

The Power of Words

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Her eyes light up when she describes the study of linguistics. Judith M. Maxwell, professor of anthropology and director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics at Tulane, is excited about a doctoral program in linguistics that is launching this year.



Judith Maxwell, professor of anthropology and director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics, drafted the proposal for the new doctoral program that will begin in the fall semester 2010. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

For several years, the interdisciplinary linguistics program has offered a four-plus-one master's track, and an occasional student has earned a PhD by proposing an independent doctoral program to the graduate education board. Now, the linguistics program has received funding as one of [three new doctoral programs](#) that will matriculate candidates for the fall 2010 semester.

"When we got the call for proposals for this initiative, I thought that we had to apply because of the clear demand for people to come to Tulane to study linguistics,"

Maxwell says. The reason for that demand, she says, can be found in the strength of the faculty from 11 academic departments who are involved in the [linguistics program](#).

And then there is simply the power of words, says Maxwell.

"Linguistics is the underpinning for human activity," she says. "We're a meaning-making species and as long as we believe things are supposed to make sense, we will create a narrative about it."

For 36 years Maxwell has been helping Mayan communities in Guatemala document their languages through the study of linguistics. Working with UNICEF and the Ministry of Education in Guatemala, she has developed bilingual education materials in 13 of the country's 22 Mayan languages. As a Fulbright scholar, Maxwell is training a cadre of local bilingual linguists to teach Mayan languages and research Mayan sacred sites.