

The purpose of this project is to respond, through two initiatives, to critical issues related to services for students with visual impairments in the state of Florida. The Personnel Preparation Initiative, which will start its 18th year in Fall 2020, addresses the statewide critical shortage of teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists by making certification and endorsement programs in these areas available to residents in the state. As part of this initiative, and as requested by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) and local education agencies (LEAs), technical assistance related to (a) appropriate services for students with visual impairments and (b) strategies for addressing the personnel shortages will be provided to the FDOE and LEAs. In the 2020 project year, a master's degree track to provide support for currently certified Florida teachers who are interested in developing competencies to teach students with visual impairments through a flexible, online and hybrid preparation program will be continued. The Low Vision Initiative, beginning its 24th year this fall, provides for the coordination and tracking of a system of comprehensive low vision services to students with visual impairments that involves (a) the provision of low vision services to students who meet the initiative's eligibility criteria, (b) technical assistance to the teachers and parents of these students, and (c) the collection of data regarding the effect of low vision device use on reading outcomes.

Personnel Preparation Initiative

The Personnel Preparation Initiative involves two major objectives, the first of which is to increase the supply of well-prepared TVIs. Since 2002, Florida State University (FSU) has attempted to achieve this objective by offering an initial preparation program leading to a degree in visual disabilities education from FSU in collaboration with the University Partnership Center at St. Petersburg College. This objective has been managed recently by a part-time coordinator employed to recruit interested individuals into the program, advise students, teach classes, supervise student teachers, hire adjunct instructors, and coordinate all activities related to this initiative. Although a great many students have received teacher preparation at this satellite location over the years, changes to the teacher education programs at FSU, combined with the decreased numbers of interested individuals who could pass the General Knowledge Examination of the Florida Teacher Certification, have resulted in fewer students being admitted. Currently, only 5 students are enrolled. During the 2020-2021 academic year, courses will still be offered to these students as they progress towards completion of their degrees, but the decision has been made to suspend new admissions as we divert funding to the potentially more effective approach to meeting the state's need for TVIs through an online master's degree (M.S.) program.

This new approach involves offering a non-teacher certification course of study that leads to an M.S. degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a major in Visual Disabilities. This program targets currently certified teachers who are interested in becoming trained to provide services to students with visual impairments. The 30 hours of coursework are flexibly delivered through a combination of online and hybrid courses, depending on the course content; students are enrolled part time and will require two years to complete all requirements. The program began in the Fall 2019 academic year with 12 participants. Graduates of this program will be prepared

to work with students who are blind or who have low vision by (a) providing instruction in skills related to the Expanded Core Curriculum, (b) supporting the educators responsible for providing instruction in the core curriculum, and (c) adapting materials necessary for these students to access the core curriculum.

The second objective of the Personnel Preparation Initiative is to increase the supply of individuals who possess the knowledge, competencies, and skills to provide O&M services to students with visual impairments. To meet this objective, both pre-service and currently practicing TVIs who have completed a university-based program in Visual Disabilities and who are interested in becoming eligible for national certification and the Florida endorsement in O&M are provided appropriate training and internship opportunities, along with tuition and stipend support, as necessary. Additionally, in an effort to increase the number of qualified internship and practicum supervisors, professional development support is provided to interested O&M specialists within the state in the form of test preparation and financial assistance with the costs of the national certification exam given by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP).

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. To complete the preparation of TVIs by providing coursework necessary for certification and advanced skills through offering a program in visual disabilities in a highly populated area and paying for instructors to teach associated courses at a satellite location where students who are enrolled may or may not be provided tuition support through this funding source.
2. To prepare alternatively trained TVIs by offering a master's degree program to currently practicing teachers who are interested in adding competencies in teaching students with visual impairments through a carefully conceived course of study that is delivered through online and hybrid instruction.
3. To prepare both pre-service and in-service TVIs with the competencies necessary to acquire national certification and the endorsement in the area of O&M by providing coursework at Florida locations.
4. To provide support for O&M specialists to earn ACVREP certification.
5. To facilitate increased access to a range of print materials used in general and special education classrooms in which students with low vision are provided special education support through the provision of appropriate clinical low vision services, non-electronic optical devices, and technical assistance to their teachers and parents. Up to 130 students, parents, and teachers will receive this support.
6. To obtain data regarding the effect of low vision device use on reading outcomes for between 75 to 100 students participating in the initiative.
7. To continue to participate in state and national meetings and conferences regarding effective practices, state and national initiatives (including statewide assessment programs), and technological applications in the field of blindness and visual impairment, following guidelines provided by the FDOE.

Personnel Preparation Initiative

To accomplish objective 1, FSU will offer classes leading to the eligibility of its students for Florida certification in Visual Impairment in the St. Petersburg area. The Visual Disabilities Program collaborates with the University Partnership Center at St. Petersburg College, where it maintains an office and has access to classrooms and other educational supports offered by St. Petersburg College. As is true at the main campus in Tallahassee, undergraduate students at the St. Petersburg location are required to enroll in the equivalent of three years of full-time study in order to complete the combined BS/MS pathway that culminates in the award of both the baccalaureate and master's degrees. Although most courses are offered in the traditional format, some are delivered through online instruction. Currently, five students are enrolled in this course of study and require either one or two semesters before graduation. As students complete their programs, additional support for locating employment in the field, preferably in Florida, will be provided.

Objective 2 will be achieved through the delivery of university coursework through online and hybrid instruction. Currently certified teachers who are interested in preparation to provide services to children with visual impairments and who apply and meet program entrance requirements will be enrolled and provided instruction to increase their competencies related to meeting the needs of this population of learners. A full-time coordinator will be employed to assist with: recruitment; student advising; teaching classes; identifying, assisting, and evaluating adjuncts; arranging practicum experiences; and managing the day-to-day demands of offering this new major.

To accomplish objective 3, FSU will offer classes that prepare graduates to teach O&M skills to children with visual impairments. Graduates of this program will be eligible for the Florida endorsement in O&M and for national certification by the ACVREP. Individuals seeking preparation as O&M specialists typically require a full year of master's level coursework and a one-semester, 350-hour internship. At the successful conclusion of their internship, graduates will be assisted in finding employment in the field, preferably in Florida. The O&M Coordinator will supervise all aspects of this specialization area, identifying and supervising adjunct instructors, recruiting and advising students, observing and guiding O&M interns, and maintaining relationships with professional and certification entities, both internal and external to the College and University. The O&M Coordinator will also teach O&M classes and supervise interns, which may require travel to their internship sites.

In addition to the above duties, the O&M Coordinator will also oversee activities related to objective 3. Because national standards require that students preparing to be O&M specialists be supervised by an O&M instructor who is certified by ACVREP, it is imperative to increase the number of professionals in the state of Florida who hold this certification.

To address this need, objective 4 will be achieved through the identification of at least one professional who is prepared as an O&M specialist who does not yet have national certification by ACVREP. This professional will be assisted in preparation for the certification examination and encouraged to sit for it. Once they have passed this test, the O&M specialist will be reimbursed for costs that may include the eligibility fee, the exam fee, and the 5-year

certification fee. In exchange, this professional will commit to supervising students completing O&M internships.

To achieve objective 7 (see next section for objectives 5 and 6), the Principal Investigator and coordinators of the O&M and online programs may participate in state and national meetings and conferences in order to maintain current knowledge and skills related to braille, technology, O&M, assessment, the expanded core curriculum, and other issues related to serving students with visual impairments to achieve independence in travel and other areas. The two coordinators are both certified TVIs and also hold ACVREP certification. These individuals may be supported by a student assistant who will assist with teaching-related activities such as preparing materials or grading assignments.

Low Vision Initiative

Objectives 5, 6, and 7 address the activities of the Low Vision Initiative, which will continue to coordinate and track a system targeted at students with low vision in the state. This system involves (a) the provision of comprehensive low vision services to students who meet the initiative's eligibility criteria, (b) technical assistance to the teachers and parents of these students, and (c) the collection of data regarding the effect of low vision device use on reading outcomes.

For this initiative, the project coordinator, who has been employed by the initiative since 2003, will contact TVIs in the state to offer services to students with low vision. She will primarily target those young students who are learning to read and (a) whose TVIs have identified through a functional vision/learning media assessment as having a near acuity, suggesting the need for enlarged text; (b) who are already using large text materials; or (d) whose access to the environment can be increased through the use of optical devices. Teachers will recommend students to the initiative and, after appropriate permissions have been granted, students will be scheduled to receive a clinical low vision evaluation by a low vision specialist and a reading assessment, when developmentally appropriate, by a project researcher. These data will be used to identify students' optical needs and necessary training.

After receiving a low vision evaluation by a qualified eye care specialist, students will be provided with prescribed eyeglasses, sunglasses, contact lenses, and/or portable handheld optical devices. For many students, goals and objectives will be identified and a plan will be developed with the teacher and project researcher to teach device use to the child. Teachers and parents of these students will receive follow-up services to assist the students in the use of any low vision aids that are purchased for student use, and teachers will be encouraged to use the resources of the Florida Low Vision Initiative to assist in the development of their skills and levels of comfort in teaching the use of devices. Teachers will also report to the Florida Low Vision Initiative progress on the identified goals and objectives. In addition, the project coordinator will maintain contact with teachers of students receiving services from the Florida Low Vision Initiative and those students' families to provide information and support if they experience barriers to the efficient and effective use of their low vision devices.

In addition to the above, the project coordinator will arrange for a second reading assessment to be conducted for as many students who have been in the project for one year as possible. Follow-up clinical low vision evaluations and reading assessments will also occur for students who have been participants in the project for a longer period of time, based on an identified schedule and on student needs. Ultimately, the project coordinator will prepare a report on the comparative costs of large print materials and low vision services for students enrolled in the initiative. Teachers who continue to order large print materials (and parents who continue to request the use of large print) for students for whom it has been documented that it is not useful will be provided data about the cost of their large print orders, information about the value of optical device use, and, to the extent that they are receptive, strategies for reducing their dependence on this medium.

As was true during the previous several years, it is proposed that the efforts of the Florida Low Vision Initiative continue to be focused on children with low vision who are developing reading skills, including students in pre-kindergarten, as it is anticipated that these students are more likely to benefit from the supports provided by the project. It is thought that if younger students, who are building letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and fluency skills, are provided with prescribed optical devices that allow them to access print of optimum size, then they will be more likely to receive the appropriate accommodations that maximize learning and to make gains in reading. Further, older students are increasingly using a variety of technology devices, including digital text, tablets, and handheld electronic video magnifiers to access print, which is outside the scope of the Florida Low Vision Initiative. Given that students with low vision need to develop life-long skills related to self-advocacy, it seems that a more appropriate role of the Florida Low Vision Initiative with students who are of transition age is to provide their teachers with the supports necessary to teach these self-advocacy skills to students as they prepare for college or careers. An early step in this process is to become a client of Vocational Rehabilitation and to actively participate in the low vision support services provided by that agency.

The project coordinator and project researcher are both certified TVIs. They will be supported by a research assistant, who is a student at the Tallahassee campus and whose primary responsibility will be handling the paperwork and electronic records required of this initiative.

The project coordinator and project researcher may participate in state and national meetings and conferences in order to maintain current knowledge and skills related to low vision, assessment, reading instruction, and other issues related to serving students with low vision to achieve optimum access to the environment.

Other

The work of the Critical Initiatives in Visual Impairment will continue to rely on the administrative efforts of the Principal Investigator, a part-time data input technician, and a part-time grants manager. These individuals will participate in FDOE webinars and face-to-face

meetings, manage data related to the project, appoint adjuncts and other project-supported employees, arrange for payment of project-related expenses, and provide reports as requested. In addition, the Principal Investigator may participate in state and national meetings and conferences in order to maintain current knowledge and skills related to providing high-quality services to students with visual impairments and the preparation of the professionals who provide these services.

DISSEMINATION AND MARKETING

Personnel Preparation Initiative

Recruitment for the non-certification master's degree program will continue in Fall 2020 and will involve advertising its availability to (a) currently certified teachers who are providing services to students with visual impairments who have passed the test, but not previously taken coursework related to providing services to these students; (b) special education directors; (c) lead teachers and program contacts responsible for coordinating district programs for students with visual impairments; and (d) the professional development coordinator at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. In addition, announcements will be made through the FIMC-VI listserv, at meetings of the Florida Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired, and with the Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind. Participant data will be reported to the FDOE through the Project Tracking System.

Funds have been set aside to assist in paying for certification or continuing recertification costs for at least one O&M specialist in the state who wishes to become nationally certified through ACVREP. These funds are needed to attract eligible O&M specialists to provide internship opportunities for trainees. Participant recruitment will be conducted through personal correspondence with currently practicing O&M specialists, through e-mail announcements made by the FIMC-VI, and at the annual meeting of O&M specialists held in conjunction with one of the spring Working with the Experts meetings sponsored by the FDOE.

Florida Low Vision Initiative

Recruitment for students to participate in the Florida Low Vision Initiative will occur through personal contacts with TVIs across the state, and at the annual fall meeting of vision coordinators. Information about students involved in the project and changes in their literacy skills will be provided to the FDOE in a formal report in which data are analyzed. Participant data will be reported to the FDOE through the Project Tracking System.