Podcasts Episode 01: Dr. Bill Wiener

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Dr. Amy Parker: Okay, Bill, are you there?

Dr. Bill Wiener: I am, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Amy: Okay, this is Amy and you sound really good.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Good. You sound great, clear as well.

Amy: Okay, good, good. Well, welcome everybody. Today's podcast, we have Dr. Bill Wiener with us today who is one of the authors and editors, the lead editor of the books that we'll be using, Foundations of Orientation and Mobility and we're very honored today that Bill would take some time to talk to our class, to talk about his history, his contributions to this field and what he's passionate about now. Dr. Wiener has been the president of AER. He is now the doctor ... A Brenda Brodie Endowed Chair at North Carolina Central University. Before coming to that wonderful role at North Carolina Central, he has worked at Marquette University for many years, as a professor and as a vice provost for research there.

We're going to let him tell you a little bit more about his background and his journey and Bill, thanks so much for making time to be with us today. If you don't mind, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Dr. Bill Wiener: All right, I would be glad to, Amy. First of all, I want to thank you for arranging this. I feel very flattered that you're interviewing me and I hope that the information that I give will be useful. I began really wanting to be either a counselor or a social worker. I was taking courses at Cleveland State University, I grew up in Cleveland and as part of my undergraduate work, I was a cooperative educational student, which meant that when I got to the point of my junior year, every other session and it was a ... rather than a semester session, it was a quarter session. Every other quarter, I would work in a field that I thought I would want to go into.

It was a way of testing out the field and so I had different kinds of positions that, related to counseling, that related to social work and one of those was at the Cleveland Society for the Blind as an assistant in the social work department and while I was there, I got to know Martha Ball-Rosemeyer, who had been one of the first graduates from Boston College, I think probably in 1960 or 1961. She came through that program and she was offering orientation and mobility services on a part-time basis at that agency. As part of my work experience, I got to observe her and see what she was doing and I thought to myself, as a social worker, I might spend months, maybe years helping somebody.

I'm seeing Martha working with people and seeing such a dramatic change in what they're able to do in such a short period of time. People who would be sitting at home doing not much, relying on other people, having to call another people to get out and to go shopping and to go different places in a period of
several months, it just changed their lives, turned their lives around. I became very interested in it and I asked, "Could I transfer from the social work or social service department into the mobility department?" They said, sure and gave me an opportunity to do that. Martha gave me an opportunity by blindfolding me, giving me some of the instruction and basic skills.

I learned a good amount of mobility techniques as an undergrad, while I was going through that program. That really opened my eyes on what my appetite, I thought this is a field I really would like to go into and so that I did. I went to Western Michigan University as a student there and graduated from Western and immediately went into teaching, basically blinded also at that point. I was at the Syracuse Lighthouse for the Blind of Onondaga County. I was there for a little over four years, between 1970 and 1974, as an O and M specialist. I know that really dates me. I've been in the field for quite a while and at that point in time, there was a new orientation and mobility program that had started up maybe a year or two before and it was at Cleveland State University, my old alma mater.

Rick Welsh, who had finished his doctorate, decided that he would take a position there as a faculty member and Rick had been someone who I was very close with because when I was in the program at Western Michigan University, my internship was at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children and at that school for the blind, Rick was an orientation and mobility instructor and he kind of took me under his wing and we really got close and he decided to ask me if I would take a position at the university. So, I interviewed along with a number of others and eventually was asked to join the program. From 1974 through 1986, I was a faculty member there and in the latter years, I became the program director at Cleveland State.

Cleveland State was an O and M program that was in the social service department so I had an opportunity ... Yeah, go ahead.

Amy: Tell us a little bit more Rick ... I'm sorry, about your relationship with Rick and also tell us a little ... because he's one of the editors, has been deeply involved in the field and a mentor and a friend to you. If you don't mind, tell us a little bit more about him and also, share a little bit why you think that positioning O and M in social services is a nice ... maybe a nice place for it to be, a nice positioning with this field.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Sure, I'd be glad to talk about that. When I was at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children, I was supposed to have a supervisor who would come out with me periodically, observe my lessons, give me a feedback and that really only happened about once. Rick was there and he saw me working and he said, "You know what, I'm going to go out with you and I'm going to talk with you and observe your lessons." That's how I really got to know him and I was just so impressed with the way he work with kids. I would also find that his students was so close to him. They really respected him, they really enjoyed the way he
taught, just a very low-keyed, personable but also down to business kind of person.

He really made quite a difference in their lives and I really respected him. When I was at Cleveland State, our families were growing up together. I had three young kids. He had young children at the same time. We'd often do things together, we'd go to the parks together. He was just incredible and in the latter years, when I was at Cleveland State, he and Bruce Blasch got together and at that time, when we were putting materials together for Orientation and Mobility lessons, for some of the courses that we were offering, we had to turn to people in other disciplines, we had to turn to articles outside of our own field and there really wasn't very much that we had in one place.

There really was no textbook per se. Rick and Bruce said, "Well, let's see what we can do to make a change in that." Together they authored the first textbook, the first Foundations of Orientation and Mobility. They started it in the latter years, when I was at Cleveland State, and that was their first attempt at putting together what finally became the Foundations of Orientation and Mobility textbook. I found, when I was at Cleveland State, being in the social service department was a really good home. I had always felt that when I was an O and M specialist, that it was the relationship between the instructor and the student that made all the difference.

You can teach all of the techniques, you can help people with their orientation but often times the growth that would occur between ... that would occur with the students would be because of the relationship between the instructor and the student. I remember one young man that I worked with, who had very low self-esteem. We worked for a long time together, gradually we built up the skills but I think it was the relationship between myself and that person that made a difference and helped him to gain self-confidence and to go on and to be independent. I always felt that having a strong background in social service or counseling or interviewing or many of the elements that relate to social work, form a good relationship and form, I think a positive way of helping people.

When I was at Cleveland State, I would teach different courses. I would teach human growth and development. I would teach different areas that would relate to social work and got very comfortable with a lot of the content in social work. Then, eventually, I decided I would continue on and while I was at Cleveland State, I studied audiology because I recognized that if you don't have vision or if your vision is low vision, you're really going to depend a tremendous amount on what you hear and I felt like I didn't know enough about hearing so I started taking classes in audiology and eventually went through the entire program and graduated as an audiologist.

Then, decided, "Okay, if I'm really serious about being in the university environment, two masters degrees won't help me. What I really need to have is a doctorate, a PHD," and because of my interest in the counseling arena, I decided that I would go into rehabilitation counseling, working with adults who
had disabilities and so I enrolled at Kent State University in counselor education and counselor supervision. As part of that, I learned about rehab counseling and became a CRC, certified rehab counselor but also in a more general way, was interested in counseling not only with people with disabilities but in a more general sense.

Once I had that PHD under my belt so to speak, I found out that there was a position available at Western Michigan University, again, my alma mater, my second alma mater and they were looking for someone to be the chair. Don Blasch, who had been the chair and one of the originators in the field of orientation and mobility was ... and Ruth Kaarlela had also been involved in, as the chair for a while at the university. I applied for the position and was lucky enough to be selected as chair of that department, that program. Between 1986 and the year 2000, I served as chair of the Department of Blind Rehabilitation as it was known at that point and was lucky enough to work with some tremendous faculty members and get involved in some of the research that they were engaged in. During that time ...

Amy: What a beautiful set of experiences, Bill to ... I knew you had worked in audiology. I did not know that you were an audiologist. I knew you had contributed in the book and in other places and some of the articles that you've written. That is tremendous, that you were able to braid together and turn these life experiences, counseling and audiology, mobility, orientation and mobility, the empowerment that that brings, social work, what an incredible gift to bring those disciplines together and to create what was a developing theoretical framework and orientation. Really fantastic, I'm even more honored that you would take some time and share this with us. Thank you.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Well, you know, I feel very lucky being where I am right now. I'm at North Carolina Central University and I'm in the school of education and in this area, in this wing of the building, in the school of education, we have audiology and speech pathology, we have counseling and we have visual impairment and blindness. It really spans all of my interest in one location so I feel very lucky to be here. When I ... In the year 2000, I was bringing in a lot of grants for the university, from OSAP, from RSA and probably at that point in time, it was probably pretty close to about a million dollars a year that were ... what's coming into the university.

It got noticed by the administration of the university and they were looking for a graduate dean who would report to the vice provost for research and so the vice provost for research contacted me and said, "We're holding interviews for dean of the graduate school, would you please consider ..." Several times I said to him, "No, I'm really not interested, I'm really so satisfied with the field that I'm in, that I really don't want to move out of the field." He came back several times and kept asking me and I thought, "All right, if he's asking me over and over maybe I should just apply for it." I did and so I went through the interview process and low and behold, they offered me the position.
There I was, dean of the graduate at Western Michigan and I did that for about five years. Then, an opportunity came along to become vice provost for research at Marquette University as well as dean of their graduate school. I decided, this is a nice opportunity, something new, different ... and so I moved on to Marquette and from 2005 to 2011 held that position. Then, I took a sabbatical and generally speaking, every seven years, a faculty member at most universities is entitled to take a sabbatical to refresh, to engage in different research activities and then to go back to their university. Well, I took my sabbatical, full of graduate schools, located in Washington DC. I was their dean and residence for a year in DC.

My daughter lives in DC and I thought, this is a great opportunity. I could spend time with her. I could learn a lot more about graduate education because 500 graduate ... 500 to 600 graduate schools belong to that council. I learned a lot about grad education and while I was there, the president of the association, of the graduate council said, "You know, you ought to look ..." at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She said to me, I was the president of that university and they're looking for a graduate dean and you would really enjoy working there. At that point in time, I was getting pretty tired of the winters in Milwaukee, at Marquette, where we're 20 below zero on occasion.

I went and I applied for that position and again, was accepted as dean at UNCG. In 2016, I had been in the field for a very long time and I decided it was time to retire but I have to say that I have ... for the past nine years, I've been ... and I'll talk a little bit more about this later but I have been involved with AER in administering their university approval process where we review all of the university programs. In my last year at UNCG, I was aware that their university program at North Carolina Central University, while it had recently been accredited by AER, the three of the faculty, all of the faculty for that matter had left.

Diane Wormsley who is the Brenda Brodie Endowed Chair had retired. Justin Kaiser had moved on to South Carolina and Tessa McCarthy had gone to the University of Pittsburgh. We have a yearly update of the universities that are accredited so I called them and I said, "I am aware that a lot of your faculty have gone. I'm not sure we're going to be able to continue approving your program." They said, "Well, give us a while, we're recruiting for new positions. It's our desire to maintain that accreditation." I said, "Okay, we will give you six months, let's see what happens." I waited the six months and during that time, I retired. I called them and I asked, "Well, where do you stand?"

They said, "We haven't been able to recruit the kind of person we'd like for this position." They said to me, "Would you be somebody who would be interested in taking that position?" I thought to myself, I'm in Greensboro, it's about an hour down the road on route 85, 40 and 85 and if I could do something to say to that program, I would do it because we have so few programs in visual impairment and NCCU had to teach you the visual impaired program and an O
and M program. I thought if I could possibly do something to shore up that program and restore it, and do it within two or three years, I'd be happy to do it.

That's what I did. I went in. Again, I had to go through an interview process but they selected me for the position and so my position is the Brenda Brodie Endowed Chair and I think it is the only endowed chair in the field.

Amy: I think so.

Dr. Bill Wiener: I think so, an endowed chair for the students who don't know about it, it comes about when somebody makes a large donation to a university and the interest from that donation is used to support the salary of a faculty member and to provide for their travel and to provide for a graduate assistant. It's been a great position.

Amy: It's quite prestigious. It's quite prestigious and it is very, very rare. I do know ... For example, the students who are studying here at Portland State, most of our students are online and at a distance. Many lived in Washington or California, as well as Oregon. We have a few in Alaska. A few maybe listening into this podcast from Hawaii. There are a few foundations that we don't have an endowed chair position at Portland State. We do have a foundation that provides a small amount of money for research based projects for helping sustain the program at Portland State but what Dr. Wiener have is quite prestigious and it's a beautiful gift though that you're giving the field to preserve ... it's at a historically Black university, isn't it?

Dr. Bill Wiener: It is, it is.

Amy: At North Carolina Central.

Dr. Bill Wiener: It is and that's another reason that I was interested in helping here. We really don't have enough African-American students in our field at all and if we can have a program that attracts more into our field, I was interested in doing that.

Amy: Wonderful, wonderful. Well, what a journey and I know that we've really only scratched the surface with this wonderful, rich tapestry, your life has been and continued to be for our field. I'm particularly excited, I, in my training program at Texas Tech University, we use ... Dr. Nora Griffin-Shirley there, use the foundations book to teach orientation and mobility. Tell us more about why you felt it was important, Bill, to create this foundations book to help grow the field, to preserve the field, to help students understand the rich practices in orientation and mobility.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Well, I really have to give the credit to Rick Welsh and Bruce Blasch. While I was working with Rick, it was very, very clear to me, that we really didn't have resources. We had a textbook, it was by Hill and Ponder, Butch Hill, Purvis Ponder and it was the Techniques of Orientation and Mobility but there really
wasn't anything that dealt with the academic side of it. It was really the practical side, that was the only textbook that we had. We were constantly finding articles, duplicating them, putting together our own course booklets and Rick and Bruce came up with the idea, well, they said, "I'm sure, all of the other universities are doing the same thing so why not put together a book that would put it all in one place?"

They turn to the American Foundation for the Blind, with the idea of putting such a book together and AFB was very open to the idea and they said yes and they formed a contract. What's interesting, as they were putting together the first book, they had to turn to a number of people outside of our field. For example, when they wanted information about perception, they would turn to Herb Pick, who knew quite a bit about perception but not necessarily and off a lot about non-visual perception. When they would think about low vision, they would turn to people outside of our field who had an understanding of low vision.

They did, I think a marvelous job of putting that together and I was honored to be able to write the first chapter on audiology and to write a chapter on the history of O and M and in a while, I hope maybe I can talk a little bit about some of those early steps in our history but as ... After that book was put together, I think it made a difference. I think all of the universities started using that textbook and it started to give us a literature base and so I thought that is incredible. Then, when I ... At that point, when I was at Western Michigan University after 1986, and that book had been out for a while, Rick and Bruce said, "Okay, a lot has happened in the year since that first edition came out."

"These days, we have had so much more research because so many of our own graduates who have taken research courses and many who have gone on and completed PHDs on their own have began to do research and have began to write." They said, "Now, it's time to redo that book and to redo it in a way that acknowledges the research that's come out of our field." They called me and they said, "We'd like a third partner in developing the second edition of the textbook." I was just thrilled because that was something that I really wanted to be a part of. I became the third partner. The first book basically had been ... The chief editor was Bruce Blasch.

The second edition, the chief editor was Rick Welsh. Rick was phenomenal. I mean, he would read through every chapter in detail. He would have so many suggestions. He would get back to many of the authors. He was really a shining example of how an editor ought to work and I watched him closely and I saw the book expand and I saw the quality of the book really increase and I think that it was another monumental addition to the literature and really helpful to our field. I was very, very glad to be a part of that. Then, after a while, and it was quite a while because the book really wasn't revised for over 15 years, we decided that we needed to do something about that and go for yet a third edition.
This time, it was my turn to serve really as the lead editor on it and so Rick and Bruce took more of a backseat. I was at Marquette at that point in time and so I was involved in, for the most part, helping with the design of the outline, contacting additional people to serve as authors of chapters, reviewing chapters and we would meet regularly, Rick, Bruce and I. Often times, it would be at Rick's house, sometimes it would be at Atlanta, at Bruce's house. Some other times it would be at my house in Milwaukee and we'd spend lots of time going over chapters, talking them through.

It was stimulating because when you do that, you get so engrossed in the field and you learn so much about so many different areas. It was just amazing. What we discovered in doing this was that we had so much material that it wasn't even possible to put it into one volume, could it be done?

Amy: I remember reading that in your foreword here. Yes, that you discovered you needed a second volume.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Yeah and we weren't quite sure how to do that but we decided, well, maybe we ought to divide it into volumes, one that had to do more with the history and the theory and one that had more to do with the practical application. We talked to AFB about it and they said, "Yeah, that sounds like it might be a good format to use." That's what we did and it was much easier, I think doing that third book than it probably ever was for that first book, that the two of them put together because we had so many people contributing and so much had been written already, that there was more information that we could actually use.

Amy: Even as I ... I've been reviewing the book for our class and our students will be obviously reading the book and reflecting on it, doing assignments, having discussions about it, creating their own historical timeline of the field, the field is young and even though the field is so young, there's so much diversity in the population of children and adults that we serve. I've admired how the editors, how you, how Rick, how Bruce put this together over time with diverse leaders in the field, like Sandra Rosen and others who ... they've been able to focus more deeply on specific areas and you in the field of audiology.

Can you reflect a little bit with the students about how their own experiences, maybe as vision teachers or as practitioners or as people coming in to the adult service world, how they will still be able to use the standards, these broad standards in our field and be able to apply them to their practice? I've been saying to them, just even as we start the class, you have something to contribute, you have something to give. As you gain these skills, you will have something to give to the people that you serve.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Well, you know, it was interesting, when the field first started, it really wasn't a ... it was a field based upon working with adults. I have students read the chapters, in the Early Originators by Warren Bledsoe, it talks about how all this came to be. That's a very complicated chapter but if you read it carefully, you
really get some good insights as to how all of this came about and what the needs were of the soldiers who were blinded within the war. When I first came to Western Michigan, which was very early on and was in that department as chair, I interviewed Don Blasch, because Don who had recently been himself, chair the department, he would come in quite frequently.

Spend time with us and also, the graduate dean of the university, who was instrumental in bringing the program to Western Michigan was also there and I spoke with him quite a bit and interviewed him as well. They shared with me that the way they had put the original Western Michigan University program together was to look at what occurred at the VA, at Hines VA Hospital, look at the kinds of content that they were providing the instructors that they were training and at the university, what they did was they took that same content and they put course numbers on it. It was very geared towards an adult population who had often times undergone trauma.

It was interesting that some of the first programs that began to work with children, began to see that many of those techniques, if they could be modified, could be applied to working with children. I think it was many of our first graduates who came out with backgrounds as teachers, who saw how the techniques themselves could be adapted. It was from, I think that early work, that some of the early programs began. Florida State in 1966, Cleveland State in '72, Stephen F. Austin, I think in probably around '72 or '73 and many of them benefited from the students in the field who had graduated from the programs, had different backgrounds, had backgrounds in working with children and they made some real changes.

Likewise, we found individuals who have had experience in working more with low vision individuals and they expanded the scope in terms of the area of low vision and we see this all the time now. We see, there's an epidemic of CVI and whether we call it cortical or cerebral visual impairment, it's pretty clear that it's involving the whole brain and it's involving the way people process information not just visually but with all of their senses and we have a lot of teachers out there who have had experience with children and I think that's shaping our field. I think whatever experiences we've had when we bring that to what we're doing, it gives new insights, it helps us to begin researching new areas and I think it improves all of our services.

Amy: Fantastic. Thank you so much for that fantastic reflection because I think that we are young and there's still much good work to do. What I love about O and M is that we learn so much from those that we serve as well as these reflections in using the theory and the experiences of others as almost the path, something to guide us as we do this work. Bill, tell us a little bit, if we could shift and talk about your work with standards. I know you've had this rich experience base contributed in many different ways, can you reflect what went in to creating the standards and maybe why it's relevant to have such standards?
Dr. Bill Wiener: Sure, I would be happy to do that. I got started thinking about standards, when I was first teaching in Upstate New York, in Syracuse. I'd become active in helping to form the New York State Association of O and M Specialist. As part of that, we recognized that we didn't have a code of ethics at all and that we thought, many other professions have code of ethics. I was acutely aware that social work had a strong code of ethics. We began working on a code of ethics for our state association of O and M specialists. I share that information with Rick and Bruce and they said, "You know, it shouldn't just be a state organization."

"It ought to be a national code of ethics for all O and M specialists." They asked if I would chair a committee to work on developing a code of ethics. I said, "Yeah, I would but I would want Rick Welsh to be my vice chair of the committee." He said yes, he'd be glad to do it. Rick and I together began looking at other codes trying to find out, "Okay, what were some of the key principles, how were they put together," and Rick had the idea of, "Oh, maybe not only should we look at other codes but let's see what's really specific to orientation and mobility." The best way for us to do that would be to send out a survey.

Rick and I put a survey out and we asked people to comment up upon issues that were critical to them, problems that they saw, ethical issues that they were dealing with. They brought a number of those ideas to us and their responses to the survey. When we started writing the code, it was easier for us because we had some reality to look at as they started indicating what some of their issues were. We put together a code that was based upon really what the various members thought were important.

Amy: It's just reflecting looking at commitments that were made to the learner, to the community, to the profession.

Dr. Bill Wiener: That's right.

Amy: These are things that our students, that we'll be discussing and talking about but you're saying that it emerged from the survey and this dialog with listening to what you were facing.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Right, I think it was probably a combination of looking at other codes, what other professions thought were important, the elements and also what our own members who were practicing O and M felt were critical. That code became ... it was voted upon by the O and M division, it became part of the fabric of O and M. Then of course, when ACVREP came into existence, the code was required by ACVREP and it became really the property of ACVREP. Periodically, it'll be revised, it'll be brought up to current standards. For example, when we first wrote the code, there wasn't an internet. There really was no social media.

Confidentiality was easier to maintain. The times have changed so much that the code really had to be updated and I'm sure, as we go ahead and technology changes, we're going to see there's going to be a need to continually update
that code. That was my first foray so to speak into any kind of development of standards. I was also involved with some ... from the very beginning, with the quality issue of who teaches orientation and mobility and it really kind of sprang from my experience when I was that co-op student at the Cleveland Society for the Blind because initially, I was taught how to teach basic skills and from that point, students who I would work with, would then go on to work with Martha Rosemeyer and a little later Kent Wardell who eventually replaced Martha.

There came a time between ... when Martha left and Kent came on to the Cleveland Society for the Blind, where there wasn't an instructor and so they asked me if I would teach outdoor mobility. I wasn't so sure about it and I said, I don't really know all the techniques to teach outdoor and mobility. I sure have observed a lot of it but I don't really ... I haven't had the experience and don't have the skills to teach all of that. They said, "Well, we've watched you. We think you could do it. Why don't you go ahead and try it?" I did go out and I did try to teach some outdoor mobility and I think all right on the sidewalk but when it came to street crossings, I really wasn't sure what I was doing.

I went back and I said, "Look, it's not fair to the people I'm working with. They deserve better than this and it's not fair to me. I shouldn't have to do this." It was at that point that I decided I'd go on to graduate school. In the meantime, I began thinking, we have to have some standards for who teaches and who doesn't teach. It was at that point, after I came back from graduate school, that I started working on developing some standards that would relate to certification and would relate to really training of assistants as well.

I thought, "Well, you know, there may be a role for assistants, if it's a limited role and if the assistants are trained properly." Based upon the experience that I had as a mobility assistant, I decided that I would try to see what I could do to put a program together that might train assistants with a more limited role but one where they would have the training that they would need. Butch Hill was also thinking along the same lines. Butch and I put together a grant. We applied to RSA and we were able to get about $50,000 from RSA to develop, what we called a mobility assistant program. We brought in mobility specialists from different locations across the country and together we worked out a curriculum as to what we thought should be included in training assistants.

We require that these assistants be trained by mobility specialist who had gone through university training programs and that it would be limited really to indoor mobility skills. We did that and we launched the program and we thought, okay, this is a way of at least assuring that they won't go beyond a certain level, in terms of their teaching and that they'll have an adequate background. Several years later, we looked at that program and we saw that maybe only about eight or nine people ever develop mobility assistance. Basically, they said, they didn't have the time to train assistants. They were so busy working with students themselves, that it was impossible.
We thought, all right, maybe what we need to do is to involve the university programs and maybe the university programs through online efforts and that was starting to become somewhat possible with online training. Maybe they could provide some of the basic training online but have certified mobility specialist, work face-to-face with basic skills at least and maybe some cane skills in protected environments, not out in the environment but kind of a pre-environmental, working with a cane. We suggested that we put a position paper together but again, that was not popular, and it really never took off.

At this point in time, I don't think we really see very much in the way of assistants and that's probably a good thing because it could be too easy for assistants to go beyond what they should be teaching if they haven't had the necessary preparation. That was one of the areas that I was concerned with and then later on, I've always been concerned with university preparation and certification of instructors. At the very beginning, AER had its own certification program, and it was the certification program that basically just require an individual to graduate from a university program. Eventually, we discovered that that really wasn't a certification program that really had any teeth or met the standards of the field.

We decided that we would look into the way other organization certify their practitioners. We held a meeting where we ... we ask people from occupational therapy to present and to kind of dialog with us and they did and they shared with us how they did their certifications. They had an independent body doing this certifications and they had an exam. We decided, that's really the way we ought to do this as well. We decided that we would talk with AER and see if we could set up something that would be an independent body. We called at the academy and we met ... I was at the first meeting when we first started planning the academy.

Amy: What year was that? When was that?

Dr. Bill Wiener: Well, that was in the 90s.

Amy: Okay, okay.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Yeah. I don't remember the exact year but we began working on that, probably the mid 90s and we asked AER if they would help us to form an independent body and they went to their board and they approved establishing an independent body and providing some funding for that body, which was amazing that they could do that. We hired a consultant, somebody who had worked with rehabilitation counselors and helping them develop their exam and we brought that person to Western Michigan and we brought people in from around the country, mobility specialists and we asked them to help us write an exam.
Our consultant taught us basically how to write good exams and so we put our first exam together and we asked, build along from the veterans administration hospital, to help us with statistical analysis to determine the cut-off score. We did that by taking that first test that we wrote and giving it to O and M specialists who had been experienced and giving it to individuals who had never been through an O and M program. We looked at the differences in the scores and we could determine at what level we needed to make the cut-off score. That was our first exam and since that time, ACVREP has revised it a couple of times.

They put together something called the SME, which I served on for a numbers of years, the Subject Matter Experts Committee and now, it's that committee, which is made up of practitioners in the field who look at all of the exam questions and they revise the questions and they add new questions periodically. That was a major leap forward and I think really now, really, helps to preserve the quality of instruction.

Amy: Absolutely.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Every time that I've always ... I've always been interested in was the quality of the university programs. I've always wanted to have a role in helping to shape some of that. At one point, when I was president of the Orientation and Mobility Division, I created a committee for the purpose of developing standards for the university programs. I worked with that committee, and we proposed standards, we brought it to the orientation and mobility division and in general, they supported the idea, but they weren't sure about the specific standards that we have put together. Another committee followed up and reviewed and modified the standards.

Eventually, they adapted curricula standards for the university programs. Initially, they then took those standards, and they would review the universities by sending one or two people to a university and have those specialist go to the university programs and talk to the students, talk to the faculty, review the curricula and make a decision as to whether the program ought to be approved. At that point in time, the body that would be the approving body was AER.

Amy: Okay.

Dr. Bill Wiener: That worked nicely except that if you think about it, so many of our universities are not well-resourced and don't have a lot of money to spend on external review processes.

Amy: Right.

Dr. Bill Wiener: I think because of that, it went into hiatus for a while. Many of the universities just couldn't afford to bring people to their campus to do the review. In the later 2000s, about 2007, 2008, it was decided, well, maybe we ought to revise the
process but bring it back and make it stronger. I served on a committee with Wendy Sapp. Laura Bozeman was on that committee, a number of other people and we rewrote the standards and we did it in a way so that we could do our review electronically, because we've come so far to be able to do things with Skype and with WebEx and Survey Monkey and so many different possibilities.

Amy: Right.

Dr. Bill Wiener: We revised it in that way and we've been using that system for about the past nine years and when we review a program, not only do we do it electronically but we have conference calls with the administrators, we have conference calls with the students and we now have approved the majority of O and M programs, the majority of VRT programs. We haven't scratched the surface yet with the TVI programs. I think the issue may be that NCAPE have done so much their accreditation of the programs.

Amy: Right.

Dr. Bill Wiener: We're moving to another arena and I'm just going to mention this quickly because I know you have some other things you want to ask but some of the students may have heard rumors that the National Accreditation Council has closed its doors and the national accreditation council, which came out of the comp stock report of 1961, that was developed through the American Foundation for the Blind and functioned for so many years to accredit agencies in specialized schools, it decided about a year ago that it would stop their certification or their ... I should say their accreditation process. They came to AER and they asked AER, if AER would assume that responsibility.

AER has been exploring that for the past year and they've been looking at what it would take legally and what it would take in terms of resources and very shortly AER is going to make an announcement and so probably your students are the first people to hear about this but AER is going to be taking on the accreditation of agencies, serving people who are blind and specialized schools serving blind children. In addition, it's going to expand the program greatly. It's going to accredit contracting agencies that now send out their employees to schools and to agencies.

Amy: Okay.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Plus, it's going to take on higher education as an accreditor and it's going to accredit the universities that provide the approval process or have provided for the last nine years, the approval process of various universities for orientation and mobility, vision rehabilitation therapy, teaching visual impaired children and also, we're going to add in low vision as well. It's come a long way. I'm very proud of that.
Amy: It's ambitious and it's ... so reflect just for a minute on what do you think that does for the field, for the clients that we serve, for the students that we serve, for the families that are served through this accreditation, this certification, that's focused on maintaining high quality? If you could because some ... I know that sometimes academics certainly have to make that argument to deans, to schools where maybe vision programs or orientation and mobility programs are seen as very small parts of what they do. People that say, "Oh, that's a low incidence program." You and I believed that it's very important, why do you think, make the argument for people who are not in the field, the vision of why this matters?

Dr. Bill Wiener: Okay. Well, let me address it from two sides, let me address it from the side of the practitioner and from the side of the university.

Amy: Great.

Dr. Bill Wiener: I can recall very clearly, orientation and mobility instructors who were teaching mobility, who had never gone to a university program and had learned their skills by being trained at agencies. To be honest with you, some of them were fine. They were strong, they did a good job. There were others that were absolutely horrible. That shortcuts were taken in their training. Rather than two years of training, they would have several months of training and it just wouldn't be adequate. I would see those instructors and I would see that they were doing a disservice. They were hurting the students that they were working with, rather than really helping them.

The certification process, it gives the consumer some guarantee that the person that they're working with has had the proper training, knows what they're doing, has passed the test and so the consumer can have some confidence that the person they're working with they can trust. Now likewise, in a similar fashion, having been responsible for the university approval process, for the past nine years, I've seen some university programs that are outstanding, that we have reviewed, that have everything that they should have and I've seen other university programs that maybe aren't quite so good. I've seen some that we've reviewed and we've asked them to improved their standards and they have.

I've seen one or two, where the standards were so low, we just had to say no, we can't approve what you have. For example, they would combine programs, they would combine both mobility and VRT in a way where they would take shortcuts and they would just not provide the comprehensive approach to either program. We had to say no, you really not of a quality where we could say you're an approved program. I think it helps the students, when they chose university programs, to choose a program that's approved. They know definitely then that it meets the standards of the field. I think it gives the universities a goal. They can see the standards, they can shoot towards those standards. To me, I think it just increases the quality all around.
Amy: Absolutely. Absolutely and I think it's a great way to have a ... from another perspective, a learning community for universities to improve themselves and to reach out and have that way of learning from others.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Yeah, I would agree with that completely. Absolutely.

Amy: Well, Bill, we've spent a lot of time, tell me what you are hoping for for the future of the field? What do you hope for these students, that are taking these courses? What do you see on the horizon?

Dr. Bill Wiener: Well, there are a couple of things that I think I would love to see happen. One that I would love to see happen is that our field expands and we begin working with people who maybe have mobility problems but problems that may not be associated with visual impairment. We know that a lot of skills that we provide are skills that are similar in a lot of ways. The skills that students need who maybe have cognitive impairments, maybe have physical impairments where they are required to use canes, crutches, wheelchairs, all of those kinds of difficulties that people will experience in many ways require the kinds of skills that we teach, to some of our students who are visually impaired.

It's my hope that at some point in the future, that our profession really expands and it becomes one that works of course with people who have visual impairment but also people who have other disabilities. At one point, when I was at Western Michigan University, we had a grant from Easter Seals Project Action, where we began to explore that possibility and we went to three or four programs across the country who did quality instruction for people who have disabilities other than blindness and we put together a set of criteria, of curricula that we thought would really be important. As a matter of fact, we then developed an undergraduate program and something that we called travel instruction.

The students in that program didn't work with people who are visually impaired but work with people who had other disabilities. Many of those students who graduated from that program then went on to get a masters degree in orientation and mobility. I would see, in the future maybe a possibility of having programs and professional training in the area of independent mobility for people with all disabilities. That's one hope that I have. Another one that I have relates to services beyond the United States. As we look at different countries, some of them have used the same service model that we use here in the US and they have university training programs.

I think about New Zealand, I think about Australia, I think about other countries that have developed some more models but there are other countries that haven't had the resources and haven't had those kinds of models and they have developed in-service training models. Sometimes they're located at Guide Dog Schools, sometimes they're located at agencies. What I'd like to see is finding a way to bring the standards up to a level that is somewhat comparable across
the world. I know ACVREP is working to develop more of an international certification.

Amy: Yes, they are. Yes.

Dr. Bill Wiener: No, I wouldn't want that necessarily to be a universal COM certification, because I think there's a different level when you have a university preparation and you do have an in-service training but I think by having standards at least in all of the countries, that require the practitioners to have a certain level of competency, to have an internship that's monitored and to pass a test, would be a step in bringing everyone up to a comparable level because I think we see that in other disciplines but we don't yet see it in our disciplines. Those are two areas that I'm really, very passionate about.

Amy: It's really very exciting and I think many of the things that you've touched on today though, travel assistants, international growth, both standards and ethics that we follow, helping to think about the future with people who don't have visual impairments, certainly individuals with autism or other disabilities that need very practical skills to have good quality of life, to have jobs, to do exactly what motivated you to get into the field in the first place, seeing how effective good orientation and mobility instruction can be. Thank you so much for spending your time with us today.

Dr. Bill Wiener: You're quite welcome.

Amy: Thank you for your contributions and for protecting the program at North Carolina Central and continuing to be such a leader and a giver for us.

Dr. Bill Wiener: Well, thank you and thank you for all you do.

Amy: All right. Well, we'll sign off here and I'll be in touch with you, Bill. Thanks again.


Dr. Amy Parker: Bye-bye.