The establishment of the new Graduate Studies in Interpreting and Translation (GSIT) program at the University of Maryland is a case study in the creative tenacity required to address the demand for translator and interpreter education in the U.S. This article outlines the process of designing, developing, and launching this program. We hope to inspire other universities and colleges to join in preparing experts with the advanced knowledge required to enable intercultural, interlingual communication in diplomatic and international relations, to promote access to justice, and to contribute to the health and welfare of individuals within local communities.

Demand for Translator and Interpreter Education in the U.S.

Despite the widespread presence of translation and interpreting courses in higher education in the U.S., calls for more in-depth educational programs for current and future language mediation professionals have been repeated frequently over the years.1 There are many fine programs offering training in translation, localization, literary translation, and legal interpreting/translation in particular, but the absence of a comprehensive program on the East Coast is quite remarkable.2 On the West Coast, perhaps the best known program that offers comprehensive, large-scale graduate-level training based upon industry requirements in both conference interpreting and translation is located at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

It is no secret that the demand for translation and interpreting services is rising rapidly due to the globalization of the U.S. economy, demographic developments, and mandates set by the federal government and by individual state governments. The Bureau of
Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor projects the demand for translation and interpreting to rise by 22% over the 2008-18 decade, with employment increasing from 50,900 positions in 2008 to 62,200 in 2018, which is much faster than the average for all occupations.3

Partnering to Demonstrate Need

Major employers of conference interpreters and translators have long desired to have a program established in the greater Washington, DC area or New York. An essential task in proposing any new program is documenting the need for such a program in order to present a convincing case to decision-makers within the university. In this respect, the burden of proof lies with the group or groups wishing to establish the new program, and these groups must lobby hard to convince the decision-makers that they would be making a sound investment. With this in mind, Catherine Ingold, director of the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) at the University of Maryland, was approached regarding the prospect of establishing a graduate program at the College Park campus, which is located on the edge of the District of Columbia. Conversations were soon underway with then Dean James Harris and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs Elizabeth Loizeaux of the College of Arts and Humanities.

Two focus group sessions were held at NFLC in the fall of 2010 to assess the need for interpreter training. These sessions were attended by representatives of roughly 10 organizations, including the European Commission, European Parliament, United Nations New York, International Monetary Fund, U.S. Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, National Virtual Translation Center under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Center for State Courts, and the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Representatives of these institutions provided information on their language mediation needs so that they could be reflected in the design, content, format, and language options offered through GSIT. The prospect of an interpreter and translator education program in the Washington, DC area received an enthusiastic response from these employers, including offers of pedagogical assistance. Employer demand also proved strong at the state level. In the spring of 2011, the Office of the Attorney General of the State of Maryland approached NFLC seeking collaboration.

To buttress the documentation provided through the needs analysis sessions, the University of Maryland’s Office of Extended Studies commissioned an online marketing study, which was conducted in the spring of 2011. This survey included over 215 contacts at dozens of agencies and organizations. The results confirmed the demand for training in translation and interpreting, ascertained what course content would be of the most value, and determined appropriate tuition and credit levels for a graduate certificate and a Master of Professional Studies degree.

Finding an Academic Home

A series of meetings was held with leaders within the University of Maryland’s College of Arts and Humanities (ARHU) to ascertain the level of interest in providing an academic home for the program at the university. These meetings were chaired by then Associate Dean Loizeaux, who led the discussion with key interlocutors from the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures and from the Department of Communication.

After nearly a year of deliberations, it was determined that the home of the new Graduate Studies in Interpreting and Translation program would be ARHU’s Department of Communication.5 The decision was well received by all involved, especially given the important intersection of the two fields. Scholars and practitioners of interpreting and translation as well as communication are ultimately concerned with the exchange of meaning through language. Such communication transactions also take place in particular contexts that often involve individuals from differing cultural backgrounds. For those involved in its development, such interdisciplinarity represents a hallmark of the new graduate studies program.

Developing the Curriculum

Once a decision was made for GSIT’s academic home, it took several
months for the program to be designed. The courses in interpreting and translation were devised and merged with courses in communication. Plans of study were envisioned for the proposed degree tracks. Assessment processes also needed to be created. In essence, the program was built from the ground up, which represented a major undertaking. David Sawyer, the chief of the European Languages Branch and a senior diplomatic interpreter for German at the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Language Services, and Diane de Terra, a former professor and dean at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, served as interpreting and translation consultants for the project. Together, they designed the curriculum in consultation with Elizabeth Toth, the chair of the Department of Communication, and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, the director of Graduate Studies in Communication.

Given the various options for curriculum models, decisions were necessary regarding the relationship between translation and interpreting, the certificates and/or degrees to be offered, the role of assessment in the program, and the relationship between theory and practice. In the interest of curricular efficiency, the decision was made to offer separate translation and interpreting credentials and graduate certificates that could be attained after one year of study. These could be followed by a second year of coursework culminating in a Master of Professional Studies degree. While the graduate certificates offer an entry-level qualification in the field, the Master of Professional Studies degree develops a functional specialization in a specific area and begins to develop specialized knowledge. This specialization is essential for a successful career.

As forms of intercultural and interlingual mediation, interpreting and translation represent communication activities situated within the specialized domestic and international contexts of health, politics, and law. So while GSIT is a professional studies program that focuses on the practice of interpreting and translation, an important feature is the integration of communication theory and practice with interpreting and translation theory and practice. While students are training to become conference or community interpreters, translators, and/or managers and administrators in one or more of these fields, they become familiar with the processes and effects of intercultural communication in areas such as health, law, and/or the political sphere. The program thus draws upon some of the most up-to-date scholarship from the fields of interpreting and translation as well as communication. The integration of communication studies is a notable curricular innovation, while roughly 75% of the coursework is aimed at interpreting and translation skill development.

One of the advantages of designing a new program is the ability to start with a clean slate, in that there is no hidden curriculum that drives decisions regarding the structure and content of the program. The latest developments in teaching methodology can be taken into consideration. This was the case with the design of the assessment measures, which are highly integrated into the curriculum and based heavily upon learning portfolios that include documentation of summative tests at the program and course levels. It was decided to incorporate all summative tests into coursework, including the career exams that are paired with a formal review of a career portfolio as a requirement for graduation. These assessments offer students a means to showcase their knowledge and skills before major employers, including international organizations, federal agencies, and private-sector entities employing staff translators and interpreters.

University Approval Process

With the curriculum designed, the next step was the approval process, which took two full semesters to complete. After first receiving unanimous approval from the faculty of the Department of Communication, the proposal then wound its way through the Committee on Programs, Courses, and Curriculum at both the college and then the university senate level. The proposal was also reviewed and supported by the University of Maryland’s Graduate School, the office of the senior vice-president and provost, and ultimately the chancellor of the University System of Maryland.

Throughout the process, the Department of Communication...
was asked to clarify and refine the proposal in ways that led to greater precision and clarity. Some of the most consequential discussions ensued over whether or not to feature a Master of Arts or a Master of Professional Studies in interpreting and translation. Eventually, it was decided to feature the latter. The university’s professional studies programs are typically “multidisciplinary” in focus and are designed to meet “the needs of employees of government and private sector organizations.” GSIT’s mission emphasizes the study of professional practice over a theoretically-based MA degree. This means that students are being prepared for work as a translator or interpreter through a curriculum consisting of roughly 75% procedural skills training in translation and/or interpreting.

Although the process of revising the proposal was arduous, it was important in developing a common understanding and a consensus about the aims, goals, and structure of the curriculum. As with any curriculum, periodic review is necessary. The framework put in place by the Committee on Programs, Courses, and Curriculum for the approval of any revisions of structure and content ensures that any program modifications will be well-considered and appropriate.

Program Launch

Among the key considerations for the rollout of the program have been administrative staffing, instructor staffing, the language pairs offered, and enrollment targets during the critical early phase of the program. The University of Maryland’s Graduate School requires that each new instructor be approved to teach graduate classes. Numerous staff and freelance interpreters and translators in the Washington, DC metro area have already expressed interest in teaching and have applied. Such individuals currently work for organizations like the International Monetary Fund, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and the Pan-American Health Organization. Some of the freelance interpreters include former staff and freelancers accredited with the institutions of the European Union.

Rather than launch with a suite of language programs, it has been determined that GSIT should attempt to recruit a full program in the Chinese<>English language pair for the fall of 2013. This decision reflects the strong presence of the University of Maryland in China, the role of the China Initiative and the Confucius Center on the College Park campus, as well as the extraordinary growth of the interpreting and translation professions in Chinese-speaking countries. However, it is in the long-term interest of the program to offer additional language pairs immediately. For this reason, the program will also include a multilingual track to accommodate all other languages for the fall of 2013. Each multilingual classroom will feature a primary instructor who is supported by other instructors with the needed language expertise to offer specialized instruction and evaluation. New language pairs will be added based on student interest with the intent of developing full language programs in Arabic, French, German, Italian, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish as demand allows.

The logistics of orchestrating the establishment of such a comprehensive program also dictated the need to focus on classroom instruction during the early phase. Although GSIT will eventually offer blended learning, the advantages of focusing on face-to-face instruction, especially when training for professions defined by communication, seem obvious. Such an approach will also afford GSIT more time to put in place the special parameters that are needed for effective distance learning in an effort to address additional unmet demand.

Developing a Program Through Creativity and Discourse

The design, development, and launch of the Graduate Studies in Interpreting and Translation program at the University of Maryland reflect the creative efforts of a broad group of individuals dedicated to translator and interpreter education and the strategic use of discourse in the public sphere. This sustained, multiyear effort has culminated in a curriculum that addresses the concerns of institutional employers, the faculty of a top-ranking academic department, and the most senior decision-makers of a public research university.
Notes


5. To read more about the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, see: www.comm.umd.edu. To read more about GSIT, see: www.gsit.umd.edu.


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