A Conceptual Proposal

Beyond Title VI: A Thriving Framework for African Language Programs in U.S. Higher Education

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Introduction

One of the most recent setbacks to foreign language instruction in the United States is the recent cut to Title VI funding. For decades, Title VI and Fulbright-Hays programs supported language teaching, research, and professional development. This support was central to building national capacity in less commonly taught languages, including African languages. Its loss now, building on existing challenges, poses a direct threat to the stability of many African language programs. Institutions depending on this funding are scaling back. What is at risk is not only funding, but a system that is designed to link language study to national educational priorities (Brecht & Rivers, 2000).

The consequences for African languages are especially acute. Many programs rely on external grants rather than permanent institutional structures. They are often staffed by temporary graduate assistants or lecturers. Cuts in funding expose this underlying instability.

Beyond Title VI, the condition of these programs reflects a long-standing contradiction. African language instruction has moved from a loose organization to a field with a superstructure (Moshi, 2011). Yet, this growth has not produced fully embedded programs. Classes are offered without secure curricular placement or long-term certainty. This raises a central question: why do African language programs remain structurally fragile despite their recognized intellectual, cultural, and strategic value?

We argue in this piece that the issue is structural alignment. African language programs have developed within frameworks that support their presence but do not consistently integrate them into core institutional structures. To address this problem, we propose the concept of thriving. Thriving refers to a condition in which programs are institutionally grounded, pedagogically coherent, and connected to broader linguistic and social environments. It provides a way to move beyond endurance toward stability and growth.

Theoretical Foundations: The Gap Between Pedagogy and Structure

African language instruction in the United States has developed across three main areas: pedagogy,

institutional context, and language ecology. Each contributes to our language programs' vitality, but they are rarely examined together. The split leaves unanswered why programs persist without achieving stability. To understand this, we must examine the gap between our pedagogical ideals and our institutional realities.

Early research on African language pedagogical have emphasized the integration of language and culture. Schleicher (1997, 1999) and Moshi (2006) show that African language learning depends on communicative use grounded in social and cultural contexts. This work has shaped instructional practice and established that language cannot be taught in isolation from cultural meaning. However, strong pedagogy does not inherently ensure institutional stability. Institutional research points to persistent structural limits. Walt Wolfram (2023) shows that language-related concerns are often excluded from broader institutional priorities, and this in turn reinforces their marginal status. This pattern reinforces earlier findings by Bokamba (2002, 2009), who claimed that African languages have long been marginal within U.S. higher education with uneven visibility and support.

Federal programs such as Title VI have helped sustain foreign language offerings through area studies centers (Brecht & Rivers, 2000). However, this support usually comes from outside core academic structures. It allows programs to operate but does not ensure long-term stability or full integration into university systems. The third area, which is language ecology, offers a broader lens on the value of African languages. In line with Haugen (1972) and Mühlhäusler (1996), this strand situates language within social and institutional networks. It emphasizes that vitality depends on use, transmission, and meaning. African languages must be understood not only in classrooms but also in their values within the wider social, cultural, and historical contexts where they function.

These three strands highlight key dimensions of language instruction, which together must be used to make a solid case for the field. External funding alone does not guarantee curricular integration, and the value of a language to its community does not secure academic support. This creates a recurring pattern of endurance without stability. Even within universities that regularly offer multiple languages, recent shifts reveal structural limits. One shift, for example, is where institutions are pivoting from graduate student instructors in favor of visiting or adjunct lecturers, and consequently, closing the pipeline for graduate training in both disciplinary knowledge and language teaching. This shift toward short-term appointments may currently sustain course offerings, but over time, this trajectory will weaken the field, resulting in fewer trained instructors and reduced continuity.

Enrollment patterns are another constraint within institutions. Overall enrollments in languages other than English have declined, though unevenly across contexts (Looney & Lusin, 2019). African languages often maintain small but steady enrollments. While sufficient to sustain offerings, these numbers rarely secure central placement within departments. In response, programs have pursued pedagogical innovation, course sharing, and digital instruction (Sanuth, 2023). These strategies improve the offering to scanty students on campus but do not resolve the underlying structural problem.

African language programs are designed around goals that emphasize cultural depth and communicative competence (Moshi, 2006). Institutional structures, however, often prioritize scale. This misalignment is the central problem. It means programs may be supported without being secured. We approach this problem through the concept of alignment. Institutional theory suggests that programs stabilize when they correspond with dominant norms and structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). To thrive, African language programs must align

institutional expectations, pedagogical aims, and broader linguistic environments.

The Thriving Framework

We showed in the preceding analysis that African language programs endure across institutions but remain structurally fragile. This condition reflects a lack of alignment across pedagogy, institutional structures, and broader linguistic environments. Addressing this problem requires a framework that intentionally brings these domains together. We propose the Thriving Framework as a model for such alignment. Thriving refers to a condition in which programs are institutionally grounded, pedagogically coherent, and connected to the social and transnational contexts in which African languages have meaning. It shifts attention from maintaining programs under constraint toward organizing the conditions under which they stabilize and grow.

Some of these ideas are not entirely new in the corridors of language pedagogy and African Studies. Various suggestions have long percolated through meetings and academic sessions. However, these insights have rarely been systematically connected, unified, or codified into a coherent framework. Our goal is to bring these different threads into a singular, rigorous model. The framework is structured around four interdependent dimensions.

Cultural and Epistemic Integration: African language pedagogy has long emphasized the integration of language and culture (Moshi, 2006; Schleicher, 1997). This aligns with sociocultural approaches where meaning develops through use and context. African languages carry systems of knowledge embedded in cultural practices. For example, work on Yoruba language pedagogy shows how proverbs function as both linguistic and epistemic resources in language learning (Adegbite, 2025). Instruction must therefore move beyond structural competence toward meaningful engagement.

This requires a shift in course design. Language instruction may be organized around cultural and social content rather than grammatical sequence alone. For example, courses can center on themes such as migration, music, or everyday interaction, with language forms introduced through these domains. Evidence from other contexts suggests that student interest often follows cultural engagement. The growth of Korean language enrollments has been linked to the global circulation of cultural media (Jin, 2016). While African languages operate within different global conditions, the principle of cultural relevance remains critical.

A second intervention concerns the relationship between language and African Studies. Language instruction could now be integrated into area studies rather than remaining parallel to them. Introductory African Studies courses can include structured language modules that introduce basic communicative forms and key cultural concepts. This creates early exposure and situates language within broader intellectual engagement. Arts-based pedagogy provides a third pathway. Structured use of music, performance, storytelling, and material culture allows language to be learned through embodied practice. In this dimension, language is an integral component of subject matter and cultural studies.

Institutional Embedding and Visibility: Institutional stability depends on how programs are positioned within the university hierarchy. This dynamic is clearly visible in contemporary strategic plans. For example, Indiana University's 2030 strategic vision outlines priorities centering on student success, research excellence, and public engagement at local, national, and global levels (Indiana University, 2023). Within these frameworks, programs are more likely to receive sustained support when they demonstrate interdisciplinary relevance and clear student outcomes. African

language programs, therefore, cannot rely solely on their cultural or intellectual value; they must be positioned in ways that align with institutional definitions of relevance. Most importantly, the responsibility for this alignment lies with program leadership, who must recognize the urgency of dynamism to ensure their programs are seen as indispensable to the university's mission.

A second challenge to institutional visibility is that most efforts towards promoting African language instruction have largely remained within the university system. Existing infrastructures, including those supported by the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC), are primarily designed to fit students who are in the conventional academic tracks. There is limited attention to non-traditional learners, such as lifelong learners, K-12 students, and professionals. While universities have established mechanisms like University Extension and non-degree certificate programs to address these categories in other disciplines, these pathways are rarely leveraged by language programs. Integrating African languages into these frameworks will present a significant value to the university. When programs launch initiatives that reach beyond the traditional classroom, they expand the institution's footprint and fulfill its commitment to public engagement.

Finally, the field must seek to be part of the solution to institutional challenges in the areas of innovations that enable scalable growth. We must coordinate with universities to create the structural flexibility required to respond to shifting global and learner demands. Pedagogically, this involves developing adaptive systems that can sustain a wider variety of African and other foreign languages. Innovative formats such as *multilanguage self-instruction seminars* by Agoke & Thompson (2023) demonstrate how programs can expand access even in resource-constrained settings. Additionally, program clustering allows institutions to collaborate to share instruction and pool enrollments. The Shared Course Initiative between Columbia, Cornell, and Yale provides a robust framework for such collaboration (Kaiser, 2023; Heidrich Uebel et al., 2023). While these approaches are gaining popularity in the field, they require careful coordination and caution in their implementation, particularly regarding the specific pedagogical needs of African languages (Sanuth, 2023). Ultimately, these interventions shift the focus toward building durable, shared structures that can support the long-term vitality of the field.

Community and Diasporic Co-Production: African language programming in many institutions has the advantage of leveraging a vibrant ecosystem of heritage speakers, cultural practitioners, and the African American population. For many people of African descent, the study of these languages is a significant act of identity recovery and ancestral connection. Programs must find intentional ways to address the specific motivations of these groups, moving beyond a model of passive outreach toward one of active partnership. To truly serve these populations, institutions should consider creating African language courses tailored specifically to the unique needs of each group, with content varied to reflect their distinct historical, cultural, and professional aspirations.

This does not imply the endless creation of new courses, which would be unsustainable in most institutional contexts. Instead, it represents a strategic reorientation of existing curricula. This shift moves the primary goal of the language course away from a purely abstract focus on grammatical competence toward a more purposeful, functional application of the language. In this model, grammar is not the end goal but the tool that enables learners to engage in meaningful cultural reclamation or professional exchange.

To achieve this, programs must leverage the opportunities found in community life and extend them into structured program components. While occasional events like story nights and

culture showcases are valuable for visibility, they are insufficient for long-term stability. An option for the African language programs can be to increase participation in initiatives, such as Service Learning. This provides a more durable model for integration by allowing students to earn academic credit while contributing to community life (Maganda, 2018). By formally partnering with local organizations, media platforms, or heritage networks for internships and projects, programs can move the community from the periphery to the center of the instructional system.

Finally, a thriving framework requires a refined pedagogical approach that recognizes the diverse learner profiles within the classroom, including foreign language learners, heritage learners, and African American students. Because these groups have distinct instructional needs, a one-size-fits-all curriculum is insufficient (Valdés, 2001; Maganda, 2016). Recent research underscores this necessity: Adegbite (2025) notes that learning is deeply shaped by community and family practices outside the classroom, while Ajibade (2025) highlights the specific linguistic strengths and gaps unique to heritage learners. By developing flexible, targeted instructional pathways, programs can honor the unique linguistic journeys of all students. This ensures that the diasporic community remains a vital, integrated part of the educational mission rather than a secondary consideration.

Transnational and Infrastructural Connectivity: African language programs can be shaped by transnational relationships, including partnerships with African universities and global networks. Currently, most programs rely on one-sided, federally supported exchange models.

While these initiatives provide essential funding, they are often designed to demand very little from African-based institutions. This hesitation to deeply engage our partners on the continent creates a significant loss.

This one-sidedness is often rooted in a shared economic assumption. U.S. institutions frequently assume that African universities are unable to match funding due to the economic realities on the continent, a point we certainly agree with. However, the African institutions and African nations seem to have also bought into this assumption, accepting a role as passive recipients. While these economic constraints are very real, this mutual resignation prevents the exploration of creative, shared resource models.

Furthermore, current federally supported models, such as the Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad, often reinforce a transactional relationship. African-based institutions provide logistical interaction and local support in exchange for U.S. funding. This reduces our partners to service providers rather than intellectual collaborators. By treating African sites as mere destinations or facilitators, U.S. programs miss the opportunity to build truly reciprocal infrastructures.

A thriving model requires moving toward more balanced and integrated collaboration. Universities should move beyond treating African institutions and nations as passive partners or service providers. Instead, we can establish direct partnerships for language programming where all are engaged as equal partners. In doing so, these institutions and nations may feel a greater sense of responsibility for language programming, promotion, and instruction in the diaspora. This shift ensures that program development is a mutual investment where both sides contribute intellectual and structural value.

Funding and Structural Alignment

The question of funding is inseparable from the structural conditions of the field. The decline of traditional sources serves as an exposure of structural dependency rather than a mere loss of resources. This dependency becomes visible when programs rely on external grants rather than internal institutional commitment, leaving them vulnerable to shifting policy cycles. The

Thriving Framework addresses this fragility by positing that funding should be viewed as a structural outcome of deep institutional embedding and community co-production rather than an external limitation. Consequently, the goal is to shift from reactive fundraising toward a proactive reorganization of programs.

The central challenge the US institution is positioning. Programs remain vulnerable when they depend primarily on external funding or temporary staffing. While Title VI has been critical to sustaining instruction (Brecht & Rivers, 2000), recent funding cuts expose the limits of this structural dependency. External grants can support growth, but they cannot secure permanence. Therefore, a thriving model requires universities to determine if African languages are integral to their academic mission. This decision will ultimately dictate hiring, curricular placement, and long-term planning. Achieving stability requires a shift from dependency to diversification, where programs draw on institutional resources, community partnerships, and transnational collaboration to ensure their enduring vitality.

Implementing the Framework: Mapping the Field

This Thriving Framework is a proposal for systemic change that requires a coordinated effort to move from theory to action. To support this transition, we propose research to map the national landscape of African language instruction, identify the structural conditions for development, and assess the framework's implementation across diverse institutional contexts. By utilizing national surveys of enrollments, qualitative studies of community practices, and analyses of institutional positioning, we can establish the empirical basis needed to refine the framework and guide strategic development. Ultimately, this proposal demands greater collaboration, clearer visibility, and more systematic approaches to ensure the field's long-term stability and growth. By moving beyond isolated advocacy toward this shared strategy, we can ensure that African language programs are not merely surviving under constraint but are positioned to stabilize and grow.

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