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Cuts threaten African Studies program



Photo by Jacqueline Sahlberg.

BY JACQUELINE SAHLBERG
 CONTRIBUTING REPORTER
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After losing nearly half its federal funding for the current academic year, the Program of African Studies is fighting to gain additional financial support from the University.

The Council on African Studies held a town hall meeting Wednesday to discuss critical issues facing the program in the wake of reductions to the program’s University funding and to federal Title VI support for foreign language education. Though the council has worked to expand the African Studies Program to meet growing student demand since 2008, diminishing resources have forced the program to decrease its class offerings and caused the council to question Yale’s commitment to African studies.

“Over the past 25 years, the African Studies [Program] has brought in a lot of money through Title VI grants,” said Bob Harms, a professor of history and African studies who spoke to the meeting’s roughly 50 attendees. “But with the federal government in a budget crisis, the Title VI grants are on the go.”

The federal government slashed funding for Title VI and Fulbright-Hays programs — which support foreign language education — by nearly \$50 million for the 2011 fiscal year in May. Yale also announced in January that it would trim funding University-wide for the 2011-’12 academic year. In an email to Yale faculty and staff, University President Richard Levin and Provost Peter Salovey asked both nonacademic and academic units to limit their use of general appropriations in the coming year in an effort to close the University’s \$68 million budget gap — a remnant of the budget woes that hit Yale with the 2008 recession.

Salovey said in a Wednesday email that he believes the African Studies Program receives its funding from the

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MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, which is funded in part through general appropriations. The Council on African Studies was established in 1985 under the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies to oversee African studies programming.

In an interview with the News before the town hall meeting, Director of Undergraduate Studies Ann Biersteker said she is uncertain when the program will learn precisely how much federal funding African studies will receive for the 2012-'13 academic year, and explained that reductions to funding have forced the council to decrease African language offerings.

The African Studies Program currently offers four African languages, but had planned to expand those courses by alternating between having two years of Igbo and two years of Amharic. While the program began offering Igbo in the last academic year, the council was forced to eliminate the language this fall and has no plans to teach Amharic next year.

With cuts directly impacting the scope and quality of African studies, Council members and professors in the program said they are skeptical of Yale's commitment to supporting the program. President of the Yale African Students Organization and panelist Dezzy Ogakwu '12 said that the University's lack of support for African studies denies opportunities to students like herself who are passionate about the subject.

"We want to ensure that African studies is a central part of Yale's global agenda," said Kamari Clarke, the council's chair.

Harms said the University has historically been "incentivized" to support African studies in hopes that a stronger program would be more likely to be awarded federal grants. The University's diminished financial support for the program has exacerbated the effects of cuts to federal funding, he added.

In an open letter written by members of the council and distributed to those who attended the meeting, the council said the recent funding cuts have caused concerns about the University's investment in African studies. "We are dismayed that the University has been slow to play its part in restoring these resources," the letter stated. "This reluctance, when juxtaposed with the University's tremendous attention to East and South Asian priorities, has left questions about the place of Africa on not only the Yale agenda but also that of the nation."

The role of African studies in the 21st century was discussed at the meeting alongside conversations about the program's budget. Panelists questioned where African studies should fit in with the University's other global initiatives, how to create connections between African studies and other departments, and which of the more than 2,000 African languages Yale should offer.

The Council will continue its discussions at a faculty committee meeting on Dec. 1.

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