With scholarship gift, alum passes the baton

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Jim Burke (A&S '91, MBA '91) launched a successful career in the energy industry after graduating from Tulane with the help of a track & field scholarship. To pay it forward, Burke and his wife recently established Jim and Marti Burke Scholarship Endowed Fund to provide need-based support for undergraduate business students from Louisiana.

A scholarship made Tulane University possible for Baton Rouge native Jim Burke (A&S ’91, MBA ’91). That generosity — from someone he didn’t even know — transformed his life and ultimately led him to create the same opportunity for future generations of Tulane business students.

In 1986, Burke received a Tulane scholarship for track and field, allowing him to train under legendary coach Danny Thiel. Shortly after starting Tulane, Burke discovered the MBA Early Admit Program, which enables students to earn both their undergraduate degree and an MBA from the A. B. Freeman School of Business in five years. Burke graduated in 1991 with a bachelor’s degree in economics and his MBA, a foundation that helped him successfully launch his career.

He began his professional life with Deloitte & Touche Consulting and then spent six years with the Coca-Cola Co. After serving in senior management positions with Reliant Energy and Gexa Energy, Burke joined TXU Energy in Irving, Texas, in 2004

and soon became CEO of this division of TXU Corp. In 2016, the parent company became Vistra Corp., and Burke was named executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Fortune 500 integrated retail and power generation company. In December 2020, he was promoted to president and CFO.

Despite his professional success, Burke never forgot the scholarship that made everything possible. In 2018, he realized the time was ripe for him to give back to the university that had given so much to him. Along with his wife, Marti, Burke established the Jim and Marti Burke Scholarship Endowed Fund to provide need-based support for undergraduate business students from Louisiana.

“The richness of my experience [at Tulane] was because I met folks from all over the world in addition to all over the country,” Burke says. “I just would like more kids in Louisiana to have that opportunity.”

A triathlete who has competed in Ironman competitions around the world, Burke hasn’t forgotten his fellow student-athletes. The endowment agreement includes the preference that, when feasible, the scholarship should be awarded to students participating in track & field.

“Work ethic is an important part of success,” Burke says. “If you are going to be a minor sport athlete, generally the scholarships are not as numerous as major sports. There is a grind-it-out approach to many of these minor sports like running where I know that people [who] are doing it are pretty driven.”

In Burke’s estimation, business, athletics and the Tulane campus environment combine to create an unbeatable educational experience.

“I was trying to find a formula for success, a formula of success for students who I think would be successful at Tulane and be successful afterwards,” Burke says. “Tulane does a very good job of creating an open-minded student who has seen a lot and been around a lot and is very adaptable. If you show up in New Orleans and can focus and do well in school, that is a level of self-discipline that is a pretty strong indicator. If people are focused and they do a great job at Tulane, they can handle a lot of things.”

While their endowed scholarship will assist Freeman students far into the future, the Burkes are also supporting current-use funds so their scholarship can help students today.

“My hope is that a recipient takes this purely as an opportunity to make the most of it,” Burke says. “Not that they feel there is something that they owe anybody else — because somebody did something for me too. The way I wanted to recognize [that generosity] was to try to hopefully create an opportunity for somebody else. I hope they are as successful as they possibly can be.”