

Statement on Native American Languages in the College and University Curriculum

MLA COMMITTEE ON THE LITERATURES OF PEOPLE
OF COLOR IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

The Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada (CLPCUSC) urges colleges and universities to support and implement the policies that are advocated in the Native American Languages Act (Public Law 101-477, Title I), dated 30 October 1990.

In section 102 of this act, Congress found that “the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages.” It also found that the “traditional languages of Native Americans are an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values.” Congress further concluded that “there is a lack of clear, comprehensive, and consistent Federal policy on treatment of Native American languages[,] which has often resulted in acts of suppression and extermination of Native American languages and cultures.”

The survival of Native American languages is at a crucial stage. Ives Goddard, the linguistic editor of the Smithsonian Institution’s *Handbook of the North American Indian*, estimates that in 1995 approximately 209 native North American languages were still spoken, “perhaps roughly half the number that existed five hundred years earlier.” Goddard stresses that “nearly 80 percent of the extant native languages of North America were

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no longer spoken by children and were facing effective extinction within a single lifetime, or, in most cases, much sooner" (3).

Therefore, the CLPCUSC urges colleges and universities to support and implement the recommendations below. Whenever possible, institutions of higher education should work with Native American language communities and with Native American educational and governing bodies to implement these recommendations.

1. To grant credit for the study of Native American languages when undertaken to fulfill undergraduate and graduate requirements in foreign languages.
2. To include, where appropriate, Native American languages in the curriculum in the same manner as foreign languages and to grant proficiency in Native American languages the same full academic credit as proficiency in foreign languages. Institutions of higher education are particularly encouraged to teach the languages of Native American nations in their regions, whenever possible.
3. To encourage research to create and update dictionaries, grammars, orthographies, curricula, and other materials to support the teaching of Native American languages. The preparation of these materials is especially important for languages for which they have never been developed.

The first two recommendations are based on policies contained in section 104 of the Native American Languages Act. For purposes of this statement, the CLPCUSC uses the following definitions, given in section 103 of the act: *Native American* means "an Indian, Native Hawaiian, or Native American Pacific Islander"; *Native American language* means "the historical, traditional languages spoken by Native Americans."

Elaine K. Chang, University of Guelph (Coch.)
Susana Chávez-Silverman, Pomona College
Roberta Hill, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Lawrence Jackson, Emory University
Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, University of Chicago (Coch.)
Elizabeth McHenry, New York University
Malea Powell, Michigan State University
Juana María Rodríguez, University of California, Davis
Shu-mei Shib, University of California, Los Angeles
Silvio A. Torres-Saillant, Syracuse University

WORK CITED

Goddard, Ives. Introduction. *Languages*. Ed. Goddard. Washington: Smithsonian Inst., 1996. Vol. 17 of *Handbook of the North American Indian*.