



SIUE's Hildebrandt Expands International Impact as President of Endangered Language Fund

by Megan Weiser
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EDWARDSVILLE - Internationally-acclaimed linguistics scholar, Kristine Hildebrandt, PhD, is expanding her impact on the revitalization of the world's endangered languages with colleagues worldwide as president of the Endangered Language Fund (ELF). Hildebrandt is a professor in the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Arts and Sciences' Department of English Language and Literature.

Her ELF presidency aligns with the United Nations' declaration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

"A language is only as "healthy" as its youngest generation of speakers, and in many cases, younger members are forced to turn away from traditional, community languages if they relocate, or if they see that the local language has little economic or social value on the larger global stage," Hildebrandt said.

Hildebrandt notes that although debated, general consensus is that 90 percent of the world's current number of languages, estimated between 6,000-7,000, will disappear within approximately the next 100 years. Reasons are quite varied, but often relate to political conflict, economic shifts, and associated outward migration or fracturing of language communities.

Hildebrandt is a noted scholar with extensive linguistics training and research activities centered around language documentation and community collaboration in Nepal. More specifically, two of the languages she has studied are Nar-Phu and Gyalsumdo, which have fewer than 1,000 living speakers combined, most of whom are over the age of 50. This leaves the languages "moribund," or expected to disappear over the next couple generations.

From 2012 to 2019, Hildebrandt was the principle investigator of the first and only prestigious National Science Foundation CAREER grant awarded to an SIUE faculty member. Her research centered around documentation and description of four languages of Nepal.

"Nepal is the perfect example of a country undergoing massive political, economic and social changes," she added. "It is heavily influenced by "big" neighbors such as China and India, and members of indigenous, and often minority, communities are bombarded by the prestige of "big" languages like Chinese, Hindi, and even English, in all dimensions of their lives. At the same time, communities see their indigenous languages as important conduits of history and traditional beliefs and practices."

As a teacher-scholar, Hildebrandt emphasizes the significant community impact of linguistics studies.

“My research has historically been collaborative,” she explained. “I would not be able to accomplish many of the achievements that I have without working with other people, learning from their ideas and releasing our findings back to the community for their own use. I have tried to instill these ideals in the SIUE students, who have worked on my funded projects, and to include them in outputs, such as publications and conference presentations, in which the focus is not only the linguistic importance of my work, but also the broader impacts and benefits to these communities.”

Involvement and leadership in ELF reflect a natural extension of that desire and career-long effort, according to Hildebrandt.

This spring, ELF issued its 2019 Language Legacies grants, which support documentation and revitalization efforts throughout the world. The awards granted represent 17 different languages spoken in areas such as Nigeria, Mexico, Guatemala, Indonesia, China, Nepal, Canada, Papua New Guinea and Brazil.

“ELF is part of a solution that empowers community members and academics alike, and equips them with resources to effect positive change, or else capture information about a dying language before the last speakers are gone,” Hildebrandt said.

“ELF grants provide alternative support to those who are interested in learning about and developing preservation and revitalization resources, who would not ordinarily be able to secure some of the larger federal or institutional grants aimed at academic professionals,” she added. “Many of the grant holders in ELF are not PhD-holding academics, but rather community members and activists who want to do someth

ing positive for their communities.”

ELF’s next cycle of awards is for eligible tribes and languages through the Native Voice Endowment: A Lewis & Clark Expedition Bicentennial Legacy. Grants through this program are available to members of the Native American tribes that came in contact with the Lewis and Clark Expedition between 1803-1806.

Central to SIUE’s exceptional and comprehensive education, the College of Arts and Sciences offers degree programs in the natural sciences, humanities, arts, social sciences, and communications. The College touches the lives of all SIUE students helping them explore diverse ideas and experiences, while learning to think and live as fulfilled, productive members of the global community. Study abroad, service-learning, internships, and other experiential learning opportunities better prepare SIUE students not only to succeed in our region's workplaces, but also to become valuable leaders who make important contributions to our communities.

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Photo: SIUE's Kristine Hildebrandt, PhD, president of the Endangered Language Fund.