

NCRA Instructional Best Practices Survey Executive Summary



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Overview

In late 2012, NCRA launched what would soon become the Vision for Educational Excellence Task Force, a group tasked with developing a vision for the future of court reporting education and identifying steps that NCRA could take to make that vision a reality. The group identified and initiated several major projects aimed at increasing student enrollment and broadening awareness of court reporting as a career path. Thanks to one of these projects, the 2013-2014

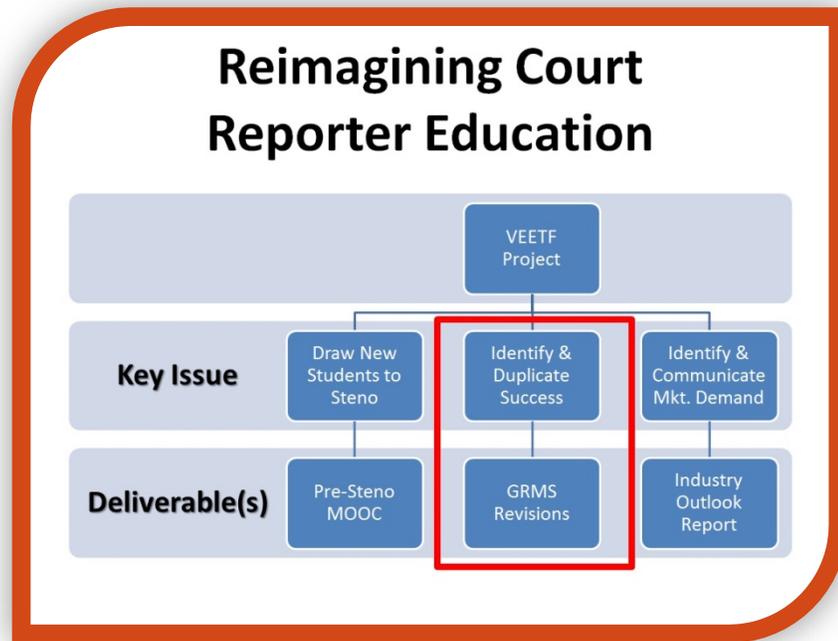
Industry Outlook Report by global consulting and research firm Ducker Worldwide, commissioned by NCRA, we now have data indicating demand for 5,500 additional court reporters over the next three to five years. This presents an historic challenge for NCRA, and one that must be met

if we are to ensure a bright and secure future for the stenographic court reporting and captioning profession.

The task force quickly realized that if our efforts to increase enrollment are to be fully effective at actually delivering qualified new court reporters to meet this demand, we must also do everything possible to ensure that current and future students have the best possible chance of successfully completing their studies and graduating. As such, an in-house survey was created to assess current practices at NCRA certified and participating court reporting schools and to identify which of those practices actually drive positive student outcomes.

Purpose, scope, and methodology

The stated purpose of the survey was to identify practices that lead to higher graduation rates in court reporting programs. In order to determine which questions needed to be asked, NCRA's CEO and Executive Director and the Education Department began by scanning the current environment and reviewing past projects and reports, including the 2006 Reporter Education Commission report, the Total Immersion project, the annual school reports, and numerous



other sources of school-related data. Next, the staff conducted phone interviews with several dozen school owners, administrators, and instructors, asking them which practices they felt contributed the most to student success and higher graduation rates. The qualitative data and hypotheses from the calls were converted into questions for the survey.

Using annual report data collected from NCRA certified schools, staff identified the fifteen schools with the highest five-year and ten-year graduation rates,* hereafter referred to as HGR schools, and the fifteen schools with the lowest, hereafter referred to as LGR schools. The survey was designed in such a way that data for HGR and LGR schools could be tracked separately, while data for all other schools was collected as a single control group.

***A note about graduation rates**

To approximate graduation rates, NCRA compared the number of graduates each year to the overall number of students who were currently enrolled at that time. While more sophisticated data may be available for certain schools, this provided a method that could be reliably used to compare a wide range of schools with the existing data.

The survey was distributed in the summer of 2014 and finalized in the fall. The results were compiled in the late fall and early winter. This report summarizes those areas where the biggest disparities were found between HGR and LGR schools.

Summary of key findings: Practice and speedbuilding

It comes as no surprise that practice and speedbuilding, which have long been considered crucial elements of a court reporting education, have a strong influence on graduation rates. However, the survey did reveal some surprises regarding which elements of a school's practice program actually correlated to schools with positive student outcomes and which did not.

In-class practice hours

One of the areas where the survey results showed the widest divergence between HGR and LGR schools appeared when respondents were asked about practice hours. In terms of in-class practice hours, the majority of LGR schools dedicated nine or fewer hours per week of in-class time to practice, and more than half of LGR schools reported dedicating just four or fewer hours per week. The majority of HGR schools reported dedicating at least 10 hours per week to in-class practice, and less than 20 percent of HGR schools fell into the four hours or less category.

Outside practice hours

When asked about practice hours required of students outside the classroom, the trends were similar, but less pronounced. The vast majority of both LGR and HGR schools reported requiring or recommending between six and 15 hours per week of outside practice time. However, it should be noted that more than a third of HGR schools reported 16 or more hours, a far greater proportion than LGR schools.

Keys to success: Practice and speedbuilding

- Dedicate at least 10 in-class hours per week to practice.
- Consider scaling up outside practice hours to 16 or more.
- Ensure that extensive support for speedbuilding is available to students.
- Ensure that instructors will intervene if they feel that students aren't fulfilling outside practice hours.
- Provide students with ample mentoring, job shadowing, and peer-review opportunities.

Support for speedbuilding

Another area that correlates strongly to a higher graduation rate is support for speedbuilding. When asked whether support for speedbuilding was available as needed, 76 percent of all HGR respondents (students, instructors, administrators, and recent graduates) strongly agreed, with another 21 percent agreeing. Less than 4 percent disagreed. When LGR respondents were asked the same question, only 54 percent strongly agreed, and approximately 14 percent disagreed. Clearly speedbuilding support should be present in these NCRA certified and participating schools. However, it appears equally clear that those at LGR schools do not feel that they have the same opportunities to take advantage of that support.

Speedbuilding intervention

The largest differentiation between HGR and LGR schools in this area was with respect to instructor involvement when students don't live up to their practice obligations. All respondents were asked if an instructor who suspected that practice was not occurring would intervene with the student. Among HGR schools, 90 percent of respondents agreed or

strongly agreed with this statement, and a slim majority (51 percent) strongly agreed. Among LGR schools, only two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement.

Availability of resources

One final element of a successful speedbuilding program was providing the proper resources to students. In terms of the more traditional resources like practice dictation and online practice platforms, HGR schools showed only a small edge over LGR schools. However, when it came to internships, shadowing working reporters, and peer review, students at HGR schools were far more likely to rate those opportunities as extensively or largely available.



Summary of key findings: Student progress

Another key area of differentiation was how schools managed, tracked, and supported students' progress. HGR schools were clearly far more likely to take a focused, systematic approach to evaluating progress and to approach this as a two-way conversation with the student.

Expectation management

Perhaps the biggest differentiator in this area between LGR and HGR schools has to do with students' perceptions of the difficulty of the program and how that perception compared to their expectations. All students were asked whether they found the program harder or easier than they had first expected. LGR students were roughly twice as likely to report finding the program much harder than expected, and no LGR students found the program easier than expected. There could be many potential explanations for this trend, but the most likely interpretation is that HGR schools are doing a better job of managing students' expectations regarding the challenges ahead of them and what it will take to meet those challenges. It makes sense that if a student encounters those challenges unexpectedly, that student will be less apt

to succeed, more frustrated, and more likely to abandon his or her studies. As court reporting schools strive to attract as many new students as possible to meet future demand, it is also vital to ensure that these students have a clear understanding of what lies ahead and what will be required for them to be successful.



Individual development plans

When asking students whether they had a formal or written plan for their speedbuilding development, three out of

four students at HGR schools replied that they did. Only about half of students at LGR schools reported having a formal or written plan. Schools that clearly document each student's speedbuilding path and goals are more likely to successfully see students through to graduation.

Student accountability

Students were asked the question, "To what degree are you held accountable for achieving progress toward your goals?" Students at HGR schools were most likely to respond that they were held "extensively" responsible, whereas those at LGR schools were most likely to respond that they are held accountable "to some degree." Clearly when students feel that they are held accountable for their own progress, they are more likely to ultimately succeed.

Feedback

When asked how often instructors provided personal or customized feedback on their progress, more than half of HGR students indicated that they receive feedback on a daily basis, and nearly all HGR students said they receive at least weekly feedback. Among LGR students, less than a third reported receiving daily feedback, and 16 percent reported receiving feedback on a monthly or even less frequent basis. In fact, one in ten LGR students reported that they never receive personal or customized feedback on their progress at all. Even more telling was the fact that responses to this question between LGR students and LGR instructors diverged widely. Instructors at LGR institutions reported that meaningful feedback was being provided on a more frequent basis, but students disagreed.

Broad-based guidance

Students were asked, “At times when you are struggling with speedbuilding or academic material, to whom within your program do you turn for advice or guidance?” Students were then asked to choose all answers that applied, and HGR students were significantly more likely to rely on a wide range of people for guidance. A majority of each group (82 percent HGR and 65 percent LGR) said that they were likely to turn to their instructors for guidance. However, HGR students were roughly twice as likely to rely on working reporter mentors or students and three times as likely to rely on specifically assigned counselors or coaches. Clearly HGR schools do a better job of making a wide range of support options available to students and/or ensuring that students can and do take advantage of the many different types of support that are offered. The importance of coaches and mentors is expanded upon further in the next section of this report.

Keys to success: Student progress

- Ensure that students have realistic expectations about the difficulty of the program and what it will take for them to succeed.
- Develop an Individual Development Plan for each student.
- Create a culture where students understand that they are responsible for their own progress.
- Deliver daily feedback to students regarding their progress, and verify that feedback is meaningful to students.
- Provide a wide range of professionals to whom students can turn for support.

Summary of key findings: Coaching and motivation

The third and final major area of differentiation between HGR and LGR schools has to do with coaching and mentoring. Given the unique nature of a court reporting education, and that so much of a student’s ability to write and build speed depends on factors like confidence, mental focus, and even managing anxiety, the roles of the coach and the mentor are uniquely

important in this field. Schools that recognize this and provide effective coaching and mentoring to their students do a better job of seeing those students through to graduation.

Coaches and mentors

When asked whether or not specific roles were filled at their schools, several roles stood out as major differentiators between HGR and LGR schools. For example, students at both HGR and LGR schools were very likely to indicate that academic advisors are available at their school (88 percent and 70 percent). However HGR students were roughly twice as likely to report that the role of coach or technique specialist and the role of court reporter mentor were filled at their school. This indicates that schools that clearly define and assign these support roles see higher rates of student success.

Student confidence

Another clear area of differentiation between students in HGR and LGR schools involved the students' confidence in their own success. Approximately 90 percent of HGR students stated that they were either very confident or certain of their success, and 60 percent of HGR respondents categorized themselves as certain. Among LGR students, less than a third of students described themselves as certain, and more than a quarter described themselves as

somewhat confident or not confident. This provides an interesting counterpoint to the findings above about expectation management. It would appear that successful schools walk a fine line between setting reasonable expectations about the challenges and hurdles of a court reporting education while still instilling confidence in their students with regard to their ultimate success.

Practice compliance

As mentioned above, HGR schools tend to devote more in-class hours to practice and speedbuilding, and students in HGR schools are much more likely to be confronted if they don't live up to outside practice expectations. It is unsurprising, then, that students at HGR schools report actually spending more total hours per week practicing. The majority of HGR students

Keys to success:

Coaching and motivation

- Ensure that the roles of coach/technique specialist and court reporter mentor are filled by a specific person for each student or all students.
- While setting and maintaining realistic expectations, find ways to boost students' confidence about their success.
- Ensure that total combined practice time is at least 16 hours.



reported practicing at least 16 hours per week, and close to a quarter of them reported more than 20 practice hours per week. The majority of LGR students reported total practice hours in the six- to 15-hour range, with only about 5 percent exceeding 20 hours.

Summary of key findings: Other findings

The survey identified a few other notable differences that didn't fit into any of the major categories above, but which still carry important implications for instructional practices.

Instructor background

Clear differences emerged with regard to the makeup of instructors at LGR and HGR schools. With regard to faculty education level, the majority (63 percent) of instructors at HGR schools reported holding a bachelor's degree or higher, whereas only 40 percent of LGR instructors said the same. With regard to background, two-thirds of LGR schools reported using current and former court reporters only as instructors. All HGR schools who responded reported using a combination of court reporting and captioning professionals and professional educators.

Keys to success: Other findings

- For maximum effectiveness, employ a mix of current/former court reporters and non-reporter education professionals.
- Ensure that the faculty includes highly experienced court reporting instructors, but make sure to also employ instructors who are newer to court reporting education.



Instructor longevity

One of the most counterintuitive results of the survey related to how long instructors had been teaching. Common wisdom holds that instructors with more experience should have more finely honed techniques and should be better teachers, driving more positive student outcomes. However, when instructors were asked how long they had been teaching court reporting, two-thirds of instructors at LGR schools indicated that they had been teaching for 10 years or longer, while only 37 percent of instructors at HGR schools fell into that category. In other words, at the schools with the highest graduation rates, a smaller portion of the faculty was highly experienced.

There are at least two possible explanations for this. The first is an extrapolation from the finding above about instructor backgrounds. The question specifically

asked how long the instructor had been teaching *court reporting*, not overall teaching

experience. The results indicated that HGR schools are far more likely to use a mix of both current/former reporters and professional educators, meaning that the professional educators on staff likely had teaching experience in other fields before they started teaching court reporting. Another possible contributing explanation is stagnation. Clearly there is great value in experience, and successful court reporting schools do employ a portion of highly experienced court reporting educators. However, when longtime court reporting instructors make up the majority of a faculty, the institution may be more likely to focus on older, tried-and-true methods and may be slower to respond to new trends in both education and the court reporting industry. This data certainly doesn't mean that court reporting schools should abandon the idea of employing highly experienced faculty members, but it does suggest that schools will be most successful when they pursue a strong mix of experienced court reporting educators and innovative, yet proven educators who may be new to teaching in the court reporting field.

Student age

Another surprising finding had to do with the age of current students. More than half of students responding from LGR schools reported that they were over 40 years old, compared to less than a third of students at HGR schools. Unfortunately, there is no data from the survey to indicate why this is the case. Common knowledge in the court reporting industry dictates that as with learning foreign languages, musical instruments, and many other similar skills, learning stenography is considered to be much easier for younger adults. One possible explanation is that because HGR students enjoy shorter times to graduation, younger students move through the program more quickly while older students gradually complete the program, making the student body become gradually younger. Meanwhile, struggling older students at LGR schools take additional months and even years to graduate, skewing the student body higher in age. This explanation is highly speculative, but the causes and effects of student age distribution in court reporting schools would make a compelling subject for future research.

Summary of key findings: Non-differentiators

As informative as the findings above are, it was equally informative to identify those areas where there was NO differentiation between HGR and LGR schools. Many of these findings debunked pieces of conventional wisdom that instructors and administrators had shared during the phone interviews and hypotheses that NCRA staff had made as a result of those conversations. None of the following factors showed significant variation between HGR and LGR schools, and thus cannot be considered contributing factors to higher graduation rates.

- School size – Large and small schools were equally likely to be HGR schools. The survey found no correlation between school size and graduation rates.
- School financials – HGR schools were not significantly more likely to charge students higher tuition. Instructor compensation was difficult to compare because of the various structures (hourly, salaried, by course, etc.), but the survey did not show any systematic differences in this area.

- Student financials – HGR and LGR students reported receiving similar amounts of financial aid and were equally likely to be employed full time or part time while attending school.
- Theory – HGR schools were not significantly more or less likely to use a certain theory. StenEd is the most prevalent in court reporting education and was also the most common among both the HGR and LGR groups.
- Realtime – The majority of both HGR and LGR schools introduced realtime as soon as theory training began. During our calls with educators, there were vehement opinions in both directions regarding the question of whether introducing realtime early may distract students and slow their progress. However, the survey does not indicate any correlation between when realtime is introduced and positive student outcomes.
- Distance education – Both HGR and LGR schools were highly likely to offer at least some portion of their programs online. Both were likely to indicate that online students performed about as well as traditional brick-and-mortar students.
- Student demographics (excepting age) – HGR and LGR students were equally likely to be married, have children, and be female.

Conclusion

The NCRA Instructional Practices Survey identified numerous practices that differentiate HGR and LGR schools. Factors associated with higher graduation rates include extensive speedbuilding requirements and support; careful analysis, monitoring, and communication of student progress; and effective coaching and motivation, among other key best practices.



Given the unprecedented job demand for court reporters and the current low graduation rates, it is absolutely imperative for court reporting schools to embrace these practices in order to maximize student success. At the time of this writing, NCRA's Education Task Force (formed in 2014) has already begun the process of reviewing the General Requirements and Minimum Standards for court reporting schools, with the objective of incorporating these practices into the requirements. Supporting and guiding schools in implementing these standards and increasing graduation rates is NCRA's foremost priority. In this way, we can ensure a bright future for the stenographic court reporting and captioning profession.