

With pleasure I present to you yet another great interview with Karen Murphy Administrator of The Boston University Center for Professional Education. Thank you Karen!

Cynthia M. Schenck
CEO Medical Interpreters of the North Shore
IMIA Board Director
IMIA ISP Journalist

Tell me about the Interpreter program at Boston University.

We are coming up on 10 years that we've offered this program. The foundation of the program started at another college in the area, but since it's been at BU, we've expanded the program and the languages.

CPE offers a certificate program for Interpreters in three languages – Chinese (Mandarin), Portuguese, and Spanish. To be accepted into our program, students must first pass a fluency test with our faculty that includes writing, role-playing, and sight translation.

We run the Spanish program twice a year (September and January). Portuguese is offered each year in September, and Chinese is offered each year in January. This is consistent with the needs for these languages in this geographic area.

How is your program designed?

Our program consists of four core courses, which take about a year to complete. If a student opts for additional information, the program can take half a year longer. They are offered on Saturday morning, and I really applaud the students for committing to this for such a long time.

Students take the course in their own language pair. None of the classes are language neutral. This means that students are continually improving both languages at the same time. In fact, we begin our program with a language component that is grounded in grammar and language usage. We want to make sure there is a strong language foundation in both languages before we move to the interpreting phase.

During the interpreting sections, the students work on building skills for simultaneous and consecutive interpreting, as well as sight translation. We then add in the subject-matter areas where we focus on vocabulary. Community, legal, and medical interpreting terms and concepts are added to the foundation we've assembled. The ethics of the profession are layered throughout our program.

How many students have gone through your program?

Since the program started at BU, we've had about 300 students earn certificates with us. Many of them have earned certificates in all three areas – community, legal, and medical.

Who takes your program?

I would say the majority of students are people who are career changers. They've had exposure to interpreting in informal situations, and they are now ready to get the formal training to make sure they are doing it correctly. Underlying it all, though, is a desire to help others.

Most of the students are local within Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. We've had students though who lived in other States – and even other countries! – who've come to Boston to take our program.

What do you look for when testing students for your program?

Well, we begin by checking how well they write in both languages. We have some short essay questions, and we ask the students to write on topics that they know, such as "What game did you enjoy playing as a child"? They don't need to tell the truth, they just need to be able to show us that they can construct sentences with substance.

The role-play section is with two faculty members who assess the person's ability to understand the process of interpreting using both languages. There is also the language flow, which is hard to quantify, but they are looking to see if the person has the innate ability to be an interpreter.

Nerves can play a part in the person's performance, but we've been doing this long enough to have a good sense of whether someone will do well in the program. We often have people test who speak well, especially with their peers, but they haven't developed a strong register, or they are heritage speakers or someone who hasn't been immersed in the community of their second language long enough to develop communication skills beyond the spoken word.

How do you see your role within IMIA as an IMIA ISP member?

We value IMIA and the professionalism it brings to the industry. Many of our faculty are members, and we appreciate the fact that they are continually educating themselves in the field. IMIA is an excellent organization for this and we are happy to promote the benefits of membership.

Is there anything else you would like to share about Boston University for professional education?

Whenever possible, I send along information to our students, whether it's a conference, training program, or job. I think it's really important that I facilitate this, even with such a large group of people I send information to. If a job request comes through, even for a one-off per diem job, it makes me proud to know that one of our students may help someone in need.