

Senior Associate Dean LuAnn White to step down

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**Reflects on 40-year career of disaster response,
environmental data management, and the Dean's
Office**



[Dr. LuAnn White](#), a professor at the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine for forty years, will step down as senior associate dean effective June 30, 2021, in the first step of a phased retirement.

During her tenure at the school, White has served as associate dean twice and has been involved with numerous rounds of the school's accreditation process with the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH). She was also the driving force behind the distance learning program that began at the school in 1994 and has witnessed the tremendous improvements in environmental quality in the state and across the country.

"Dr. LuAnn White has been an institution at this school," said Dean Thomas LaVeist. "Her institutional knowledge and the breadth of her experience in the field have been invaluable to me since joining Tulane as dean in 2018."

White first came to Tulane as a doctoral student in pharmacology and clinical toxicology at the School of Medicine, where she also served as a NIH post-doctoral scholar. It was her mentor, Dr. Bill George, who first turned her attention to public health, encouraging her to apply for a faculty position to teach toxicology. She got the job in 1980 and began applying her toxicology background to the environment.

“There was little information on the environment at that time,” she says.

It was a train disaster, however, that turned White on to the wider field of public health. On September 28, 1982, 36 cars of a 101-car Illinois Central Gulf train derailed in Livingston, La. Most of the derailed train cars contained hazardous or toxic chemicals, many of which were punctured in the accident.

Dr. Raoult Ratard, who would later become the state epidemiologist, was at the Louisiana Department of Health in charge of environmental epidemiology. He called on White as a board certified toxicologist to assist with the disaster, which spilled chemicals into the surrounding area, causing fires and releasing smoke and toxic materials into the air and ground water. Residents were forced to evacuate immediately.

“It was my first foray into emergency response. I loved it,” White recalls.

The disaster happened before there were many environmental standards or regulations, and she worked with officials to develop cleanup guidelines and determine what levels were safe for residents to return to their homes.

“I loved the action of it, the thought process, putting principals into work and applying them,” she says. Her work with the train derailment also led to a 38-year collaboration with the state health department, and she’s served as the state’s consulting toxicologist for every environmental event since then, including chemical spills, industrial accidents, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and the Gulf Oil Spill.

She takes note at how much environmental policies have changed environmental quality for the better since then. She’s been able to have hand in establishing methods and protocols for cleaning up and managing both chemical and environmental events.

She was also instrumental in developing childhood lead surveillance systems for the state, as the root causes and risks of exposures for lead poisoning were uncovered.

During her time investigating lead poisoning with prevention research funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, she saw state exposure rates for children drop from 50% of children with lead poisoning to just 2-3%. “This is still too much,” she says, “but significant progress has been made on the insidious disease.”

Technology has played a significant role in many of the public health projects she’s directed. She received CDC funding for the Center for Excellence for Environmental Public Health Tracking that compiled environmental and health data to identify problems and target solutions. Using technology and data, she says, can help public health agencies target their resources in ways that lower cost while improving health. “It’s easy to get involved in a feel-good project,” she says, “but by using data, you can make a real impact.”

Data Skills Applied to Academics

White was still a junior faculty member when she was elected president of General Faculty for the school. It was 1987 and the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine was preparing for a visit by CEPH accreditors. “We were going to lose accreditation,” she says. Dr. John Walsh, chancellor for the health sciences, approached her and asked what could the school do to maintain accreditation. White rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

She forged a vision backed up by data that were available and developed the school’s first strategic plan. It involved a major restructuring of the school’s curriculum, but it succeeded in keeping the school accredited. She’s been involved in every CEPH accreditation since.

“You learn how the school functions, how the university functions, and where the data lives” during the accreditation process, she says. Collecting academic data is just another way of using public health surveillance and evaluation techniques.

She’s served as associate dean twice, first during that initial accreditation process. She returned to the faculty and began building her portfolio of projects, which ultimately came under the banner of the Center for Applied Environmental Public Health to handle over \$65 million of external funding. The center’s work pulled together both the distance learning program, the first of its kind at a school of public health, as well as Health Resources and Services Administration training grants that translated research into practice and provided outreach to communities and city and state health departments.

In 2011 she returned to the dean's office as senior associate dean for academics at the request of Dr. Pierre Buekens, who was dean of the school at that time. She planned to serve for only three years, but it turned into a 10-year role under two deans, another accreditation, and the growth of online programs at the school.

"LuAnn White combines outstanding leadership skills with a deep understanding of what public health means in Louisiana and around the world," said Buekens. "It is this sense of purpose which has made her management so effective. LuAnn inspires us to be confident in the mission and role of Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. We are all grateful to her."

Looking back on a 40-year career, she says, "I never chose public health; it chose me." She didn't plan any of it, she says, but life happened, and she's satisfied that she has made a difference both in the field and in the lives of students.

"We are incredibly grateful for LuAnn White's service to this school," says LaVeist. "She has seen the school through trying times in the past and helped establish a thorough academic grounding that the school benefits from today. This school is respected throughout the academic community thanks to Dr. White's efforts."

Dean LaVeist has established a search committee to fill the associate dean role, a position that requires extreme attention to detail as well as a thorough understanding of the academic enterprise. Although White will step down, she'll remain on faculty through a phased retirement to see existing grants and projects to their conclusion and be available to assist with the transition as needed.

Still, she's eager for a change. "It's time," she says. She looks forward to more time spent cooking, working in her garden, and enjoying her grandchildren.