

**UNIVERSITY OF
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UNC-IRIS Project Curriculum Guide

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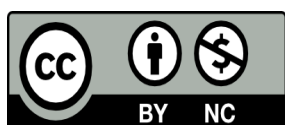
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UNC-IRIS Acknowledgments

UNC-IRIS's ability to positively impact the American Sign Language interpreters who live and work in rural settings is dependent on the substantial contributions and dedication of many [organizations and individuals](#). IRIS programs and experiences were cultivated in large part by its [instructional team](#) and [leadership](#), without whom this grant would not be possible. We are especially grateful for the University of Northern Colorado's institutional support and the leadership of Drs. Leilani Johnson and Barbara Garrett. IRIS's success is directly attributable to the dedication and tenacity of its participants, who are the future of this field.

About UNC-IRIS

IRIS: Improving Rural Interpreter Skills is a \$2.1M, five-year grant (#H160D210006) awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration to the University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) Department of American Sign Language & Interpreting Studies (ASLIS) under the leadership of Schawn Hardesty and Kelly Decker between the years of 2021 and 2026.

There is an overall shortage of qualified interpreters in the U.S. (Leigh, Andrews, & Harris, 2020; McLaughlin, 2010; NDC, 2022; Olson & Swabey, 2017). This shortage is compounded by the fact that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for interpreting services provided over video has skyrocketed (Mauldin, 2022). As reported by the IRIS Project's [Council of Experts](#) (comprised of rural stakeholders invested in the outcomes of rural interpreter growth and education) and the IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel (Decker & Hardesty, 2024; UNC IRIS Project, 2022), rural areas have long experienced this strain without the infrastructure of local interpreter education programs, mentoring, and professional networks to sustain these demands. Rural interpreting communities often rely on the creativity and collaboration of colleagues in neighboring states, as well as on video technology, provided it is secure, stable, and available (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2022; UNC IRIS Project, 2023).

In an effort to mitigate these shortages, the IRIS Project serves to increase the quantity and quality of interpreters living and working in rural areas. Working in rural settings requires advanced interpreting competence, which includes the ability to fluently execute consecutive and simultaneous interpreting of complex texts, work effectively and collaboratively as a team

with Deaf¹ (Kusters & Friedner, 2015; Sheneman, 2018), Coda², and hearing Interpreters, and adapt language use to a wide range of sign language users. Further, it requires an in-depth understanding of a wide variety of community settings and scenarios.

The IRIS Project envisions increasing the quantity and quality of interpreters working and living in rural settings by cultivating educational opportunities and sustainable connections that support professional growth.

To realize its vision, the IRIS Project:

- recognizes that rural interpreters experience professional isolation with limited educational opportunities,
- upholds that the shared language of our space together is American Sign Language (ASL),
- creates the intentional space for rural interpreters to build an ethical support community,
- implements communities of learning that have the shared experience of living and working in rural settings,
- requires that diverse perspectives are intentionally sought to provide depth and balance to the learning experience and one's personal growth, and
- believes dialogic engagement via peer interaction is centered on exploration and discovery as a pathway to learning.

To better understand the needs of working interpreters in rural areas, the IRIS Project conducted a needs assessment survey between December 15, 2021, and January 11, 2022. The data shared via the needs assessment survey was collected and synthesized to help the IRIS

¹ The term “deaf”, with a lowercase, is used to encapsulate the multitude of identities and experiences of all people who identify as d/Deaf. This includes people who are; DeafBlind, deaf disabled, late-deafened, hard of hearing, and culturally Deaf (Kusters & Friedner, 2015). Deaf interpreters are written with the capitalized letter, D to represent their linguistic and cultural expertise (Sheneman, 2018).

² The term “Coda” is used to reference those who are hearing that grew up with one or more deaf parents. CODA (in all caps) refers to [CODA International](#), an organization whose mission is to celebrate the unique heritage and multicultural identities of adult hearing individuals with deaf parent(s).

Project leadership team and its contributors identify and prioritize gaps and opportunities in rural interpreter training and align the project strategies, resources, curriculum, and practices toward addressing those needs. The IRIS Project [needs assessment report](#) is publicly available for review.

What are the IRIS Frameworks?

Derived from the needs assessment and its council of experts, the IRIS Project's four programs (described below) embody curricula that are rooted in two fundamental guiding frameworks: the Integrated Model of Interpreting (IMI) (Colonomos, 1989) and the philosophy of deaf-centric interpreting (Hall, 2018; National Deaf Center, 2020).

The IMI has had a profound effect on the field of interpreting over the past thirty years (Colonomos, 1989; National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, 2016; Wattman, 2018). With careful intention, the IRIS Project has centered this model as the foundation of the overall curriculum. Interpreters who are heritage language users of ASL (Pichler, Palmer, & Lillio-Martin, 2018) with enculturated lifelong language brokering (Napier, 2021) reported the IMI as beneficial in understanding their interpreting work (Williamson, 2016). Based on the teachings of Danica Seleskovitch, the IMI is an interdisciplinary model of interpreting that frames the process that sign language interpreters experience explicitly while outlining the factors that influence the work (Seleskovitch, 1978). The IMI focuses on the cognitive processes and decision-making of interpreters. The teachings of the IMI are derived from the work and constructivist approach of Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978), premised on the belief that each learner is exactly where they need to be in their development. The model utilizes a strengths-based approach to learning that is learner-led and expert-guided (Wald & Harland, 2022).

According to Dr. Wyatte Hall, deaf-centric interpreting embodies the collectivist expectations of the deaf community (Hall, 2018). This means interpreters practice with intention, recognizing that interpreting is a dynamic and dialogic interaction versus the static conduit

(hearing) model cloaked by the myth of interpreters as inherently neutral actors (Forestal, 2015; Robinson & Sheneman, 2021). This approach of collaborating with deaf people when engaged in interpreted interaction builds a shared construction of greater contextualized meaning in each interpretation (Clark, 2021; Henner & Robinson, 2023) and strives to equalize the inherent power imbalance between parties present (Hall, 2018; Leigh et al., 2020).

As defined by Dr. Paddy Ladd, *Cultural Holism* (coined to illustrate the expertise of deaf educators in deaf education) is defined as deaf people who draw on what they have learned from their deaf ancestors, paying it forward to the next generation to aspire to the highest possible quality of life as empowered members of their communities (Ladd, 2022).

Deaf-centric interpreting honors Cultural Holism. Interpreting in this way acknowledges and upholds the expertise and cultural capital deaf individuals hold within interpreter education, collegial dynamics, and community-driven expertise (Forestal, 2015).

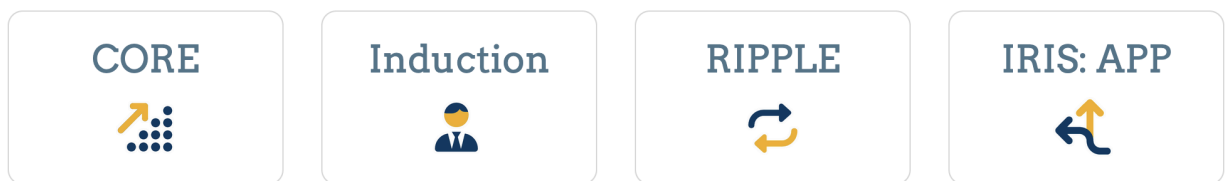
Throughout the curriculum, the importance of a deaf-centered framework in interpreting is strategically unpacked by exploring ideas such as language models, diversity within deaf communities, ethics, and cultural nuances situated firmly in that of a lived deaf experience.

At the outset of the IRIS Project's programming, the frameworks of the IMI and deaf-centric approach to interpreting were introduced to each new IRIS cohort of learners. Upon completion of the on-site portion of the program, learners moved on to their online programming. The IMI and deaf-centered interpreting are coupled into each unit of learning (e.g., module) as a part of an iterative curriculum. Modules build a pathway to a shared understanding of the task of interpreting and [entry to practice competencies](#) to interpret with autonomy (DO IT Center, n.d.). Each module is a vital part of a comprehensive curriculum with a scope and sequence designed to lay a solid foundation for skills and professionalism as a rural interpreter.

How did IRIS implement those frameworks online?

The IRIS Project firmly believes that learning happens best via interactive dialogue (Learning: Dialogic learning, 2016; Manalo, 2020). To create learner-centric activity-based synchronous and asynchronous online spaces, the IRIS Project established Communities of Learning (COL). For the IRIS Project, a COL is a committed group of colleagues working towards the shared goal of improving their interpreting (Dingyloudi & Strijbos, 2019). This COL model had programmatic success during the previous 2016-2021 UNC grant, [Project CLIMB](#). The IRIS Project had an evidence-based head start replicating this model, knowing that the COL online learning environment had various benefits for participants and enhanced overall outcomes of the program. Benefits include critical reflection with other colleagues, expanded insights into the range of ethical decision latitude, and authentic relationships outside of the online classroom. These lasting influences, guidance, and direction only come as a result of the wisdom and counsel of competent and diverse colleagues (Hardesty, Decker, Williamson, & West Oyedele, 2021).

What are the IRIS Project's Programs?



What is IRIS's CORE Initiative?

The Connections, Opportunities, Resources, and Education (CORE) Initiative is the IRIS Project's 9-month, 300-hour hybrid (online and in-person) dynamic, interactive, and bilingual (ASL & English) interpreting knowledge and skills training designed specifically for rural interpreters.

Upon completion of this program, participants will be able to:

1. Build a network of support with other rural interpreters;
2. Demonstrate fundamental best practices in the interpreting profession;

3. Employ context-dependent and culturally competent ethical decision-making strategies;
4. Analyze interpretations following a practice profession framework; and
5. Deconstruct interpreting product apart from the person via an Integrated Model of Interpreting framework.

All CORE Initiative course materials are available via the [IRIS Project website](#).

What is IRIS's Induction Program?

Upon successful completion of the 9-month IRIS: CORE Initiative, participants were invited to further their development via the IRIS Induction experience. This 150-hour hybrid (online and in-person) learning environment provides IRIS participants with the foundation and tools needed for continued self-directed and lifelong learning. This experience focuses on two primary ideas: (1) participants' connection to this work and (2) enhancing participants' employability toolkit.

Upon completion of this Induction experience, participants will be able to:

1. Complete self-analysis of various interpreting work sample submissions
2. Develop an interpreting portfolio, including an updated resume and work samples
3. Make connections with their local deaf community
4. Build professional relationships with interpreting organizations outside of IRIS
5. Engage in at least 10 hours of interpreting observation over video
6. Attend synchronous sessions focused on the task of interpreting

All Induction course materials are available via the [IRIS Project website](#).

What is IRIS's RIPPLE Program?

Adapted from the [UNC-Project CLIMB mentor training](#), the IRIS Rural Interpreters Promoting Professional Learning and Engagement (RIPPLE) program is designed as a 5-month, 120-hour hybrid (online and in-person) community of learning that focuses on reflecting on one's journey

of learning and how to apply those experiences when facilitating and mentoring others. The program utilizes current interpreting models and frameworks, paired with social justice as the lens of the discussion.

Upon completion of this program, participants will be able to:

1. Demonstrate the competencies required to facilitate IRIS Project participants through an online curriculum;
2. Demonstrate the competencies required to mentor IRIS Project participants;
3. Recognize systematic barriers inherent in interpreting work;
4. Reflect upon factors impacting decision-making while facilitating and mentoring; and
5. Extrapolate a participant's interpreting work apart from the person via an Integrated Model of Interpreting framework.

All RIPPLE course materials are available via the [IRIS Project website](#).

What is IRIS's Alternative Pathway Program?

The journey to national certification poses challenges for many reasons, especially for interpreters in rural areas. The absence of formalized interpreter education in rural regions and gaps in organizational support are significant issues.

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) recognized these challenges and collaborated with IRIS to provide the Alternative Pathway Program (APP) via the IRIS Project. Together, we aimed to address this gap by providing a supportive IRIS-based environment that offers an alternative pathway toward national certification.

This program is designed for individuals who: (1) work as interpreters, (2) are not RID certified, and (3) do not have a bachelor's degree, a requirement by RID to take the CASLI Generalist Performance exam for national certification.

Upon completion of this program, participants will be able to:

1. Identify systematic barriers that rural interpreters face in the RID Alternative Pathway process;
2. Locate documentation of alternative lived experiences that satisfy the RID Alternative Pathway process;
3. Collate documented experiences in the format as required by the RID Alternative Pathway process;
4. Articulate short and long-term goals for obtaining RID national certification; and
5. Submit a completed application for the RID Alternative Pathway Program.

All APP course materials are available via the [IRIS Project website](#).

How can I utilize the IRIS online curriculum and resources?

IRIS's online course content was delivered via asynchronous modules within the [Canvas Learning Management System](#), utilizing the video-based interactive platform of [GoReact](#) with regular synchronous sessions via [Zoom](#). Each program (i.e., CORE, Induction, RIPPLE, and APP) includes a course map that outlines the module sequence, objectives, assignments, and external resources needed. Each module includes a slide deck in printed English accompanied by ASL translations of all module content.

Those wishing to access the curricular resources provided should understand that foundational to the curriculum was the approach used to engage learners. A social constructivist framework was the underlying element of the entire curriculum, which allowed participants to maximize learning. Participants engaged with each other in ASL through asynchronous discussion boards and regular, structured, synchronous course meetings. Each participant was encouraged to bring real-life background and experience into the community of learning to allow for rich and relevant discourse around the work. To maximize the learning, as was envisioned by the IRIS

Project, individuals accessing the curricular resources below are encouraged to model their learning environments in a community of learning framework.

Canvas Commons

All three of the IRIS curricula are available in the open-source Canvas Commons repository of educational content offered under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). This view of the content will allow you to see the materials as IRIS participants experienced the content in its bilingual modality. The materials in these courses are downloadable as a Common Cartridge file. This file can be transferred to another online Learning Management System.

How to download a Common Cartridge file (with embedded links for further guidance):

1. Establish a [Canvas Free-for-Teacher account](#)
2. Open [Canvas Commons](#) and search for “IRIS Project”
3. [Download the cartridge file\(s\)](#)
4. [Set up your new Canvas course in 30 minutes or less](#)

UNC-IRIS Project Website

Please note that these resources are being made available to you as they were presented during the 2021-2025 grant cycle. Permission is granted to copy and disseminate this product for noncommercial educational purposes, provided UNC-IRIS is credited as the source and referenced appropriately on any such copies. [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Suggested citation: UNC-IRIS. (2025). *Name of Resource*. URL (if applicable).

As you download these resources, take caution that you will need to edit materials to fit the unique needs of your instruction. Neither endorsement nor verification is intended or made of any hypertext link, product, service, or information, either by its inclusion or exclusion from

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