that will get them here, she says, “but it is the student experience that’s going to keep them here and keep them connected as they graduate and become ambassadors for our school.” Her belief is that if they have a good experience at SPHTM, as alumni they will send more students and will return to work with students.

Another aspect of her role will be to encourage diversity and foster an inclusive campus culture for all students. She has had significant experience creating campuses that are inclusive, open, and engaging for students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and international students. She’s excited about the strong presence of students at SPHTM from all over the world and is already working with Tulane’s global advisory board to develop better onboarding to help students from diverse cultures make the adjustment to Tulane and New Orleans.

Whitiker, herself, is making that same adjustment to the city. “I never thought I’d move to South Dakota, but I always knew I wanted to come South.”

“There so much beauty and culture and respect for persons here,” she says. “I’m really excited to be in the south. Also, I’m really excited for the food!” she added, admitting that the pandemic has so far hampered her exploration of the city’s food culture.



*Dr. Erica Whitiker and Roz Bailey, executive secretary, working together in the Office of Student Experience (Photo by Rebecca Gipson)*