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 tribe, trying to build 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.”

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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 relaunch a laboratory school once property and state legislative approval are secured. The University of Louisiana System Board of Supervisors has already approved the concept.
a community not just individuals moving somewhere inland.

"I really believe that to save the coast, we have to know the coast," she continued. "After speaking with the tribe, they wanted to be able to use their experiences to teach others about the decisions we make about the environment and how that’s going to affect our futures."

Oral histories have been Stone’s preferred method of research, now using a 360-degree camera and putting those videos into virtual reality for students in some eighth grade classrooms. Students can see the community through Stone’s eyes while she is interviewing someone who has seen his island decimated over the last 90 years.

"To teach students about something that’s authentic and happening right down an hour away from them in Lafayette is really critical," Stone said. "The last one we did was on erosion and I asked a young lady when she finished watching it, I said, ‘What was your favorite part?’ and she goes, ‘Oh my gosh. We’ve been studying erosion for a week and a half and it didn’t really sink in until I heard from the people who are going through it, what they were really going through,’ she said. ‘And that’s what this is all about.’"

Stone says her work is a cooperation not possible without the help from the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe and Chief Albert Naquin and the access that he’s allowed.

"They’ve been through so much but they’re still trusting and welcoming and I mean I’ve been around two years so everyone’s gotten to know me down there in the tribe, but they’re just a lovely group of people and they just want to share their story in hopes that it helps others and they welcome people to come down there and talk to them and hear about what’s going on," Stone said.

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Savoie said university officials have turned to improving buildings and spaces.

"We are currently evaluating each building on campus, getting a condition report on all of it, and we’re looking at how do we fund that?’” Savoie said. "We’ve got to self-fund that in some fashion."

In addition to upgrading science labs and expanding learning spaces, the university is also seeking to implement technological improvements to 90 percent of classrooms. Although the university renovated what he described as "deplorable dormitories," rebuilt the Student Union and remodeled the Quad, Savoie said more can be done.

Asked what he looks forward to in the future, Savoie said he is eager to see the university continue to improve, whether through improved academic programs or facilities, larger influence in other states and more graduate degree programs. Although he said he believes the university is "well on (its) way," he called the task a "never-ending responsibility."

"There’s no finish line, but you can run laps," he said with a chuckle.

department as soon as possible. According to Abshire, of the thousands of calls the IT Service Desk receives each semester, only 10 percent are related to ULINK and Moodle.

“It’s possible that students are not aware of the IT Service Desk and all of the assistance it offers," Abshire said.

The university has promoted the IT Service Desk frequently in emails, Abshire said, including advertisements on the digital monitors across campus, during student orientation and on multiple social media platforms each semester for students.

"Students should always contact the IT Service Desk to report a problem and open a ticket so that any issues can be logged and addressed by the professionals who are responsible for maintaining the university’s systems," Abshire said.

Students can contact the IT Service Desk at (337) 482-HELP, chat online with a support team member at helpdesk.louisiana.edu, or send an email to ithelp@louisiana.edu.