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A View From Higher Ed

Licensure: All You Need To Know But Didn't Know Who To Ask

by Nicole Sherf and Kristine Doll of Salem State College

Greetings new teachers, veterans and those in between! We hope that you have had a great summer, balanced with professional development endeavors as well as some much-needed fun and relaxation. With the start of the new school year, we thought it would be appropriate to address the ever-changing dilemma of obtaining or moving to the next level of licensure. In this article, we will discuss the foreign language portion of the Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure, describe the three levels of licensure, and answer some of your questions regarding the process.

The joke these days regarding the licensure process is that if you do not understand it, don't worry, it will change again soon! Hopefully, we will clarify the regulations as of this publication, but be sure to check with the Department of Education to remain up-to-date (www.doe.mass.edu/Educators/e_license.html?section=k12). Currently, there are two licensure grade levels for foreign language teachers: elementary and secondary. The secondary license spans from grades five through twelve. In the summer of 2003, the licensure parameters for the elementary foreign language license changed from Pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade to Pre-Kindergarten through sixth grade. This effectively made the license a less desirable one considering the relatively few elementary foreign language programs in the state in which to train and then teach as compared to middle and high school. If you feel strongly about this, as we do, write a letter to Commissioner Driscoll and the Board of Education encouraging them to revert to the Pre-kindergarten through eighth grade parameter, thus establishing parity with other like subjects at the elementary school, and strengthening elementary foreign language in the state (Massachusetts Department of Education, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA, 02148-5023).

The first level of licensure, the preliminary, requires an on-line application after completing a Bachelor of Arts degree and passing the specific foreign language portion of the Teacher Test as well as the Communication and Literacy portions. The Teacher Test is offered five times a year at various sites across the state. The foreign

language specific tests are proficiency oriented with skill based sections in listening, reading, writing and speaking, a grammar and language section, and a culture section. Test preparation booklets are available on line for all of the languages (www.mtel.nesinc.com/MA_SG_opener.asp) and there is also a list of test preparation workshop sites across the state at (www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/faq/tprep_1st.html). Thus far the foreign language test is the same for the elementary and secondary levels, but there have been discussions about creating two distinct tests to align them to the specific content goals of the two levels.

The initial license is the next step in the licensure process, usually requiring a preparation program that has been officially approved by the Massachusetts of Education (see the list at www4.doe.mass.edu/elar/licensurehelp/HigherEdOrganizationsPageControl.ser). This route can be undertaken through a Secondary Education Minor at the undergraduate level or through a Masters of Education or a Masters of Arts in Teaching. The licensure component of these programs involves four Education courses, a Methods course and a Student Teaching Practicum.

The final stage of licensure is called the professional level. A Masters degree with at least fifty percent of courses in the content area and three years of teaching under the initial level is required for advancement to this level. Once at this level, documentation of professional development needs to take place and the license needs to be renewed every five years.

Question: I am very interested in teaching Italian. I speak Italian well, but I do not have a BA. What should I do?

The Department of Education does not require a Bachelor of Arts in Italian, and as we know, proficiency can be attained through a variety of means. You need to pass the Teacher Test in Italian, and in Communication and Literacy to obtain your preliminary license. This will make you employable. Then you need to find a DOE approved program, preferably a Masters degree program, so that you can obtain the next level of licensure, the initial one, and work towards the Masters degree which you will need after that.

Question: I have a professional license to teach French, I speak some Spanish. How many courses do I need to take to get my license in Spanish, too?

Once you have at least an initial license in one subject, all you need to do is take the Teacher Test in another content area to obtain the initial license at the same grade level. So it is not a matter of the number of courses in the new language, but rather your proficiency level in it. One possibility if you are borderline, is to take the test and review the score report of your test to see in which areas (speaking, writing, listening, reading, culture, or grammar) you need most focus.

Question: I have taken the Teacher Test in German four times and I just can't pass it. What should I do?

The Teacher Test in Foreign Language assumes a Bachelor of Arts preparation in the subject matter. You could certainly take more and varied courses in German, either at the undergraduate or at the graduate level. However, as was mentioned in the introduction to this article, the test is very proficiency oriented rather than content specific. Though the one content specific section, the culture section, is generally the one that causes the most anxiety among test-takers, the grammar section is probably a much better area on which to focus effort. The topics of the culture section are so vast, including all history, literature, arts, geography, politics of the country of origin and other countries that speak the language. A focus on improving complex grammar and idiomatic vocabulary will not only improve your performance in the grammar section, but also in the writing and speaking sections.

Question: I teach high school and I would like to teach a college class in the evening and in the summer. What should I do?

There is no license to teach at the college level. Generally a Masters degree is what is required to teach part-time. You will need to prepare your Curriculum Vitae and a cover letter, with letters of reference and submit them for review to the Department of Foreign Languages at your local college. To teach full-time at the college-level, you generally need a doctoral degree.