

Bringing food policy to the table at NOLA Book Fest at Tulane University

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Through her panel at the 2026 New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University, alumna Samantha Fleurinor hopes to emphasize the ways in which food policy can cross divisions and bring people together.

Food brings people together. That's the message Tulane University graduate Samantha Fleurinor hopes visitors to this week's New Orleans Book Festival at

Tulane University take away. It is the same message Fleurinor learned when she first discovered Tulane and the city of New Orleans as a prospective undergraduate student.

“I visited during my high school spring break and immediately fell in love with the city,” said Fleurinor.

Today, that early sense of connection has grown into a career centered on making her chosen home a better place to live. Fleurinor, regional director of the New Orleans Food Policy Council, will be featured at the [New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University](#), where she is facilitating [a tabling activity on the food system](#).

The activity is in collaboration with the Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking, and will be held Friday, March 13, from 1 to 3 p.m. in the Rosenberg Mezzanine in the Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life.

Fleurinor will be joined by experts and authors [Jelagat Cheruiyot](#), [Melissa Fuster](#), [Lesley-Ann Noel](#) and [Marguerite Sheffer](#).

“They’re all touching on different aspects of the food system. I’m there to bring it all together and provide the New Orleans context,” Fleurinor said. “What are the issues, and how can folks use these skills and this knowledge to make their communities better?”

At Tulane, Fleurinor double majored in finance and classical studies at the A. B. Freeman School of Business and the School of Liberal Arts, graduating in 2016. After graduating, Fleurinor worked for the Taylor Center for nearly six years and earned her Master of Public Health in 2020. Her Tulane education helped prepare her for her current career in food policy, combining training in public health with hands-on experience through the Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking — an approach that encourages students to tackle real-world challenges facing New Orleans and communities around the world.

“My public health training has been really key,” she said. “The Taylor Center helped cultivate a lot of my curiosity and interest in understanding social problems and different ways to tackle those problems, what strategies and tactics have worked, what their shortcomings have been and how people are working toward fixing those shortcomings.”

She shared statistics that paint a stark picture: 16% of local residents with low access to grocery stores, a quarter of the population reliant on SNAP federal food-assistance benefits and many people in New Orleans eating fruits and vegetables less than once a day.

“Even though New Orleans is known as a food destination, we’re actually really bad at feeding our own residents,” Fleurinor said.

She said food policy is a powerful lens for understanding many of the most pressing issues in public health.

“Everyone eats, and food intersects with so many spaces in public health,” she said. “It touches housing, where people are often choosing between paying for their homes or paying for food. It touches incarceration, immigration, labor. And to be honest, food is actually a bipartisan issue. It’s a way to bridge political lines in such a divisive time. Food brings people together. It has the potential to bring everyone to the table.”

A longtime New Orleans Book Fest attendee, Fleurinor is excited to be a first-time participant.

“I never thought I would be on this side of Book Fest,” she admitted. “I’ve been in attendance. I love to read. I love being able to engage with thought leaders in their fields and experts. I feel very humbled and honored to have been asked.

“Books open a pathway to new ideas,” she said. “It’s one thing to read a book in isolation. It’s another to be in a community of other readers who are engaging with multiple touchpoints, multiple ideas, and to have real discussions — especially with those who have come up with these ideas.”

For Fleurinor, returning to Tulane for the New Orleans Book Fest feels like a full-circle moment, one that reflects how the university’s connections to New Orleans continue to inspire graduates to turn ideas into action for the communities they serve.

In addition to its dynamic author panels, the New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University offers a curated slate of experiential programming designed to invite participation and discovery. This year’s offerings include the interactive pop-up exploring the local food system, a Silent Reading Hour in the Burgundy Room, a meet-and-greet and signing with official festival poster artist Francis X. Pavy, and a special art tour at the Newcomb Art Gallery for festival attendees.