

Alaska Native Language Center exists in name only as languages face extinction

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By **Amber McCain**

After more than 50 years of preserving Alaska Native languages, the Alaska Native Language Center now faces budget cuts, staffing shortages, and a gap in leadership. These challenges threaten decades of progress in the efforts to preserve languages on the brink of extinction.

Professor Anna Berge, the center's only remaining full-time faculty member, described the strain of trying to keep the center running. "ANLC is an empty shell. It exists in name," she said. "We have done an amazing job of upholding the mission that the legislature put forward, but we can't do it without being valued and supported."

Established in 1972 by the state of Alaska, the ANLC's mission is to study, preserve, and revitalize Alaska Native languages. It is legislatively mandated to document languages, develop literacy materials, assist in translations, promote Alaska Native literature, and train speakers to work as bilingual teachers.

The center operates within the University of Alaska Fairbanks system and is administratively housed under the College of Indigenous Studies, or CIS, which oversees Indigenous and rural academic programs and student services such as Rural Student Services. Because ANLC is part of CIS's structure, decisions about staffing, funding, and administration directly affect its ability to carry out its mission.



Photo by Fin McCain

The Alaska Native Language Center offices are located on the first floor of the Brooks Building, March 19, 2026.



Photo by Jonathan Wasilewski

The Brooks building houses the College of Indigenous Studies, on February 17, 2026.

Sam Alexander, assistant professor and department chair of the ANLC, said that recent cuts threaten the center's ability to achieve its goals. "If ANLC publications goes away, then our ability to develop literacy materials and provide for the development and dissemination of Alaska Native literature is gone. We just can't do that," he said.

The center has no researchers heading into the fall semester, and few qualified candidates exist to fill the roles, Alexander added. "For Dene languages, there's probably 10 specialists in the world, and of those, maybe three are under 50."

This shortage has made it difficult for faculty to offer language instruction. "When I teach, I develop all my own materials, and I also have to figure out the grammar myself, with the support of our in-house linguists," Alexander said. Without trained research staff, developing comprehensive teaching materials, especially for complex languages like Dinjii Zhuh K'yaa (Gwich'in), becomes a huge challenge.

Short-term relief has come in the form of temporary extensions for two staff positions. After an [op-ed on Anchorage Daily News](#), the publisher position was extended through December, and the one remaining research staff member received an extension as well. After that, the research staff member will need to secure grant funding to continue. Meanwhile, CIS is currently advertising a new paid administrative position.

Alexander also raised concerns about the ANLC website, which the center does not control. It inaccurately lists languages that haven't been offered in years. "It says we teach Unangam Tunuu. That's completely incorrect. We haven't taught it in at least a decade," he said. "The person on staff who does know Unangam Tunuu has never taught it, and she's been here for 26 years."

He also expressed frustration over adjunct faculty, particularly those teaching Yupik. "We have some adjuncts teaching Yupik, and CIS will not offer them full-time faculty roles, even though that's our largest language in terms of number of students," Alexander said.

The ANLC has been without a director since 2022, leaving the center without a strong advocate for its needs. "If we had a director, they could fight for us. But I'm a department chair, and raising money isn't part of my job. The director is external-facing; they're the ones who can search out funding and build partnerships," Alexander said.

Berge explained that teaching Alaska Native languages without sufficient research support is daunting. "If you're not a native speaker and you're trying to teach the language, you have no existing knowledge of how the language works, and you are going to need learning materials. It took me 16 years of documenting Unangam Tunuu to create learning materials from scratch, and five years working on existing learning materials of Alutiiq to create a resource grammar. This is the level of work that teachers need for endangered languages." She added that the center has been "functionally closed," talking about how staffing cuts and administrative changes have eroded ANLC's ability to fulfill its mission.

Teisha Simmons, dean of CIS, pushed back against rumors about the ANLC's future. "I just want to be really clear that we are not making any plans for significant reductions in positions or offerings at the Center for Alaska Native Languages," she said. Despite public speculation, Simmons said, the center is committed to expanding offerings, including meeting the needs of local communities and stakeholders.

"We're still making plans for the 2026–2027 academic year," Simmons explained. "I can assure you that we are not reducing staff or cutting programs. We're actually looking to expand."

Simmons said the center is modernizing its materials distribution by partnering with the University of Press Colorado, making books, maps, and other resources easier to access. ANLC continues documenting elder speakers, developing literacy materials, and supporting translation efforts, keeping these efforts aligned with its mission.

Former UAF faculty member Gary Holton, author of the [opinion piece](#), now at the University of Hawaii, expressed concerns about the long-term effects of cuts. "The foundation that ANLC provides is essential to the ongoing efforts to revitalize and preserve Alaska Native languages," he said. "We have seen significant progress across the state, but that progress is only possible because of the resources ANLC has provided."

Holton warned that without a strong ANLC, years of progress could unravel. "If we lose that support, we may not see the immediate effects, but eventually things will fall apart. It's akin to cutting funding for the National Science Foundation; over time, you lose the ability to innovate and support critical work."

Alexander is calling on students to take action. "If we want to show that we truly value our Alaska Native languages, then the university needs to put its money where its mouth is. Students should demand that the state put this into law. The state created the ANLC because the people of Alaska demanded that there be an Alaska Native Language Center," he said.

He stressed that students influence the center's future. "Students have power. If they want these languages to survive, they need to demand the support we're not getting. It's not enough for the university to say the center is still open, we need action."

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