

Interpreting for Crisis Contexts in Immigration: Engaged Humanities

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ABSTRACT

I will develop a new course for students of intermediate and advanced Spanish to improve their ability to translate legal documents and interpret between Spanish-English in the context of crisis immigration and asylum seekers. Students will learn about asylum law with a focus on cases from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Cuba (the origin of a majority of Spanish-speaking asylum seekers) and research the country conditions leading to persecution. During the course, we will produce translations through a partnership with Respond Crisis Translation, a network of volunteer translators working with asylum seekers on the Mexico border. After this course, students will be qualified to volunteer for one of the many organizations relying on volunteer translators and interpreters to help prepare asylum seekers for their hearings. At the same time, we will read short stories, view films, and read non-fictional testimonies from the perspectives of economic migrants and asylum seekers.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Rationale: Translation courses at the undergraduate level are rare. Most are offered exclusively for graduate-level students, and those typically use literary texts as the main focus. This narrow view of translation is a tremendous lost opportunity. Students at the intermediate and advanced undergraduate levels of language learning are capable, with guidance and oversight, of translating authentic texts. Moreover, translation allows them to fulfill many of the recommendations listed in “Partnership for 21st Century Skills” by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (“The Five Cs”). For example, translating allows students to make **comparisons** between languages, understand **cultural products** and perspectives, and make **connections** to other disciplines. Furthermore, undergraduate level courses in language interpreting are practically nonexistent. This is surprising, given that practicing interpreting skills can fulfill so many of the goals of our language departments: improve spoken language fluency, increase vocabulary, and provide an opportunity to reflect on linguistic justice. By ignoring translation and interpreting, language departments are also sacrificing their students’ access to one of the fastest growing industries in the United States.¹

To address this deficit at Knox College, I hope to develop a course that focuses on translation and interpreting between Spanish-English in the context of crisis immigration and asylum seekers. This course will build on the introductory translation and interpreting courses that I developed and have taught at Knox College since 2016. Enrollments in these courses have been healthy. Many of the students enrolled are not Spanish majors; they are heritage speakers who are attracted to the Modern Languages department for the first time through these courses. I would like to continue this positive

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(http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?sd=6%2f4%2f2015&siteid=cbpr&sc_cmp1=cb_pr897_&id=pr897&ed=12%2f31%2f2015)

trend by creating an exciting new course and project related to the crisis of asylum seekers at our border.

I am inspired by the work of Annie Abbot and her community engagement courses at the University of Illinois-Urbana. She writes in her article, “Engaged Humanities and the Future of Spanish Programs”:

“To prepare students to be civically-engaged, savvy cultural critics who are equipped to combat highly-charged, racialized discourses will require integrating into our curriculum topics such as human migrations (historical and global), economics, policy studies, communication, media studies and more... our profession should embrace both civic and career connections to Spanish studies²

Spanish departments can do more to address the immigration debate by moving from classroom discussions to action. As students begin to imagine themselves as professionals, they see the bigger picture, that translation and interpreting are not just about knowing a second language well, and moving in between languages effortlessly. Instead, they see themselves as part of a complex network in which a limited-English proficiency person (LEPP) comes into contact with health, education, and legal services and all the administrative paraphernalia and lingo that accompanies it. My new course on legal translation and interpreting will focus on asylum seekers. Rather than just learning about asylum seekers, we will put our knowledge into practice by both translating documents for their cases, and when appropriate, moving on to the role of volunteer interpreter.

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https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.aatsp.org/resource/resmgr/Hispania_Centenary/Hispania_100.5_Bayliss_Prep.pdf

Audience: Students with intermediate and advanced Spanish mastery are often hungry to use their language skills to advance issues of social justice. Many Knox students in Spanish language courses are also heritage speakers with a personal connection to immigration and the injustices of immigration law. Moreover, DACA students do not have access to study abroad opportunities outside the US, yet have similar immersion needs. My planned course will provide students with opportunities *within* the US, through translation or through volunteer interpreting programs. For example, students may engage by phone with asylum seekers in U.S. detention allowing them to interact with native Spanish speakers who are facing bewildering challenges in the US immigration system. This course gives DACA students (and students grounded due to COVID-19 travel restrictions) a safe way to build their language skills, address a community need, and participate in a linguistic justice action project.

Course Content and Design Primary Learning Goals

Spanish 233, Translating and Interpreting in Legal Contexts

- Explain the asylum seeking process in the US: history, common practice, and recent changes;
- Familiarize ourselves with the first-person stories of asylum seekers from Central America, Venezuela, and Cuba (fiction and nonfiction);
- Research country conditions leading to persecution;
- Translate evidentiary documents (cultural products): birth certificates, marriage certificates, medical reports, police reports, newspaper articles, Facebook posts;
- Interpret consecutively for mock immigration scenarios, in person and over the phone / video;
- Explore opportunities to provide volunteer translation and interpreting services in Illinois, and in detention centers throughout the US.

Secondary Learning Goals

- Familiarize ourselves with the perspectives of practicing legal interpreters;
- Understand ways that bilingual language skills can be employed for linguistic justice;
- Recognize the names of major border crossing cities and the geography of the border;
- Research the effects of Migrant Protection Protocol (“Remain in Mexico”) and other bars to asylum.

Our major class project will be to translate documentary evidence provided by an asylum seeker or two (depending on length). These documents are collected by advocacy groups and will be shared with my students after they sign confidentiality waivers. Students will translate the documents with my oversight. In addition, students will practice interpreting with realistic scripts, paying attention to common false cognates in legal interpreting and lexical variation in Central America and Caribbean Spanish. These scenarios will focus on preparation for Credible Fear Interviews. At this interview, asylum seekers must convince an asylum officer that they will face persecution, torture, or death if forced to return to their home countries. Two students will play the roles of pro-bono attorney and asylum seeker, while one student interprets for the two parties.

Participants: I have been a Certified Medical Interpreter since 2016. In addition, I have served in the capacity of translator, serving various agencies advocating for asylum seekers for about two years. I have also served as an interpreter in over thirty cases for pro-bono lawyers and asylum seekers, both at the border and over the phone. I have established a professional relationship with advocacy groups with translation and interpreting needs. I partnered with the “Respond Crisis Translations Network” (Simon

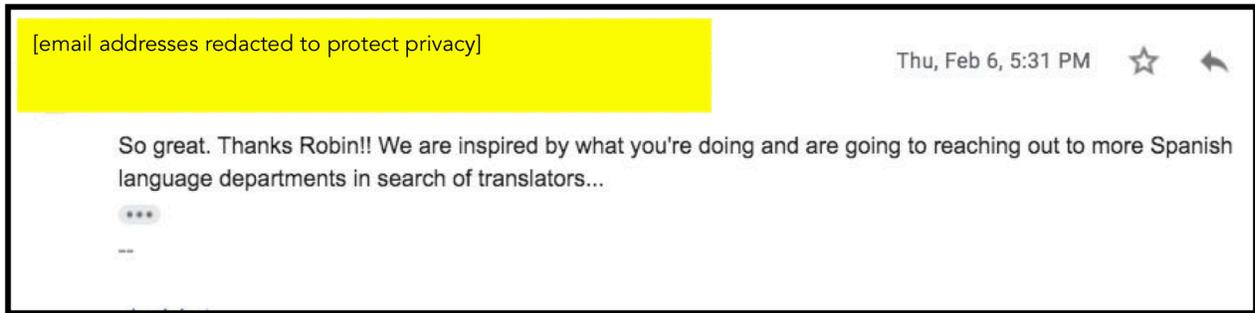
Beins, coordinator) for a class project in Winter 2020 and will carry out another with the Minnesota group “The Advocates for Human Rights” this fall.

Impact and Assessment: The coursework would happen through a series of steps. I first will introduce students to this work through one of two introductory courses in intermediate Spanish 205 (Introduction to Translation) and 206 (Introduction to Interpreting). The next step is to participate in the new course described in this application. Following completion of this course, students can elect to continue to participate in translation and interpreting projects aimed at helping asylum seekers.

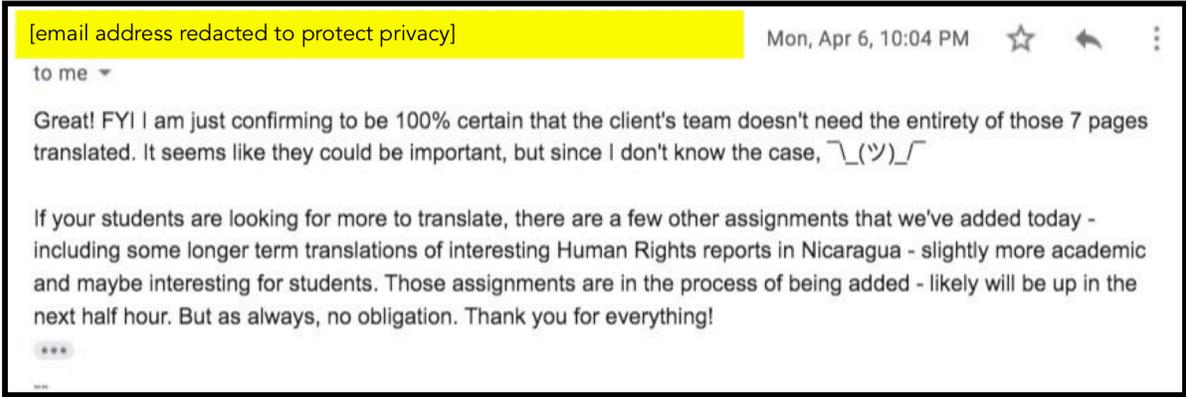
<i>STEP ONE</i>	<i>STEP TWO</i>	<i>STEP THREE</i>	<i>STEP FOUR</i>
<i>Introduction to Translation 205</i> <i>and/or</i> <i>Introduction to Interpreting 206</i>	<i>Translation and Interpreting for Legal Contexts</i> <i>-PROPOSED NEW COURSE- to begin Jan 2021</i>	<i>Travel to Border Detention Facilities</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Spring Break</i> ● <i>Summer</i> ● <i>December</i> <i>and/or</i> <i>Internships/ Remote volunteer</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Translation</i> ● <i>Interpreting</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Raising awareness</i> ● <i>Collaborate in training</i> ● <i>Campus Panel presentation</i>

Step One: Spanish 205: Translation

In the winter term 2020, I assigned my class the entire file of supporting documentation for two asylum seekers. The documentation varied from birth certificates, death certificates, police reports, witness statements, and medical reports, etc in Spanish. Students were placed in teams with one classmate serving as editor. I revised and certified final copies. In this way, my students used their knowledge of Spanish and English to create real value in providing translations to two asylum seekers, a step toward linguistic justice.



After this course, one student requested an independent study to continue translating work for asylum seekers. Shortly after, I received this request from the Crisis Response Translation coordinator.



My student translated a major section of the report (in Spanish to English), which I expect will be published. Her translation required detailed research not only on specific Nicaraguan vocabulary, but also on the abuse of political dissidents. The report contained many first-person accounts of horrific torture. Yet, we were motivated to work beyond the emotional pain, knowing these reports are key in establishing country condition reports for asylum seekers.

Step One: Spanish 206: Interpreting

In this class we learn the basics of interpreting roles [Conduit, Clarification, Cultural Broker, Advocate] and practice with role-play scripts. The class is divided into 3 units: social work, medical, and legal. Using a rubric, student interpreting skills are graded on: vocabulary, register, accuracy, ethics, procedure, speed and tone. As a field trip in this

course, we attend a federal court hearing, observe a courtroom interpreter, and interview her at the end of the hearing. After this course, students will be able to choose to continue to the new Legal Interpreting course focused on asylum seekers.

Step Two: Spanish 233: Translating and Interpreting for Legal Contexts

After completing this course, students may continue to engage in several ways:

Step Three: Working in the detention centers or remote contributions

During the 2019 school year, I took three groups of students to the US/Mexico Border to serve in detention centers South Texas Family Residential Center (TX), Port Isabel Detention Center (TX), and the Otay Mesa Detention Center (CA). These students had taken the Introduction to Interpreting course with me as well as a follow up independent study. We served one week at each location (spring break, summer, winter break). We participated in programs designed to pair pro bono attorneys with interpreters and visited the asylum seekers in detention for lengthy interviews in which the basis of the asylum claim was revealed. We carefully interpreted the details of each person's life story, narrating persecution and harm, fear and violence, sometimes for political reasons, other times for religious reasons, or sometimes due to gang violence or severe domestic abuse. When not interpreting, we worked on translating supporting documentation for the cases. These experiences have served as a basis for designing this new course. For those students not interested or able to travel to detention centers, I am able to connect them to the agencies in need of translations and remote interpreters. This program strengthens their connection to the field of law, migration studies, trauma counseling, as well as exposure to a variety of different accents and lexicons. One of the lawyers on the San Diego program sent me this note of appreciation:

[email address redacted to protect privacy]

Tue, Dec 10, 2019, 11:22 AM



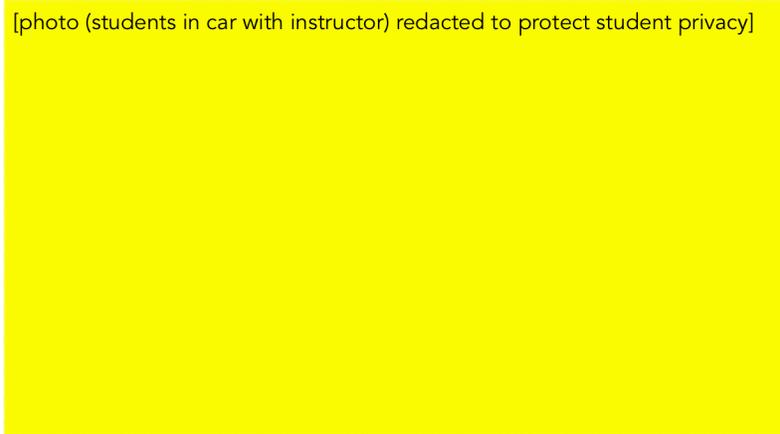
to me ▾

Hi Robin,

Thanks for sending this. I also just wanted to say thank you (and your entire team) for how helpful and wonderful you all were during the trip. Seriously, it's a real testament to you and your students how well prepared everyone was especially during what was definitely not the easiest circumstances. What a great group.

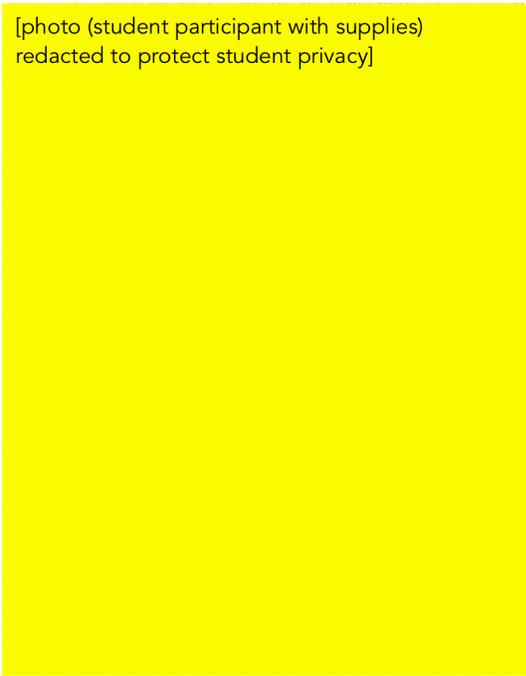


[photo (students in car with instructor) redacted to protect student privacy]



Day Three at the border (Harlingen, Tx), headed to Port Isabel Detention Center

[photo (student participant with supplies) redacted to protect student privacy]



Jenn is ready to start the day at the crack of dawn at the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Tx.

- We need to bring in our own coffee, water and snacks
- See-thru backpack required by security
- A sweater to combat the chilly space
- Govt id and permission letter
- A great attitude is always a big help!

Jen helped create this photo for future training. (Dilley, Tx)

Step Four: Reflection

Upon return, students were clearly changed, with their convictions solidified. What had been abstract concepts were made real and human. They wanted to keep working with asylum seekers and educating others about the broken asylum system. Many of us shed tears of joy every time when we learned that one of the asylum seekers we had helped had been released. Jenn (above) graduated and now works with LGBT asylum cases in Chicago with the National Immigrant Justice Center. Five of them participated in a panel presentation for the campus (see visual below). Their panel presentation prompted a glowing editorial in the campus student newspaper on how our work is a testament to the power of education (“Thoughts from the Embers”). I continue to see all of them use social media to raise awareness of asylum and immigration issues among their peers and families. They also help me with my courses by writing short scripts that realistically represent the kinds of conversations / scenarios for which they interpret.

Timeline: The course has already been approved by the Knox Curriculum Committee and will be offered January 2021 for the Winter term. Since Knox College is on a quarter model, the course will finish mid March 2021 (nine weeks).

BUDGET (Class size 12)

Quality headset for each student / x12 \$32.00 each headset x 12 students	\$384
Stopwatch for interpreting performances x1	\$15
<i>Tell me how it ends, An essay in 40 questions</i> (Valeria Luiselli) \$12.00 per book x 12 students	\$144

Spanish-English Legal Dictionary \$29.00 each x 12 students	\$336
Excursion Fees: Van rental to courthouse (Peoria) \$125 rental + \$20 gas + \$5 parking	\$150
Excursion Fees: Van rental to Esperanza Center (Moline, IL) \$150 rental + \$20 gas + \$5 parking	\$150
Lunch after excursion to courthouse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$12 per meal x 12 students • \$12 for professor • \$12 for guest speaker 	\$168
Honorarium: Interview with court interpreter (guest speaker)	\$100
Honorarium: Interview with two alumni working in immigration	\$200
Student Teaching Assistant (35 hours x \$10)	\$350
Stipend for Professor Robin Ragan (faculty) for course development	\$1000

*Students will keep the books, but headsets will be returned to Knox at the end of the term for future participants.

ADDENDUM

Assessment/Impact. Panel Presentation on Campus

Knox Students Use Spanish Language Skills to Translate and Interpret for Asylum-seekers



"You never realize the importance of [listening] until you meet someone who doesn't have a voice," said Stephanie Martinez-Calderon '20 at a panel

"You never realize the importance of listening until you meet someone who doesn't have a voice." Stephanie Martinez-Calderón, second from the left.

(Photo at the law office of Immigrant Justice Campaign, San Diego)

<https://www.knox.edu/news/knox-students-translate-and-interpret-for-asylum-seekers>

"As my client was telling his story of trauma, I'm translating to the lawyers. Every word he spoke, I spoke; and every tear he shed, I had shed as well" Alexis Ramirez

"I got a thank you with tears in his eyes because I made him feel a lot better about his situation. He told me that he had found a new hope in his life for the future of his family" Alexis Ramirez

"Getting that human interaction definitely helps you see the world in a different way. Sitting in a classroom, you're never gonna get that" Stephanie Martinez-Calderon

THE KNOX STUDENT

SPRING TERM 2020 RESOURCES HOME COVID-19 NEWS MOSAIC DISCOURSE SPORTS

DISCOURSE / EDITORIALS / JANUARY 22, 2020

Thoughts from the Embers: Using the power of education off campus

There is a recognition across many fields in the humanities that college students, regardless of where they come from, are particularly poised to act, intervene and volunteer in the world.

Helping others with knowledge gained is one of the central tenets of a liberal arts education. Fields that may at first seem impractical can be important and have huge effects on others' lives.

Of course, interpreting and translation are not fields that are generally written off. Moreover, last week students brought home a very real and very powerful application of those skills with life saving potential.

With newfound knowledge and resources, it is now easier than ever to find a way to help out or fight back. Even miles away, students at Knox College were still able to find the means and the might to aid in helping asylum-seekers at the distant U.S-Mexico border.

The ever shifting and often narrowing landscape of immigration policies in our country has brought the lives and struggles of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees to the forefront of American political thought.

It felt necessary for many to act, but who weren't sure how. Illinois is by no means close to Texas or California. It is not simple and clear sometimes what options exist for action.

But rather than be held back by "what ifs" and "hows," Professor **Robin Ragan** and her fellow student volunteers – **Alexis Ramirez**, **Natalie Juarez**, **Ellis Staton**, **Maika Padilla**, **Montse Cancino** and **Stephanie Martinez-Caldero** – moved their passion past uncertainty and into vital action. We at TKS couldn't be prouder for this continued act of humanity, love and solidarity.

On its face, this certainly highlights the value of an education you can take on the ground and into the lives of others. Knox doesn't emphasize the importance of experience in learning because it looks cool or kills time. Ideally, it is not even because it is a central part of the act of learning (even though it is).

Rather, this service goes far beyond a graduation requirement or a chance to learn. It helps others in a clear and tangible way and should serve as a model for the good we can do as students. It is easy and necessary to take what Knox has taught us out into the world to make it better.

Education is a tool we can use to bend, break and remake the world around us. It is a new lens through which we see what lies outside Knox as well as within. It is a resource we can extend to others, to build bridges and create new ways of being.

We also benefit from and are sobered by them bringing their experiences back and sharing with us. We cannot understand what they or the migrants they served go through in the rooms but we can start to learn about them. It is another chance to give spread stories that need to be heard more widely.

On a deeper level, this is yet another clear indictment of inaction. If there is a need in this world and a desire within you to help, you can use what power and what support college gives you to act.

Colleges, institutionally, give a financial structure and a number of transportation, educational and human resources to get things done. They give us a handful of like-minded people that want to act as much as we do. If you are lucky, like we are, it also gives you quite a few faculty and staff that want to help.

It has never been easier to make change in this world. It will likely never be easier than it is in your time in college. And, looking at the world before us, it may never be more important than it is today.