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# The Visually Impaired Learner (VIL) and Orientation and Mobility (O&M) programs at Portland State University

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## **Program History**

In 1964, PSU began the *Visually Impaired Learner* (VIL) program to address the critical need for personnel training in the Pacific Northwest. Because of its strategic geographic location of Portland, candidates had access to numerous partnering agencies including the Oregon Commission for the Blind and the Washington State School for the Blind. The VIL program was launched with a \$15,000 federal grant. These funds also provided scholarships to students. Dr. Keith Larson, who was the first Special Education chair (1964-78), hired Madge Leslie from Portland Public Schools as the VIL program's first coordinator. According to PSU historian Steve Brannan, "Ms. Leslie was well-respected in the field," and the PSU

program soon received national recognition, attracting students from across the country.

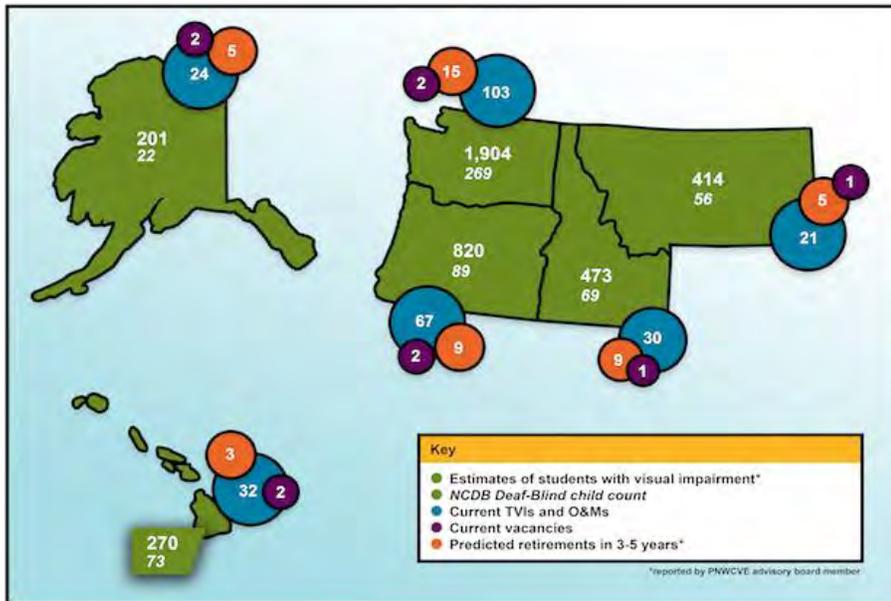
In 2004, the PSU VIL program was one of the first university vision programs to offer an online delivery (with one campus summer intensive). Director Jim Bickford (1987-1990 and 2001-2014), pioneered online distance education in order to reach students in rural areas where access to specialized graduate programs is limited. The VIL program prepares teachers of students with visual impairments (TSVIs) to be highly qualified in accordance with Section 300.18 of IDEA and is approved by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and the Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC). All coursework and fieldwork experiences are based on Oregon and national CAEP/CEC standards for the low-incidence area of visual impairment.

In 2016, PSU was awarded Project ***COMET, Certified Orientation and Mobility Educators in Training***, to prepare 38 O&M instructors in the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, and Hawaii. The O&M program reflects the national professional standards of the AERBVI - University Review Orientation and Mobility Curriculum Standards and Guidelines (AERBVI University Review Curricular Standards, 2010). Curricula use the ACVREP Standards and Competencies.

PSU hosts the ***Pacific Northwest Consortium for Vision***

***Education*** (PNWCVE), a six-state (OR, WA, ID, MT, AK & HI) cooperative trust that informs our personnel preparation programs. Students from consortium states receive priority admission and pay in-state Oregon tuition. PSU's well-established VIL program and its newer O&M program, are by design, both distinct and overlapping preparation programs that are nested within the regional six-state PNWCVE to respond to the critical personnel shortages of our state and local partners in OR, WA, ID, MT, AK and HI. While most O&M and TSVI personnel programs across the country serve a smaller geographic area within one state, PNWCVE covers nearly 28% of the entire 50-state territory. Four of the PNWCVE states are rural and include frontier counties, which are defined as "less than 7 persons per square mile" (National Network Libraries of Medicine, 2018). Alaska, Montana, and Idaho are considered category I frontier states because more than 15% of their population resides in frontier counties (Zelarney & Ciarlo, n.d.).

Figure 1. Recent Needs Data with PNWCVE Region



## Program Offerings

PSU offers a variety of flexible program options. Within the VIL program, candidates can complete an initial licensure program (57 credits) for those who do not have a teaching degree. Those with a teaching certificate enroll in our endorsement program (48 credit). Students in the O&M program may complete the O&M single track, which is for those who do not have an existing credential as a TSVI (34 credits). Many students pursue an add-on O&M endorsement, which is 25 credits. Since PSU has both the VIL and O&M programs, 14 students have opted to complete the

dual O&M/VIL program, which is completed in three to four years. We anticipate an increase in students seeking the dual credential.

### **Current Research and Community Outreach**

One aspect of Lawson's scholarly agenda is creating open source technology to promote braille literacy while incorporating Universal Design principles. This is realized through Unified English Braille using a Powerful and Responsive eLearning Platform (UEB PREP, 2014) – a project funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (\$550,000.00). As Co-PI, Lawson led the braille curriculum development process, consulted regularly with the software development team, and, along with Co-PI, Dr. Sennott designed an innovative, accessible braille eLearning platform. It was field tested four times by PSU teacher candidates enrolled in their first braille course across three cohorts of students. In addition, Lawson mentored three candidates with their master's thesis who conducted a usability study on the UEBPrep app with four parents of young braille learners. After numerous iterations of the braille learning tool, [version 1.1.0](#) of the iOS app was launched in September 2019. The first course, *Braille for You and Me*, is targeted specifically for family members. UEBPrep represents a unique braille learning app that allows users to read and write in braille and complete short gaming exercises on a mobile device. Within one week of

its launch, close to 1,000 individuals downloaded the app. Several professionals, including those from national organizations praised our efforts.

As a part of Parker's scholarly agenda, the topic of wayfinding apps for travelers who are blind and deafblind has been under investigation. Through a partnership with Dr. Martin Swobodzinski, a geographer at PSU, Parker has been conducting focus group research along with a systematic review of the literature to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ways and types of wayfinding apps that are used in largely urban settings. Initial findings have been disseminated in this report: [Electronic Wayfinding for Visually Impaired Travelers: Limitations and Opportunities](#). Swobodzinski and Parker have received a second grant from the National Institute for Transportation Communities (NITC), a U.S. Department of Transportation funded research and dissemination program. In a close partnership with the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), Swobodzinski and Parker, along with graduate students in O&M, are investigating ["seamless" wayfinding from indoor to outdoor environments](#).

Both Parker and Lawson have collaborated with experts in O&M to design resource entitled: [Maximizing O&M Services Through Distance Consultation](#). This multimedia module is being field tested with students

and clinical partners who are examining strategies to serve students in rural and remote communities. With partners like Mary Tellefson, a respected clinical faculty member at PSU, the challenges in balancing ethical service provision; role release to paraprofessionals or other team members; and effective partnerships with families are being discussed in thoughtful conversations with graduate students who often serve rural and remote communities. In the next phase of revision, a version of the resource will focus on teachers of students with visual impairment and the emerging research around telepractice as a means of creating greater equity for service delivery.

As we look to the future, we hope to deepen our effectiveness in preparing culturally responsive and innovative personnel that serve students and clients with visual impairments and deafblindness.

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# Orientation and Mobility



## Quick facts

- 25- to 34-credits for a graduate certificate
- 45 credits for licensure and a master's degree
- Flexible cohort model
- The only TVI and O&M training in the Pacific Northwest!

## Become an orientation and mobility specialist

O&M Specialists are professionals who teach individuals with visual impairments, including those with deafblindness, how to travel safely, efficiently, and with purpose in a variety of environments. Students in the O&M program gain the professional skills and preparation to complete the international certification exam through the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP).

The O&M program is offered as an extension of PSU's long-standing Visually Impaired Learner program that has been preparing teachers of children with visual impairments (TVIs) to work with school-age children for over 50 years.

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