

## RID Certification: Lessons Learned

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Good morning. I am Laurie Swabey, and I will be talking about RID certification. I am the chair of the Interpreting Department at the College of St. Catherine, where we offer a B.A. degree in ASL/English interpreting. Our college is one of five regional centers in the nation to be awarded federal funding to work on interpreter education, and one particular initiative our Center is leading is medical interpreting. So I have a particular interest in this topic, although I am not a testing or certification expert. The RID office would have loved to have sent someone; however they are planning our national convention in August, expecting over three thousand members, so the national office is very involved with the national conference right now, but wishes you very well.

So, I am giving more of a member perspective. I have been a member of the RID since 1976 and have been certified by the RID since 1977 and teaching interpreting since 1980. My interest and expertise is really in interpreting education, not testing and certification. But I think I have several things I hope will be of use to you in your work, and I hope that stakeholders in the field of sign language interpreting and the field of spoken language interpreting can work collaboratively to advance both fields. In developing certification processes for sign language interpreters over the years, we have certainly made our share of mistakes, and I hope you can benefit from what we've been through. As a side note, my involvement with spoken language interpreting started in 1990, when I met Bruce Downing and I began doing some teaching at the University of Minnesota in their program.

I thought I'd start off with a little history. RID was established in 1964 and as Bruce was saying, we actually started out as a registry of interpreters. Interpreters were considered "on the registry" if they were recognized by two other members as being competent and ethical. It wasn't until 1972 that we actually started a testing process. And at the time we thought that was a great thing. As we look back, we see we went from a system where people over time had to prove their competence both with professionals and with community members, to a system where it was just one snapshot of what people could do at one particular moment. So even though we were sure of ourselves at the time, we can now see how our first system was not as bad as we originally thought it was.

In 1972, when we started this formal testing procedure, we had about four hundred members and now we have over 12,000 members. Those are not *certified* members, but those are *members*. There has been some concern in our organization now that we have more non-certified than certified members. In 1972 when testing started, we had no degree-granting programs for interpreting, which those of us in education saw as an issue. In 2007, we have approximately ninety-nine associate degree programs, and although this number changes, I think we may be up to about thirty-three B.A programs. We also have one master's degree in sign language interpreting at Gallaudet University and a master's degree (which is very exciting) in teaching interpreting. This is an online program offered at Northeastern University, and it's in its second year. The first cohort will be graduating at the end of this year. This is going to have an incredible impact on our field, to have a master's program that prepares teachers to teach sign language interpreters, so that's a very exciting piece.

Talking about history, one of the mistakes that we made had to do with our partnerships with stakeholders. We originally started out being in very close partnership with NAD, which is the National Association of the Deaf. In 1972 when we lost some of our national funding that brought us together with them, we went our own separate way, developed our testing system, and did not include the NAD. In the late 80s and early 90s, NAD quite frankly was fed up with the RID and thought that we weren't addressing the issues of stakeholders. And they decided to establish their own certification process. I don't think that was good for the field, but I think it was a big wake-up call to the RID that we needed to be more inclusive and to consider stakeholder input. And after a lot of negotiation and meetings and planning, the NAD and the RID did join forces and created a new test, which we started administering about two years ago. It was named the NAD-RID National Interpreting Certification. I did bring information about the certification process and test, if any of you later during a break would like to see it. This is our practice DVD. It's very important to have test materials for people to practice, and this is very similar to the actual test, so I did bring that if anybody would like to look at that. I also brought examples of what our application materials look like. You may also be interested in this, our Journal of Interpretation. Again, another important component of having a testing or certification process is the component of education.

Another piece that we learned (and it took us a while to learn this lesson) was to have realistic expectations of what certification can accomplish. It's not a cure-all. We originally thought, and I'm speaking very generally, that testing would be a gate that would keep unethical and unqualified people out of the profession. Of course we see people who can pass the test. That they did well at that date doesn't mean that they're ethical. It doesn't even necessarily mean that they're competent in all the situations we would like them to be. So that's been a hard lesson for us to learn, that testing does not fix everything, and it's not everything that we want it to be. It measures people in a particular situation on that particular day. I don't know if you have this in your communities, but there was a lot of political pressure. I think for a long time, we really tried to please everybody; we didn't know how to address those issues, and it's taken us a long time to get a good sense about that.

A couple of other things I'll talk a little bit more about later are again being realistic about testing, and that going along with testing, we found we really needed a grievance procedure and a continuing education component. One of the things we feel is most important is to be able to be a good ethical decision maker and that's not something we can test. We can test people to see if they seem to understand the party line and if they can give a good description of what they would do in a situation and why, but are they truly ethical on the job? We really can't test for that. We've gone back and forth for years discussing *what is the standard?* Are we looking for the gold standard or are we looking for the basic driver's license that is going to get people on the road? What we have finally come to is a basic professional standard. What we have now for our generalist test is a minimum competency that people need to function in the field.

We have gone other ways before getting to this point. When we had a national standard that people were having difficulty meeting, many states developed their own state tests. At the time I was living in the state of New Hampshire, and we were not having interpreters pass the national test, even though they were graduating from interpreting programs. They were not passing the national test as quickly as we would have liked. The state developed a test, and the idea which a lot of us were in favor of

was that people would take the state test as a first step and then go on to the national test. What we found – a broad generalization in our field – is that people stopped. They got their state certification and did not go on to meet the national standard. So we are at the point now of thinking that this basic professional standard on the national level is the way that we should go.

Education is a very important component, both before and after testing. As you have seen from these statistics, we are going towards bachelor's degree programs in interpreting. We have a new provision that is going to go into effect in 2008, that interpreters will not be able to take the interpreting exam, NAD-RID National Interpreter Certification (NIC), if they do not have an associate's degree. So that's beginning in 2008. Right now, anybody that walks in the door can take the test. Starting in 2008, they will have to have an associate's degree. It does not have to be in interpreting; it just has to be an associate's degree. In 2012, candidates for certification will have to have a bachelor's degree, so that's something new that we have gone to.

The other thing that we have found, of course, is that we have to be very clear on the web site and through other avenues to show what our matrix is, what categories we are looking for, how people are being evaluated, how they are going to be assessed, and how they can be prepared. Providing preparation for certification is a big business. People often want that before they go in, even though they may have graduated from a two-year or four-year interpreting program. When and where they received their education, the type of work and continued education they have undertaken since graduating and their comfort with test taking, are all factors that influence their perception of readiness for certification.

Let me just talk about one more thing with respect to interpreting and education. We are very fortunate in interpreter education and with sign language interpreters to have an organization called CIT. The Conference of Interpreter Trainers is an association that brings together more than two hundred interpreter educators every two years for a national conference as well as publishing a newsletter and a proceedings. What is most important now, our biggest step forward, is that, based on the standards developed by CIT, there is now an independent accreditation process to accredit interpreter education programs. And programs are starting to go through that. Currently there are about ten programs that are in the two-year process which includes a self-study and a site visit. So we see accreditation as a very important piece.

Now, I'll talk about the knowledge test. The first thing that our certification candidates have to do is take a knowledge test. It consists of 150 multiple choice items, and there are two dates nationally when it's given. It's given the first Saturday in June and the first Saturday in December. Other than that, people can arrange to take it individually at other times, but it is more expensive.

I want to go back for a moment. It's a little confusing. We have a generalist test, which is really where the focus is, and in the generalist test, you take a knowledge test and then a performance test. We also have a legal certification test. For the legal certification, you have to earn the generalist certification first. And then you take a written legal test, and then a performance test for legal certification. We also have something called oral transmission, which is only of interest to a very small number. It doesn't involve sign language, but only the use of the face and mouth to do oral translation for people who don't use sign language. That was a very heavy political piece in some ways

too. We also have an educational interpreting certification that was not developed by the RID or NAD. It was developed by an outside organization, but it is now under the umbrella of RID. One of the concerns with that educational certification is that people called themselves certified, but they were only tested in interpreting in a K-12 setting. However, they may be working in a variety of community settings. When RID first started, we were going to have lots of specialty tests. In fact, we had a performing arts certificate. Now we look back on it, and we say with medical, legal, and educational settings needing qualified interpreters, why did we go from generalist to performing arts? We don't offer that certification any more, but it was something that we did in the past. We also don't offer a medical interpreting certification.

The other piece I wanted to address is that we do have a certificate called the CDI (Certified Deaf Interpreter) which is for deaf interpreters, interpreters who *themselves* are deaf. They often work as intermediary interpreters, as language specialists. That is a separate test, and one that I want to talk about related to the knowledge test, because some of the deaf people who want to take this test are native ASL signers, others are native English users. Some may have become deaf when they were five. Others, born deaf, with deaf parents, have ASL as their native language. Some deaf people are having a difficult time passing the written knowledge test and there was a demand to offer it in ASL. That now is being offered. So, the knowledge test for the deaf candidates is offered both in written English and in ASL on DVD. Candidates view the test questions on DVD and then mark their answers. Interestingly enough, having that piece has not increased the passing rate. And again it is an interesting discussion because if you're an interpreter, you need to be fluent in both languages. So that has been sort of a debate or a topic, whether or not that was a good way to go. I'm sure that's something some of you might face in terms of English-language proficiency for some of the less common languages.

We also have a performance test, of course, and for the performance test candidates for certification watch a DVD. On this DVD, test candidates are asked questions about how they would handle certain situations. They respond to these questions and their answers are recorded on video. Then they also do actual interpreting, simultaneous interpreting. On the old tests, the test before this one, the pass rate was about sixty per cent. Now, the pass rate is about thirty-three percent. On the written test, the pass rate is about eighty-eight per cent. Many candidates pass the knowledge test before or right after they graduate from their interpreting programs. They seem well prepared for this portion of the test, as you can see from the pass rate. With the legal written test, I think about eighty-eight per cent are passing the written test, and also a high number are passing the performance test.

A piece we have found very important is our certification maintenance program (CMP). Interpreters maintain their certification through a CEU program. It's not a lot of CEUs, in fact it only comes out to about twenty hours a year, but we have found that it really encourages the number of professional development opportunities. You have people that are just chair-warmers at professional development opportunities, but you also find many interpreters are truly engaged, and this has tended to move our field forward.

I will just say that we used to have a very formal kind of grievance procedure with a board making a decision. We have gone to a mediation system. So we are really

trying to resolve grievances through mediation, which we have found to be fairly successful.

I will go on to costs. Our current test cost one million dollars to develop, so it was very expensive. The sense that I'm getting from interviewing people in RID is that as much as we would like to have a certification, say in medical or something like that, it probably will not be performance-based, just because of the cost. But it could be that interpreters would achieve the generalist certificate and then take a written knowledge test, perhaps to demonstrate knowledge of the healthcare setting. Anyway, currently test candidates pay high fees to take the test. It costs between five hundred and six hundred dollars to the participant. And that just barely pays for the test. That does not incorporate any profit. We have to have raters who are very skilled at rating the test. When we have a rater training, it costs between fifty to seventy thousand dollars to train fifty raters. It is estimated that maybe thirty of them will rate for us.

We have a burn-out rate at testing centers. Our college is a testing center. People do it from their heart. They are paid twenty-five dollars to administer a three-hour test. They are going in, changing the tape during this three hour period, so they *can* do other work but they are interrupted throughout the testing time. So the administration of the test is heavy in terms of cost and people power. The RID would like to farm out the test. They can't find anybody that's willing to take it on because of the costs and the administrative needs.

Another issue is that it's difficult in some ways to keep the test current. We are still giving a test that was designed in the 1980s. It will be phased out within the next two years. There are things on that test that aren't current any more. When people are talking about technology, it's just simply not current. Test takers are having a hard time even understanding it if they are talking about certain things. So there is the cost of keeping the test current which has been incorporated into this. This is our first test that the RID feels is legally defensible, and reliable and valid. Again, such a test is much more expensive to develop. But of course, that's the direction we needed to go.

Also, it's very expensive when you need to bring in all of the experts (and it sounds like some of you have the expertise), such as psychometricians and the other true experts in testing and certification that need to be involved, as well as stakeholders, which are also a very important part of the process. The portfolio is a way that we have thought about going, although we haven't done it yet, where people make examples of their work on video, have letters of recommendations, and have their degrees. There's been talk of this both in the United States and Canada with their interpreting associations. That's not a way that we've gone yet, but it's certainly something that's under discussion. And as I told you, there is a BA requirement that will be in effect in the near future. Some people believe that there should also be an option for people to waive this requirement by submitting a portfolio. No decisions have been made on this but interpreters who have been interpreting for thirty years and don't have a bachelor's degree are advocating for a portfolio option or some other option in lieu of the bachelor's degree.

I want to close by saying again that this information on certification is from the perspective of somebody who is a longtime member and an educator. And I think that there are several critical components to keep in mind when considering a certification process: The educational component, knowing what standard you're going for; the

grievance procedure; the continuing education procedure; and having realistic expectations about what certification will do for the field.

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Q: I'd like to know what your knowledge test exactly tests?

A: There are questions about linguistics on a very basic level, knowledge about culture on a very basic level, knowledge about professional issues and the professional organization, and then interpreting issues. And some of them are just recall questions, others require a higher level of analysis or processing. We have a test prep book that gives examples of all of them.

Q: And then is that used as a screening test to be able to take the performance test?

A: Right. You can't take the performance, unless you've passed that test successfully.

Q: I'm curious. Is it considered in the ASL interpreting community that being able to read and write English is an important skill for ASL interpreters?

A: Yes. And we have talked about having an English proficiency test. There is no plan for that now, although we hope that the A.A. degree requirement, and then the B.A. degree requirement will cover at least part of the English proficiency piece. But no, we have never tested for that. In fact, to get into a lot of interpreting programs historically, you have not had to have proven competency in either ASL or English beyond whatever the college requires for English. So it's an area of weakness for us.

Q: I'm also curious where you got your million dollars, so I can go talk to them about giving us a million dollars.

A: I don't know where we got the million dollars. I really don't. Although maybe it's partly from our membership dues.

Q: Actually, [with regard to] the screening test issue, did you have a lot of discussion (in a field where certified people are hard to come by) about the worries about screening people out that could pass the performance test?

A: No. We have a very high pass rate because most interpreters do go through an interpreter education program. That seems to be a piece that we're very successful at doing. There's a suggested reading list and practice examples.

Q: One of the big concerns in court interpreting in particular is that the pass rates are so low. I mean, we're talking four percent or twenty percent, you know, sort of very low. And so, there you have a very high level of concern about telling somebody that they couldn't do the performance test because they did badly on a multiple choice written test.

A: That's probably more similar to our deaf interpreters who have a very low passing rate on the written test. And there is concern about that.

Q: I was fascinated. Actually, I'm trying to figure out the issue of why native ASL speakers would have trouble reading English. And then I realized well of course, it's a completely different language. And who's going to teach it? Can you talk a little bit about, just for general interest, how you teach reading written English to an ASL native speaker or language person?

A: Through bilingual, bicultural education programs. And deaf education is a whole other huge issue. Some deaf people have had opportunities to become fluent in ASL and English, either through their school or home environment. Other deaf people may not have had the opportunity to become fluent in ASL and/or English because of the education that was available to them.

Q: It just never occurred to me that native deaf people might not be able to read the newspaper. It just never occurred to me.

A: One of the big issues for deaf people of course is if they've grown up in a home with deaf parents who are fluent in ASL, they've got a first language base. It's much easier for them to learn a second language. If they grew up in a situation where they entered the educational system without any language base, that's much more difficult.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the practical side of delivering the test? I always hear that there is a lot of wait time, that people are not able to take the test, so that they can, you know, get there. And I know you've been working on improving that. How is that?

A: I will talk about that from the point of being a center, and it's a little bit of a sore point for us because RID used to say that our center was a "test on demand center," which we agreed to, and which means that people can call up and schedule a test. It's not just on a fixed schedule like the first Saturday of every other month. Instead there are a variety of time blocks on various days that are available on a first come, first served basis. What happened was people thought they could call up and say, "I want to take my test on Wednesday at 8:00 a.m.," and that's not the case at all. So that's where some of those complaints come from, that people think that they can call up and schedule a test at a moment's notice. Also, there are limits to the number of test slots, depending on the number of tests administrators. The test administrators who give the test are practically volunteering. The other thing that happens is that people want to wait until the last minute. If their employer has said, "You have to be certified within two years," people wait until they've been employed one year and ten months, and then they try to schedule a test. And when we say we can't schedule you within the next two months because it's summer and our testing center is already full for those limited slots, then they're also unhappy. We're seeing some of the testing centers across the nation close because it is very time intensive. With this new test, there are several different parts, and the person administering the test may have to change or start the tape every ten minutes over a two to three hour period. So it's very disruptive for the person who's also trying to work. From our perspective it's very clearly laid out where you register, when you register, and where you pay. Candidates for the test don't pay us, they pay the national office. But people don't always read everything and so they sometimes get frustrated. I think it is a good process but that people think that they can just do it instantly.

Q: One other question I had was about the state certification or registries. Have you been successful in moving away from that or do they continue to want to use those state certification processes and registries they had?

A: That varies. The state of Texas has had one for many years. Kansas has one. Wisconsin has one. They vary greatly, and that's a very politically hot issue that I'm not sure I want to touch on in the thirty seconds I probably have left. Some of them are well done and contribute to the field. Others, not so much.

Q: My question was just related to the comment you made about the fact that the national test had a very low pass rate, and states started creating their own certifications at a lower, more basic level. I'm just wondering, this new NIC, how does it fair?

A: This new NIC is what has been determined as the basic standard for entering into the profession.

Q: But how does it compare to those states? I mean, did it end up becoming more basic to address that need?

A: OK. Let me say one other thing about that which I didn't say. With this test, you can pass at three different levels. It's a generalist test with the following levels: the NIC level, the NIC Advanced level and the NIC Master level, so it does take in those three levels. The other thing about this is that it's a valid and reliable test, where the previous test had some issues, and so it was very difficult to compare it to state certification. I can't really address how this compares to state testing. That's your question, isn't it? I think what the national decided was that at least if people could get certified with this, it would meet a basic professional standard that was based on a reliable and valid test.

Q: On the registry, you say there are some certified members and non-certified members. What is required for someone to get onto the register without certification?

A: We no longer have a registry, even though we're still called the RID. Anyone can join as an associate member, and then if you're certified, you can join as a certified member. If you take the test and you're not a member of the RID, you pay a higher fee for the test than if you're a member.