

Despite the pandemic and technology challenges, AILDI presses on with its mission to preserve and promote Indigenous languages

University Communications
November 2020

Many Indigenous communities are seeing a decrease in the number of people who speak their native languages. Increasing those numbers requires an approach that will engage young learners, but the combination of an ongoing pandemic and an existing lack of access to technology on reservations is slowing the effort.

While **National Native American History Month** ^[1] highlights Indigenous cultures every November, the **American Indian Language Development Institute** ^[2] works year-round to preserve the languages at the heart of those cultures.

Alyce Sadongei ^[3], project coordinator for AILDI and a member of the Tohono O'odham and Kiowa nations, says the institute works with tribal leaders through workshops and training programs to help them move forward with efforts to improve technology access and use among Native American communities.

"So many people are using technology in language learning," Sadongei says. "Tribes are developing their own programs and computer games. They know that's where young people are, and they're going to have to meet them there."

Ofelia Zepeda ^[4], Regents Professor of linguistics and AILDI director, says the pandemic has shined a spotlight on the challenge.

"Like everyone else, we are trying to change with the times," Zepeda says. "We are looking more at applications of technology for language teaching and learning. We found out as we have all had to go online that there is still a divide for native communities that have limited or poor access to the internet. So that move toward technology has been slowed."

Zepeda, who is a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, says **University of Arizona Cooperative Extension** ^[5] has offices on many reservations that make hot spots available to students. However, she says those are "Band-Aids," not long-term solutions.

"There are still students who have to take classes while sitting in their car. That is not conducive to learning," Zepeda says.

A step forward came in October, when the Federal Communications Commission **issued the first set of spectrum licenses** ^[6] through its Rural Tribal Priority Window program. The **154 licenses** ^[7] – including 11 to tribes with a presence in Arizona – involve the use of the 2.5 gigahertz band to provide broadband and other wireless services, including 5G connectivity, to tribal communities.

There are more than 1,500 Native American students enrolled at the University, and with many classes still largely or entirely online, many are facing the challenge brought on by the digital divide. The University's first senior vice president for Native American advancement and tribal engagement, **Nathan Levi Esquerre** ^[8], says addressing that divide is one of his immediate priorities in his new position. (*Read more about Esquerre in [this LQP story](#)* ^[9].)

AILDI was founded in 1978 and found its permanent home at the University in 1990. The institute aims to promote and preserve Indigenous languages by engaging educators, Indigenous communities and policymakers through training, workshops and other events.

The centerpiece of AILDI's offerings is its intense **summer institute** ^[10]. The annual program offers training to reservation-based language teachers on how to effectively teach tribal languages and culture in a school setting. It also features courses related to language maintenance, documentation and revitalization. The organization additionally offers workshops and training opportunities throughout the year on topics ranging from dictionary making to language documentation technology. In addition to training teachers in tribal communities, AILDI works with graduate students in Arizona and beyond conducting research on Indigenous language and culture.

Zepeda has been with the institute for 38 of its more than 40-year history. The former MacArthur fellow says AILDI will press on through the challenges, because its mission is critical to Indigenous communities with languages that have few speakers left. She says preserving language is key to strengthening the culture of Indigenous communities.

"Language can be learned from rituals, songs, prayers and other practices that a tribe might have," Zepeda says. "But it also works in reverse. You can learn to be a practitioner of certain cultural practices if you have access to the language. "Preserving language is not about capturing it and putting it away. It's to capture it so you can use it actively."

Despite the challenges, Sadongei says she sees a "resurgence" in interest among tribal communities in increasing language preservation efforts and the number of people who speak the languages. In addition to Arizona, AILDI's training workshops have attracted participants from California, New Mexico, Montana, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Kansas, Alaska,

Canada and Mexico. While University-affiliated Indigenous language institutes are not common, she says AILDI has been the model for at least two others – the **Northwest Indigenous Language Institute**^[11] at the University of Oregon and the **Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute**^[12] at the University of Alberta in Canada.

Overall, in the ongoing goal of preserving and revitalizing tribal languages – and with them, native culture – Sadongei says she has reason for optimism.

"I get inspired every summer when I see the people that come through our programs. I get inspired when I go out in the field and do our workshops. While the task is hard, the commitment is so strong."

Source URL: <https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/despite-pandemic-and-technology-challenges-aildi-presses-its-mission-preserve-and-promote>

Links

[1] <https://nativeamericanheritagemonth.gov/> [2] <https://aildi.arizona.edu/> [3] <https://aildi.arizona.edu/person/alyce-sadongei> [4] <https://aildi.arizona.edu/person/ofelia-zepeda> [5] <https://extension.arizona.edu/> [6] <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-367726A1.pdf> [7] <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-367726A2.pdf> [8] <https://president.arizona.edu/person/n-levi-esquerra> [9] <https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/new-svp-looks-help-native-american-students-and-tribes-reach-their-true-potential> [10] <https://aildi.arizona.edu/content/aildi-summer-session> [11] <https://nili.uoregon.edu/> [12] <https://www.ualberta.ca/canadian-indigenous-languages-and-literacy-development-institute/index.html>