2017

Interview with Dr. Phyllis Perrin Wilcox: The Accreditation Process

Phyllis Wilcox
University of New Mexico, pwilcox@unm.edu

Anita Nelson-Julander
University of North Florida, n01243274@unf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/ijie

Part of the Education Commons, and the Sign Languages Commons

Interview with Dr. Phyllis Perrin Wilcox: The Accreditation Process

Dr. Phyllis Perrin Wilcox[1]

University of New Mexico

Anita Nelson-Julander[2]

VRS Interpreting Institute, University of North Florida graduate student

Abstract

Dr. Phyllis Perrin Wilcox, professor emerita, taught the first sign language class at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 1971, when eight students were enrolled in a one-credit class. Many years and many students later, the University of New Mexico offers a Bachelor of Science in Signed Language Interpreting (SLI), and Dr. Wilcox headed the faculty as they sought accreditation by the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE; see http://ccie-accreditation.org/). In this interview, Dr. Wilcox, describes the experience of preparing for review and becoming accredited, as well as the impacts accreditation has had on the program. Her insights and advice will help support other SLI programs considering CCIE accreditation.

Anita Nelson-Julander, a graduate student in the Master's Interpreting Pedagogy program at the University of North Florida, who has worked at the Sorenson VRS Interpreting Institute for 7 years, interviewed Dr. Wilcox.

Keywords: Signed language interpreter education, CCIE accreditation

---

[1] *Correspondence to: pwilcox@unm.edu*

[2] *Correspondence to: anelsonjulander@gmail.com*

Interview with Dr. Phyllis Perrin Wilcox

Anita: Tell me about when your department decided to seek CCIE accreditation.

Dr. Wilcox: I can honestly say that my desire to see our program accredited stems from the great respect I have for the CCIE as an organization and the work it is doing to set high standards for interpreter education. There have been many people over a span of many years that have worked to create an accrediting body, and they have all earned the respect of any institution applying for accreditation.

There were multiple efforts before CCIE was complete and running. I was involved with the Conference of Interpreter Trainers and the beginning efforts to establish CCIE. I recall someone describing that time as trying to change the tire on a car while it was going 60 mph. It was a lot of work, and many of the people involved with CCIE were there because they saw the value of accreditation for interpreter education programs. Those people respected the accreditation process and wanted to make sure their own programs as well as others across the country were of the highest caliber. Like them, I too wanted my program to be accredited. I have an enormous respect for the accreditation standards and process and I knew I wanted the UNM program to be among those that achieved accreditation.

When I proposed CCIE accreditation to my team in the SLI program, I had to sell some of them on the idea. It was not because they did not want to adhere to the high standards; rather, they knew that the process would be an enormous amount of work for everyone. We voted to begin the CCIE accreditation application process in August 2011, then began talking to the administration, the Department of Linguistics, and the College of Arts and Sciences, who committed their support. We received candidacy status from CCIE in May 2012 and determinedly began working on the self-study review (SSR) with the goal of accreditation.

Anita: The accreditation process can seem daunting. How did your team begin it all?

Dr. Wilcox: We were both excited and nervous to get started. We had a good program that I was very proud of but I was also a bit afraid that we were not at the level needed for accreditation. No one can truly know if their program is at the required level until the process starts—until you begin to look at your program through a magnifying glass. I knew of other programs that had already earned accreditation and I was a bit in awe of them. I wondered if we had it in us to do everything the accreditation process required, and there was a pretty big question mark at the end of that wondering. I'm sure that every program starting the SSR process has to make changes to satisfy accreditation standards. I also think every program believes themselves to be a good program. However, when you know a rater will look at every part of a program in comprehensive ways, you typically find things that need to be modified and cleaned up. We were proud of our program but we knew there were things that could be polished.

So, we dove right in! When we started and soon figured out how much work it was going to take, we became even more determined to complete it all. My team recognized that it would be worth the work—for our students, for our institution, and for our field. The SSR process gave us the chance to deeply reflect on our program values, our curriculum, what we were doing, and what we wanted to be doing. And although we did have improvements to make, we were proud of our program and excited to see the polishing improvements we could make to the outstanding parts we already had.

Anita: Can you give me a picture of what it was like for your program to work toward accreditation?

Dr. Wilcox: To start with, all faculty got involved, both full- and part-time faculty from our main campus as well as from the branch campuses. We divided the faculty into teams with each team responsible for giving evidence that the program adhered to their assigned CCIE standard. Additionally, one person was responsible for receiving the work from each team and modifying the language as needed to ensure the final documents were all written in the same voice. Another person managed due dates and follow-up with all the teams.

Being organized in our approach became an important part of successfully completing everything. In addition to faculty entering data on a shared Google Drive, we created a folder for each standard, and every supporting

document went into that folder. This made it easy for anyone to see what was either completed or missing for any given standard. The system also made everything readily accessible to the accreditation raters, allowing them to find what they needed, arranged according to the standards.

Another important part of the process for us was to make sure the faculty felt supported as they put so much work into this. Thus, team communication was significant. Additionally, effort was made to provide ongoing professional development opportunities that also supported the work we were doing for the SSR. For example, a large training event was organized that brought in a presenter who had expertise in Bloom's taxonomy. This person worked with us on our process for the accreditation SSR, our curriculum, and the program's mission. Another example of faculty professional development that also supported the SSR work was reading a book together that aimed at improving us as college teachers. We then took time at each faculty meeting to discuss the application of the reading to improve our teaching and ourselves.

Anita: What was it like to have the raters visit UNM?

Dr. Wilcox: Of course, it was pretty intense to have the raters come to campus. We were very prepared and excited to be nearing the end of the two-year's work. The raters met with several groups involving administrators, linguistics department faculty (which included members of the linguistics program, the Navajo program, and the SLI program), extended SLI faculty, the SLI majors, previous SLI graduates, and members of the deaf community in the area.

This final step of the accreditation process was inspiring to be a part of. It was amazing to see the CCIE accreditation process in action. We were awarded full accreditation, satisfying all 102 stipulations. It was wonderful to be told that not only did we satisfy all the stipulations, but that some of them were marked as strengths rather than merely being satisfactory. It felt validating for our efforts.

Anita: What impacts did you see because of the accreditation process?

Dr. Wilcox: Every faculty member can attest to the benefits to the program that came from the accreditation process. The SLI program is better, the curriculum is better, and I think the faculty grew as educators from the experience.

One example of an impact was the improvements to the SLI mission statement. Working on the mission statement was an endeavor we wanted everyone to be a part of. So, we held a faculty retreat to sincerely consider what we believed in and how we wanted it to be evident in a mission statement and philosophy. We were very proud of the resulting mission statement! We hung it on the wall for faculty and students to easily see and we talked with others about it to keep it in the forefront of our minds. Every line of the mission statement was consciously applied to our work. One way we did that was to incorporate the mission statement into the students' exit assessment. We asked each student to make a brief note about each point in the mission—how they had experienced that point or how they had seen the faculty apply the point. We saw students identify specific classes where they learned the points of the mission statement. It is rewarding to see students read through the SLI mission and realize that every part of the program is designed specifically to support their educational experience. We hope the students can look back and see how all the parts of the program and curriculum come together for their learning and growth.

Another impact from the accreditation process is that we became more visible in the eyes of the university. Our program's accreditation achievement became a proud topic for the linguistics department, where we are housed, as well as for the university. I appreciate that visibility. Prior to accreditation, I think the university saw us as a quaint little program without much draw compared to some of the larger programs on campus. But the provost at the time, who is now the university president, saw the potential in us to be a bright star for the university. He knows what it takes to become accredited and with our work, he became aware of the quality of our graduating students and the program faculty research. This visibility became helpful when we needed to hire faculty or staff. Like many other universities who face financial hardships, there are often hiring freezes and budget cuts that hurt smaller programs like the typical-sized SLI programs. But with accreditation, the university

administration saw us as more valuable than they had before, which helps when discussions of lower budgets pop up around campus.

Anita: As you said, it was a lot of work to become accredited. Was it worth it?

Dr. Wilcox: It was absolutely worth it! I knew it was going to be a tremendous amount of work but it wasn't until we started working on it in meaningful ways that I truly understood how much work it was going to take. But we did it! We started with a strong program that I was very proud of. All of the faculty united in the cause and worked hard to contribute, and everyone was proud of the result. We worked well as a team and, even with the stressful moments, everything came together nicely.

It was two years of continuous analysis of the program. We were exhausted from the process, but what we ended up with was a beautiful program and a team that was unified in ways we hadn't been before. It was worth it to have an opportunity to deeply examine the strengths and weaknesses of our program and create an SSR that shows how the program and the faculty shine.

When we got notification of accreditation results, we were thrilled. Because we knew the success of the program was due to many people's contributions in so many ways, we wanted to celebrate with everyone! We invited the faculty from the linguistics department, SLI faculty, current majors, past graduates, and people from the deaf community that supported the program. We wanted everyone to see that the work was worth it! Following local Native American tradition, we also had a Navajo blessing on the future of the program.

Another reason why it was worth all the work is the way the SLI program increased in value for the university. It's like before accreditation we were a little orphan program. As I mentioned before, after accreditation we were seen as equally important as the larger programs on campus. The SLI program is now respected on campus in ways we weren't before.

Anita: What advice would you give to other SLI programs considering CCIE accreditation?

Dr. Wilcox: The best advice I can think of is to expect the process to be very in depth. Everyone likes to believe their program is wonderful. But even the best programs can modify things to be better. Programs starting the SSR development should understand that preparing for accreditation is a rigorous process. It is important to respect the process and those who worked so hard to create it. I hope others approach the accreditation process with humility and respect for the accreditation standards and procedures.

The second piece of advice is to get everyone on board and just make it happen! Don't wait for the "perfect time" because it will never come. The work done toward accreditation is, of course, done during the same times that regular educator activities continue. Classes, finals, grading, entering-student screenings, family visits, and graduation do not pause for accreditation processes. Make a plan and stick with it! I believe faculty will never regret the work done to become an accredited program.

Anita: Thank you for your time. It has been a pleasure talking with you.