

Dealing with Serious Budget Cuts without Cutting Service Quality

Summary of presentation given by Jo Alexander of Oregon State University, at the Text-Interpreting Professional Seminar, May 14, 2011, Portland, Oregon

Background

During the Spring of 2011, surveys designed to gather information about the effects on text interpreting services of recent budget cuts were sent to 26 service coordinators at colleges across the United States and Canada.

Survey questions focused on these 6 areas: editing time, prep time, pay rates, scheduling (teaming), equipment, and professional development.

Results

Coordinators at 17 sites responded to the survey. Of those responding, 56% said that budget cuts have had an impact on their speech-to-text services. The areas most affected were editing and prep time (reduced or eliminated) and pay rates (reduced or frozen). To a lesser degree, scheduling (teaming), purchase of equipment, and professional development were negatively affected.

Suggestions for Maintaining Quality Services

Survey respondents reported using a number of strategies to support good services in the face of budget cuts and transcriber shortages:

Editing and Prep Time

- Provide editing time only for new transcribers, until they have stabilized their in-class transcribing skills.
- Reduce the amount of editing time, or eliminate it altogether, based on the difficulty of the class.
- Provide each student with a thumb drive to use to get the unedited transcript immediately after class from the transcriber's computer.
- Provide prep time on a case-by-case basis, only for specific courses on difficult topics. Have transcribers apply for prep time, explaining their reasons for needing it for a specific course.
- To increase efficient use of prep time and editing time, require that they be done in the DSS office, and clocked in and out.

Pay Rates

- Research the availability of special grants in your state for funding direct support services. One respondent reported that their site's cost of speech-to-text wages was covered 100% by such a grant.
- Consider hiring to become transcribers college students who are qualified for work-study funding from the federal or state government.
- Apply for FTE transcriber positions at your school, instead of using independent contractors or agencies. The benefits and competitive pay in such positions better attract . . . and retain . . . high-quality service providers.
- Re-negotiate with agencies/independent contractors rates that were set up before the budget cuts.
- Remove/reduce guaranteed hours in service provider/agency contracts.
- Pay less for editing hours and prep time than for in-class transcribing itself

Scheduling

- Use a "floater" to provide transcribers a break when classes are not teamed
- Split assignments between two transcribers, using "sequential scheduling." In this strategy, one transcriber transcribes the first part of a long/difficult class, and a second transcriber takes over for the second half of the class.

Equipment

- Procure laptops from university surplus.
- Use mini-laptops for reader computers. They are significantly less expensive than regular notebook computers.
- Purchase all the same brand of computers and the same model, when possible. This makes sharing power supplies and batteries possible.
- Identify one person to become proficient at troubleshooting and repairing your department's "old" transcribing computers.

A Revolutionary New Idea: The Resource Sharing Plan (RSP)

It's clear that creative thinking is required in order to preserve quality support services for students during this time of serious funding cuts. The development of Resource Sharing Plans holds great promise for the future.

A Resource Sharing Plan is an agreement among partnering institutions to share equipment, technical support, staff positions and/or captioning resources; to coordinate transcriber schedules with RSP partner institutions for local on-site services or for remote services (e.g., one partner institution provides remote services to another partner institution, at lower rates than available from for-profit agencies).

If you are interested in brainstorming about ways to make Resource Sharing Plans a reality, email Jo Alexander at Jo.D.Alexander@oregonstate.edu

A Final Note

The strategies used now to compensate for budget cuts will have an impact on students and the profession of speech-to-text transcribing for a long time to come. Precedents become "standards." We must strive to preserve the quality of services during these challenging times so that the standards that do emerge will best protect the interests of our students.