

Tulane student researchers add indigenous voices to state's history

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Tulane first-year students Alex Whitacre and Mirna Sanyal discuss their research projects with attendees at a Native American Heritage Day celebration on Nov. 12 hosted at Vermilionville, a living history museum in Lafayette, Louisiana. (Photo provided by Laura Kelley)

Tulane University students who conducted research on the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe (PACIT) presented their historical documentation projects at Native American Heritage Day in [Vermilionville](#), a living history museum located in Lafayette,

Louisiana, on Nov. 12.

The students wrote historical narratives and middle-school lesson plans that were presented to the tribe and other visitors. The projects built on adjunct professor of history Laura D. Kelley's extensive research on the history of the PACIT and other local Native American groups.

For 12 years, Kelley has collaborated with PACIT, a community with ancestral lands in lower Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes close to New Orleans. In a partnership between the tribe and the university, Kelley introduces first-year Tulane students to Native Americans' role in shaping state history through a course called Indian Tribes Down The Bayou: Native American Communities of Southeastern Louisiana. The course is offered by the [Tulane InterDisciplinary Experience Seminars \(TIDES\) program](#).

Kelley said in her own research, she reviewed 10,000 18th-century letters stored in the General Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain, including documents from Louisiana's Spanish colonial period, that had not been published before.

After receiving selections of the translated letters, students recorded all documents referencing local Native Americans in a primary source database for the PACIT. They then used the letters as valuable sources for two types of research projects.

Seven students chose to craft narratives, such as an analysis of how the relationship between Acadians and Native Americans living in Lafourche Parish changed over a 20-year period.

Ann Kapustiak, a political science and psychology double major, chose to design a lesson plan suitable for an eighth-grade Louisiana history curriculum. After presenting her project alongside fellow classmates at the Vermilionville performance center, she discussed her work with PACIT members and other visitors.

"It was a very fulfilling experience to meet the groups of people that we had been studying in real life," said Kapustiak. "I would like to continue working with them."

"This is the first time that we've done a public presentation. The students had previously only presented to the Pointe-au-Chien tribal council," added Kelley. "We're trying to bring an indigenous voice to Louisiana history, because it's a missing perspective."

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“We’re trying to bring an indigenous voice to Louisiana history.”
— Laura Kelley, Tulane adjunct professor in history