

Challenges and successes in collaborative language revival

A case study of the Tunica Language Working Group

Outline

Setting the (big) stage

- The Tunica people
- The Tunica language
- Tunica revitalization & the Tunica Language Working Group
 - Framework and structure
 - Challenges
 - Ensuring language ideologies are clear and language goals are shared
 - Ensuring priorities and objectives are set by the community
 - Ensuring that language decisions are linguistically grounded and community-determined
 - Successes
- Conclusion

The Tunica People

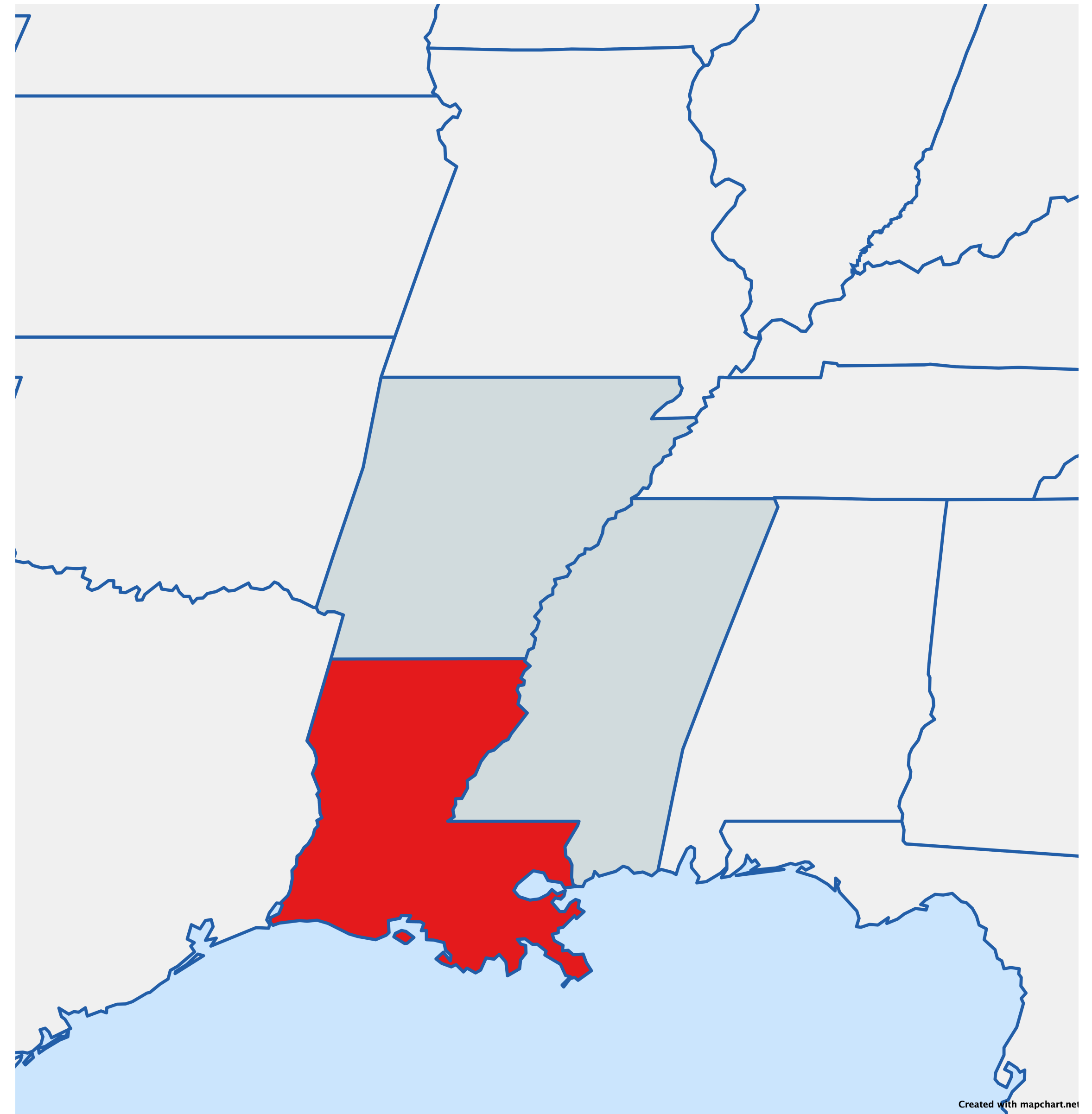
- A Native American tribe in the Lower Mississippi Valley
- Southward migration in stages along the Mississippi River
- Close allies of the French
- Currently located in Central Louisiana
- Land grant from the Spanish



Louisiana within the United States

The Tunica People

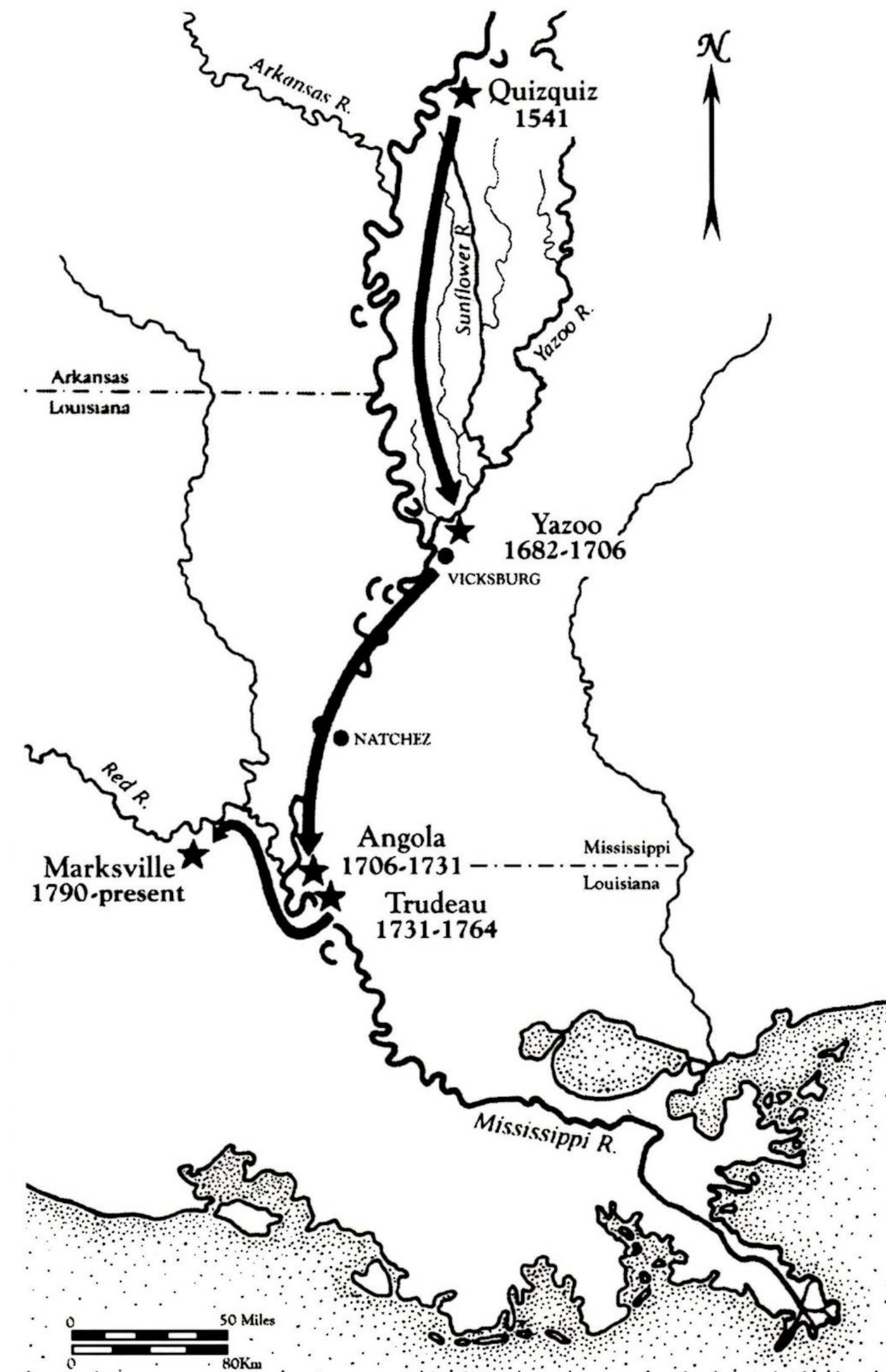
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The Lower Mississippi Valley

The Tunica People

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Tunica migrations (Brain 1977)

The Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana

- Amalgamated tribe of Tunica, Biloxi, Ofo, and Avoyel people
 - Five heritage languages (Tunica, Biloxi, Ofo, Avoyel, and Choctaw)
- ~1600 enrolled members

The Tunica Language

- Language isolate
- Subject to linguistic pressures
 - Mobilian Trade Language (MTL), French, Spanish, English
- Language shift to French, then to English
- Last known native speaker died in 1948
- Before Tunica ceased to be spoken, it was documented by three linguists working with three consultants

Tunica language revitalization efforts

- 1948: Last known native speaker dies
- 1964: Chief Joe Pierite writes to Haas to request copies of her work with Tunica
- 1970s: Donna Pierite begins to work with Mary Haas's language materials
- 1990s: Donna Pierite hosts Tunica language summer camps at her home
- 2010: Tunica-Biloxi/Tulane University language revitalization collaboration begins
- 2014: Tunica-Biloxi Language & Culture Revitalization Program (LCRP) created

The Tunica Language Working Group

Community-engaged scholarship

- Operates in a framework of **community-engaged scholarship**
 - “must have an intentional *public purpose* and direct or indirect benefit to a community” (emphasis in original) (Stanton 2008: 24)
 - “promotes trust and shared power and decision-making between researchers and community representatives, 2-way capacity building, and mutually beneficial co-creation and dissemination of study findings” (Mikesell, Bromley, and Khodyakov 2013: e7)

“Community engagement research is a framework that seeks and nurtures community involvement, leverages community knowledge, and is led by community need.”

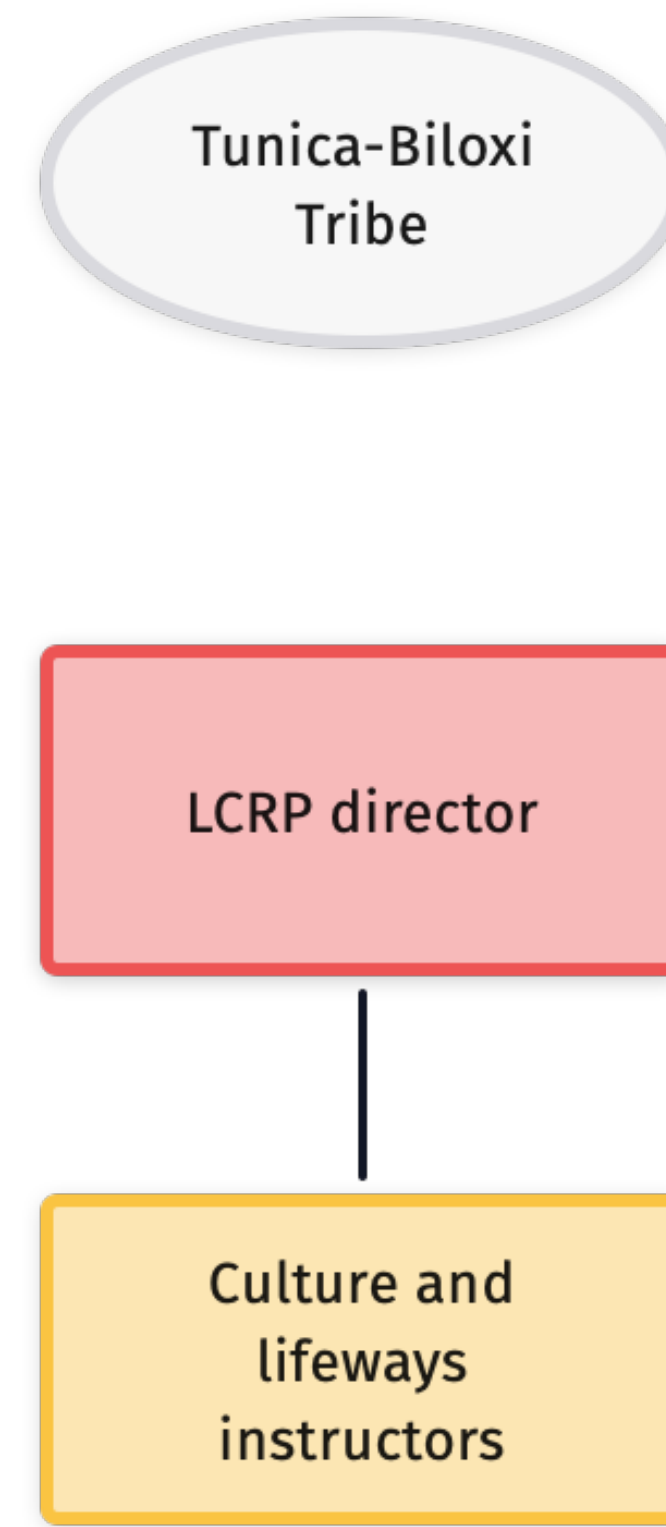
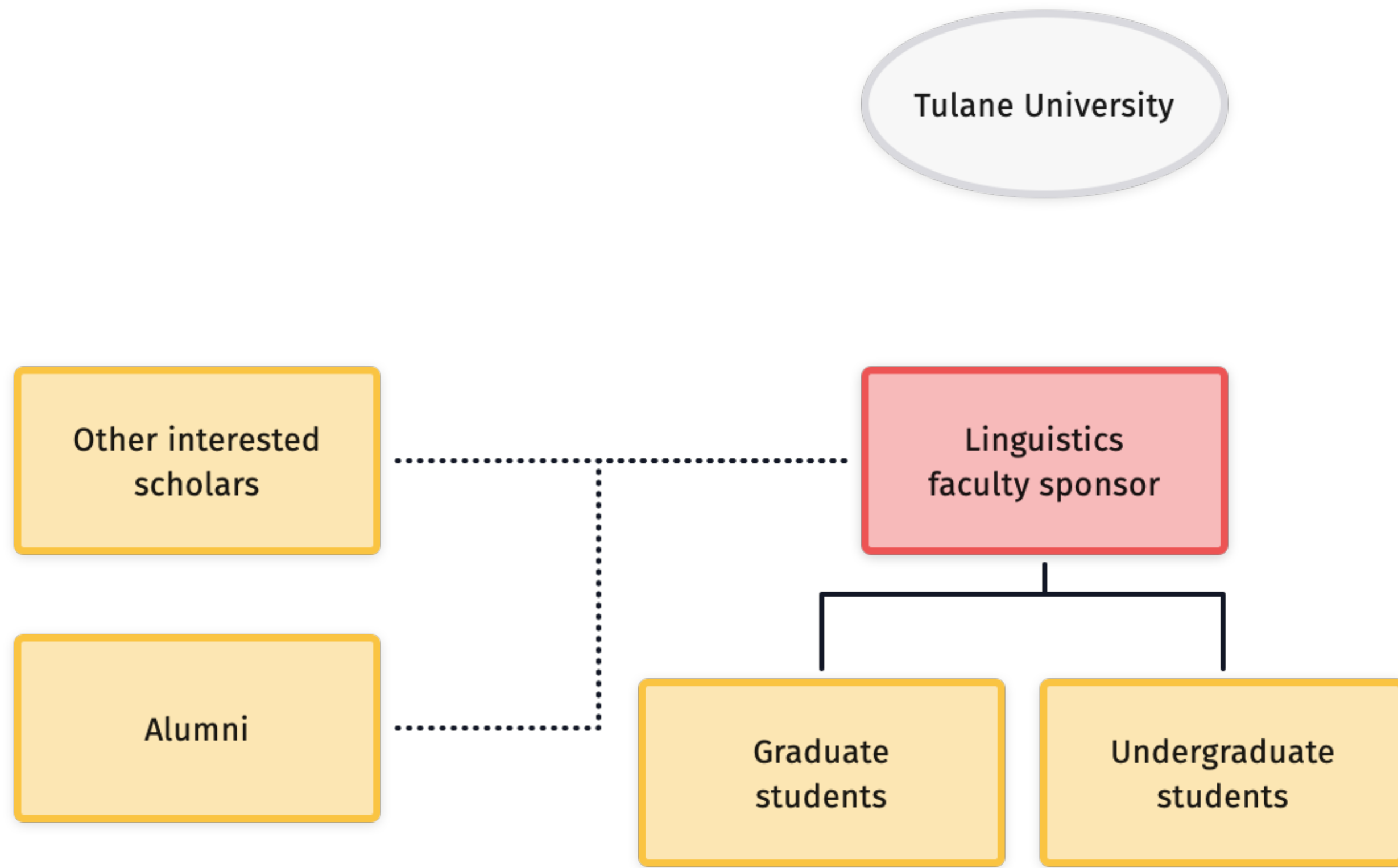
Baldwin et al. (2022: 176)

The Tunica Language Working Group

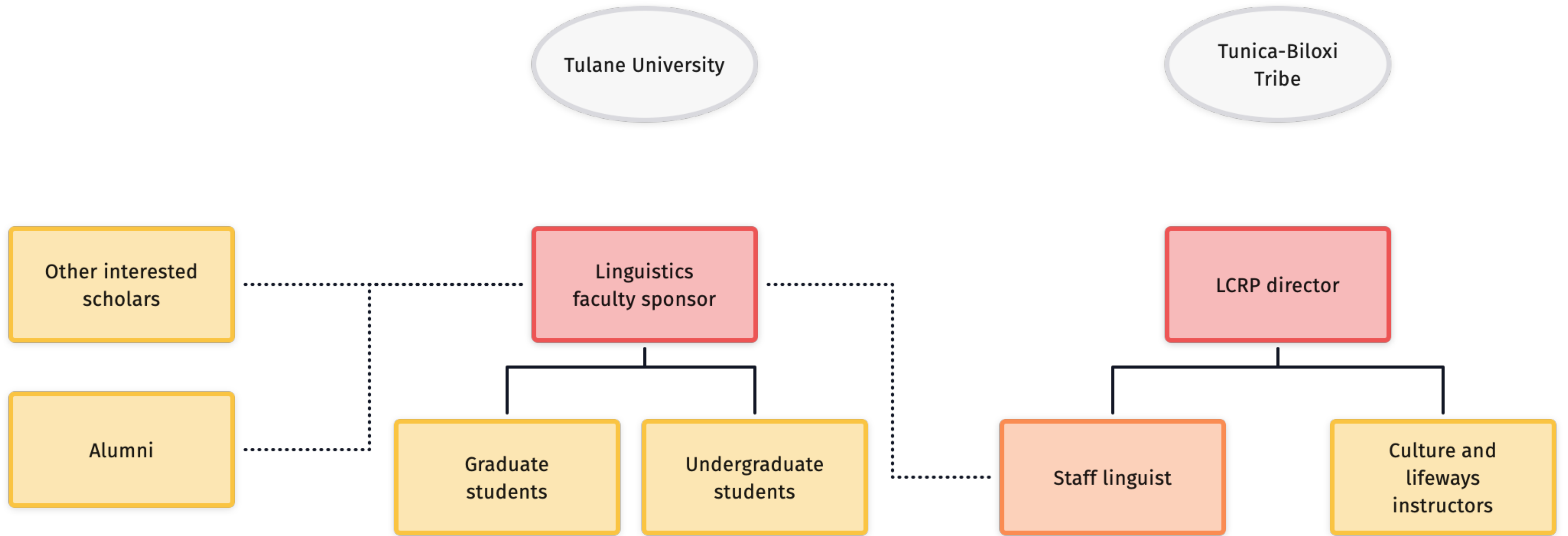
Community-engaged research

- How can linguists serve communities doing language revitalization?
 - Making historical language documentation accessible
 - Documenting contemporary language
 - Co-creating pedagogical materials and language learning curricula
 - Co-teaching language classes
 - Helping to “take the language from a place of description to a place of creation” (Whitaker 2017: 23)
 - building capacity
 - **teach yourself out of a job**

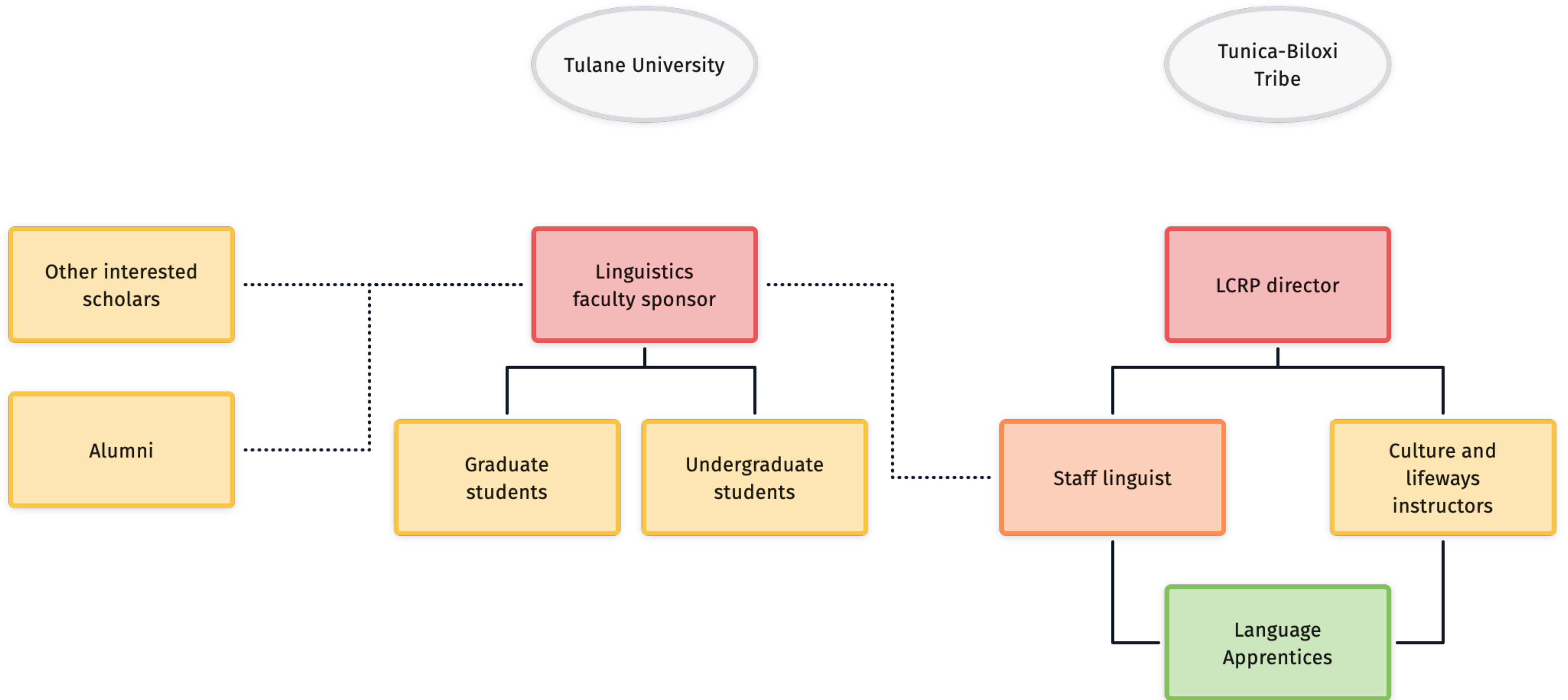
Structure of the group



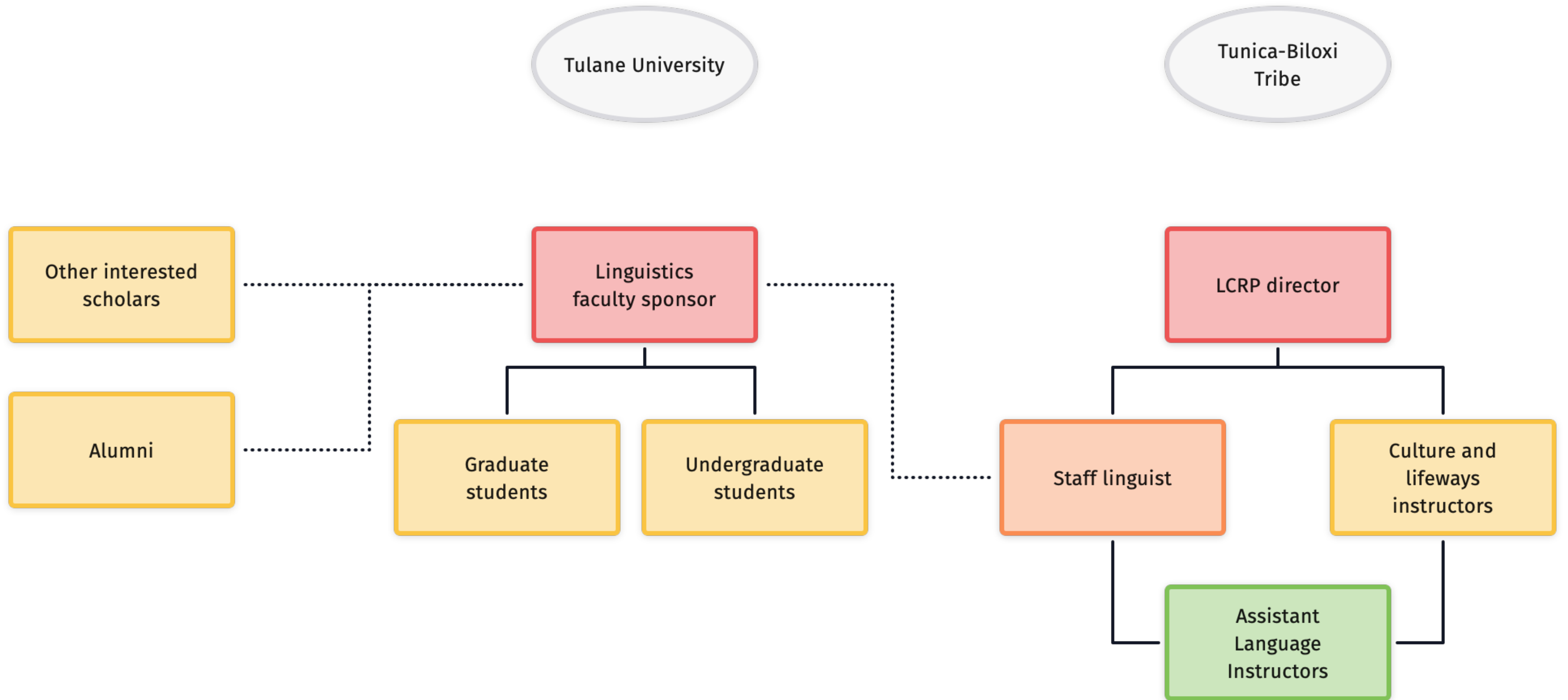
2014



2017



2018



2020

Tunica Language Working Group

Communication

- Monthly “all-hands” meeting
- Weekly or biweekly meetings of subgroups (e.g., documentation group, neologisms group)

Tunica Language Working Group

- Tulane
 - All volunteer
 - Membership fluctuates
 - Fewer contributors than in years past
- Tunica-Biloxi Tribe (LCRP)
 - Paid positions
 - Less turnover
 - More contributors than in years past

Capacity is increasing on the
Tunica-Biloxi side of the
collaboration

Challenges

Challenges

- Ensuring language ideologies are clear and language goals are shared
- Ensuring priorities and objectives are set by the community
- Ensuring that language decisions are linguistically grounded and community-determined

Language ideologies and language goals

Challenges

Language ideologies and goals

- Language revitalization as a site of language ideological conflict (Kroskrity 2009)
- **Ideological clarification** is necessary

Ideological clarification “covers the conflicts of ‘beliefs, or feelings, about languages’ (Kroskrity 2004)... The differences between these points of view are displayed and even magnified by language renewal activities”

Kroskrity (2009: 71)

Challenges

Language ideologies and goals

- Prior ideological clarification: determining the community's relationship to the language, and what they want its role to be in the community
 - Original decision for Tunica (~2011)
 - language of everyday communication between tribal members
 - design it to be taught in an immersion environment

Challenges

Language ideologies and goals

- “[I]deological clarification is not a one-time achievement but rather an ongoing process in need of periodic fine-tuning” (Kroskrity 2009: 78)
- In Tunica revitalization, language ideologies and goals remained largely unexamined
- Early results from current reexamination
 - Immersion teaching not currently feasible
 - Community members want to know some Tunica words and be able to use them
 - Desire among community members who identify as Biloxi to have a Biloxi revitalization effort as well

Community-led priorities

Challenges

Community-led priorities

- A multitude of possible projects
 - Language textbook, dictionary, teaching materials, language classes, online language learning games, children's books, cultural activities with language component
- Group had a tendency to say yes to any possible project
 - Projects suffered from lack of attention due to small size of the group
 - Projects often completely separate—did not build off of each other
 - Differences between Tulane members' priorities and community members' priorities remained unexplored due to a “just say yes” philosophy

Challenges

Community-led priorities

- *Academic top priorities*
 - **Second Tunica textbook**
 - **Further transcription and parsing of historical documentation**
 - Decision-making on remaining grammar questions
- LCRP top priorities
 - Tunica language learning website
 - Updates to Tunica dictionary
 - Biloxi coloring book
- *LCRP lowest priorities*
 - **Transcription of historical documentation**
 - **Second Tunica Textbook**

Challenges

Community-led priorities

- LCRP priorities *must be* the group's priorities
 - Academics will help with LCRP's priorities if needed
 - Academics will work on lower priority items if LCRP's priorities have all necessary help
- Work on lower priority items will likely be useful to LCRP in the future

**Linguistically grounded,
community-led language
decisions**

Challenges

Linguistically grounded, community-led language decisions

- “There is always the question of what will be easy, accessible, and transparent versus what is authentic, justified, and true to the source material” (Whitaker 2017: 97)
 - Clear tension between the needs of pedagogy vs. the academic penchant for linguistic accuracy and implementation of linguistic rules
 - Extreme example: compound words
 - Question of which should be written as two words and which as a single word
 - Should this be determined by compositionality? By whether there is vowel elision between the words? By some other metric?
 - Tendency on the academic side to use every tool possible to convey perceived linguistic rules

Challenges

Linguistically grounded, community-led language decisions

- Decision
 - Two main principles
 - Morphological completeness
 - Ease of pedagogy
 - Let those who are teaching the language decide what would aid their teaching the most. The linguists can guide, but not decide.

Challenges

Linguistically grounded, community-led language decisions

- Language revitalization in theory vs. practice
 - Labelling neologisms as such in the dictionary
 - Theory: linguistic purism can have negative effects on revitalization and revival efforts (Dorian 1994)

When neologisms are displayed in the dictionary alongside other Tunica words, their standing as “legitimate” language grows.

Anderson (2017: 153)

Challenges

Linguistically grounded, community-led language decisions

- Language revitalization in theory vs. practice
 - Labelling neologisms as such in the dictionary
 - Theory: linguistic purism can have negative effects on revitalization and revival efforts (Dorian 1994)
 - Decision: do not label neologisms in public-facing dictionary
 - Practice: community wants to know whether a word is historically documented or a neologism
 - New decision: label neologisms

Successes

Successes

Examples of community-engaged scholarship

- Dissertations
 - Patricia Anderson (2017): Dissertation on the creation of a dictionary from historical documentation and creation of new words. The New Tunica Dictionary created as a product of the dissertation, along with a methodology for community-led neologism creation.
 - Meg Harvey (2023): “presents a method for documenting languages as they are being revitalized that minimizes disruption and maximizes support by centering the documentation around language revitalization activities and output.”
 - Andrew Abdalian (2023): Examines language change over the period of historical documentation (1886–1933), showing a high degree of speaker variation. Created a normalized, integrated, searchable corpus of documented Tunica as a byproduct.

Successes

Products of revitalization effort

- 2011: First bilingual Tunica/English children's book published
- 2011: First Tunica-Biloxi Language & Culture summer camp. Still held annually.
- 2016: Online Tunica-English dictionary published
- 2018: Tunica moved from “extinct” to “reawakening” on a number of language databases (e.g., ISO-639-3, Ethnologue, Endangered Languages Catalog)
- 2023: Tunica Language Textbook published
- 2024: Second children's book to be published

Conclusion

Conclusion

- Successes are possible with a very small team working together with a strong commitment to the project
- Challenges can be overcome through constant reexamination of needs and goals
- Honest, open, and frequent communication are necessary to achieve a shared vision

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Questions?

andrew@abdalian.com