

Postsecondary Interpreters: How to Find Them? How to Train Them? How to Keep Them?

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Postsecondary institutions often have difficulty finding skilled interpreters for students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Those institutions located in small towns, away from metropolitan areas, find the task doubly daunting. In many areas of the country, there simply are not enough interpreters, and those that are skilled can find better paying jobs than what most colleges can offer. Although we all recognize the problem that does not excuse the college from providing services. Thus, the question becomes: How do we find interpreters? How do we train them? How do we keep them?

Although Jacksonville State University (JSU) is located in a rural area of Alabama, we provide the most extensive postsecondary support services for students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing in the state. We also face the problem of finding qualified interpreters. What is a qualified interpreter? The term *qualified* is tricky because it does not always mean *certified*. While it may be best to hire nationally certified interpreters when possible, it is not always feasible. Thus, colleges are forced to be creative in finding alternative solutions to a very real problem. JSU has found that one solution is to recruit new and/or inexperienced interpreters and train them. In this situation the term interpreter is not really applicable. A better term is *signer*. Interpreters are not born, but made. Even the most skilled interpreters began as novices, and experience comes only with time. In low-key situations, a signer can facilitate communication effectively. Providing a signer with training and practice is one way for programs to create their own interpreters. This is a slow process, but it will pay off in the end for both the program and the students.

We actively recruit interpreters through advertisements, contacts with state agencies, and word of mouth. Some of our interpreters began with minimal skills, but vastly improved through interaction with the students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and dedication to learning. We have found that many of our students may prefer a non-certified interpreter with class-specific knowledge rather than a nationally certified interpreter who does not have the same experience. Although credentials are important, one should not discount a motivated interpreter who has not yet obtained those credentials.

If an institution does recruit new interpreters, it is imperative to provide training so that the interpreters can achieve the highest possible skill level. JSU has a long history of providing interpreter training. We are able to send our interpreters to national, regional, and state conventions and workshops. Also, we provide in-house training on an ongoing basis. Since going to outside workshops can become expensive and may not be possible for everyone, there are a variety of inexpensive skill building exercises that even the most limited program can afford. For example, interpreters can practice voicing by using videotapes of students; interpreters can practice fingerspelling in small groups; and peer evaluations can help staff members learn from each other. For those programs that have a little more money to spend, there is a plethora of videotapes and CD-ROM programs available commercially.

Another problem small colleges not have many incentives to attract and retain interpreters. College administrators may not be willing to pay top dollar to get the best interpreters when minimal compliance is all that is

¹ Jacksonville State University is an affiliate of the Postsecondary Education Consortium (PEC).

required. Thus, it often falls to the program coordinator to find non-monetary incentives. Many of these incentives can be as simple as offering a peaceful and pleasant work environment. The freelance interpreter often faces instability, criticism, and little encouragement. Interpreters may be willing to negotiate salary in exchange for a stable and supportive environment. Giving interpreters flexible scheduling which they help to plan is another incentive which costs the program nothing. New interpreters may also be attracted to programs, which offer opportunities for growth and continued training. There is much more to a job than just monetary compensation.

In a perfect world, there would be plenty of certified interpreters to go around; however, in the real world, we are often forced to find alternative solutions. Developing an in-house interpreter training program maybe one way to provide necessary services. This is not a quick process, and patience is required, but the results can be very rewarding for all involved.