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## Virtual and Viral: Shifts in Signed Language Interpreter Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mark A. Halley

*University of North Florida, mark.halley@unf.edu*

Dawn M. Wessling

*Faculty, dawn.m.wessling@unf.edu*

Stephanie N. Sargent

*Former Graduate Student, Interpreter in Private Practice, stephanie.n.sargent@gmail.com*

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## Virtual and Viral: Shifts in Signed Language Interpreter Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

### Cover Page Footnote

We gratefully acknowledge the interpreter educators across the globe who took the time to participate in our study and shared their experiences during such a turbulent time in our history.

# **Virtual and Viral: Shifts in Signed Language Interpreter Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Mark A. Halley**

**Dawn M. Wessling**

University of North Florida

**Stephanie N. Sargent**

Graduate, University of North Florida

## **ABSTRACT**

While online education has become more prevalent throughout the years, nothing prepared signed language interpreter educators for the likes of the COVID-19 pandemic. We surveyed educators in the United States and internationally to not only determine if practices had changed to keep up with the demands of the pandemic but to learn how these practices were implemented. This study delves into how interpreter educators adjusted their pedagogical approaches during the global pandemic. Responses showed a variety of adaptations to meet the needs of students, and a primary theme was the adeptness of educators in overcoming technology frustrations, intent on providing rigorous curricula, and the emotional support their students needed during trying times. The data revealed major changes for students in practical skills courses (83%), sign language courses (87%), and internship or practicum courses (90%), as well as minor changes in theory courses (61%). Faculty indicated changes in their scholarship and service as well as the personal/emotional impact the pandemic has had on their professional work. This study provides a snapshot of educators' response to the pandemic, and we argue that qualitative research approaches are needed to discover the specific pedagogical tactics employed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

In this paper, we describe the phenomenon that unfolded as the world went viral and signed language interpreter educators went virtual. Despite the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical similarities between spoken and signed language interpreting, notable differences exist in the ways that interpreters have historically been trained in these two modalities. For this reason, in this paper, we turn our attention only to interpreter education programs (IEPs) dedicated to preparing interpreters who will use one or more signed languages as their working languages.

A search of the existing literature reveals no studies that have directly examined how the COVID-19 global pandemic has affected signed language interpreter education. Research has been conducted on pedagogy for existing interpreter education programs (IEPs) delivered via distance

learning and the use of online resources<sup>1</sup> when teaching interpreting students (see, for example, Darden et al., 2015; Darden & Maroney, 2018; McDermid, Pope, & Conrad, 2019). However, there is a lack of literature studying the shift in pedagogical practices of signed language interpreter educators amidst a global pandemic that has negatively impacted the ability to be in real spaces together. To address this lack of empirical knowledge about the shift to distance learning in interpreter education, we begin by providing an overview of the literature on 1) IEPs, 2) COVID-19 and distance learning, and 3) IEPs and distance learning. This review of the literature encompasses a variety of key concepts in distance learning, including technology, delivery approaches, and student engagement.

In this study, we examine shifts in signed language interpreter education across the globe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the resulting global pandemic brought nearly all sectors, public and private, to a screeching halt for most of the world in March 2020. As billions across the globe adapted to pandemic conditions, interpreter educators were faced with the unforeseen and unprecedented challenge of teaching signed language interpreters while adhering to mandatory social distancing and other precautionary measures. Signed language interpreters have traditionally been educated in face-to-face settings, which makes an exploration of the shifts in contemporary signed language interpreter education during the pandemic a worthwhile line of inquiry. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions: a) What are the perceptions of signed language interpreter educators about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pedagogy and delivery approaches, and b) how did their work and interpreter education shift as a result?

## **INTERPRETER EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Before the beginnings of the professionalization of American Sign Language/English interpreting in the United States in the 1960s, signed language interpreters were typically those who had personal connections with deaf people. They were family members, teachers, clergy, and others with close ties to local deaf communities, despite having no formal education in interpreting theory or practice (Cokely, 2005). As mandates addressing accessibility and protecting the communication rights of deaf people and people with disabilities were enacted into law, ad hoc training of interpreters began. The first IEP in the United States was established in 1948 in Missouri to prepare interpreters to work in religious settings (Ball, 2013). In 1963, the first organizational meeting of individuals who interpreted for deaf people was convened at Ball State Teachers College, which led to the establishment of the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) one year later (Ball, 2013). In the 1970s, a series of federal grants were issued to provide interpreter training in several key areas of the United States, many of which remain in place (Ball, 2013). In those early days, IEPs in the United States were considered vocational training rather than academic preparation, and programs were often short, ranging in length from a few weeks to two years (Ball, 2013). Today, the field is shifting toward more rigorous and

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the term “distance learning” in a general sense to refer to both synchronous and asynchronous learning that takes place outside of the traditional face-to-face classroom environment. When discussing specific technologies leveraged in distance learning, we also use terms such as “online resources” and “teaching online” to specifically note the technical aspects of distance learning.

lengthy programs of study. For example, the current certification process for the RID includes the requirement of a bachelor's degree or the equivalent of sitting for the performance examination (RID, 2021). Further, sixteen bachelor-level and only four associate-level IEPs are currently accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE) of the over 140 IEPs in the United States.

### **COVID-19 AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

A key concept for contextualizing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is *Emergency Remote Education* (ERE). As Bozkurt et al. (2020) explain, distance learning existed in many forms before COVID-19, and thus the interruption of education due to the pandemic should be aptly referred to as ERE. The researchers discuss the concerns that arise with ERE and the inequity it poses across the globe. Many issues were identified regarding shifting to ERE and included: 1) psychological; 2) educational roles of parents; 3) community support; 4) pedagogy of care, affection, and empathy; 5) assessment; 6) data privacy concerns; 7) digital divide; 8) inequity and social justice; 9) gender issues; and, 10) competencies to survive in a time of crisis (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Further, the authors detail how nations handled the pandemic in different ways as they shifted into ERE. With so many different technologies implemented across the globe for educational delivery, the researchers conclude that “no single technology is superior to other ones, and different technologies, if used purposefully and adequately, can serve well to facilitate education” (p. 10). While Bozkurt et al. (2020) did not focus on IEPs, their findings do serve as a useful comparative baseline for distance learning in pandemic conditions. Our study aims to narrow the field of investigation to focus solely on how IEP faculty shifted their pedagogical methods to meet the demands of ERE.

Another study focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic describes the importance of teachers adapting their teaching methods when working with deaf and hard of hearing students via distance learning. Alsadoon and Turkestani (2020) share recommendations for virtual classroom improvements for students since the onset of COVID-19. Accessibility recommendations include videoconferencing (such as Zoom), interpreters, captions, and sharing materials before lectures. While this study did not focus on IEPs, it explored shifting pedagogical methods during a pandemic and therefore helps to frame shifting pedagogies for signed language interpreter education. Alsadoon and Turkestani (2020) also reported that teachers found virtual classrooms for deaf and hard of hearing students to be time-consuming, prone to technical issues due to inadequate bandwidth, and cause additional social pressures for students. Faculty also struggled with the amount of time it took for interpreters to interpret the lecture and/or to interpret questions from the student, perhaps leaving the hearing students bored and causing them to lose interest in the lecture. The study concluded that more research was necessary to better understand how technology plays a role in distance education for deaf and hard of hearing students. We extend this suggestion to the investigation of the role technology plays in interpreter education. In particular, Alsadoon and Turkestani's (2020) findings suggest challenges of teaching children during a pandemic that may parallel teaching in IEPs, such as connectivity problems.

### **IEPs AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

The use of technology is often taken for granted by developed countries, and it is not until we look at less developed countries that the realization happens of how important technology is in

interpreter education and pedagogy. An overview of distance learning technology and approaches in interpreter education is helpful for understanding a shift to ERE during a pandemic. Darden and Maroney (2018) studied the impact of technology on interpreter education in the United States and in Ghana, comparing the two countries to identify successful outcomes. In the United States, while most the IEPs are conducted in-person, some institutions house hybrid programs, in addition to several programs being online (Darden & Maroney, 2018). The researchers conducted a pilot study to better understand the role of technology in an interpreter education and/or professional development setting. The researchers deployed a mobile-based learning platform (m-learning) to investigate the phenomenon. Findings suggested that teachers must consider the accessibility and reliability of internet access for students, the bandwidth capabilities as some digital content requires more than others, and the students' familiarity with the technology being used. In emphasizing the importance of access to the requisite technology, they note:

Due to the visual-gestural nature of signed languages, the use of video as a teaching tool in signed language interpreter education in the U.S. is widespread. Advances in technology, such as video compression rates supporting at least 10–15 frames per second (Cavender, Ladner, and Riskin 2006), consistent access to the Internet and cloud computing, and easily shared digital files have led to a general reliance and dependency upon video for instruction and assessment. (Darden & Maroney, 2018, p. 453)

Considering that an activity may be successful for a face-to-face setting, educators must assess their teaching practices to determine if these activities are transferrable and equally accessible in an online capacity. One take-away provided by a Ghanaian participant suggested the course creators develop a feature that allows the content to be accessed both on and offline during times of internet outages (Darden & Maroney, 2018). The results of this study of m-learning provide insight into the requirements for teaching interpreting via distance learning, but they do not specifically address how to adapt one's pedagogical approaches and delivery systems from fully in-person to a distance-learning experience as rapidly as was required due to the existence of a global pandemic.

Another study examined various aspects of pedagogies and their efficacy in delivering interpreter education via distance learning. McDermid, Pope, and Conrad (2019) explored project-based activities in distance learning. While the study is granular and does not address curriculum design for an entire IEP, the researchers employed a mixed-method approach focused on students engaging in a sight translation project online, viewing/participating in four Web-based lessons, and then re-submitting the sight translation. The researchers then analyzed the data to determine whether the online lessons contributed to student improvement. Although the study yielded conflicting results, the data suggested that online lessons did help participants to improve on resubmissions. Noting negative feedback provided by students, the researchers point to navigating new online platforms, less interaction than traditional classes, and internet availability as potential barriers to success. However, students shared positive feedback regarding distance learning, focusing on the ability to fit lessons into their schedules. Taken together, the findings tentatively support distance learning for sign language interpreting education, particularly for project-based learning and sight translation skill development.

At the time of this writing, no studies have addressed attrition for interpreting students in distance programs; there has similarly been little investigation into attrition rates for students in general during the pandemic (see Ogunmokun et al., 2022). However, attrition in distance learning has been a topic of research for more than two decades. While some educators argue that a higher dropout rate from distance learning programs is because most students in this population are older and thus lead busier lives, others allege that it is simply the nature of distance learning and that some students need in-person education. Regardless, a study by Carr (2000) found that “several administrators concur that course-completion rates are often 10 to 20 percentage points higher in traditional courses than in distance offerings” (Carr, 2000, para. 11). Yet there are professors of distance learning courses who can maintain the interest of students by engaging and interacting regularly. One such professor experienced this first-hand when “he switched to a more interactive Internet program that allowed him to hold regular chats and organize email messages more efficiently, [and] his course-completion rates jumped from 62 percent to 90 percent” (Carr, 2000, p. 35). This study provides insight into the complicated world of distance learning, and the modifications professors must make to their pedagogy to meet the needs of a diverse student population. While distance learning approaches have necessarily shifted with advances in technology over the past few decades, retention remains a problem in a variety of disciplines (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Distance learning in signed language interpreter education continues to be an area of research. A study by Darden et al. (2015) of a graduate signed language interpreting program in its infancy analyzed the effectiveness of one IEP. Referencing work by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) into online interactions, they note that “for online courses, interaction alone did not indicate deep engagement with the curriculum,” (Darden et al., 2015, p. 269) but that “...sustained teaching presence that encourages participation, but is not teacher-centered, is crucial” (Garrison and Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p. 145).<sup>2</sup> This data supports McDermid, Pope, and Conrad’s (2019) findings that the distance learning project did not garner as much participation as a traditional program (their four online lessons were not teacher-led). However, Darden et al. (2015) chose not to focus on the quickly changing technology available for distance learning but rather on the effective underlying principles educators could use to teach signed language interpreting via an online platform. The results supported other earlier findings on using technology to learn signed language interpreting. They found emergent themes of:

...the flexibility that asynchronous interaction provides, the ability to utilize different technologies for different purposes, and the convenience of interacting with colleagues at a distance. However, collaborating and interacting through technological mediums can be complicated and is always subject to failure of the systems involved. (Darden et al., 2015, p. 275)

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<sup>2</sup> In distance learning, educators face an increased challenge in fostering and maintaining student engagement. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that because teachers must ensure that students are “...creating meaning and confirming understanding... It is not educationally desirable or reasonable from a time-management perspective to have the teacher respond to each comment. But it is crucial that the teacher moderate and shape the direction of the discourse” (p. 269).

While the study reported both positive and negative outcomes for interpreting education delivered primarily via distance learning, the IEP also included two on-site, week-long stays. This helped the students get to know one another and build a sense of camaraderie, which overwhelmingly contributed to the success of the online classes (Darden et al., 2015). During a pandemic such as COVID-19, however, hybrid modalities with face-to-face components were not generally an option due to social distancing constraints.

Distance learning technologies have also been employed across a variety of IEPs that prepare spoken language interpreters and translators. For example, Hirci and Peterlin (2019) assessed the incorporation of digital wikis<sup>3</sup> into translator training, concluding that while participants generally considered face-to-face models to be easier, they reported wikis to be an effective approach for time management. Paralleling these findings, an evaluation of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in interpreter education by Braun et al. (2020) found that the use of VLEs in one program “amplified the need for interaction management and encouraged the development of alternative interaction strategies, broadening the students’ interactional competence and, ultimately, their adaptive expertise” (p. 275). However, despite a trend toward the adoption of digital technologies in interpreter and translator education, such changes do not come without negative consequences. For instance, translator trainers have reported dissatisfaction with online teaching due to a lack of peer interaction, the challenges of facilitating distance learning, and the perception that trainees are more apt to search for “quick answers” rather than engaging in critical thinking (Lee & Huh, 2018, p. 457). Further, trainers have described an increased workload as one of the perils of distance learning, noting that they feel “more obliged to make their feedback more detailed lest trainees were left with any misunderstandings or misinterpretations” (p. 457).

Given the historical trend for signed language interpreter education to be delivered in face-to-face formats, the studies we have explored here are helpful for conceptualizing what education delivered via distance learning may look like during emergency situations. Although distance learning was not a novel phenomenon in interpreter education at the onset of the pandemic, the rapid and global shift to new delivery approaches was unprecedented. An overview of the existing approaches, therefore, provides a clearer look into the possibilities and pitfalls in ERE.

## SUMMARY

After an examination of the literature, it is clear there is a need for research about the pedagogical and delivery shifts in IEPs during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this gap in current knowledge, we surveyed respondents from an international pool to determine what, if any, shifts were needed to continue to teach signed language interpreting students during a global pandemic.

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<sup>3</sup> Hirci and Peterlin (2019) conceptualize a wiki according to Leuf and Cunningham’s (2001) definition: a “freely expandable collection of interlinked web pages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database, where each page is easily edited by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client” (p. 14).

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

Respondents in our study were signed language interpreter educators from across the globe. The distribution method resulted in a snowball effect in sampling; that is, respondents frequently shared the survey with colleagues. Respondents ranged in age from 25 – 34 to 65 – 74 and were primarily female (73%).<sup>4</sup> Approximately 84% of responses came from within the United States (West: 26%, Midwest: 11%, South: 23%, Northeast: 24%). The remaining 16% of responses from outside the United States were gathered from interpreter educators in the following countries: England, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Detailed demographic data is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Demographics of All Respondents*

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Employment status		
Tenure, full time	19	43.2%
Non-tenure, full time	13	29.6%
Instructor, part-time	8	18.2%
Other faculty position	4	9.1%
Age		
25-34	5	11.4%
35-44	14	31.8%
45-54	7	15.9%
55-64	16	36.4%
65-74	2	4.6%
Gender		
Male	10	22.7%
Female	32	72.8%
Non-binary	1	2.3%
Prefer not to state	1	2.3%
Race/ethnicity		
White	42	95.5%
Black	1	2.3%
Other	1	2.3%
Deaf status		
Deaf or hard of hearing	5	11.4%
Not deaf or hard of hearing	38	86.4%
Prefer not to state	1	2.3%
Interpreting experience		
1-5 years	2	4.8%
6-10 years	4	9.5%

<sup>4</sup> Reported percentages are rounded for ease of reading.

11-15 years	7	16.7%
16-20 years	5	11.9%
21-25 years	8	19.1%
26-30 years	3	7.1%
>30 years	13	31.0%
<b>Educator experience</b>		
1-5 years	10	22.7%
6-10 years	11	25.0%
11-15 years	6	13.6%
16-20 years	5	11.4%
>20 years	12	27.3%

Despite the diversity reflected in their responses, respondents most frequently fell into the following categories: full-time, tenured, white, female, and non-deaf. We note that IEPs in many countries typically lack faculty of color, as well as faculty who are deaf. The respondents' demographics align with other studies of interpreting and interpreter education (NIEC, 2015).

## **MATERIALS**

The survey instrument (Appendix A) was comprised of both closed- and open-ended questions. The questions aimed to collect data that would center around the guiding research questions. The survey was distributed directly from the survey program (Qualtrics) through social media, professional contacts, professional organizations, and listservs.

## **PROCEDURE**

This study proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Florida (#20-087) in December 2020, and data collection took place through a survey instrument in January and February 2021.

We first conducted a pilot study and made revisions based on feedback from respondents in the pilot testing group. Following an initial request for participation, reminder emails were sent at regular intervals for ten days. Before participation, all respondents were provided with informed consent within the survey tool and indicated agreement to participate. The survey was closed when no further responses were being gathered.

Eleven respondents' data were removed due to incomplete responses. The final pool of respondents included 44 completed surveys that met the criteria for use in this study. The researchers conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the survey data. A snapshot of responses to the pandemic is provided via reporting of numerical findings. We then employed thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of responses to the open-ended questions to identify overarching themes. To strengthen the analysis, we approached the data in two phases. First, we performed the qualitative analysis individually. After familiarizing ourselves with the data and forming initial impressions, we discussed our analyses with the entire research team, ensuring that all relevant aspects of the data were illuminated and consistent across the research team.

## FINDINGS

In this section, we report key findings evident in the survey data. Specifically, we describe the overarching trends in interpreter educator responses to the pandemic at curricular and institutional levels and share illustrative examples of responses to open-ended qualitative questions.

### LOGISTICAL ACCOMMODATIONS

No respondents that their programs either a) were completely suspended as a result of the pandemic or b) continued as normal. Instead, all respondents indicated programmatic changes implemented to address the unfolding public health crisis. However, decisions about approaches to the pandemic were made at a variety of levels and were not consistent across programs. A plurality of course delivery decisions was made by institutional administration: 37% reported decisions made by administrators, and 33% reported decisions made collaboratively between administrators and faculty. Only 17% of respondents indicated that faculty were empowered to make independent decisions about course delivery methods during the pandemic. Further, respondents indicated a variety of external bodies that had a bearing on course delivery, including guidance from governmental authorities and medical experts. Such external organizations might have included mandated closures and quarantines or lockdowns from the onset of the pandemic through data collection. In other words, the range of choices available to faculty – even those who were able to make “independent decisions” about course delivery – may have been limited (e.g., public health mandates).

### ACADEMIC LIFE: TEACHING, SERVICE, AND SCHOLARSHIP

To address the impacts of COVID-19 on faculty, respondents were asked to consider academic life and workload during the pandemic. When considering the life of faculty in academia, the work is often divided among three areas: teaching as their primary duty, with service and research/scholarship<sup>5</sup> at the lower end of responsibilities in many institutions that house IEPs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> We use the term ‘scholarship’ as an inclusive term to encapsulate both traditional research and other scholarly activities that faculty may engage in as a part of their workload.

<sup>6</sup> Although this assumption would be challenging to verify, we note that it is likely given that, in the United States for instance, few R1 and R2 institutions offer IEPs. Further, we note that while our home institution, the University of

However, for many faculty, scholarship responsibilities have become more heavily weighted in recent years (see, for example, Green, 2013). Most respondents indicated notable workload increases during the pandemic. Ninety percent of the respondents reported that they shifted to physical distancing and distance learning/ERE in about the middle of March 2020, a shift which we note is associated with changes in work/life balance. Respondents were asked to categorize changes to their workload across three areas: teaching, service, and scholarship. In the next section, we identify some of the responses related to these three areas. A fourth area we explore that arose from the open-ended data relates to faculty and student morale due to the emotional impact of the pandemic.

### ***TEACHING***

As IEPs shifted to ERE following the onset of the pandemic, faculty in our study reported a tremendous increase in their workload related to teaching. The consensus was that the time and effort required to make this transition was far greater than they had experienced or planned for. Some of the reasons that faculty described for the increased workload in this area were that “teaching had to be rethought,” “I had to ensure that every single piece of media...was digitized,” “teaching required much more prep,” and “I had to completely revamp my coursework.” The increase in this area impacted the faculty’s ability to engage in the other two areas of their work: service and scholarship.

### ***SERVICE***

This area was at times reported to have increased, and at other times, the respondents reported that their service duties decreased. Initially, we considered that *service* might apply to several areas. For example, community or public service interpreting may be considered service in a practical sense, but in academia, service often refers to work on committees and other administrative functions outside of teaching. Respondents described their service as being reduced when it related to community-based events and engagements but increased concerning administrative and committee work for their institutions. As institutions grappled with logistical challenges posed by the pandemic, faculty were compelled to contribute in ways that ensured continuity of education. Some of the committee work was in response to the COVID-19 outbreak to, as respondents explained, “develop policies, processes, and protocols to facilitate data collection in an online environment,” and much of the “service became totally through zoom meetings,” which also “enables me to have more meetings (bump-to-bump) as compared to meetings on-site.” Thus, while service was impacted by the pandemic, it seems to have improved the administrative efficiency for faculty in the other work of their institutions but may have been less effective in engaging with local deaf communities through external service.

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North Florida, recently achieved R2 status, a search for interpreter education programs in the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf database indicates that the majority of programs today are offered at the associate or certificate level.

## **SCHOLARSHIP**

While we asked about this aspect, the responsibility of some faculty may not include scholarship as part of their workload. For the respondents who engage in scholarship, they described this area as having been impacted in ways that suggested that scholarship was no longer prioritized. In some cases, “research was put on hold,” “slowed considerably,” with “less time for my required research,” and it was put “on the back burner.” Some of the respondents also talked about conferences being canceled and that there were instances of delays in writing or completing ongoing projects. One of the respondents mentioned that they found it “pretty hard to organize and follow research activities (tied to a practice field).” Another respondent said, “WHAT research? Each week I was dealing with a student either being diagnosed with COVID or dealing with severe mental health challenges.” This response ties to the next section of our data, in which we elucidate the emotional impact of the pandemic on respondents.

## **EMOTIONAL IMPACT**

Themes around the emotional impact of COVID-19 and the continued lasting impacts were uncovered in the analysis of responses to open-ended questions. Several of the respondents talked about the stress and emotional impact of the pandemic on themselves and their students. One respondent made clear that the morale of their students was impacted in that they “need more support when everything in their own lives is harder because of the pandemic.” They discussed the loss of “connection with students” and the feeling that students lacked “confidence in me as a teacher” due to challenges with technology and struggling to meet deadlines for both the faculty member *and* students. Faculty talked about lacking the motivation to do anything more as they were overwhelmed by the other areas of their academic and personal lives. Furthermore, they referred to multiple meetings via Zoom “on top of screen time” as being exhausting. Several respondents identified a notable change in their work in that they became full-time faculty or experienced a shift in their work responsibilities as they were charged with running an IEP as an administrator because of COVID-19. As one respondent shared, personnel changes at their institution leading up to the pandemic left them in a challenging situation: “I was left to run the program alone [sic] I also had to prepare the adjunct faculty to teach virtually - the college materials for said training were not user-friendly, so I spent a good part of the summer training faculty and making suitable training materials.” Finally, three of the respondents added comments about leaving the field of interpreter education and pursuing other work as a result of their experiences during the pandemic. To be clear, as of the writing of this manuscript, the pandemic continues, which is echoed by the respondents who shared that “it’s not ‘after’ yet,” and that the preceding year felt like “three years or more...it is not over yet.” Respondents described this time as infinitely challenging in that it was something that “I will never forget and the students that I taught will be forever etched in my memory” and that “It feels as though we are doing everything we can do and still failing daily.”

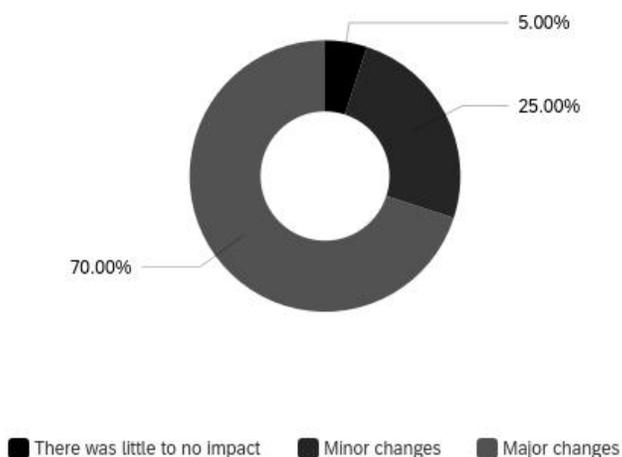
Some of the responses suggest that there may be long-term consequences far beyond the classroom for interpreter educators. While the long-term consequences of the pandemic on interpreter education remain to be seen, only 4% of respondents indicated that they planned to make no adjustments to their teaching going forward. Instead, respondents noted intentions to

retain a variety of new practices beyond the pandemic, including reduced assignments, increased virtual meetings, greater flexibility, increased use of non-local guest speakers, and changes to internship requirements (e.g., allowing virtual internships). While we have been able to illuminate the typical areas of an academic's life and the emotional impact of the pandemic on the work of faculty members, the equanimity of teaching under a cloud of a global pandemic remains troubling moving forward.

## PERCEPTIONS OF COVID IMPACT ON COURSEWORK

Respondents were asked to rate the level of impact of the pandemic for different types of coursework, both in terms of faculty and perceived student impact. The various types of coursework in a typical IEP included practical interpreting skills (e.g., consecutive or simultaneous interpreting courses), sign language courses, interpretation theory courses, and internship or practicum courses. Respondents indicated that there were primarily major changes<sup>7</sup> for themselves as faculty in practical skills courses (70%), sign language courses (77%), and internship or practicum courses (84%), while respondents reported primarily minor changes in theory courses (55%). Although rare, some respondents indicated that the pandemic had little to no impact on their work in each of these course areas: practical skills courses (5%), sign language courses (5%), theory courses (26%), and internship or practicum courses (5%). See Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4 for a visual representation of responses.

*Figure 1: Reported Impact of Pandemic on Interpreting Practical Skills Courses*



<sup>7</sup> We note that “major changes” and “minor changes” were not operationalized for this study.

Figure 2: Reported Impact of Pandemic on Sign Language Courses

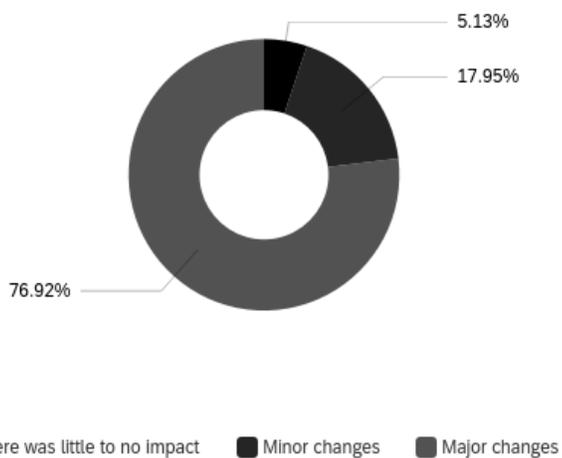


Figure 3: Reported Impact of Pandemic on Interpreting Theory Courses

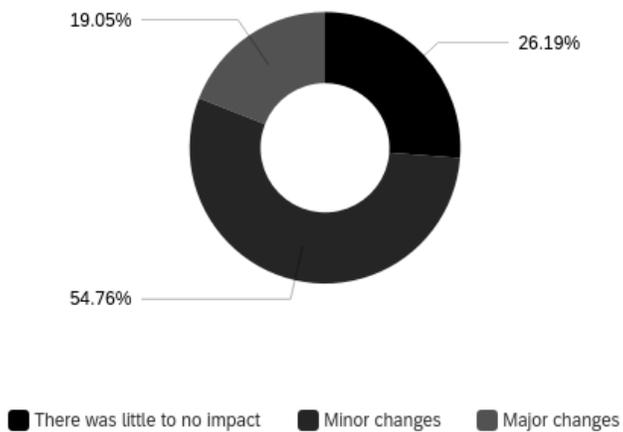
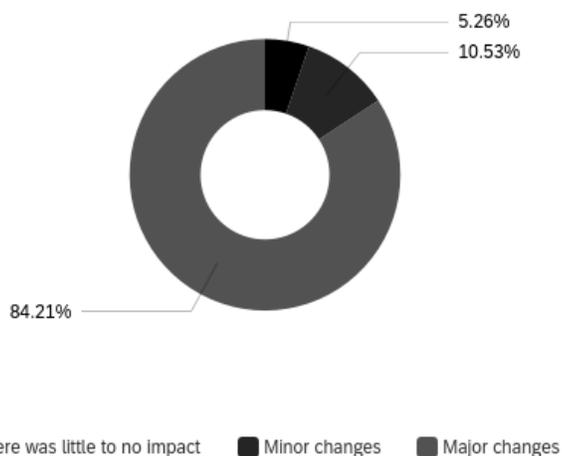


Figure 4. Reported Impact of Pandemic on Internship or Practicum Courses



When asked to rate the impact of the pandemic on coursework for students, results followed the same general pattern, despite variation in percentages. Respondents indicated that there were primarily major changes for students in practical skills courses (83%), sign language courses (87%), and internship or practicum courses (90%), while respondents reported primarily minor changes in theory courses (61%). Much like the estimation of the impact of the pandemic on their work, few respondents indicated that the pandemic had little to no impact on students in each of these course areas: practical skills courses (5%), sign language courses (3%), theory courses (12%) and internship or practicum courses (5%). See Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, and Figure 8 for a visual representation of responses.

Figure 5: Perceived Impact of Pandemic for Students in Interpreting Practical Skills Courses

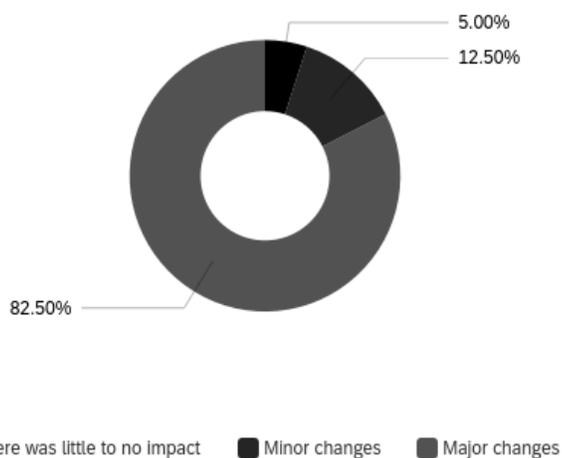


Figure 6: Perceived Impact of Pandemic for Students in Sign Language Courses

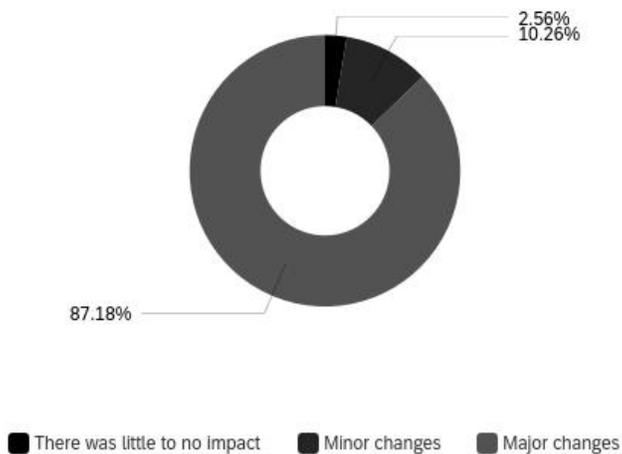


Figure 7: Perceived Impact of Pandemic for Students in Interpreting Theory Courses

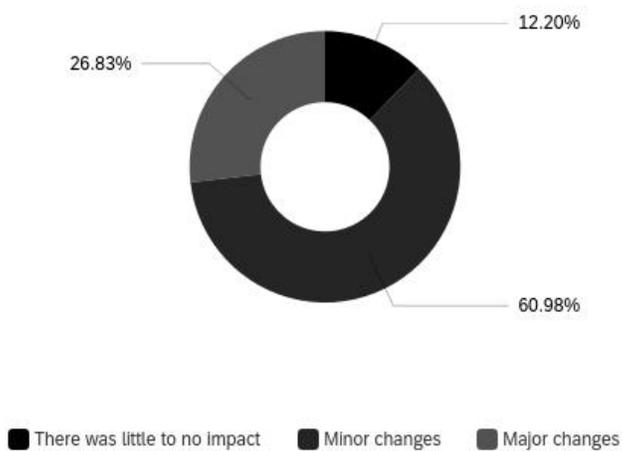
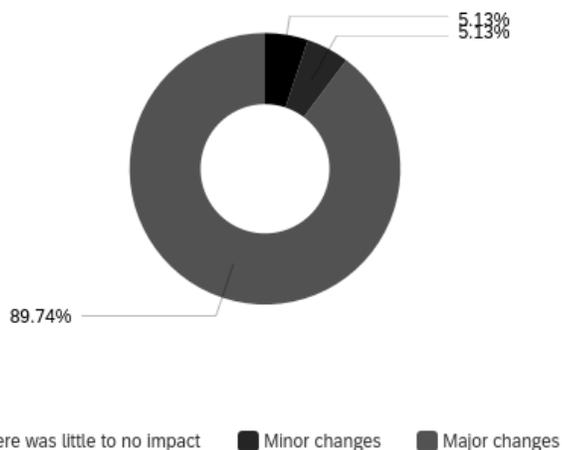


Figure 8: Perceived Impact of Pandemic for Students in Internship or Practicum Courses



Taken together, these findings suggest that the pandemic resulted in the greatest impact on practical skills related to interpreting and language instruction, as well as student internship experiences. This reality raises grave concerns about the impact the pandemic may have had on the readiness of graduates to practice, which may ultimately lead to adverse consequences for deaf people across the globe. In addition to the reported level of impact for faculty and their perceptions of the impact on their students, respondents were also asked to identify course delivery methods used in their program before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and six months post-pandemic shutdowns.<sup>8</sup> The data indicate that before the pandemic, the vast majority (62%) of programs were traditional face-to-face programs or hybrid (29%), while few programs were online asynchronous or synchronous (10%). During the pandemic, all programs transitioned to various forms of distance learning, with 56% using synchronous online technology, 16% being offered via asynchronous online methods, 28% employing hybrid approaches, and none maintaining traditional face-to-face programming. Similarly, in the six months after COVID-related shutdowns, programs reported continued use of primarily online synchronous course delivery methods (60%). These findings demonstrate how signed language interpreter educators were tasked with transitioning historically face-to-face coursework to online delivery formats using ERE.

### INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENTS

In a positive turn, respondents indicated a marked increase in institutional support to students as a result of the pandemic. For instance, the data show that the number of educators with students who were provided free resources (e.g., Internet access, hardware such as computers or tablets, and software) approximately doubled during the pandemic, compared to the provision of these same resources previously. However, respondents indicated relatively lower support for their work to

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<sup>8</sup> We note however that as of this writing, communities across the world continue to experience the pandemic and its associated shutdowns in varying levels of severity.

develop online course materials and resources from institutional channels. By way of example, most respondents (57%) reported that they developed expertise in online teaching without institutional support, with many indicating that they learned either on their own or in classes they elected to take on their own.

## **DISCUSSION**

The sample of respondents suggests that we were able to access IEP faculty from a broad sample, indicating that the results may be generalizable to the wider population of signed language interpreter educators. Although the survey yielded a relatively small number of responses, we note that the completion rate was 51%, which falls in line with Kumar's (2011) suggestion that an acceptable response rate for surveys is between 20 and 50%. Further, analysis of responses from 44 individuals is large considering the general population of signed language interpreter educators. The Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT), the largest organization of signed language interpreter educators in the world, has 210 individual members (CIT, 2020). Although the data collected in this study do not warrant statistical testing for significance, we argue that the results offer a clear view of signed language interpreter education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The negative impacts of the pandemic on nearly all aspects of our lives cannot be overstated. As of the writing of this manuscript, there have been more than 1 million deaths from COVID-19 across the United States and more than six million worldwide. As variants of the virus appear and the challenge of providing vaccinations on a global scale remains unmet, these numbers are likely to continue to rise. Further, we argue that the pandemic's effects will, in many cases, be permanent and may outlive early expectations.

This study has provided a snapshot of the historic shift in interpreter education toward ERE. We posit that the findings detailed in this paper offer insight not only into the response to a singular pandemic but rather into future directions of the field. As many interpreter educators responded in the survey, they have adopted new pedagogical strategies they plan to incorporate into their work after the pandemic has subsided. For example, these findings suggest that the pandemic has broadened horizons and opened new possibilities for integrating distance learning technologies into interpreting curricula. Seeing possibilities in technology, educators and students can embrace these shifts as new opportunities rather than reject them as unwanted change. However, we also emphasize the importance of faculty receiving institutional support when undertaking historical shifts and facing uncharted waters. As Orlando (2019) and Nitzke, Tardel, and Hansen-Schirra (2019) have demonstrated, interpreter and translator educators must be trained and guided through using new pedagogical innovations, including online learning modalities.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

In addition to the knowledge offered in these findings, this study has generated many valuable questions. Faculty service in colleges and universities includes not only contributing to shared governance and their disciplines but also to the community at large. For faculty in interpreter education, service often includes work conducted in partnership with local deaf communities. As the respondents indicated, many forms of external service were reduced or moved online;

community-based in-person events were no longer permitted. While the present study did not investigate the impact on deaf communities directly, we can surmise, based on responses about the changes in service-learning activities and other community-based learning, that many students and educators did not support and partner with local deaf communities in ways that are historically typical for IEPs. This holds implications for students' ability to engage with local deaf communities and may also have had a detrimental effect on students' language proficiency. Further, while not apparent directly from the data, the necessary focus on service to educational institutions suggests that some of the impacts to service may have been related to deaf communities as well. In other words, IEP faculty who frequently engage in service activities that partner with local deaf communities may have had their service stymied by the exigencies of the pandemic and the need to prioritize continuity of learning.

Additionally, while we argue that these findings provide a telling overview of interpreter educators' responses to the pandemic across a variety of geographic locations and programs, we note that future qualitative research may yield deeper insight into the shift to ERE and pandemic response. Future researchers should consider employing interview and focus group methodology to uncover specific strategies employed by educators and produce detailed analyses of their experiences. Such research may provide fruitful data on pedagogical shifts not only during the pandemic but also in a post-pandemic world.

Consideration must also be given to the impact that the pandemic has had on deaf communities and the future availability of qualified interpreters. Notably, Wessling (2020) found that novice interpreters experience challenges leading to attrition in their work upon entry to the field due to a lack of adequate preparation while in their IEPs. This bears consideration as the possibility remains that interpreter attrition may increase due to compounded issues post-pandemic. For instance, interpreters' increased financial insecurity during the pandemic may have been exacerbated by the uncertainty of lockdowns and other public health measures. Interpreters who work in private practice and rely heavily upon face-to-face community interpreting work as a source of income may – like some of the faculty respondents in this study – consider other more stable career options. A study of students and practitioners during the pandemic might be warranted, focusing on attrition from the field and student outcomes. Whether interpreters continue to practice – and the quality of their work – has a bearing on accessibility for deaf people.

Finally, we note the differences in the perceived impact on different types of courses, as reported by the faculty members. For this reason, we suggest further investigation into how teaching approaches were modified according to course type (e.g., theory vs. skills courses), as well as the impacts of the pandemic on students across various types of coursework. For example, Shaw and Halley (2021) examined student adaptability in service-learning coursework during the pandemic, analyzing student outlook, approach, effort, focus, and locus of control, finding that “the pandemic afforded students new opportunities for relinquishing the traditional sense of geographic place and experiencing the advantages of more widespread community impact in a virtual space” (p. 40).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have provided a slightly blurred snapshot of the COVID-19 pandemic in institutions of higher learning where signed language interpreters are educated as the pandemic is

ongoing with new variants extending the life of COVID-19, which continues to impact IEPs. Taken together, the findings indicate great diversity in pedagogical adaptations during the pandemic. Despite challenges posed by the shift to an unfamiliar platform and the limitations posed by being unable to share real spaces with students, the respondents showed great adaptability in navigating these issues. Faculty were adept at responding to challenges posed by the crisis and making contextualized decisions according to conditions on the ground. We remain in awe of the care and consideration faculty gave to their students, offering them much-needed emotional support while also providing them with rigorous course material. As one respondent stated, “By making decisions based on pedagogy, one can focus on how good learning can occur through a pandemic. This requires collaboration and investment, [but] it’s worth it.”

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## APPENDIX A

### Survey Instrument

This section will ask you about your background and the structure of the sign language interpreting program where you teach. You may provide approximate answers if you are unsure.

Location of your program (state, province, country)

Program of Study type(s) [Please check all that apply]

- Certificate
- AA/AS/AAS
- BA/BS
- MA/MS/M. Ed.
- PhD/EdD
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Typical total number of students enrolled [Across all levels of your program]

This section will ask you some basic demographic information about your position, and your educational and professional preparation as a sign language interpreter and interpreter educator.

I am currently in the following position:

- Tenure, full time
- Instructor/non-tenure, full time
- Instructor, part-time
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

I have the following professional and educational qualifications [Select all that apply]

- BA/BS or equivalent
- MA/MS or equivalent
- PhD/EdD or equivalent
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Interpreter credentials (RID, NAD, BEI, AVLIC, NAATI, NRCPD, etc.)  
Write in \_\_\_\_\_

Age

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 64
- 65 - 74
- 75 - 84
- 85 or older

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer

Race and ethnicity

- White

- Black
- Indigenous [write in] \_\_\_\_\_
- Asian
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

Deaf status

- I am deaf or hard of hearing
- I am not deaf or hard of hearing
- I prefer not to answer

Number of years working as a sign language interpreter:

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- More than 30 years

Number of years working as an interpreter educator:

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- More than 20 years

This section will ask you questions about the interpreter education program of study before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. You may provide approximations.

What date did your location begin mask use, quarantining, remote instruction (in some areas, this may be called emergency remote education, or ERE), and/or social distancing? [Please enter the day of the month as closely as you recall]

- January \_\_\_\_\_
- February \_\_\_\_\_
- March \_\_\_\_\_
- April \_\_\_\_\_
- May \_\_\_\_\_
- My location did not experience this event.

The interpreter education program where I teach offered classes in the following manner

[Please select hybrid to include both traditional and online if this was offered]

	Traditional	Hybrid	Online Asynchronous	Online Synchronous	Closed or temporarily suspended
Pre-COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>				
During-COVID-19	<input type="radio"/>				
6 months post-COVID-19 shutdowns	<input type="radio"/>				

Decisions about changes to course delivery were made by [Select all that apply]

- University or institutional leadership
- Collaboratively between faculty and administration
- Faculty made independent decisions about how to deliver courses

Other \_\_\_\_\_

This question will ask you about the impact to courses within your interpreter education program for you as the faculty member.

	There was little to no impact	Minor changes	Major changes
Interpreting practical skills courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sign language courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interpreting theory courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Internship or practicum courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

This question will ask you about the impact to courses within your interpreter education program for your students.

	There was little to no impact	Minor changes	Major changes
Interpreting practical skills courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sign language courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interpreting theory courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Internship or practicum courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

This section will ask you questions about the use of technology to include hardware and software programs before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please share the type of learning management system utilized by your institution.

Canvas

- Moodle
- Blackboard
- Teams
- Google Classroom
- None
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please share any technology (hardware such as laptops, webcams, and tablets) or applications (software such as GoREACT, and You Tube) that were regularly used in your program before COVID-19.

Pre-COVID-19, the technology (hardware such as laptops, webcams, and tablets) were provided to students at no cost:

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

Pre-COVID-19, students were able to access the internet using wi-fi or hardwired connections at no cost.

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

Pre-COVID 19, the applications (software such as GoREACT) were provided to students at no cost:

- Yes

- Not sure
- No

Please share any technology (hardware such as laptops, webcams, and tablets) or applications (software such as GoREACT, and You Tube) that were regularly used in your program during COVID-19.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the technology (hardware such as laptops, webcams, and tablets) were provided to students at no cost:

- Yes
- Not sure
- No
- Additional comments? \_\_\_\_\_

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were able to access the internet using wi-fi or hardwired connections at no cost.

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

During the COVID 19 pandemic, the applications (software such as GoREACT) were provided to students at no cost:

- Yes
- Not sure
- No
- Additional comments? \_\_\_\_\_

Pre-COVID-19, what was your level of expertise teaching in virtual environments? [5 being an expert level of experience, 1 being a novice level of experience in virtual environments]

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

How did you learn about the use of technology?

- Institution provided training or certification
- Learned on my own
- Training or classes taken on my own
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

This question relates to your level of engagement with students pre-COVID 19. Engagement might be virtual using email, text, or online discussion, or it may be in face-to-face settings such as hosting office hours, or other outside classroom events. [5 being a high level of engagement, 1 being a minimal amount of engagement]

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Please indicate your level of engagement with students during COVID 19. Engagement might be virtual using email, text, or online discussion, or it may be in face-to-face settings such as

hosting office hours, or other outside classroom events. [5 represents a high level of engagement, while 1 indicates a minimal level of engagement]

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Provide examples of strategies you used to remain engaged with students during COVID-19.

What changes did you make as a result of COVID-19 in assignments, due dates, or other expectations such as internship, observations or other activities? <div>[Select all that apply and write in any other changes you may have incorporated]</div>

- I was more flexible and granted extensions
- I reduced the number of assignments
- Internships were suspended
- Internship requirements were reduced
- Internship requirements were waived
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please share any practices you intend to retain as a result of the experiences you have had teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This section will ask you about your work activity as a faculty member before and during COVID-19. There are three areas of interest: teaching, service, and research/scholarship.

Please identify the amount of work you engaged in as a faculty member pre-COVID as compared to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- There was no change to my work load
- My work load increased slightly
- My work load decreased slightly
- My work load increased tremendously
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

After the COVID-19 pandemic began, my teaching, service, and research/scholarship were impacted in the following ways:

	No impact	Some impact	Major impact	Not applicable
Teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Research/Scholarship	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please describe the impact to your teaching, service, and/or research/scholarship.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I will

- Make changes to my teaching practices
- Make no changes to my teaching practices
- No longer teach in an interpreter education program
- Seek further training in the use of technology
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please feel free to use this question to provide the researchers with any additional comments, suggestions or experiences you would like to share about the COVID-19 pandemic and the

impact it has had on you as an interpreter and/or interpreter educator.