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Godfrey

# Characteristics of Effective Interpreter Education Programs in the United States

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## Abstract

The goal of this study was to expand the limited research that currently exists in the field of interpreter education—specifically, as it relates to the *readiness-to-credential gap*, the consensus in the field that students graduate from interpreter education programs (IEPs) but are not ready to obtain the minimal interpreting credentials set forth by the field at both the state and national levels. To accomplish this goal, in this article the author identifies programs that have a low readiness-to-credential gap and analyzes the characteristics that are contributors to each program's success, so that improvements can be made in current IEPs. In this article, the author presents some principal findings of the study; for more information, please refer to the full dissertation report (Godfrey, 2010)

Keywords: interpreter education; interpreter education programs (IEPs); school-to-work gap; school-to-credential gap

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# Characteristics of Effective Interpreter Education Programs in the United States

## 1. Background

Signed language interpreting is a relatively new profession in the human services field. Interpreters are needed in areas including but not limited to education, employment, medical, legal, financial, state and local government services, and public accommodations for people with widely divergent linguistic needs. Recent legislation in the United States mandates the provision of signed language interpreters in a variety of settings.

Historically, the first interpreters for deaf people were family members, educators, and clergy (Winston, 2004). As the field moved toward professionalization, signed language interpreter education programs (IEPs) became the primary method for producing professional interpreters. However, there remains debate about how to properly educate interpreting students so that they emerge from IEPs as competent practitioners (Patrie, 1995; Stauffer, 1995; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005).

In the United States, three types of interpreting credentials are recognized within the profession. At the national level, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) is the governing body that establishes and sustains standards that define the field of signed language interpreting and that monitors the practice of interpreters. A first interpreting credential is that the holder of RID's generalist certificate has met or exceeded a nationally recognized standard of minimum competence in interpreting (RID, 2005) and is deemed qualified to interpret in a variety of settings. A second interpreting credential that has national acceptance—although on a more limited scale—is the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA; Schick & Williams, 2004). A third interpreting credential is a state-level credentialing body, often referred to as a *state quality assurance screening* (QAS).

Anderson and Stauffer (1990) first described a crisis situation in the field of signed language interpreting as the *readiness-to-work gap*, which is also referred to as the *readiness-to-credential gap*. The two concepts are closely related, and the terms are often used interchangeably; however, there is a distinction. The former (*readiness-to-work gap*) indicates that students graduate but are not ready to gain employment as an interpreter practitioner who is competent to provide services across a wide variety of settings (Patrie, 1995; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). The latter (*readiness-to-credential gap*) indicates that students graduate and may be employed to provide rudimentary interpreting services in limited settings but are not yet ready to obtain interpreting credentials set forth by the field at either the state or the national level. Both terms indicate that IEP graduates are not ready to enter the interpreting profession as fully qualified and certified professionals. The sheer demand for interpreters and poor governmental regulation ensure that some poorly qualified individuals will, in fact, work in situations that exceed their professional skills. This reality makes the task of statistically measuring the readiness-to-work gap difficult, if not impossible; using credentials to measure preparedness is a more objective and quantifiable way to gauge the actual qualification of IEP graduates. Because of this unfortunate reality, it may be more appropriate to identify a discrepancy in skills and capability on the job as the *readiness-to-credential gap*.

## 2. Attempts to address the readiness-to-credential gap

Soon after the Anderson and Stauffer (1990) study, several authors (Frishberg, 1995; Patrie, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Stauffer, 1995) wrote about the readiness-to-work gap. These authors confirmed that the gap still existed. Over a decade later, Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005) reiterated the now-familiar lament from stakeholders regarding the continued existence of the gap between completion of a program and readiness for competent practice as evidenced by interpreting credentials. In three major independent initiatives, researchers have attempted to lessen the readiness-to-credential gap. In the 1980s, the field began to expand the condensed skills-focused training from primarily 2-year programs housed in community colleges and vocational training centers to broad-based, liberal-arts, 4-year degree programs (Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004). The understanding was that a longer period of training would yield more competent graduates, thereby decreasing the readiness-to-credential gap. Next, the Conference of Interpreter Educators (CIT) developed national standards for interpreter education. These national standards were introduced “to be used for the development of education and self-analysis of post secondary interpreter education programs” (CIT, 1995, p. 2). These standards were adopted by the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE) when official accreditation of programs began in 2007. Finally, Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005) met with stakeholders in the field of interpreting and interpreter education to identify entry-to-practice competencies and to develop a detailed list and explanation of each one. However, despite the move to 4-year programs, the adoption of recognized standards for interpreter education, and the establishment of entry-to-practice competencies, there remains debate about how to properly educate interpreting students so that they emerge from IEPs as competent practitioners.

### 2.1. *Specific curricular characteristics that affect readiness of successful IEPs*

There is a lack of agreement, profession wide, about what an interpreter must know and do in order to be most effective at his or her job (Roy, 2000) as well as the scope and sequence of what should be taught in IEPs. In the current literature, researchers include various potential curriculum-related strategies for effective interpreting education programs. This current literature is discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

Cokely’s (2005) study revealed that most entry-level interpreters engage in one-on-one interpreting. In this study, the author suggested that the focus of interpreter education should be more discourse based (i.e., interactive) and less monologue based. Many researchers agree that interpreting should be taught using discourse analysis (Roy, 2000; Winston & Monikowski, 2000). Researchers have found teaching translation skills to be an effective technique because it aids students with a deeper understanding of the interpreting process and allows students to hone discrete skill sets without the time-imposed pressure of simultaneous interpreting (Cokely, 2005; Winston & Monikowski, 2005). The inclusion of self-assessment (Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004; Winston, 2004) is also recommended as an integral part of the IEP curriculum. In this type of curriculum, students then take responsibility for their own learning and foster lifelong learning habits (Winston, 2004).

Community-based learning also plays an important role in interpreter education. One area that is lacking is a period of supervised interpreting practicum, such as that required in the professions of education and medicine (Dean & Pollard, 2001). During the early years of the interpreting profession, novice interpreters were apprenticed through involvement and interaction within the Deaf community (Winston, 2004). This practice diminished with the inception of formal academic programs (Cokely, 2005), much to the detriment of interpreters. Monikowski and Peterson (2005) acknowledge the limitations of the classroom environment and promote service learning as a way to enhance what students learn in the classroom. As interpreter education “shifted into academia, it has, albeit unintentionally, lost experience and expertise of the [D]eaf community” (Monikowski & Peterson, 2005, p. 209).

Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2004) stated that the solution can be found in collective agreement about entrance and exit criteria for IEPs. Many researchers believe that one reason for the current readiness-to-credential gap is the lack of an important prerequisite—that is, skills and fluency in American Sign Language (ASL) on the part of students entering IEPs. It is unfortunate to note that successful ASL course completion does not guarantee competence in ASL. Therefore, IEPs need to establish stricter entrance criteria and, equally important, exit requirements (Stauffer, 1995). Most graduates of IEPs indicate that the programs from which they graduated did not have any specified exit requirements (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005).

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### 2.2. “Other-than-curricular” characteristics of successful IEPs that affect readiness

In the literature, the focus is less related to the attempts to reduce the readiness-to-credential gap relative to “other-than-curricular”-related characteristics of successful IEPs. One other-than-curricular characteristic has to do with the length of the IEP. Interpreter credentialing professionals agree that 2 years is just not enough time to prepare skilled interpreters (Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004; Shaw, Collins, & Metzger, 2006). Another solution may be to hire more qualified interpreter educators and to establish more stringent hiring criteria: Winston (2004) suggests that one critical challenge that IEPs confront daily is the ability to identify and assess qualified, competent teaching staff. IEPs need educators who are skilled and competent not only as instructors but also as practitioners (Roy, 2000). Educators who have advanced training in language study and who are researchers (Roy, 2000) are better positioned to have success in preparing students.

## 3. Method

In this study, I anticipated identification of “specific curricular” and “other-than-curricular” characteristics that contribute to lowering the readiness-to-credential gap. Thus, I sought data that would address related questions—that is, questions concerning the characteristics of successful IEPs.

### 3.1. Participants

In fall 2009, the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) conducted the Interpreter Education Program Needs Assessment (NCIEC, n.d). The population for this study on the readiness-to-credential gap was the 2-year and 4-year interpreting training programs that participated in the 2009 NCIEC IEP Needs Assessment (NCIEC, n.d). Programs whose responses indicated a lower readiness-to-credential gap (6–18 months) were considered the more effective IEPs and were categorized as Tier One schools. The nine Tier One programs were invited to participate in the next phase (Phase Two) of the data collection; five of the nine invited schools agreed to participate. During Phase Three, and using the list of schools from the NCIEC website (NCIEC, n.d.), I sent a second assessment tool to all of the 2- and 4-year IEPs that had been in existence for the minimum amount of time required for an entire class to complete the program.

### 3.2. Survey instrument and interviews

As noted in the previous paragraph, in this study I used the data collected by the 2009 NCIEC IEP Needs Assessment. The survey included information that was related but not limited to the following items:

- Program age, level, and location
- Teaching staff, staff educational background, and interpreting credentials
- Program budget, program enrollment, class size, and entrance and exit requirements
- Student demographics and student load
- Timeline for completion of the credentialing process at the state and national levels

During Phase Two, semistructured interviews were conducted with approved program representatives. I developed the interview questions, which were then reviewed by a content expert as well as an expert in program evaluation. The interview was piloted by four former IEP coordinators. On the basis of their feedback, I modified the instrument to increase ease and understanding, and I added additional questions to ensure a comprehensive collection of relative data.

In Phase Three, I used the information collected from the literature review, the NCIEC Interpreter Education Program Needs Assessment, and the Tier One investigation to develop an assessment tool that categorized suggested characteristics, curricula, and practices of IEPs. The first portion of the survey asked respondents to

identify the approximate amount of time, relative to graduation, required for students to earn credentials. The options for respondents were (a) *State-administered credential*; (b) *EIPA of 3.5–3.9*; (c) *EIPA of 4.0 or higher*; and (d) *National level (RID)*. Respondents were asked to select one of the following time frames: (a) *They have them upon graduation*; (b) *1–6 months*; (c) *6–12 months*; (d) *13–18 months*; (e) *19–24 months*; (f) *More than 2 years*; and (g) *We do not track*. Date ranges were selected to parallel the NCIEC study. The two additional time frames—*They have them upon graduation* and *1–6 months*—were added because they were not included in the original NCIEC survey. In the second portion of the survey, respondents were asked to rate (using a four-point Likert scale) how each item on the scale defines their institution or is used by their institution (1 = *great extent*; 2 = *moderate extent*; 3 = *minimal extent*; 4 = *we do not include it*). To encourage further discussion of the identified characteristics, I provided a section for comments after each question on the survey. The same instrument verification process was followed for both the interview questions and the survey questions.

### 3.3. Data collection procedures

In this study, I used survey data and personal interviews as part of a sequential, mixed-method design conducted in three distinct phases of data collection. The study began with a quantitative analysis of preexisting data, followed by a semistructured, interview-driven qualitative investigation and concluded by a quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed survey.

Phase One used preexisting data collected by the NCIEC during the 2009 NCIEC IEP Needs Assessment. The data collected during Phase One were used for two distinct functions. First the data from the NCIEC Needs Assessment were used to identify the population for Phase Two of the data collection. Second, information from the 2009 NCIEC Needs Assessment was used for statistical computations. The questions—which related to the average time, postgraduation, that students needed to secure initial national-level professional credentials taken from the 2009 NCIEC Needs Assessment—were used to establish an IEP group ranking system (see details in the last paragraph of previous subsection). Institutions that replied “6–12 months” or “12–18” months were grouped into Tier One; institutions that replied “19–24 months” were grouped into Tier Two; and institutions that responded “More than 2 years” were grouped into Tier Three. Institutions that responded “Do not currently track” were eliminated from the study sample.

In Phase Two of the data collection, five institutions were queried. The primary means of data collection in this phase was a semistructured phone interview with an approved program representative. The interview contained open-ended questions to allow the participant to respond in any manner that he or she wished. Interviews were recorded, and written transcripts of the sessions were made. Both the original recording and the hard copy transcript were filed.

In Phase Three, an invitation to participate in the electronic survey was sent via e-mail to all of the qualifying programs ( $n = 126$ ) listed on the NCIEC website. Each invitation included either an individual link or an electronic code so that participation could be tracked. Weekly email reminders were sent during the 2 subsequent weeks.

## 4. Results

Reporting of the results is organized relative to the research questions. Sections consist of quantitative and qualitative results, as appropriate. For the qualitative results, Phase Two respondents are identified alphabetically (Respondent A–Respondent E) and Phase Three respondents are identified numerically (Respondent 1–Respondent 26).

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### 4.1. What is the readiness-to-credential gap of IEPs in the United States?

Descriptive statistics were used to address research Question 1. Tables 1 and 2 present data from the 2009 NCIEC IEP Needs Assessment. Table 3 demonstrates the credential rate of the queried institutions. The largest percentage ( $n = 14$ , 42.4%) indicates institutions that require a period of more than 2 years from the time students graduate to the time that they earn their credentials at the national level.

Table 1: Credential Rate—Phase One Data (NCIEC)

Institutions divided by tier	Frequency	%
Tier 1: 6–18 months	9	27.3
Tier 2: 19–24 months	10	30.3
Tier 3: More than 2 years	14	42.4
Total	33	100

Table 2 demonstrates the timeline for credentialing using Phase Three data. State-level credentials are earned at a much faster rate than are national-level credentials.

Table 2: Timeline for Credentialing—Phase Three Data

Readiness-to Credential gap	State		National	
	frequency	%	frequency	%
They have them upon graduation	9	34.6	1	3.8
1–6 months	1	3.8	2	7.7
6–12 months	5	19.2	2	7.7
13–18 months	2	7.7	6	23.1
19–24 months	1	3.8	3	11.5
More than 2 years	5	19.2	7	26.9
Missing	3	11.5	5	19.2
Total	26	100	26	100

Table 3 indicates the measures of central tendency for the credential rates. The average amount of time needed to earn state level credentials is 7–12 months, whereas the average amount of time needed to earn national-level credentials is 18–20 months—the approximate the midpoint between 13–18 months 19–24 months—which is represented by a mean score of 2.619. The majority of programs indicate that their graduates are able to earn state-level credentials upon graduation but that more than 24 months are required to earn national-level credentials.

Table 3: Measures of Central Tendency for Credential Rates—Phase Three Data

Factor	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Mode
State level	23	4	4.00	6
National level	21	2.619	3.00	1

*Note.* 6 = Upon graduation; 5 = 1–6 months; 4 = 7–12 months; 3 = 13–18 months; 2 = 19–24 months; 1 = More than 2 years.

Using these data, the readiness-to-credential gap can best be explained that graduates from 4-year program may be able to secure state-level credentials upon graduation but may take up to 1 year to earn national-level credentials. Graduates from associate-level programs may require almost 2 years for state-level credentials and more than 2 years for national-level credentials.

#### 4.2. What curricular-related characteristics of successful IEPs affect readiness?

For the purpose of this study, the term *curricular-related characteristics* refers to any item that is related to program requirements, instruction, and/or assessment. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used to address this research question.

##### 4.2.1 Quantitative results

Table 4 indicates the extent to which IEPs incorporate various curricular factors, as found in the Phase Three survey. Almost 81% indicated that they incorporate self-analysis to a great extent. A total of 69.2% of the programs indicated that they incorporate critical thinking to a great extent, and 65.4% of the programs indicated that they incorporate discourse-based instruction to a great extent.

*Table 4: Incorporation of Curricular Factors—Phase Three Data*

Curricular factor	Great extent (%)	Moderate extent (%)	Minimal extent (%)	Do not include it (%)	Did not answer (%)	not
Discourse-Based Approach	65.4	34.6	0	0	0	
Discourse Analysis	46.2	50	3.8	0	0	
Consecutive Interpreting Instruction	53.8	42.3	3.8	0	0	
Transcription	7.7	53.8	26.9	7.7	3.8	
Translation	23.1	57.7	11.5	3.8	3.8	
D-CS	34.6	26.9	26.9	11.5	0	
Critical Thinking	69.2	23.1	7.7	0	0	
Self-Analysis	80.8	11.5	3.8	0	3.8	
Preparation for Credential	34.6	38.5	15.4	0	11.5	
Service Learning	30.8	38.5	3.8	19.2	7.7	
Portfolios	26.9	30.8	19.2	11.5	11.5	

*Note.* D-CS = Demand-Control Schema (Dean & Pollard, 2001).

Table 5 presents chi-square results using the Phase Three data for curricular factors relative to state- and national-level credentialing rates, respectively. Thirteen tests failed to reach the conventional rejection alpha level of .05 and, therefore, failed to reject the null hypotheses. The single exception was service learning at the state level. The



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four programs that indicated no inclusion of service learning require a period of more than 2 years before the student can obtain state-level credentialing.

*Table 5: Chi-Square for Curricular Factors—Phase Three Data*

Factor	State			National		
	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Consecutive Interpreting Instruction	9.20	10	.513	7.370	5	.195
Discourse-Based Approach	6.17	10	.800	4.341	5	.501
Discourse Analysis	6.491	10	.772	4.105	5	.534
Transcription	23.514	20	.264	7.012	15	.957
Translation	22.697	20	.304	10.783	15	.768
D-CS	17.621	15	.283	14.733	15	.471
Critical Thinking	11.483	10	.321	11.133	10	.347
Self-Analysis	8.474	10	.583	12.255	10	.268
Preparation for Credentials	19.473	15	.193	17.045	15	.316
Service Learning	34.628	20	.022*	24.444	15	.058
Portfolio	26.398	20	.153	20.089	20	.452
Entry Requirements	10.276	10	.417	9.137	10	.519
Exit Requirements	8.532	5	.129	7.255	5	.202

*Note.* State, *N* = 22; national, *N* = 21.

\**p* < .05.

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### 4.2.2 Qualitative results

#### *Entrance Requirements*

Entrance requirements differ from college to college, but there was consensus that strict entrance requirements impact student success. Four of the five programs have rigorous requirements for entrance into the interpreting portion of the program. Respondent E indicated that because the selection process into the IEP is carefully conducted, most students succeed once they are admitted. The one university (Respondent B) that does not have entrance requirements into the interpreting department indicates that the university is so selective that they enroll high-quality students into the program without any additional selection criteria.

#### *Exit Requirements*

There are differing opinions regarding the use of exit examinations. Only one of the five programs interviewed in Phase Two required an external performance examination. Three of five encourage an external performance examination but do not require it. Respondent D purported that the key to student success is setting exit requirements. She stated, “[I]t impacts their involvement and dedication and how they do their work hours and how they interact” and, therefore, concluded that establishing exit requirements does, in fact, affect credentialing. Respondent C’s program requires students to undergo the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (Schick & Williams, 2004), however she believes that this requirement is not an extrinsic motivation that leads to credentialing; rather, the motivation to earn credentials is intrinsic.

#### *Curriculum in General*

Only one respondent, Respondent B, indicated that the strength of the program was directly related to the interpreting program curriculum. She argued that most places do what they have always done.

#### *Instructional and Assessment Techniques*

The respondents in Phases Two and Three all tended to be eclectic in their instructional approach, not favoring a specific approach or technique over another. Respondent A described her program as having more of a breadth of knowledge versus the depth of any specific approach. The same results were found for the types of assessments used. These types varied greatly among the respondents. There was no consistent approach, format, or rubric.

#### *Practicum*

In Phases Two and Three, the requirements for the practicum varied in structure and duration. Three of the five Phase Three respondents indicated that the practicum experience was one of the more critical factors to student success. Respondent C indicated that “What goes on in the classroom is a minor part of our students learning the language/culture. Internship classes are crucial to skill development.”

#### *Service Learning*

Respondent C indicated that service learning has an amazing impact on the success of her students. Respondent 15 indicated “It does improve student’s understanding of deaf individuals and their comfort level with them, which probably improves their performance to some extent on the state test.

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### 4.3. What “other-than-curricular”–related characteristics of successful IEPs affect readiness?

For the purpose of this study, the term “other than curricular”–related characteristics refers to any item that is not directly related to program requirements, instruction and/or assessment but instead deals with factors such as type of program and student, class size, quality of faculty, adequacy of resources and technology, funding, campus and community environment, and out-of-class opportunities. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used to address this research question.

#### 4.3.1 Quantitative results

Table 6 represents chi-square results using the NCIEC results for “other than curricular” factors relative to tier rank of the programs. Most tests failed to reach the conventional rejection level of .05 and, therefore, failed to reject the null hypotheses. The single exception in this set of data is the type or length of program. I conducted a two-way contingency table analysis to evaluate whether there was a difference in the tier rank on the basis of program length. The two variables were tiers (Tiers One, Two, and Three) and program length (2- and 4-year). Tier rank and program length were found to be significantly related,  $\chi^2(2, N = 33) = 20.32, p = .00$ . The decision was made to reject the null hypotheses. One-hundred percent of the schools in Tier one were 4-year programs; in contrast, none of the schools with associate levels belonged to Tier One. This trend is further amplified by the fact that 93% of the schools in Tier Three have 2-year programs, and only 7% have 4-year programs.

Table 6:  $\chi^2$  for “Other-Than-Curricular” Factors—Phase One Data (NCIEC)

Factor	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Degree type	20.315	2	.000**
Type of institution	4.997	2	.082
Minimum degree of program director	7.726	4	.102
Minimum credential for program director	9.120	4	.058
Resources	19.762	16	.231
Minimum degree for FT interpreting faculty	6.140	8	.632
Minimum credential for FT interpreting faculty	4.058	4	.398
Minimum degree for FT ASL faculty	5.063	8	.751
Minimum credential for FT ASL faculty	13.551	8	.094
Institutional support	3.861	2	.145

Note. FT = full-time; ASL = American Sign Language.

\*\* $p \leq .01$ .

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Table 7 represents the results of two chi-squares for “other-than-curricular” factors. I conducted two 2-way contingency table analyses to evaluate whether there was a relationship between the tier rank and the date when the program was established. For the first chi-square, the two variables were tiers and the decade in which the program began (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.). The results were  $\chi^2(6, N = 33) = 7.936, p = .243$ . A similar chi-square was conducted using the same tier rank but grouping the establishment dates into larger time frames (“prior to 1990” and “1991–present”). The relationship between the tier ranks and the two-decade grouping of when the programs were established was analyzed, and the two were found to be significantly related,  $\chi^2(2, N = 33) = 6.947, p = .31$ . The decision was to reject the null hypotheses. A total of 77.8% ( $n = 7$ ) of the Tier One schools were established subsequent to 1990, whereas 76.9 % ( $n = 10$ ) of the Tier Three schools were established prior 1990.

Table 7:  $\chi^2$  for “Other-Than-Curricular” Factors—Phase One Data (NCIEC)

Factor	$\chi^2$	df	p
Single-Decade Grouping Program Was Established	7.936	6	.243
Grouping Program Was Established	6.947	2	.031*

$p < .05$ .

Table 8 represents chi-square results of “other-than-curricular” factors relative to state- and national-level credentialing rates. At the state level, most tests failed to reach the conventional rejection levels of .05 and, therefore, failed to reject the null hypotheses. The exception was Type of Program. I conducted a two-way contingency table analysis to evaluate whether there was a difference in the rate to credentialing on the basis of the incorporation of Type of Program. The two variables were time to credential (upon graduation; 1–6 months; 7–12 months; 13–18 months; 19–24 months; more than 24 months) and type of program (2-year or 4-year). Time to credential and type of program were found to be significantly related,  $\chi^2(5, N = 23) = 14.629, p = .012$ . The decision was made to reject the null hypothesis. At the national level, all tests failed to reach the conventional rejection levels of .05 and, therefore, failed to reject the null hypotheses.

Table 8:  $\chi^2$  for “Other-Than-Curricular” Factors—Phase Three Data

Factor	State			National		
	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\chi^2$	df	p
Degree Type	14.629	5	.012*	10.977	5	.052
Type of Students	16.299	15	.362	17.576	15	.286
Support by Community	8.780	15	.889	8.750	5	.119
Interaction with Native Users	12.157	15	.667	23.600	15	.072
Classroom Facilities	19.354	20	.499	22.708	20	.303
Resources	17.559	20	.616	25.750	20	.174
Lab Facilities	10.819	15	.765	21.563	15	.120
Technology	10.083	15	.814	24.950	15	.051
Cohort System	12.031	10	.283	13.165	10	.215

Note. State,  $N = 23$ ; national,  $N = 21$ . \* $p < .05$ .

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### 4.3.2 Qualitative results

#### *External Opportunities for Learning*

All of the Phase Two programs provide external opportunities to foster language acquisition and interpreting skill, and respondents agree that such opportunities are beneficial to the students. This is accomplished through service learning, campus clubs, classroom requirements, and individuals from IEPs actually getting out into the larger community. Most of the Phase Two programs were located within a large Deaf community, and representatives from both programs agreed that close proximity to a large Deaf population is an advantage. Respondent E believed that interaction with the local Deaf community is vital to student success. Respondent 18 echoed this sentiment by saying, “Students who willingly make friends with members of the Deaf community and interact more than the required amount of time tend to do MUCH better on their state certification exam[s].”

#### *Teaching Staff*

All five respondents discussed the importance of a high-quality teaching staff that consists of competent educators as well as practitioners. Respondent C stressed this point by saying that one of the more critical components to student success is a highly qualified staff, all of whom are credentialed, involved in professional development, and active at the national level. She went on to say that “I don’t think that we would have the curriculum in the way that it is structured if we didn’t have the faculty to make it so. I think that, certainly, curriculum is crucial, but the only reason we have that curriculum is because we have such qualified faculty...you couldn’t have a curriculum without the faculty that supports it.”

The five respondents unanimously agreed that having teaching staff who are engaged as practitioners is an important factor for student success. Respondent B supported this assertion by stating that teachers who continue their work as interpreting practitioners ultimately experience the most benefit. Respondent C added that it is important to have recent practical experience. Respondent E drove the point home by adding, “We are only as good as our up-to-date knowledge and skill[s], and we are only as good as we are invested in the community.”

## 5. Limitations of the study

This study had two main limitations. The first limitation was a lack of tracking of graduate credential rates on the parts of IEPs nationwide. In a 2009 NCIEC survey (Cokely & Winston, 2010), 130 programs were invited to participate. Fifty-four institutions responded to the survey. Of those, 30% of 2-year programs and 28 % of 4-year programs did not track graduate credential rates. Lack of tracking data results in a less-than-complete understanding of the current state of interpreter education in the United States. This limitation was beyond my control as a researcher.

The second limitation centered on the Phase Three Survey response rate. The return rate for Phase Three was 20%. There were several potentially contributing factors to the low response rate. The survey contained 112 questions—with 51 questions allowing for qualitative responses—and took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete. Additionally, the survey was deployed in late spring near the end of the traditional academic year. Because most IEPs are small departments staffed with a single full-time faculty member who also administers the program, that faculty member may not have had the time needed to complete the survey.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. *What is the readiness-to-credential gap of signed language IEPs in the United States?*

When considering the NCIEC data information that combined 2-year and 4-year programs and looked only at national-level credentials, the readiness-to-credential gaps can be described as follows: 27.3% of students are able to obtain credentials within 6–18 months postgraduation; another 30.3% of students are able to earn them within 18–24 months after graduation; and 42.4% of students require more than 24 months to obtain national credentials.

Using the Phase Three data, the average amount of time needed to earn state-level credentials (regardless of type of program) is 7–12 months, whereas the average amount of time needed to earn national-level credentials is between 18 and 19 months. The majority of programs indicate that their graduates are able to earn state-level credentials upon graduation, but more than 24 months are required to earn national-level credentials.

When applying the Phase Three data to further explore the credential rate at the state level, it is reported that 72.7% ( $n = 8$ ) of graduates from 4-year degree programs are able to earn state-level credentials upon graduation. The remaining 27.3% ( $n = 3$ ) have state-level credentials within 6–12 months. One-hundred percent of graduates have state-level credentials within 1 year of graduation. Conversely, for students in associate-level programs, only 8% ( $n = 1$ ) have credentials upon graduation, and only 33.3% percent have their state-level credentials 1 year after graduation. For 66.7% of graduates from 2-year programs, it takes more than a year, and 41.7% require more than 2 years postgraduation to earn state-level credentials.

When applying Phase Three data to further explore the credential rate at the national level, only the graduates from one program had national credentials upon graduation—and that was a 4-year program. Fifty percent ( $n = 5$ ) of 4-year-program graduates require 13–18 months after graduation to earn national-level credentials. Eighty percent ( $n = 8$ ) have national credentials by 13–18 months postgraduation. Only 20% ( $n = 2$ ) require 19–24 months, and no program requires longer than 24 months. Alternatively, when considering the average graduates from 2-year programs, 63% require more than 2 years postgraduation to earn national-level credentials.

### 6.2. *What curricular-related characteristics of successful IEPs affect readiness?*

#### 6.2.1 Various suggested approaches

In the literature review, several approaches or skills were suggested as a means of fostering effective interpreter education. Some researchers assert that the basis for the credentialing gap is that the “monologue” approach used by most IEPs is less than effective (Cokely, 2005; Roy, 2000). The present study’s results showed that 65.4% of the respondents use a discourse-based approach to instruction to a great extent in classroom discussion. Winston (2004) states that critical thinking skills are key to an interpreting education, and of the programs in this study, 69.2% incorporate critical thinking to a great extent. Winston (2004) also suggests that students need to assess their own skills and abilities, construct knowledge (vs. simply receiving it), and take responsibility for their own learning, thus fostering lifelong learning habits. In this study, 80.8% of respondents indicated that they incorporate self-analysis to a great extent. It appears that programs are including some of the suggested approaches. This may indicate a shift in what is being included in programs. Much of the literature regarding interpreter education has been written within the last decade, and books that have been published as part of the *Effective Interpreting Series* (Roy, 2000, 2005, 2006; Napier, 2009) have increased the dissemination of information, potentially resulting in the inclusion of suggested techniques. What were former gaps in instruction are now being covered by the curriculum.

#### 6.2.2 Practicum

Dean and Pollard (2001) suggested that the requirement of more structured supervision in the interpreting practicum would lead to more effective interpreting programs. Quantitatively (Phase Three), the results regarding practicum were not significant, but the qualitative data confirmed a significant impact. In Phases Two and Three, the requirements for the practicum varied in structure and duration; however, regardless of the structure or

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requirements, three of the five Phase Three respondents indicated that the practicum experience was a critical factor to student success. Respondent C indicated that “What goes on in the classroom is a minor part of our students learning the language/culture. Internship classes are crucial to skill development.” These data strongly suggest that the practicum experience has a considerable impact on student success. Just as student teaching is a key experience that is integral to the development of a teacher (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990), the practicum experience is critical to the development of competent interpreting practitioners.

### 6.2.3 Service learning

During consideration of the Phase Three data, it was found that time to state-level credentials and incorporation of service learning were significantly related. It is important to note that the significance was not in the number of programs that incorporated service learning but, rather, in those who did not incorporate it; graduates from all four programs who did not incorporate service learning did not earn state-level credentials until more than 2 years post graduation. Students who responded indicated that service learning experiences added something unique to their understanding of what they were learning in the classroom (Monikowski & Peterson, 2005).

## 6.3. *What “other-than-curricular”-related characteristics of successful IEPs affect readiness?*

The results from this study revealed evidence that more significant differences can be observed when considering “other-than-curricular” characteristics than when considering curricular characteristics. These differences are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

### 6.3.1 Type of program

The most significant difference can be seen with the type of program. The discussion of this factor has already been covered previously in this article, in the discussion centering on the current school-to-credential gap. It is abundantly clear that graduates from 4-year programs earn state- and national-level credentials at a much faster rate than do their counterparts at 2-year colleges. Despite this, 2-year degree programs outnumber 4-year degree programs almost two to one<sup>2</sup>. And the number of students being educated in 2-year programs exceeds the number of students being educated in 4-year programs almost three to one. According to the 2009 NCIEC IEP Needs Assessment (Cokely & Winston, 2010), a total of 1,037 students are enrolled in associate-level programs, whereas only 378 students are enrolled in baccalaureate-level programs.

### 6.3.2 Teaching staff

The key finding in the Phase Two qualitative portion of the study was the importance of the programs’ teaching staff. This finding overwhelmingly affirms the general conclusions of the literature that one solution for reducing the school-to-credential gap lies in using more qualified interpreter educators. Clearly, there is a documented need for educators who are skilled and competent as educators as well as practitioners (Roy, 2000; Winston, 2004). Interpreter educators need to understand how learning best occurs, be able to construct learning activities based on the learner’s needs, and evaluate their own effectiveness as educators (Winston, 2004). Educators who have advanced training in language study and who are researchers (Roy, 2000) are better positioned to experience success in preparing students. Winston (2004) suggested that one of the two critical challenges that IEPs confront daily is the ability to identify and assess qualified, competent faculty.

A major concern related to this finding is that according to the NCIEC 2009 IEP Assessment (Cokely & Winston, 2010), 43 signed language interpreter educators in the United States are expected to retire within the next 5 years, and it is projected that an additional 175 educators will be needed in the next 5 years. This shortfall makes the findings discussed here even more critical to the field.

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<sup>2</sup> See see [www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org)

### 6.3.3 Age of program

Another factor that reportedly had a significant impact on the IEP's success was the time-period in which the program was established—a factor not considered in any of the literature identified in this study. A significant relationship was found between (a) the tier ranks and (b) the two-decade grouping identifying when the programs were established. The study revealed that 77.8% ( $n = 7$ ) of the Tier Three schools were established subsequent to 1990, whereas 76.9% ( $n = 10$ ) of the Tier One schools were established prior to 1990.

It could be that the older programs are the associate-level programs and, as previously discussed, the 4-year programs seem to be more effective than the 2-year programs when considering the school-to-credential gap. This study showed that 58% ( $n = 11$ ) of associate-level programs were established prior to 1990, and 85% ( $n = 13$ ) of baccalaureate-level programs were established subsequent to 1990. It could also be that associate-level programs were established long ago and may be using outdated methods and approaches.

### 6.3.4 Involvement in the Deaf community

There is general consensus that successful IEPs infuse the knowledge and experience of the Deaf community into every aspect of the program (Cokely, 2005; Roy, 2000; Monikowski & Peterson, 2005; Winston, 2004; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004) because they are essential language and cultural models.

### 6.3.5 Summary

All of the Phase Two programs provide external opportunities to foster language acquisition and interpreting skill enhancement, and all program representatives who were interviewed agree that this activity is beneficial to students. Programs demonstrated a clear intention to develop and foster service learning programs, campus clubs, and activities to provide students with additional community-based interaction. Most of the Phase Two programs were located within a large Deaf community, and program directors agreed that close proximity to a large Deaf population is an indisputable advantage. The key to this finding is that regardless of the numerous opportunities that a program provides, it is the frequency with which students avail themselves to such opportunities that will ultimately influence their success.

## 6.4. *Additional findings*

An interesting and incidental discovery in this research—one that does not directly address a specific research question—centers on the intended purpose or expected end result of a degree in signed language interpreting. The prevailing literature supports the belief that IEPs should result in credential-ready graduates. The literature bemoans the school-to-credential gap and insists that steps need to be taken to change it. A large number of researchers (Cokely, 2005; Frishberg, 1995; Patrie, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Stauffer, 1995; Winston, 2004; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004, 2005) indicate that programs need to produce graduates who are able to earn interpreting credentials after graduation. However, a few programs disagree with this school of thought. Respondent 22, for example, stated, “Ours i[s] an entry-level program. We are not preparing people for national certification.” This respondent goes on to say, “[T]he goal of our program is not for students to be nationally certified. There is no way they could be ready for national certification in 3 years.” Respondent 19 indicated that her program cautions students that few will be ready for the performance/interview portion of the RID upon graduation. And, finally, Respondent 6 stated, “I object to the assumption here that the goal is to lower the graduation-to-credentialing gap. Two years of seasoning post graduation with intense mentorship should be expected and not [be seen] as a catalyst to credentialing. Your metric here is flawed . . . We are not aiming to speed this process up. We are aiming to foster lifelong learning and professional development.” The issue of the goal of credential-ready graduates is not universally accepted, and it will be difficult for the interpreter education profession to move forward without consensus on this important goal.



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### 7. Implications

On the basis of these research findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- IEPs need to receive additional support that will allow them to track students. This support should come in the form of national database, which is a major need for a future research agenda..
- Opportunities for teaching staff development need to be increased. Apart from the biannual convention of the Conference of Interpreter Trainers, the field provides IEP teaching staff very few opportunities to further develop their skills.
- Two-year interpreting programs need to be restructured so that their curricula are better aligned to facilitate student transfer into baccalaureate- level programs.
- IEPs need to foster more opportunities for out-of-classroom learning. Programs need to provide students with real-world experience through interaction within the Deaf and interpreting communities through practica and service learning.

### 8. Conclusion and recommendations for future research

The school-to-credential gap in interpreter education is a systemic crisis whose resolution will require collaboration among all stakeholders. Because IEPs are the primary producers of interpreters, the future of the interpreting field lies in the quality of education delivered by these IEPs. If changes are not made to improve the quality of the education provided by IEPs, the status quo will remain, and the field of interpreting will stagnate while deaf individuals suffer because of less-than-competent, unqualified interpreters. Considering the growing needs of well-trained interpreting professionals—and the near-crisis-level shortage of active interpreters that looms ahead—careful attention to this issue is essential. Change is required. Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005) summarize the direction of the interpreter education field as follows: “[I]t is time [that] we held employers’ feet to the fire, set ourselves a deadline, and begin working on the infrastructures. We all own the gap” (p. 15).

As a result of this study, the following recommendations are suggested for further research:

- Acquire a better understanding of alumni’s program perceptions: This study considered the perceptions of program directors. Program graduates may have differing viewpoints.
- Conduct quasiexperimental studies using control groups to empirically determine the effectiveness of various instructional approaches: This study yielded very general results regarding the effectiveness of various approaches and factors. A series of experimental designs—each of which considers a single approach—would enable more in-depth consideration of the various approaches.

### 9. Acknowledgment

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