UL professor advocates for awareness to save nearby tribe

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University of Louisiana at Lafayette associate professor Heather Stone, Ph.D., is cataloging the history and culture of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe of the shrinking Isle de Jean Charles to use their experiences to demonstrate the necessity of knowing the coast in decision making and planning for relocation.

Stone said changes that have been made on the Mississippi River or the levee system, which were made without thinking about what was going to happen downstream, has affected the tribe to the point where they now have to relocate.

“We need to think about the long-term effects and not just from the viewpoint of engineers, but from the community perspectives,” Stone said. “Doing fieldwork is when you realize how much local people know and can help when you’re making big decisions like that.”

An example of a lack of community perspective is in the one road to and from the island, according to Stone. The road was constructed on marshland, causing it to continually sink.

“There’s one way off the island, and it floods frequently, so for access to medical (care) and education and work it’s really hard to live there,” Stone said. “If they had been advised by people who live on the island, it would have gone a different way.”

Because of natural and mostly man-made coastal erosion, Isle de Jean Charles has lost 2,000 square miles of land in the past century, according to www.isledejeancharles.com. Residents of the island have been given a $48 million grant to relocate, the first of its kind to move an entire community struggling with climate change. The New York Times has dubbed the residents the world’s first climate refugees.

“I do know that they have been given that distinction from the New York Times and other people, but it’s not just about climate,” said Stone. “It’s erosion.

“Also they’re not refugees,” she distinguished. “They’re from here.”

According to Stone, the tribe became self-sufficient with livestock and trees on the island, unaware of even the Great Depression, after being forcibly relocated to the island during the Indian Removal Act. Since the erosion, saltwater incursion killed their trees and made water undrinkable for the animals, making it a challenge to stay.

“It’s not like they can pick everything up and move. Native Americans have a tie to the earth, a strong connection to it,” Stone said. “They were indigenous to this land. They’re going to have to adapt. They have some ideas on how. The goal is to put the community back together.”

The move wasn’t just about relocating the small number of people that still live on the island, Stone said, but about bringing back the whole tribe of people who have had to move to a place where they can create a makeshift version the paradise they have lost on Isle de Jean Charles.

“They’re not going to be the only ones that have to relocate,” said Stone. “What makes them special, though, is that they are a tribe, trying to relocate as a

UL, LSU to collaborate state Educator Research Consortium

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Starting in January and continuing for the next five years, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and Louisiana State University will lead the Louisiana Educator Research Consortium, which will oversee research, write grants and give advice on state education policies.

“This innovative and pioneering consortium will serve as a hub for research on teacher preparation methods and policies,” said John White, state superintendent of education.

Both universities were awarded a $25,000 grant by the state’s Department of Education to lead the program. UL Lafayette and LSU were selected after being reviewed by a committee consisting of representatives from the Department of Education, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Louisiana Board of Regents and the Louisiana Association for Career and Technical Education.

Joseph C. Rallo, Ph.D., state commissioner of higher education, said he looks forward to working with the consortium to continue the state’s leadership role in teacher preparation and guaranteeing that students are successful.

The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education instructed the Louisiana Educator Research Consortium to be established in October 2017 to help direct teacher preparation research.

The consortium will provide “a scholarly premise to policies associated with preparation of teachers,” said Peter Sheppard, Ph.D., head of UL Lafayette’s department of educational curriculum and instruction.

The UL Lafayette College of Education is also planning to launch a laboratory school once property and state legislative approval are secured. The University of Louisiana System Board of Supervisors has already approved the concept.

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The lab school, which has yet to be named, will educate its students using model teaching methods and a “learning by doing” curriculum. UL Lafayette students will be able to gain teaching experience and the research that is conducted at the lab will be shared throughout the school district.