

# Curricular Models for University African Language Programs

DAVID DWYER, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

## Introduction

Many universities include study of a foreign language as one of their general education requirements for some or all of their students. Foreign language study provides students with exposure to another language and culture and helps them develop cultural awareness. While any language can fill this requirement, African languages offer students the unique opportunity to study a language and culture that are different from the Western tradition that is the normal cultural grounding of most U.S. students.

Some university programs require students to learn an African language as part of their degree or area of specialization. These degree requirements are aimed at students who plan to use the language as a professional tool for research, translation, teaching, or overseas service. Most such students are African studies majors.

Still other students study an African language in order to learn about the language and culture of their ancestors. Others may choose an African language in order to benefit from Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships available through a federally funded National Resource Center at their university.

This digest describes features of successful university African language programs, the students who enroll in these programs, and program models currently in place. It is hoped that this digest will be of use to university language educators interested in starting an African language program or in revising or assessing an existing program.

## Features of Successful Programs

**Mission Statement.** A successful African language program (ALP) needs a clearly stated rationale. Ideally, this rationale is presented in a mission statement that addresses program goals, students to be served by the program, and instructional models to be employed. The mission statement is needed to educate and win the support of those outside the department that houses the ALP because, like other less commonly taught languages, African languages require greater institutional support than more commonly taught languages. This is due to their lower and more variable enrollments, which result in a higher per-student instructional cost.

If an ALP is at a university that operates one of the National Resource Centers (NRC) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the ALP's relationship with the NRC should be made clear in the mission statement. Through the NRC, the ALP is able to offer Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships. A strong relationship with the NRC is also helpful to secure sources of outside funding. This is especially important considering that universities often underestimate the resources needed to maintain a successful ALP.

**Designated Language Coordinator.** The language coordinator position, common to all African National Resource Centers and many other institutions, is responsible for overseeing, publicizing, and coordinating the African language offerings at the institution as well as working nationally with other language coordinators and the African Language Teachers Association to coordinate and promote the teaching of African languages. The language coordinator also helps to design the ALP and ensures that the program functions according to the established rationale. In smaller programs, language coordinators may be the faculty member who teaches the language(s). In larger programs with multiple language offerings, the language coordinator may need to devote a significant portion of their time to language coordination activities. In all cases, it is important for the language coordinator to have a clearly articulated job description.

**Clearly Defined Purpose.** The primary purpose of most African language programs is to provide students with the language courses they need to fulfill their general education or degree requirements. The mission statement should address how the ALP can help students meet their language requirements. It is also important that the university

articulate the ways in which the ALP fits into its overall mission of teaching, research, and outreach.

## Students in African Language Programs

Most students who choose to study an African language can be classified as either heritage language learners or career learners.

**Heritage Language Learners.** Heritage language learners seek language study to learn more about the language and culture of their community, relatives, or ancestors. African heritage learners fall into two categories: those whose ancestors arrived in North America during the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and those whose families came to this country in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because the specific African origin and ancestral language of the former group is often unknown, almost any African language will meet the heritage function for these learners. Given the salience of Swahili as the African language in American popular culture, Swahili is often the language of choice for these heritage learners. This helps to explain why Swahili far outnumbers other African language offerings in the United States.

African-heritage students whose families came to the United States more recently are likely to know the African language of their parents or grandparents. Furthermore, because newer African Americans tend to settle with co-ethnics, individual communities often have specific African language needs. Many ALPs have responded to heritage language students by providing courses at the university and in the broader community as part of their outreach and service mission.

Heritage language learners' interest in developing a better understanding of the culture of their parents is often greater than their interest in learning the language. Consequently, language courses for these students should emphasize cultural content.

**Career Students.** Career students, who often seem to be the most motivated African language learners, seek to develop communicative proficiency in an African language to further their career goals. This group includes graduate students who need fluency in a particular language to accomplish fieldwork in Africa and undergraduate students who plan to use an African language in their professional careers. Career students need a minimum of 3 years of effective study to achieve communicative proficiency. These students need a higher level of commitment to African language study than students who are merely trying to fulfill a general education requirement or learn about the language and culture of their ancestors. They also require a greater commitment of resources from the ALP.

## Program Models

Several program models are currently in use in ALPs. Each model requires a different level of material support and commitment from the university. Needless to say, sound pedagogical training of the personnel involved will enhance any program, regardless of the model used. Several instructional models are described below.

**Faculty + TA.** A tenure-stream faculty member teaches 2 years of a language (often beginning and advanced), and a graduate student teaching assistant (TA) teaches a 3<sup>rd</sup> year. A variant of this approach involves alternating offerings, with the 1<sup>st</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-year courses given during one academic year and the 2<sup>nd</sup>-year course given during the next. This allows 3 years of study, although the student may have to wait a year to get started.

### Advantages

- Provides the 3 years of instruction needed by career language students
- Provides support for a graduate student TA

### Disadvantages

- Requires the long-term commitment of a tenure-stream faculty position for the teaching of a specific language, making it difficult to respond to changes in learner demand
- Requires the periodic replacement and training of a TA

**Language Coordinator + TA.** A TA teaches 2 years of the language under the supervision of a tenure-stream faculty member (known as a language coordinator) who is familiar with the language. The percentage of the language coordinator position varies with the number of languages supervised but begins at around 20% to 25% for one language. This model has greater flexibility than the faculty + TA model because when enrollments are too small for a given language, a different language can be taught by a different TA. With the faculty + TA model, it is far more difficult to train the faculty member to teach a different language.

#### Advantages

- Provides 2 years of language study with only modest faculty commitment

#### Disadvantages

- Requires periodic replacement and training of TAs
- Does not provide 3<sup>rd</sup> year needed by career students

**Supervised Tutorial.** A faculty supervisor who has a structural knowledge of the target language and training in second language acquisition guides instruction by a native speaker. The native speaker works with a single learner who shares responsibility for developing a successful learning environment. A half-time supervisor can oversee about six separate tutorial classes.

#### Advantages

- Works well with career students, who tend to be highly motivated
- Can accommodate the specific needs of the learner
- Can provide instruction through the advanced level
- Engages both the tutor and the learner in the learning process

#### Disadvantages

- Cost of instruction is high (half-time faculty supervisor plus approximately \$2,100 per tutor)
- Because of its learner-centered emphasis, does not work as well with immature and unmotivated learners
- Works better for developing oral proficiency than for providing cultural content and thus does not as easily meet the needs of the general education or heritage learner

**Instructor.** The department hires a trained language instructor on an annual basis as a non-tenure-stream faculty member to teach 2 or 3 years of the language.

#### Advantages

- Allows for a professionally trained language teacher, though not tenure stream
- Program can be abandoned when resources are scarce or enrollments low
- Provides flexibility for the university

#### Disadvantages

- Does not provide job security for the instructor

**Self-Instruction.** The self-instructional model, developed by the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs, allows career students to study a language on their own, with minimum supervision and some exposure to a native speaker. An external evaluator, fluent in the language and trained in learner evaluation (e.g., in the use of the ACTFL oral proficiency interview) determines learner progress.

#### Advantages

- Can be offered when the university has no other resources for teaching the language

#### Disadvantages

- Lack of formal structure and supervision produce variable results

**Summer Institutes.** All of the African NRCs are committed to offering courses through the Summer Intensive African Language Institute. Most programs do so collectively in the Summer Cooperative African Language Institute (SCALI). These courses are staffed by the best teachers of African languages in the country.

#### Advantages

- Provides languages not available at many campuses
- Provides more advanced levels of language study than are available at many campuses

#### Disadvantages

- Priority for admission to the program and for scholarships given to graduate students who have already had 2 years of study in the language

**Group Projects Abroad.** With support from the U.S. Department of Education, the Association of African Studies Programs operates from two to three language programs in Africa for advanced learning with scholarship support. This involves an East African language (often Swahili), a West African language, and a South African language.

#### Advantages

- Enables students to learn an African language in its cultural setting
- Can augment the offerings of 1- and 2-year programs
- Allows students to continue their use of the language outside the classroom

#### Disadvantages

- Gives priority for admission and scholarships to graduate students who have already had 2 years of study in the language

All of the models described here represent ideals that occasionally fall short of the mark in practice. For example, personnel may not receive adequate professional training; it is far too common for a native speaker with no pedagogical training to be hired and given no supervision. Defective implementation of the models leads to less successful language programs in terms of both student achievement and enrollment.

#### Enrollment

Strong and consistent enrollments depend on the existence of a language requirement, program requirements, publicity, and high-quality teaching. Furthermore, maintaining strong institutional support depends on maintaining adequate student enrollments. When enrollments approach program capacity, operating costs are at their lowest.

Attrition of students is common to all language programs but is particularly common to those without a clearly defined rationale or a designated language coordinator. Generally, one finds a sizable drop in enrollment between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of study and a similar slippage between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years. Many dropouts are heritage language learners and students studying the language to meet a general education requirement. Because local conditions vary, students in ALPs should be polled on a regular basis, ideally as they enter the program and at the end of each year of study, to determine their reasons for learning the specific language and their expectations about what they will gain from language study.

#### Conclusion

A successful college African language program depends upon the development of a realistic program whose mission matches the institution's resources with its constituents. A language coordinator is the vital link to ensure the success of this relationship. As the United States becomes increasingly aware of the diplomatic and economic importance of understanding the languages and cultures of all the world's citizens, we hope to see an increasing number of African language programs established at universities across the nation.

#### Resources

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