

Lost in Translation: Interpreting in the Justice System

Madison Drees

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Stephen Owen

I have always had an interest in languages. My father is from Germany so I grew up speaking English and some German as well. When I was in fifth grade, I had the opportunity to take Mandarin Chinese and did so for most of my life. When I came into Radford I had a minor in Chinese and I took an elementary Arabic class. So when it came to thinking about my capstone I wanted to find a way to combine my major of Criminal Justice with my passion for languages. When thinking about it I was able to land on the role of translators.

I got some background and ideas on how to do my capstone during my Police and Society class. I had to write a paper on my choice regarding policing. I explored how language barriers impact community trust. I submitted that paper to the Winesett Awards and was a Finalist. After that, I decided to expand beyond just policing into the courts as well. For both of these areas of criminal justice I ran into many gaps in the literature. Despite that, I was able to find great research on the topic.

I began with policing as that is what often feeds into the courts. Policing has many aspects, but often their interactions and interrogations become testimony in the courts. When you have language barriers starting in policing it will often feed over into issues in the court. With policing I also found the importance of mitigating language barriers in order to increase community trust. Next, I focused my research on the courts. I looked at what was in place, the issues with it, and what the research was lacking. I found lots of reports and a few qualitative sources but very little quantitative research had been done. Despite that, I was able to get an overall look of what interpreting in the courts looked like, and more importantly: the issues.

While exploring I wanted to try to reach out to those directly involved in the field. I was given the contact of a professor on campus that was a court translator and a Blacksburg police officer. Unfortunately, I was not able to get into contact with either. Beyond this, I also found many gaps in the literature. Primarily, there was not much research done period. It was an under researched topic that was not very prevalent or easy to find. When looking at the courts, I was able to find some reports by the ABA on what *should* be done, not what was currently happening. In addition, there was a National Summit I looked at as well as a report five years later examining the changes. However, after 2017 I could not find any more data from the National Center for State Courts or the ABA.

I was able to come up with some solutions based on both the existing literature and the gaps. This capstone helped me learn how to search through the gaps of literature to see what can be improved. As I prepare to go into law school I will take the researching skills I learned in this project with me. In addition, I will take the knowledge I learned with me as I prepare to become a lawyer. I will make sure to always advocate for those that may not realize they have a right to equal access in language. I hope that this capstone will encourage others to look at this issue and

understand the significance. Only continuing advocacy and research on this issue will bring change into the criminal justice field.