



Improving Rural Interpreter Skills

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Supporting Rural Deaf Communities: Challenges and Opportunities



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Module Overview & Objectives

Overview: This module offers space for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals to explore, reflect and identify the challenges and opportunities faced by deaf rural communities and the interpreters in these settings.

Learning Outcomes and Objectives

Upon Completion of this module participants will be able to:

1. Describe key components of rural professionalism.
2. Identify key challenges faced by rural deaf community members.
3. Identify key challenges presented to interpreters in rural settings.
4. Identify opportunities for future collaboration with rural deaf and interpreting communities.

Pre-Test

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this pre-test

1. The definition of rural is clearly defined by the U.S. government.
 - a. True
 - b. False
2. Interpreters who do not live in rural areas:
 - a. Will likely work with rural deaf people at some point.
 - b. While working in VRI settings, have the possibility of teaming with rural interpreters.
 - c. Both of the above
3. The IRIS Project envisions increasing the quantity and quality of rural interpreters by decreasing educational opportunities and limiting sustainable connections to encourage professional growth.
 - a. True
 - b. False
4. Dual relationships are often experienced by VR professionals providing services to the deaf community in rural settings.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. In the IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel, the panelists discussed characteristics of their rural communities. One commonality was that Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) is preferred by rural deaf and DeafBlind people because it is effective and convenient.
 - a. True
 - b. False



Welcome to IRIS!

Some context

Access to quality interpreting services in rural areas across the country is undeniably challenging. While there are limited published empirical studies on rural interpreters and services provided there are qualitative reports and personal testimonies attesting to the pervasive need.

Individuals in rural areas often begin interpreting out of a need for communication access in healthcare, education, religious, or employment environments. Heritage signers (e.g., individuals parented by at least one signing, deaf person), individuals who are involved with the Deaf community, or those who have taken sign language classes step up to serve (Ball, 2013; Williamson, 2015). While the needs are great and resources may be limited, rural interpreters have unique insight and valuable experiences to offer the broader interpreting field.

Welcome to IRIS!, Part II

Since COVID-19 the demand for interpreting services provided over video has skyrocketed (Mauldin, 2022). This places rural interpreters working in various non-rural settings, with non-rural teams and a wider variety of non-rural deaf consumers. Conversely, this also means that the rural interpreter experience is no longer limited by geography. Interpreters with little to no first-hand knowledge of the rural landscape are engaging with rural entities (i.e. medical providers, law offices, social services, etc...) in rural deaf communities' cultures.

The [Improving Rural Interpreter Skills \(IRIS\) project](#) a \$2.1M, five-year interpreter training grant project awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration to the University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) American Sign Language and Interpreting Studies (ASLIS) department, aims to highlight the unique vantage point of rural interpreters and deaf communities. In this module, we provide you with framing from both the rural deaf community and rural interpreters. With those lived experiences in mind, we will explore the ways Vocational Rehabilitation professionals can shift as a profession and ideas on how you can keep pace.

Before we get started, a few definitions . . .

Definitions, Part I

What is rural?

The definition of rural is a challenge, as there is no consensus.

The U.S. Census Bureau (Ratcliffe, et.al., 2016) uses four factors to determine rural locations including: density per square mile, land use, distance from a city, and the population threshold. Therefore, rural areas are usually considered areas outside of the urban corridors with a population of fewer than 50,000 people where resources and services for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind are more limited.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) designates counties as Metropolitan, Micropolitan, or neither. A Metro area contains a core urban area of 50,000 or more population, and a Micro area contains an urban core of at least 10,000 (but less than 50,000) population. All counties that are not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) are considered rural (HHS, 2020).

For the purposes of the IRIS Project, we have adopted the U.S. Census Bureau's definition with further consideration of deaf communities' access to credentialed interpreters via the [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#) and access to formalized interpreter education opportunities (i.e. college-based interpreter education programs).

Should you be curious to learn more, we suggest the additional references and resources provided.

- Additional resources:
 - [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)

Definitions, Part II

deaf

The term “deaf” with a lowercase ‘d’ 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) argue, “We write *deaf* with a lowercase ‘d’ because we see *deaf* as more encompassing, less politicized, and less context-dependent than *Deaf*,” (p. ix).

There is an exception you may notice throughout this curriculum. “In the sign language interpreting profession, Deaf interpreters are labeled with the capitalized letter, D to represent their linguistic and cultural expertise.” (Sheneman, 2018, p. 1).

- Additional Resources:
 - [What Does Deaf Mean?](#) by the National Deaf Center (2018)
 - [Deaf Identity](#) by Morpheyes Studio (2024)

Definitions, Part III

Coda

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).

- Additional resources:
 - [Cost of Invisibility: Cudas and the Sign Language Interpreting Profession](#) by Williamson, A. (2012)
 - [The Case for Heritage ASL Instruction for Hearing Heritage Signers](#) by Isakson, S.K. (2018)
 - [A Short Introduction to Heritage Signers](#) by Pichler, D.C., Lillo-Martin, D., & Palmer, J.L. (2018)
 - [Lost in the Shuffle: Deaf-Parented Interpreters and Their Paths to Interpreting Careers](#) by Williamson, A. (2016)

IRIS Vision & Values

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. In alignment with its vision, the IRIS Project:

- recognizes that rural interpreters experience professional isolation with limited educational opportunities,
- upholds a language policy of American Sign Language (ASL) for its shared spaces,
- creates intentional space for rural interpreters to build an ethical support community,
- implements communities of learning (COL) 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.

Introduction

There is not enough literature nor discussions on rural interpreting which is the reason why the IRIS Project came to fruition. It was recognized that there was a dire need for support for rural interpreters.

This self-directed module is unique. Rather than supplying you with knowledge-based topics, you will work together as a collegial community in exploring the experiences of rural individuals affected by Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) work in rural deaf communities and how to leverage resources for those you serve.

Let's get started . . .

Canvas Discussion: Rural Professionalism, Part I

Is that a thing?

Working as a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) professional in a rural setting oftentimes means fulfilling various overlapping roles in the community. For example one might be a Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf (RCD), a board member of their child's Parent Teacher Association, and an active member in their state association for the Deaf. These overlapping roles can create ethical quandaries as the lines between personal and professional lives blur.

When resources are limited and needs are unmet, how can rural VR professionals best navigate professionalism in a rural area? This question is explored in the text [*Disability and Vocational Rehabilitation in Rural Settings*](#), specifically chapter 6 *Ethical Vocational Rehabilitation and Dual Relationships in Rural Settings* (p. 95-115) by Melissa Manninen Luse and accompanying IRIS-created summary video of this chapter.

Canvas Discussion: Rural Professionalism, Part II



NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original Post:

After viewing the Manninen Luse chapter [summary video](#) create an original Canvas post of no more than four (4) minutes, in ASL, addressing the following questions:

1. Is rural professionalism something talked about in your workplace? If so, how?
2. Have there been times in your career where you've felt stuck to make a hard choice upholding your personal/professional values? If so, share that experience?
3. In your tenure working with VR how has your perception of professionalism shifted?

Response post directions:

Respond to the post of one of your colleagues by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.

Canvas Discussion: Serving Rural Deaf Communities



NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original Post:

Review the [Serving Deaf Individuals in Rural Communities](#) research brief developed by the [National Deaf Center](#). While this brief is focused primarily on the providing services within the educational sector, what parallels do you see to VR? Please create an original Canvas post of no more than four (4) minutes, in ASL, addressing the previous question.

Response post directions:

Respond to the post of one of your colleagues by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.

Canvas Discussion: IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel



NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original post directions:

Review the video [IRIS Deaf Community Panel](#). Take note of what resonated with you. In an original Canvas post of no more than four (4) minutes, upload an ASL response to address the following questions:

1. As a Vocational Rehabilitation professional, what are your reactions to the IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel?
2. What new thoughts and questions do you have?

Response post directions:

React to the post of one of your colleagues by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.

Canvas Discussion: RID Town Hall



NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original post directions:

Review the video [Working Interpreters in Rural Communities](#) from the RID Town Hall on March 24, 2022. Take notes of what resonated with you. In an original Canvas post of no more than four (4) minutes, upload an ASL response to address the following questions:

1. As a Vocational Rehabilitation professional, what are your reactions to the Town Hall?
2. What new thoughts and questions do you have?

Response post directions:

Respond to the post of one of your colleagues by asking clarifying questions, seeking additional information, or expressing an idea that encourages critical thinking and moves the conversation forward.

Canvas Discussion: Putting it all together



NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this assignment

Original post directions:

Consider the four resources shared in this course; Manninen Luse chapter, NDC Research Summary, the RID Rural Interpreter Town Hall, and the IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel. In an original Canvas post of no more than four (4) minutes, upload an ASL response to address the following questions:

1. When thinking about your work as a Vocational Rehabilitation professional, how has your perspective shifted about providing services to rural deaf communities?
2. When thinking about your work as a Vocational Rehabilitation professional, how has your perspective shifted about working with rural interpreters?
3. Taking what you have learned here both from the resources provided *and* your colleagues' postings, what will you carry forward with you in your professional endeavors?

Post-Test

NOTE: You have to log into Canvas to complete this pre-test

1. The definition of rural is clearly defined by the U.S. government.
 - a. True
 - b. False
2. Interpreters who do not live in rural areas:
 - a. Will likely work with rural deaf people at some point.
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 - c. Both of the above
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5. In the IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel, the panelists discussed characteristics of their rural communities. One commonality was that Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) is preferred by rural deaf and DeafBlind people because it is effective and convenient.
 - a. True
 - b. False

Correct responses: 1.B, 2. C, 3. B, 4. A, 5. B.



References, Part I

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