Pierre Conner: The Future of Energy Is Now

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As executive director of the Tulane Energy Institute at Tulane University's A. B Freeman School of Business, Pierre Conner is educating the leaders of tomorrow's energy companies today. Photo by Eugenie Uhl.

When Pierre Conner was drilling for oil on Alaska's North Slope in the 1990s, one of his challenges was to move 400 tons of equipment across a stretch of sea ice to an island. His solution was to build a floating ice road.

“We would drill a hole in the ice and pump the water up on top until it would freeze,” he recalls. “Then, we would just drive back and forth, until we had thicker ice there than elsewhere.

“But on the surface there was no visible sign of the road. It was a little unnerving driving across this white plain, not knowing whether you were over three feet of ice or seven feet of ice.”

Today, Conner is building a different kind of bridge: to the future of energy. As executive director of the Tulane Energy Institute at Tulane University’s A. B Freeman School of Business, he’s educating the leaders of tomorrow’s energy companies. His programs include an Energy Certificate for Bachelor of Science in Management students and a Master of Management in Energy.

He’s preparing students at a crucial time, when energy demand is rising rapidly, he says. “We have a focus on energy that we haven't seen since the early seventies. It's clear that it's going to take all the various types of primary energy production sources to meet our needs.”

Back to the Bayou, and the Classroom

Conner joined the Tulane Energy Institute in 2019 after four decades in both the production and the financial sides of energy, but in some respects, Tulane felt like coming full circle.

His father was a math professor. But his grandfathers on both sides were Cajuns from southwestern Louisiana, and both had worked in the oil patch. One sold equipment and photographed rigs. The other, in 1947, did a seismic survey for the state’s first offshore well.

Conner leaned towards the hands-on side of his heritage, getting his bachelor's in mechanical engineering at Tulane in 1981. He went to work for Exxon, which eventually sent him back to Tulane for a master's in petroleum engineering.

Though he was based in New Orleans, he supervised onshore drilling projects all over the country. “You get a breadth of exposure, being at a large company,” he says. “I told Exxon I would go anywhere and do anything.”

One of his projects pioneered horizontal drilling, a technology that would become crucial to hydraulic fracturing. But by the 2000s, when fracking transformed the oil industry, Conner had shifted to the financial side of energy.

From Oilfields to Finance

Conner viewed his career change as a return to his roots, to the smaller, entrepreneurial businesses his grandparents had run. In 1999, armed with a third Tulane degree — an MBA — he joined a small research firm that advised institutional investors. His specialty was energy company securities.

“I found that I was adding a tremendous amount of value for the people who owned these equities and didn't know much about what the companies did,” he says. “I could use my understanding of the industry combined with my new set of skills with financial analysis.”

Over 20 years, his boutique firm was absorbed by a local bank and later by Capital One. While he still focused on energy, he rose to head up all institutional sales, research and trading for its securities affiliate.

“It gave me a tremendous exposure to hundreds of energy companies around the world,” he says. “We analyzed, evaluated, and built financial models around them. I think I developed a really good understanding of what works and what doesn't work.”

Educating for the Energy Future

Over time, something started nagging at Conner. He was back to working in a large organization. He also wanted to have a more strategic role in charting energy’s future.

About that time, he heard the Tulane Energy Institute was seeking a new executive director. He remarks, “I wish I’d done it sooner.”

The institute’s primary role is education. Besides its energy-focused degrees, it offers dual masters degrees that combine energy with accounting, business, finance or management. It offers energy specializations as parts of other graduate level business degrees, as well.

Mentoring students is Conner’s new passion. He tells of a recent graduate who thanked him for helping her get a job at an energy investment firm.

In the job interview, she spent two hours chatting with the managing director about energy. He never got around to asking about her personal history. Her knowledge of the subject had been enough to get her the job.

She later told Conner, “The reason I could have a two-hour conversation with the managing director of an energy investment firm was because I'd been taking your class and understood all these concepts.”

Energy and the Environment

While he teaches students, Conner is concerned with another aspect of energy’s future: mitigating its environmental risks. He’s chaired the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, a nonprofit that seeks to repair a century of damage to the state’s wetlands.

“I believe that there are really opportunities to do well by doing good, to be profitable in the energy industry and not have a negative effect on our quality of life and our environment,” he says.

He points to one of his grandfathers, who had sought an alternative to moving heavy equipment through the marshes. He’d ended up starting a helicopter company to airlift equipment for short hauls and avoid damaging the wetlands.

Coastal erosion, he notes, threatens not only ecosystems and towns but the state’s energy infrastructure, including oil and gas import, export, processing and transportation —all significant components of its coastal economy. “There's a convergence of energy in Louisiana,” he says. “So the benefit of protecting our coast is that it protects our communities, and it protects our energy systems, as well.”

Explore Becoming an Energy Leader

As both worldwide demand and environmental impacts of energy increase, the industry needs leaders who combine energy expertise with business and financial aptitudes. Degree programs like the Bachelor of Science in Management Certificate in Energy and the Master of Management in Energy at Tulane’s A. B Freeman School

of Business can help prepare students with those diverse sets of skills.

Faculty include practitioners and energy experts from oil and gas, clean energy and renewables, finance and investment, and more. Discover more about how these programs can equip you to help shape the energy future.