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Native American Languages Report

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Introduction

The short-term goal of this project is to allow for Native American students who arrive at Yale fluent in their Native language to test out of part or all of their Yale College Language Requirement for graduation. The long-term goal of this project is to have instruction for language credit in Native American languages at Yale, building off of existing community class framework at the Native American Cultural Center (NACC) through the NACC's Native American Language Project.

Background

Yale's current situation is two-fold. First, there is no mechanism for Native American students who arrive at Yale with knowledge of a Native American language to test out of part of their language requirement. Second, there is no mechanism for Native American students to study a Native American language for credit, whether it be through independent study or formal class offerings at Yale.

Currently, informal community language classes are taught at the NACC based on student demand and requests. These classes are taught twice a week through videoconference technology with a certified instructor, typically using textbooks or worksheets and weekly homework. As of last year, seven courses were offered through the NACC's Native American Language Project, which was founded in 2015: three intermediate classes in Cherokee, Choctaw, and Native Hawaiian; and four elementary classes in Lakǎ́óta, Mohawk, Navajo, and Ojibwe. These courses are not funded by Yale. Rather, they are funded by Professor Ned Blackhawk's research grants. He funds this program out of his dedication to the Native American community, and has mentioned that he will continue to do so as long as the need is present and he remains a tenured faculty member at Yale. Students do not get any language credit or recognition on transcripts for taking these courses—they function more as extracurriculars than anything else.

Yale's Center for Language Study has recently started a committee called LCTL, or "Less Commonly Taught Languages Committee," of which I attended a meeting on December 3rd. Their goal is to evaluate how Yale can accommodate less commonly taught languages, such as Hindi, Wolof, and Native American Languages as a whole. The concern of Dean Fayard, who is Assistant Dean of Yale College and Director of the NACC, and of her students, is that grouping Native American Languages into the LCTL ignores the unique circumstances that these languages face. On one hand, these languages are endangered due to years of targeted assimilation policies by the US government and neglect of Native American communities which continues today. On the other hand, there is also a concentration of Native American students here at Yale who come from schools that didn't offer foreign languages, largely due to those same policies and neglect on the part of the federal government. Some of these students come from a First-Generation Low-Income (FGLI) background due to detrimental policies on the part of the US government—Yale's refusal to offer them options to test out of part of their language requirement could harm their Yale education as a whole. Yale has a vested interest in showing support for these

students, especially given the targeted assimilation policies that have created these circumstances.

There are a plethora of Native American and indigenous languages. Some of them are written and offer textbooks, the most notable example of which is Lakǰóta. The Lakota Language Consortium (LLC), which is dedicated to the preservation of the language, is currently developing curriculum and offers [an online bookstore that sells materials like the “Lakota Grammar Handbook, 2nd Edition.”](#) The Lakota Summer Institute also offers an immersive summer language program, which is in its 11th year at Sitting Bull College. There are some languages that are not written and don't desire to be; however, certain languages like Lakǰóta, Cherokee, and Choctaw have begun to be written and offered at universities around the country, such as Stanford University, University of Oklahoma, University of North Dakota, and University of South Dakota.

**[More background can be found here in this article in The New Journal at Yale.](#)

Peer Institutions

Stanford

Formal Courses: Stanford currently offers formal courses for credit in Native American Languages. [As of the 2018-2019 school year, its course catalog](#) listed: First Year Cherokee, First Year Nahuatl, Second Year Nahuatl, Third Year Nahuatl, First Year Navajo, Second Year Navajo, First Year Quechua, First Year Lakota, and Second Year Lakota. Some courses used distance learning combined with periodic on-site instruction, while others had full-time Stanford professors teaching the course. All courses count towards Stanford's University Language Requirement, which is necessary for graduation. Offerings vary each year based on student requests and interest, per my calls with their faculty.

Placement Testing: For students that arrive at Stanford proficient in a Native American language, Stanford asks faculty who are teaching or have taught the language to conduct the placement test. If such a faculty member is not available (because Stanford does not offer that particular course), the university reaches out to a certified instructor off-campus to conduct the proficiency test.

Dartmouth

Formal Courses: Dartmouth does not offer formal language courses, but does allow students to major or minor in Native American Studies. [According to this year's course catalog, the Native American Studies Department offers 45+ Native American-specific courses](#), including “The Invasion of America: American Indian History Pre-Contact to 1800,” “Federal Indian Law,” and “Native American Literature.” Students at Dartmouth can take informal language classes (similar to the NACC's Native American Language Project at Yale) through Dartmouth's Native American Program (similar to the NACC). However, some of these can count toward Dartmouth's language requirement for graduation, per Sarah Palacios, Director of the Native American Program at Dartmouth. Unlike Yale, these informal language classes are funded by Dartmouth.

Dartmouth also allows students to study off-campus for credit. If:

- A Native American language is taught at a 4-year institution, students can do a transfer term and take courses there that will count toward their language requirement and general graduation credit when they return to Dartmouth.
- A Native American language is taught at a 2-year institution or a tribal college, students can do a transfer term that will count toward their language requirement. They will not be able to transfer any credits back to Dartmouth or count it towards general graduation credit.
- A Native American language is not formally taught, the student can take a leave term to return home and study with elders or others with language capacity. On their return, they can be tested for proficiency by Dartmouth's linguistics department and gain credit toward their language requirement.

Placement Testing: For languages without formal testing (which includes Native American languages), the Chair of Dartmouth's Linguistics Department, David A. Peterson, evaluates whether a student has completed the equivalent of a year's worth of foreign language study at Dartmouth. If so, he or she is granted an exception to the language requirement.

This test is based solely on oral proficiency but can also evaluate literacy. Because it is a linguistics test, the evaluator does not need to have prior knowledge of the language, just of linguistics. The test uses indications of relative fluency and recurrent patterns, asking students to perform standardized speaking tasks. One of them includes watching [this film designed by linguists to study various aspects of language](#) and having students describe what they saw in the film. According to Peterson, this test could be performed by anyone trained in linguistics.

Recommendations

- Yale should begin funding the NACC's Native American Language Project, at least until it reaches a long-term solution. This will ensure the opportunity for generations of graduating Yalies to prevent language endangerment and demonstrates an institutional commitment to the community involved.
- In the short-term, there are two possibilities for placement testing:
 - 1. Yale's Linguistics Department could adopt the linguistics testing method developed by Dartmouth's Linguistics Department to test Native American students for language proficiency (further details can be given on this and are not detailed in the report for concision). This could allow Native American students to fulfill part of their language requirement for graduation.
 - 2. Yale could contract certified instructors via the NACC to certify students' level of language proficiency in a given Native American language, similar to Stanford. They could also reach out to Stanford professors who teach formal Native American Language courses to evaluate students if applicable.

- In the long-term, there are a couple of possibilities for formal course offerings:
 - 1. Students continue to take classes informally through the NACC's Native American Language Project during their time at Yale. They are then evaluated formally at the end of each year (either through Dartmouth or Stanford's methods) and granted credit toward their language requirement.
 - 2. The NACC's Native American Language Project is built on and formalized based on [New England Commission of Higher Education \(NECHE\) accreditation standards](#).
 - 3. Yale can create their own set of Native American language courses based on Stanford's model. (This will take significantly more time than option #2, and prevents generations of students from being able to delay language endangerment.)
 - 4. Yale can allow students to do independent language study through Directed Independent Language Study (DILS) under the Center for Language Study (as it has done in the past for a variety of Native American languages) and grant them language credit. DILS typically does not offer language credit, but given the circumstances specific to Native American languages (endangered languages, targeted assimilation policies against Native American communities, emotional strain of studying colonizing languages, members of the FGLI community), the Dean's Office could consider making an exception for specific students.

Progress

- Met with Dean Fayard, Assistant Dean of Yale College and Director of the NACC
- Met with Ned Blackhawk, Professor of History and American Studies at Yale
- Called Bruce Duthu, Professor of Native American Studies at Dartmouth
- Called Sarah Palacios, Director of Native American Program at Dartmouth
- Corresponded with David A. Peterson, Chair of the Program in Linguistics at Dartmouth
- Called Eva Prionas, Coordinator of the Special Language Program at Stanford (which offers a variety of formally taught Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTC) for credit)
- Met with Yale's Less Commonly Taught Languages Committee (LCTLC) on December 3rd

Challenges

- Difficulty in securing meeting with the Director of the Center for Language Study, Nelleke Van Deusen-Scholl (Yale)
- LCTLC has potential to delay any sort of immediate action for Native American students and dilutes the importance of their particular language struggle

Next Steps

- Meet with Chair of Linguistics Department or Yale Linguistics Department to discuss Dartmouth's linguistics test and possibility of implementation
- Continue to attempt meeting with Nelleke Van Deusen-Scholl to discuss recommendations of this report and feasibility
- Meet with Dean Fayard continually over the next semester, inquire about LCTL progress
- Hold town hall with NACC to inform students of advocacy and distribute this information to further their advocacy

Conclusion

Yale has an obligation to support the Native American community by allowing them to test for placement or take formal classes in their Native languages. Given the endangerment of many of these languages and the targeted assimilation policies of the US government, Native American languages should not merely be categorized within the Less Commonly Taught Languages group. Permitting these students to place out of their requirement or take formal classes would also help them from a practical standpoint, taking away the emotional strain of studying colonizing languages like French or Spanish and offering support for those in the FGLI community who may have come from schools that did not offer language courses.

Infrastructure already exists at peer institutions like Stanford and Dartmouth for both placement and formal course offerings. Yale should implement short-term solutions as it seeks longer-term changes through the LCTL, if it chooses to continue grouping Native American languages under that committee.

By taking this project seriously, Yale could become a leading institution on this issue among its peers, practically help a group of students on campus, and play a role in preventing the endangerment of many Native American languages that have been targeted throughout history.