

American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center

Representative Heather Wilson is working with the COE to keep American Indian languages alive.

Since the arrival of Europeans in North America, scores—if not hundreds—of native languages have disappeared. By 1995 only 175 indigenous languages were still being spoken in the U.S. Almost ninety percent of these languages have been classified as moribund, meaning that fewer and fewer children are learning them. By 2050, linguists project that only twenty American Indian languages will still be spoken in the United States.

A recent survey of Native languages found that among the Lipan Apache on the Mescalero reservation in southern New Mexico, just ten native speakers remain. At the Sandia Pueblo, north of Albuquerque, most of the native speakers are middle-aged or older. Even Navajo, spoken more than any other American Indian language in the nation, is spoken fluently by fewer than half of the Navajo children entering kindergarten.

In response to American Indian communities across New Mexico, Congresswoman Heather Wilson is working to secure \$200,000 to establish the American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center at the UNM College of Education. The funding for the center will be used to train instructors and conduct research to help preserve Native American languages. “We’re working to preserve these native languages and this UNM program helps accomplish that goal,” Wilson says. “Once lost, they will never be recovered.”



Corrie Photography

Enjoying the Acoma Language Retention Program’s “Make & Take: Aak’ume Christmas Night.”

Below, Chris Sims (standing) helps to make ornaments.



Corrie Photography



Corrie Photography

Wilson inserted the money in the Labor, Health and Human Services appropriations bill that passed in the House of Representatives and, at press time, was awaiting action in the Senate. The bill also includes \$3 million to fund the Esther Martinez Native Languages Preservation Act program, which was passed in 2006 and named to honor a master Tewa storyteller from Ohkay Owingeh, which was formerly known as San Juan Pueblo.

Why, one might ask, is it important to preserve Lipan Apache or Tiwa? “From the tribal point of view, our languages are irrevocably intertwined with cultural survival,” says Chris Sims, an assistant professor in the College’s Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies and member of Acoma Pueblo. “If a language goes, then so do most aspects of a people’s culture, including their values, belief systems, and traditional practices.”

Regis Pecos, senior policy and legislative analyst for the speaker of New Mexico’s House of Representative and former governor of Cochiti Pueblo, adds that “language is what gives us the means for the intimate relationship with the space, place, and ceremony that makes for understanding and celebrating our place in connection with all of creation.

“The fact that the [American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training] Center will be located on a major university campus recognizes the value of indigenous languages and the importance of striking a balance between a formal education and a cultural education. We are indebted to our congressional leaders for recognizing the need for this incredible undertaking, for their vision and leadership. Dr. Chris Sims has been an eloquent spokesperson and has been a major architect in the development of strategies to make this a reality.”

The center’s location on campus is due in large part to the work of Sims, who has dedicated her career to help-

ing tribes maintain their languages. She began her teaching as a Keres language instructor before becoming a bilingual/bicultural specialist with the tribe’s bilingual program. But bilingual education had its limitations. “The ultimate goal of these programs was to transition students into English-based curricula, not to preserve or maintain their native languages,” she says. “What American Indian communities needed was a way to create new generations of speakers.”

In 1981, Sims co-founded the Linguistic Institute for Native Americans, a nonprofit organization that provides training resources to Native American communities engaged in language retention efforts. Over the years, she worked with Rebecca Blum-Martinez, who is now chair of the Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies, to develop and implement a series of language maintenance and revitalization programs throughout New Mexico. The centerpiece of their approach was language acquisition through immersion.

Sims’s current research includes the examination of attitudes held by tribal communities, language teachers, and school administrators regarding heritage language teaching in public schools. In 2003, New Mexico created alternative certification to allow American Indian language speakers to teach language and culture in public schools. It provided New Mexico tribes the opportunity to develop their own internal tribal certification processes.

“Some tribes are making substantial progress in developing these new processes,” she says, “but there continues to be a need for training speakers in methods and strategies for language teaching as well as providing technical assistance to tribes in planning language initiatives.” This need is one of the primary reasons for creating the American Indian Language Center.



Corrie Photography



Corrie Photography

