

# Establishing Interpreter Mentorship Programs in Postsecondary Institutions

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## *Abstract*

One of the problems facing many postsecondary institutions is the lack of qualified sign language interpreters to meet the rising demand of deaf and hard of hearing students. Citing legal precedence, Jeanne Kincaid, a nationally recognized disability rights attorney, noted that the Office of Civil Rights (1993; 1991) recognized that there is a "critical shortage of qualified interpreters to meet the societal needs of the deaf population nation-wide" (p. 9). Establishing an interpreter mentorship program can help train new interpreters and community interpreters to become qualified postsecondary interpreters as well as provide many other benefits for postsecondary institutions.

In an interpreter mentorship program, a mentee interpreter is paired with an experienced and qualified mentor interpreter in order to improve the skills of the mentee. Mentorship can be a cost-effective way to train new interpreters and provide a means for more experienced interpreters to share their knowledge. Thus, a mentorship program can be beneficial to postsecondary institutions as well as the mentees and mentors.

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## **Advantages of Establishing Interpreter Mentorship Programs for Postsecondary Institutions**

Interpreter mentorship programs provide many advantages for postsecondary institutions. Establishing a mentorship program can help in coordinating team assignments, reducing costs, providing professional development for staff interpreters, providing an orientation program for new staff interpreters, and increasing the pool of qualified postsecondary interpreters.

### **Coordinating Team Assignments**

Two interpreters are often needed for classes that are more than one hour in duration. However, many times, using two certified interpreters in the same class can make coordinating schedules a challenge. An alternative may be to utilize one certified interpreter and one uncertified interpreter. The certified interpreter (mentor) can use the semester to work one-on-one with the uncertified interpreter (mentee) as the uncertified interpreter prepares for certification performance evaluations.

### **Reducing Costs**

An interpreter mentorship program can be cost effective for postsecondary institutions by aiding in cost reduction. Rather than having two certified interpreters in one class, the institution can pay one certified interpreter at a higher hourly rate and one uncertified interpreter at a lower hourly rate. For example, an experienced postsecondary

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RID/NAD certified interpreter's hourly rate might be \$25 per hour. A competent, but uncertified, interpreter's rate might be \$15 per hour. A two-hour class that requires two interpreters would cost \$100 per class with two certified interpreters. However, a two-hour class that has been designated as a mentorship class might cost only \$80 per class. If the class meets twice a week, a possible \$40 savings could be realized. In this example, at the conclusion of a 16-week semester, the institution would save \$640 for each class that had been designated as a mentorship class.

### **Providing Professional Development for Staff Interpreters**

Additionally, a mentorship program can serve as an avenue for professional development for an institution's staff interpreters. Mentorship is a learning process for both the mentor and the mentee. Mentors often gain valuable insight into the interpreting process as they mentor others. Mentees are able to receive consistent feedback on their interpreting skills over several months. Consequently, the improvement over the course of a semester for mentees can be remarkable.

### **Providing an Orientation Program for New Staff Interpreters**

A mentorship program can also be utilized as a way for postsecondary level experienced interpreters to be used as role models for recently hired interpreters. Experienced community interpreters usually require time to learn the nuances of postsecondary interpreting through the training of an experienced interpreter. This orientation can also help in standardizing the interpreting practices at an institution.

### **Increasing the Pool of Certified Interpreters**

Increasing interpreters' skills through a mentorship program can directly increase the pool of qualified postsecondary interpreters. Nationally, there is a shortage of qualified interpreters, especially in rural communities. To further compound the problem, postsecondary interpreting requires not only a qualified interpreter, but also one who is knowledgeable in a multitude of areas. Mentorship provides on-the-job training for potential postsecondary interpreters to gain valuable in-class experience while fine-tuning their interpreting skills. Also, mentorship provides an avenue for experienced community interpreters to try postsecondary interpreting. While mentorship is certainly not an immediate solution to the shortage of interpreters, it has the ability to increase the certified interpreter pool in the coming years.

### **Advantages for Postsecondary Interpreters Participating in Mentorship Programs**

#### **Advantages for Mentees**

Mentorship directly benefits both the mentor and mentee each in different ways. Mentees can be either new interpreters wanting to improve their overall interpreting skills, or experienced community interpreters who want to learn more about postsecondary interpreting. Many community interpreters have not experienced the varied course content of postsecondary interpreting and may be afraid of the challenges that are involved. Mentorship provides an effective way for interpreters to experience postsecondary interpreting. The new interpreter is able to observe a certified interpreter, make notes from observations, and further discuss questions from the interpreting assignment after class. The mentee can utilize a journal to record notes or questions each day. This journal can serve as a valuable resource in charting the development and progress of the mentee throughout the semester. The mentor can also add feedback from observations to the mentee's journal to provide further assistance in the development process.

## **Advantages for Mentors**

There are also several advantages for interpreters who are serving as mentors. Mentors are able to contribute to the growth process of another interpreter. Quite often, mentors learn as much as the mentee through a mentorship assignment. Through evaluating skills and making suggestions to another interpreter, the mentor is able to view the interpreting process from a different perspective. Other incentives can be given to mentors at the discretion of individual institutions. Mentors may be paid at a slightly higher rate for each class that is designated as a mentorship assignment, or mentors may be given first preference of interpreting schedules.

## **Peer Mentorship**

The goals and objectives of a peer mentorship program are quite different from that of a mentee in training with a mentor. Peer mentorship consists of two highly skilled, qualified interpreters working a team assignment together and providing advice and feedback to each other. The roles of each interpreter in a peer mentorship assignment should be determined prior to the assignment. For example, each interpreter could simply write down comments about the assignment, vocabulary, conceptualization, sign space, etc., and exchange notes afterward. On the other hand, interpreters in an ongoing assignment could alternate functioning on a daily or weekly basis in the mentor and mentee roles. In order for peer mentorship to be effective, both interpreters must come to some type of clear understanding as to the roles each has so that one person does not dominate the peer mentorship or cross over the line of constructive criticism. Both interpreters should have respect for each other as professionals and have a desire to grow from the experience. Postsecondary assignments of more than one hour on an ongoing basis provide an excellent opportunity to utilize peer mentorship possibilities.

## **Developing a Postsecondary Interpreter Mentorship Program**

### **Guidelines for Selecting Mentees**

First, the number of mentee slots that are available for the upcoming semester must be determined. The number of interpreters who are qualified and willing to mentor, as well as the scheduling availability, determines the number of mentees that can be accommodated each semester. It is recommended that a mentor not be assigned more than one or two classes with a mentee in a semester.

In selecting mentees, certain criteria must be established. The interpreter mentorship program is not geared for individuals with only basic sign language proficiency. Mentees should be fluent in ASL and preferably have passed some type of sign language or interpreting screening assessment. Additionally, mentees should be knowledgeable of RID's Code of Ethics as well as all of the postsecondary institution's policies related to interpreting. The mentorship program should be designed to help good interpreters become better, non-certified interpreters become certified, and/or allow community interpreters to gain experience with postsecondary interpreting.

Letters of recommendation should be obtained from respected individuals in the deaf and/or interpreting community that can attest to the individual's sign language/interpreting skills, dependability, promptness, and dedication. Mentors will be investing a tremendous amount of time both in and out of the classroom working with the mentees. It is important that these individuals are committed to improving their skills and gaining from this valuable experience.

### **Guidelines for Selecting Mentors**

In order to have a successful mentorship program it is imperative to have highly trained and certified interpreters serving as mentors in the program. Mentors should be individuals who have worked at the institution for at

least a year and have demonstrated themselves to be role models for other postsecondary interpreters. These individuals should have a willingness to help others, but not be overly critical or have a superior or condescending attitude.

### **Establishing Goals for the Mentorship Assignment**

At the beginning of the semester, the mentor and mentee should meet to discuss specific goals to be obtained from the mentorship. Many times, the mentee will already know weak areas and be able to discuss them with the mentor. The mentor and mentee should meet again a week or two into the assignment after the mentor has had an opportunity to observe the mentee interpret. At that time, the mentor may establish specific objectives to focus on during the semester. It is important that the goals and objectives of both the mentee and the mentor be put in writing in the mentee's journal. At mid-term and again at the end of the semester, they can refer back to their beginning goals and objectives in order to better evaluate the success of the mentorship assignment.

### **Utilizing a Mentorship Journal**

A mentorship journal is an excellent way to chart and evaluate the progress of the mentee throughout the semester. The journal should be kept in chronological order and should include the goals and objectives of the mentor and mentee at the beginning of the semester, feedback from the mentor, the mentee's observation notes from the mentor's interpreting and the mid-term and end of the semester evaluations. For documentation purposes, the journal can also serve to track the total number of hours during the semester that the mentee participated in mentorship. The mentee may also want to videotape an interpreting assignment at the beginning and end of the semester in order to recognize the progress made during the time period.

### **Responsibilities of a Mentee**

The interpreter is not relieved from any ethical obligations by functioning in the role of a mentee. The RID Code of Ethics is still applicable for interpreter mentees. If a mentee feels that the message can not be rendered faithfully (RID, 1996), the mentor should immediately take over the assignment. In addition, the mentee should remember that the primary purpose of their interpreting is to provide equal access to communication with deaf students.

### **Responsibilities of a Mentor**

A mentor has a tremendous amount of responsibility when accepting a mentorship assignment. It is the responsibility of the mentor to make certain that the mentee is providing an accurate interpretation to the deaf student. A mentor must constantly be alert to assist the mentee or take over interpreting at any time. The ultimate responsibility of the interpretation in the class falls to the mentor. Also, it is the mentor's responsibility to provide daily feedback to the mentee as well as additional suggestions and comments. The mentor must also be available outside of class on a routine basis to further explain feedback or answer any questions for the mentee.

### **Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Feedback**

Feedback can be a positive and useful tool for new interpreters wanting to improve their interpreting skills. Sometimes, however, feedback can become negative and critical if not provided appropriately. A mentor should try to give constructive criticism in an upbeat tone to the mentee rather than in a condescending tone. If receiving feedback becomes overly critical, the mentee may feel under attack. It is also important for the mentee not take offense to the feedback being offered. Mentees should remember that the feedback is being given for their benefit and is not intended to offend.

## **Mid-term and End of Semester Evaluations**

In order to assess the progress of a mentee throughout a semester, an evaluation should be done by both the mentor and mentee at mid-term and the end of the semester. The mentor and mentee should look at the beginning of the semester goals and objectives as a guide in evaluating the progress. Additionally, accomplishments that have taken place (i.e., use of signing space) should be noted on the evaluations as well as areas that still need more work. The more in-depth the evaluations are, the more benefit they will have for the mentee.

## **Summary**

There are many advantages associated with establishing a mentorship program in postsecondary institutions. Both the interpreters and the institution can benefit from participating in interpreter mentorship programs. Additionally, the program can be expanded to include a peer mentorship component that can continuously provide professional development opportunities for postsecondary interpreters. In developing an interpreter mentorship program, criteria should be established for selecting both mentee and mentors for the program. Once selected, the mentee and mentor can determine their individual goals for the semester. Mentorship journals can help mentees accomplish their goals for the semester and also chart and evaluate their overall progress. Mentors and mentees should be informed of their responsibilities with respect to their roles and some guidance should also be provided concerning appropriate ways to provide feedback. At mid-term and again at the end of the semester, evaluations can assess the progress and provide more in-depth information to the mentee. Interpreter mentorship programs in postsecondary institutions can be highly successful and a positive experience for everyone involved.

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## **References**

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