

Establish an “American Sign Language & Interpreting” Degree Program at the University of Nevada, Reno

Interpreter Training at UNR – Proposal Details

This project is a coordinated effort to address many problems in the Deaf Community with a comprehensive unifying solution. The proposal for a Baccalaureate Degree program in “American Sign Language & Interpreting” was developed with an eye toward the unique challenges faced by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community in Northern Nevada. In order to build a robust major, **we must first begin with a minor**. This proposal seeks seed money to launch the first phase of the program: a minor in American Sign Language/Deaf Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno.

What are the challenges facing Deaf Nevadans?

1. There is a profound lack of sign language interpreters in Northern Nevada.
2. Many businesses and institutions are non-compliant with ADA title II for lack of available, qualified resources.
3. There is currently no Deaf service center in Northern Nevada.
4. Deaf community members continue to struggle with accessibility issues in their daily lives
5. Washoe County School District reports an ongoing need for qualified sign language interpreters to serve their Deaf and hard of hearing students.

Our mission is Two-fold:

1. [To train a cadre of interpreters to work in our communities; and](#)
 2. [To employ Deaf individuals as part of the program’s implementation.](#)
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Phase One: The minor in ASL/Deaf Studies

As with all big goals, we must crawl before we walk, and walk before we run. The university has expressed nearly unanimous support for a minor in American Sign Language/Deaf studies. To this end, we are proposing the addition of eight new courses for entry into the UNR course catalog for Fall of 2023. A complete list with course descriptions is attached to this proposal. This first academic year 2023-2024 will help us demonstrate interest and prove our ability to provide a quality educational path to all registered students. At this time, we have approximately 60 ASL 4 (AM 148) students, and we project that approximately 24 of them will seek to register for ASL 5, Deaf History and Fingerspelling I in the fall. This is a good-sized cohort for our program launch. Once classes populate the course catalog sometime in March, we will begin a public relations campaign to advertise the minor. We will have access to the Navigate system at UNR to blast out

emails to all currently enrolled ASL student levels 1-4. We can also utilize social media to generate interest. We will create a flier in both electronic and print versions for distribution to the community at large.

Deaf Community Participation Initiative

We must cultivate and maintain a strong working relationship with the Deaf Community in Northern Nevada. Without their support the program cannot succeed. The uniqueness of American Sign Language, as a modality different from spoken language, presents the first challenge to any would-be learner. Another barrier to language fluency is the lack of immersion experiences. Other language learners can travel to a country of language origin to garner immersion, but there is no “Deaf country.” This means that immersion experiences must be created by recruiting the assistance of local Deaf Communities.

Further, the Deaf population is extremely diverse. As a result of medical advances, and because of the influx of immigrant populations, the functionality and types of sign systems used can vary greatly. Some Deaf consumers have co-occurring disabilities, or cultural backgrounds that influence language acquisition and use. For this reason, an interpreter cannot successfully meet the needs of a wide spectrum of language users unless that interpreter has a deep understanding of the internal structure of American Sign Language, and exposure to its various subsets and pigeon signing systems (SEE, PSE etc.).

The best, and perhaps, the only way to acquire such specific knowledge is through instruction by, and exposure to, native sign language users. **Therefore, the Deaf community is essential to the training of qualified interpreters. Without native language users to provide exposure and guidance, our students will be unable to achieve the level of fluency required to succeed.**

That’s why this isn’t a simple degree curriculum proposal. It is also a jobs development program for a very specific population: Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals. While the degree program cannot employ a high number of Deaf people, it can provide meaningful, well-paid opportunities for Deaf Community engagement. As such, the program will actively seek grant funding for:

- 1 . Deaf teaching assistants (TAs) and Deaf tutors
2. The creation of a video library of Deaf stories, perspectives and insights that will inform the training of all our students.
3. Deaf-lead immersion weekend retreats, where students will spend time with our Deaf Community members in environments that use ASL to communicate 100% of the time.
4. Deaf consultation on curriculum development and implementation.

This initiative will create a locus of opportunity and growth to draw the Deaf Community up to campus and involve them in our program. The small price we pay for their time and expertise goes a long way toward building social capital with our most important partners: The Deaf Community. The current rough draft for our budgetary request is attached. Please note that I will be meeting with a budget writing specialist here at UNR to modify this document before submitting it to any grantmaking foundation.

Phase Two: The Interpreter Training Program

Pending the success of our first year with the minor in ASL/Deaf Studies, we will move to the second phase of this project and propose a major that bestows upon completion a Bachelor's degree in American Sign Language Interpreting. This Interpreter Training Program, or ITP will train interpreters with the assistance of qualified instructors and the Deaf Community Participation Initiative.

Qualified interpreters are in high demand at all levels of education and in the community at large. Graduates with a B.A. in interpreting will find a fertile job market. The demand for skilled interpreters is not limited to our local area; there is work to be had in all 50 states, in schools, medical and legal settings, and Video Relay Service centers.

The scarcity of highly skilled interpreters in Northern Nevada has been persistent and continual. This lack of service providers means that communication access for the Deaf and HoH (hard of hearing) Community is severely limited. Creating new, homegrown interpreters will reduce liability for business and services by providing the resources needed to satisfy community demands for accessibility.

During phase two, I will seek funding for a full-time teaching position for a Deaf instructor, ideally a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). Whether this position is supported by soft funding, or the university's departmental budget remains to be seen. Additionally, I will ask for an increased budget to support our team of Deaf TAs/Tutors and other assistants.

Bridge Building

This proposal aims to build working bridges between several entities within our community.

- From the Program to the social service sector: we will create home-grown interpreters that can serve in K-12 settings, post-secondary settings, and in the community at large, providing access to government services, hospitals, police and court rooms.
- We will build a bridge to the Deaf Community, to reach out and open space for them on campus, both literally and figuratively. By engaging their talent and support for

our program benefits can land on both sides of the fence, with both Deaf and hearing jobs, and most importantly Deaf Community investment in the outcome.

Service Learning and General Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the guiding principle of our proposal. The Deaf community helps to train our interpreters, and our interpreters volunteer to assist the Deaf community. Reciprocity engenders cooperation and social capital, which will boost the success of our graduates entering the field.

Tutor-Trading with Deaf students at Washoe County School District

Our Deaf Studies & ASL/Interpreting students and Washoe County's dDeaf students can forge tutor-trading arrangements that will benefit both parties. Interpreting/Deaf Studies students will offer assistance as tutors and classroom aides in K-12 settings. Washoe County dDeaf students will assist our students in fulfilling the required Service Learning component of the curriculum. We hope that the tutor-trading program can also become a recruitment path for transitioning Deaf teens into higher education. Deaf students at Hidden Valley Elementary, Vaughn Middle School, and Wooster High School will have access to specialized service provided by our students.

Serving Nevadans Well

The challenge for Nevada has always been how to justify providing excellence for a small population. Our state has fought to have a voice on the national stage, for services in rural areas, and much needed funding for infrastructure. Nevadans have always been a small, but mighty group. Though few in number, we have big hearts and bigger vision. Growing up here provided me with a sense of limitlessness that I still have. I know we can make the lives of Deaf Nevadans better, and moreover, we should.

Outcomes -

An Integrated, high quality ITP will:

- Create local jobs for Deaf and hearing alike.
- Engender social capital within and between communities as we work toward a common goal.
- Act as a locus of support for the Deaf community by example, and in practice.
- Relieve the burden of many public and private institutions that struggle to provide interpreting accommodations.

- Providing ASL/Deaf Studies as a minor will allow those majoring in Special Education to supplement their degree with a working knowledge of ASL, thereby increasing the pool of TODs (Teachers of the Deaf) who are fluent in sign *and* culturally sensitive.
- Improve education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children in Northern Nevada

Thank you - For questions, comments or suggestions please contact:
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