



Virginia Institute of Autism

Placement Description

VIA is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services.

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- Develop an understanding of VIA's mission, structure and delivery of service model
- Enhance understanding and knowledge of the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis
- Use reinforcement to promote socially significant behavior
- Collect data during individual sessions and social skills programs
- Design individualized goals and objectives for community-based programs or social skills programs
- Facilitate a group discussion and group activities for social skills programs
- Implement educational and clinical behavioral programs as directed by the Outpatient Behavior Analyst
- Work on developing rapport and communicating effectively with clients, caregivers and staff

Contact Information

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Read about students' experiences at this site below:



Spring 2018 – Veronica Wood

The Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) is an organization located in Charlottesville, VA that provides evidence-based services to individuals of all ages diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Their mission statement is “The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services”. VIA has three main programs through which they serve their clients: the James C. Hormel School, Outpatient Behavioral services, and the VIA Academy for Adults. My field placement at VIA took place in Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS). Outpatient typically serves children and adolescents from as young as 2 to 22 years old. Behavior technicians in OBS provide direct 1:1 services to their clients. Sessions with clients at OBS last anywhere from 2-6 hours daily and include table work, circle time, small group, snack, and play time.

Throughout my time at VIA I had a number of great and interesting experiences. My days were typically split half and half with session observation and working on projects for VIA. I was able to observe sessions with almost all of the children that regularly attended VIA during the days/hours I worked. I was also paired with one client and his behavior technician and was able to attend their sessions together every morning. During their sessions I was able to learn more first hand how ABA techniques are used in a hands-on way, and I was even able to practice using some of them myself. It’s one thing to learn about these techniques in a classroom, but being able to see and practice them hand-on is a much greater learning experience and gives you a deeper understanding. I also helped with the creation and implementation of a staff wide incentive program “VIA Bucks”. I created a fake currency, which could be earned by employees for doing various behaviors that improved the work environment (getting session notes in on time, keeping office spaces neat and tidy, and meeting billable hours). They could then exchange these “VIA Bucks” for various rewards located in the “VIA Store” I created as well. Along with these two experiences I was also able to help with the creation of any materials behavior technicians may need for their sessions.

I was able to learn and grow so much during my time at VIA and would gladly recommend the experience to anyone who was at all interested. As someone considering a career in the field of ABA I was able to see first hand what that could look like. I was able to gain skills in working in a clinical setting, working collaboratively with other professionals, collecting data, working directly with children diagnosed with ASD, and practicing ABA techniques. Working with children with ASD presents a unique variety of obstacles. Every child is different and so the more experiences you have the better. These experiences helped me to better understand the field and reaffirm my interest in pursuing a career in ABA. I know that this job is not the easiest one to take on, but seeing the kids learn and grow, and knowing that you are leaving a lasting positive impact on their life makes it all worth it in the end.

I have truly enjoyed each day of my field placement at VIA and I’m so sad for it to be coming to an end. Everyone who works there is so welcoming and genuinely wants to help you learn. My supervisor Julie was extremely helpful and was sure to set me up with interesting



opportunities day to day and was always there to answer any questions I had. She also offered me many opportunities to challenge myself and attempt the use of various ABA techniques with the children. Another great advantage to taking a field placement at VIA is that there are very few opportunities like it. This opportunity looks amazing on a resume and gives you irreplaceable hands-on experience in the field of ABA. The only obvious disadvantage to this placement is the distance from JMU. The drive takes about an hour there and back. This disadvantage, however, is greatly outweighed by the numerous opportunities it provides you with. The employees at VIA make the work environment very fun and welcoming. If anyone were at all considering this position I would tell him or her to go for it! It's an amazing opportunity you wouldn't want to miss out on.

Fall 2017 – Jessica Hiter

Virginia Institute of Autism in Charlottesville works with individuals diagnosed with autism using behavior analysis techniques. The mission at Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) is very evident there: “The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of Autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services.” Each person is very dedicated to this mission; their passion for the children is unquestionable. This is one of the many reasons I loved my time at VIA. VIA includes Outpatient Behavioral Services for individuals ages 2-22, VIA Academy for adults ages 22 and up, and James C. Hormel School for students with autism in the surrounding areas. I spent all of my time in Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS). At OBS, the behavior technicians work one-on-one with clients in a clinical setting to teach skills through behavior analysis techniques. A session ranges from two hours to about six hours and typically include table work, group play time, snacks, and circle time.

I was provided a variety of great experiences during my semester at VIA. My time there focused on two major projects. Because of my interest in training teachers and parents of children with autism, I was able to be an assistant for the Jumpstart Parent Training Program at VIA. I reviewed the psychologist's PowerPoints before the sessions to provide feedback, helped create worksheets for the parents to complete, and participated during the meetings while taking notes on the topics and questions from parents. This group met once a week. Another one of my projects was creating a curriculum with themed activities for each week that included crafts, games/P. E. activities, and music. The master schedule at VIA incorporates all of these school-like activities to prepare them for a school setting, but it has been difficult to implement. The supervisors and I are hoping this helps lay out ideas for the behavior technicians to use. During my time there, I was able to start the craft sessions on Thursday afternoons. Aside from those assignments, I created Smart Board lessons for Language for Learning to encourage interactive, group learning, observed client sessions and collected data, and other miscellaneous office activities. In addition to observing in the clinic, I was able to observe in-home therapy sessions and school sessions. Towards the end of my time there, I had the opportunity to lead a couple trials of client sessions myself. It was great to know I could apply my experiences at VIA to illicit the desired responses.



I acquired and practiced many skills at my placement. Some most prominent are professional development, experience in a clinical setting, experience working hands-on with kids who have autism, facilitating group activities, and data collection. At VIA, I worked among a group of Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, clinical psychologists, and other professionals in order to develop a comprehensive treatment for the client. Additionally, I worked with and led parents during the parent training sessions with the clinical psychologist. In a clinical setting, I observed how to set up the environment to gain the child's attention, create and use supplies available, and collect data during the session. I learned more about how to take precise data in a behavior analysis setting and which types of data is appropriate across different settings. I then used inter-observer reliability with the behavior technicians to check for accuracy. I was able to complete these tasks independently after some practice. Experience working with children with autism in this kind of career path is so important. Each child is different, and I was able to learn how to work with them better in a behavior analysis clinical setting. I was even able to lead a few of my own trials with the children on skills such as feeding, peer interactions, and using words for communication. Additionally, I facilitated some of my own planned activities such as the craft sessions. I had learned enough about each of the children that I could incorporate what ABA skills they were working on into the craft time. This placement has definitely impacted my future career. I really enjoyed working with the kids, but it surprised me how much I also loved working with the parents in the Jumpstart program. As with most placements, this placement is also a great resume builder. I was just recently offered a job with a company that was very impressed about my internship at VIA and the experiences I had during my time there. Not only do I feel as though that will continue in the future, I feel more confident about working in this setting and with this population. It solidified my desire to work with children with autism, however, I would love to look into more treatment options and models before I decide on a definite career path. I am considering ABA, school psychology, or clinical psychology after working with the clinical psychologist for the Jumpstart classes.

Overall, I was very impressed with VIA as a workplace and facility. The BCBA's, behavior technicians, clinical psychologists, and other professionals are each so passionate about their jobs and the children on their caseload. Everyone is so friendly and welcoming to clients and interns. I also really loved working with the kids. It was so fun getting to know them and interacting with them. There were very few disadvantages of this internship. One somewhat obvious one is the distance from James Madison University. Each day there is an additional two hours of travel time. Luckily, I did not have classes on Thursday and was free most of the day on Friday, so I could go for extended periods of time. Additionally, I was able to work on the curriculum for group activities from home to gain more hours without being on site for all of them since it was on the computer. With that said, the distance was very much worth it with all of the great experiences offered, their openness to providing me with experiences I wanted, and the genuine, welcoming environment. I would definitely recommend this field placement to anyone who is interested in ABA, desires clinical experience, or wants more experience working with children diagnosed with autism in an inviting setting.



Fall 2017 – Kimberly Bianco

I completed my Field Placement at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in Charlottesville, Virginia. The goal of VIA is to assist individuals of all ages to overcome the barriers of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) using Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) techniques. VIA offers three primary services: VIA Academy, James C. Hormel School, and Outpatient Behavioral Services. VIA Academy services adults with ASD and is a day program focused on building social and life adaptation skills. The James C. Hormel School caters to individuals ranging in age from 2 through 22. Individuals who need additional resources that the school district cannot accommodate are directed to the James C. Hormel School, where there are specialized instructors who are trained and prepared to help this population. Lastly, Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) focuses primarily with younger clients, with the target of early intervention for social and behavioral problems in the hopes to transition children with ASD into the typical school system. OBS helps clients in the clinic, in their homes, and in the school system, and is the location I spent my semester.

At the Outpatient center, individuals come from all backgrounds to get the expertise help of VIA's professionals. I was incredibly fortunate to work with the clinicians and their clients throughout the semester, and observe ABA in action. I had opportunities to interact with clients in sessions, and assist the therapists as they were running various programs. I also attended home sessions which consisted of similar activities that would be done in the clinic, but were more focused on integrating the families into the programs and generalizing skills to a different environment. I collected data on the clients and therapists throughout these sessions. This gave me an opportunity to learn how professionals in this field collect data. After collecting data, I was able to discuss my results with the therapist who ran the session. We compared my observations with the ones they collected and discussed discrepancies and consistent findings. This was an incredibly beneficial and educational experience, as I was able to ask questions and gain clarity on any confusing behavioral definition or what classified as appropriate or inappropriate behaviors/responses. All the therapists I worked with were more than willing to discuss any of these topics with me, which I found comforting as a novel learner in this field.

While at VIA, I had the pleasure of attending a parent training cohort meeting. Because of my schedule, I was not able to attend the other meetings that occurred once per month. However, the first meeting came at the beginning of my time at VIA. This meeting was teaching parents of clients on the Competent Learner Model (CLM), which is the training program implemented by therapists at the clinic. It gave me immense insight on this program, and I was learning right along with the parents. It prepared me for what I observed the remainder of the semester. The meeting was also a rewarding experience because it demonstrated how invested and interested the parents were in the treatment of their children. During the meeting, a Direct Instruction training tool, Language for Learning, was discussed. Language for Learning is a group-centered teaching tool consisting of 150 increasingly difficult lessons that is meant to improve language skills of all children, not just those with ASD. A majority of my time at VIA soon turned to me working directly with these Language for Learning lessons.

My contribution project consisted of me transferring the paper version of Language for Learning to an interactive SmartBoard version. It was an intense process that involved a lot of planning and trial and error since the SmartBoard was fairly new at VIA. I was given the



opportunity to engage my creative side when developing these lessons, which I found incredibly rewarding and exciting. I improved on my autonomy and independence skills throughout this process as well. When confronted with various issues that arose regarding my contribution project, I felt like it was my personal responsibility to discover a solution individually. This not only dramatically improved my ability to figure out problems without asking others for assistance, but it helped me gain confidence in myself and what I was capable of completing. My supervisor, the OBS Director, Ashley Stonemetz-Walding, facilitated an environment that allowed me to embrace my individuality and implement this program that I felt incredibly passionate about. Not only did Ashley facilitate this environment for me, but she also encouraged me the entire time. It was incredibly reassuring to hear from her and many other staff members that my contribution project would be used at VIA for years to come because it ensured that my hard work and dedication paid off.

Ashley's support and encouragement is only one of the many advantages of interning at VIA. My experiences are not the only opportunities that VIA offers for their interns. There are multiple programs relating to social skills, behavioral interventions, language acquisition, etc. that field placement students can get involved with. There are opportunities in the clinic, in home settings, and in the school system for interns. Not only do you have access to each of these locations, giving you the ability to cater your experience at VIA to meet your interests and passions, but you are encouraged to explore any aspect that you have the slightest affinity towards. This is an incredible advantage to completing field placement at VIA because you have the opportunity to direct your path throughout the semester to fit your interests. VIA has a supportive staff that is encouraging and helps you grow personally, academically, and professionally, and I strongly recommend this location to anyone who has an interest in ABA to work with individuals with ASD. There are very little disadvantages and limitations to completing field placement at VIA. The most obvious one is the driving distance between Harrisonburg and Charlottesville. However, even though the drive is long, it is outweighed by all the opportunities offered. One additional disadvantage is that I was never given a "spot" to call my own. It sometimes felt like I was imposing on staff members' work locations, so it would have been beneficial to have a personal desk or area dedicated to field placement students. This can easily be addressed for future students, though.

My experience at VIA gave me insight into a field that was fascinating and inspiring. Observing professionals in this setting showed me how to use ABA to help enhance the lives of individuals with disabilities. I gained a breadth of knowledge on how to implement behavioral analysis techniques in real-life, as opposed to learning from a textbook. I worked in an Autism clinic at JMU at the same time as my field placement, and I found myself frequently using what I had learned at VIA in my other clinic. I gained ABA skills, professional skills, and interpersonal skills throughout the semester, all due to the phenomenal staff that VIA employees. I strongly recommend taking the jump and immersing yourself into VIA and making the commute if you are interested in ABA to work with individuals with ASD. The experience and knowledge gained by interning at VIA could never be replicated in a classroom environment.



Spring 2016 – Rose Morlino

My field placement was at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA), which is located in Charlottesville, Virginia. VIA helps individuals overcome the struggles of autism using evidence-based interventions. VIA provides educational services through a school program for individuals 2-22, outpatient services to improve social and behavioral function, and adult services for individuals older than 22. These services can be provided one on one or in group settings. For all services, VIA uses applied behavioral analysis because research shows this intervention method is the most effective. VIA assesses the needs and individualized goals of every family and dedicates their work to accomplishing those goals. I specifically worked with Outpatient Behavioral services addressing social and behavioral problems through one on one or group sessions.

At this site, there is a wide range of opportunities and experiences. I was able to observe numerous one on one client sessions and learn to collect data during these sessions. I was also given the opportunity to assist in assessments of clients. This included creating materials to use during assessments, helping to run the different parts of the assessments, and scoring the assessments. I was given the opportunity to assist with VIA's social skills program *Pathways*. This program meets once a week and assists individuals age 7-20 with different social skills. Because of scheduling conflicts, I only worked with the two older groups. Group 1 consists of teenagers from 13-16 and group 2 consists of young adults age 17-20. I was able to create weekly lesson plans to work on a specific social skill. Each skill was beneficial to the whole group. The lessons consisted of a discussion of the skill and numerous activities to practice the skill. For example, to practice the social skill of initiating conversation, we did an activity similar to speed dating for individuals to take turns initiating conversation with different people. Each week, I assist groups with the different activities in the lesson. For some lessons, I was given the opportunity to lead the groups. Both creating lessons and leading lessons allowed me to develop skills in assisting social development of older individuals with autism spectrum disorders. This skill will be useful in a graduate program as well as in my future career when I will need to develop and implement intervention plans for many different individuals.

Aside from working with individual clients at VIA, I also gained experience and knowledge in the office aspect of the organization. I assisted in creating binders to train parents of clients in a specific intervention program called CLM. I also assisted in creating the training materials and binders for new behavior technicians. I was also given the opportunity to sit in on the training classes given to each cohort on new behavior technicians. This training consists of the many different aspects of applied behavioral analysis intervention plans such as different reinforcements. This opportunity to receive this training was extremely beneficial to my learning in the field of applied behavioral analysis. Due to a couple reasons, I was unable to take the Applied Behavioral Analysis course offered at JMU. Prior to VIA, my only training in behavioral psychology was an introductory course and Learning. Receiving the training at VIA gave me the knowledge that I missed out on by not taking the course offered at JMU.



There are many advantages to interning at VIA. As mentioned above, there are a plethora of opportunities to gain experience and knowledge in the field of applied behavioral analysis. These opportunities include learning how to create and implement intervention lesson plans, learning to collect data while working with a client, and learning to assess a client's progress. Along with these opportunities, my supervisor, Julie Patterson, allowed me to dictate the different aspects of VIA that I wanted to experience. For example, I am really interested in Functional Analyses (FA). I was able to meet with a coordinator who has a lot of experience with FAs to learn about their purpose and the different modifications available. I was also able to sit in on meetings to discuss an FA being run with one of the client's. I was able to see the client's data charts and watch videos of the actual FA. Interning at VIA also provides you the opportunity to experience many different types of services.

The only limitation to interning at VIA is the distance from JMU (it is an hour long commute). However, this limitation is extremely minuscule compared to all of the wonderful opportunities for experience and knowledge provided at VIA. This site really provides you with hands on experience working with autistic children and applied behavioral analysis. The diverse backgrounds of the supervisors, coordinators, and behavior technicians that work at VIA provide you with experience in many different implementation styles and different levels and areas of expertise. The staff make-up provides an extremely welcoming atmosphere at VIA. All staff members treated me as a part of their team and not just some disposable intern. They were all willing to work with me to help me gain the knowledge and experience I desired. Because of the staff's openness, I was able to learn about the various graduate programs and opportunities in the field of applied behavioral analysis. This knowledge allowed me to refine some of my future career goals. I discovered that I would like to spend most of my time working with younger individuals with autism. However, I also learned that I can use my same experiences and knowledge to work with older autistic individuals if the need is present in my community. This internship was the first step of many that I need to fulfill my dream of becoming a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst for autistic children. VIA is the perfect organization for any individual looking to get into the field of applied behavioral analysis with autistic individuals. With the helpfulness of every staff member at VIA, you will gain more knowledge and understanding of applied behavioral analysis than any college course could ever provide.

Fall 2015 – Taylor Livesay

My field placement was at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in the Outpatient Behavioral Services. VIA is located in Charlottesville, Virginia, near the University of Virginia and approximately one hour away from James Madison University. VIA is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services. The organization's core values include strategic leadership (LEAD), innovation and evidence-based (CREATE), and systems transformation (CHANGE) into planning, program development and operational activities. These services and programs produce individual, family and community outcomes. These outcomes are then



analyzed to enlighten consequent program development and improvement. These services reach out to both children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I specifically worked with children receiving direct one-on-one services in the outpatient building. I also worked directly with my supervisor to lead a social skills program named Pathways, which services kids from ages 7 all the way to 22. Pathways focuses on enhancing significant social skills in a group setting where the kids get to interact with their peers and develop specific social skills. Each client has specific goals and are assigned to programs that they are working towards during each session. During my time at VIA, I was able to help clients work towards their specific goals and implement programs with these goals in mind.

In my field placement at VIA, I learned many things about behavior analysis, and I improved on and developed a variety of skills. I established an understanding of VIA's mission, structure, and delivery of service model. My experiences at VIA enhanced my understanding and knowledge of the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. For instance, I developed the ability to use reinforcement to promote socially significant behavior. I also worked on developing rapport and communicating effectively with clients, caregivers, and staff. I worked on many different projects to help develop a collection of programs and necessary materials. I learned how to design individualized goals and objectives for community-based programs or social skills programs for individuals. I worked on creating examples and materials for different programs on social skills and adaptive functioning. I implemented educational and clinical behavioral programs as directed by my supervisor with clients using the data collection software *Skills*. I also fine-tuned data collecting skills by recording and organizing data for individuals in one-on-one sessions, Pathways, and the *I Can Do It, You Can Do It!* program. I also occasionally helped out with administrative tasks, such as putting together Behavior Technician training binders for new Behavior Tech hires. I organized supplies and client information into folders and binders and put together clients' lesson binders. I researched and worked on grant proposals for scholarships and a SMART Board for Outpatient Behavioral Services. I ordered supplies for different programs like *Pathways* and IDCI.

Working with the social skills program, *Pathways*, was also beneficial to my development. I created materials, such as pictures, scenarios and videos, for the *Pathways* program. I made nametags and goals for each individual child in the social skills program as well as a contingency plan for the group. For the group contingency, the kids had to get a certain number of points each session in order to have a pizza party at the end of the semester. We made an interactive poster so that the kids could see their progress each week and earn different items for the pizza party along the way. I helped make a contingency chart for one child to decrease his interruptions and inappropriate behavior during the social skills program. One of the most amazing opportunities I had during my placement at VIA was to facilitate group discussions and group activities for *Pathways*. Each week I would develop a lesson plan around a specific social skill, and then I would teach the lesson to the different age groups of kids. It was an awesome experience to get to interact with the kids and help them learn and improve socially significant behavior. It was rewarding to see these kids make new friends and have fun participating in the group activities. For my contribution project, I decided I wanted to work with the older *Pathways* kids to help them with life skills, like getting a job or applying to college. I developed



a job skills and interview skills intervention plan, which we implemented in a three-week series to help the adults improve their interview skills and customer service responses. It was incredible to see the improvement in just three short weeks. At the end of my internship, I decided I just could not leave, so I applied for the entry-level position, Behavior Technician. I am so excited that my internship lead to the first step in my career and my first job in the field of ABA.

Each of these unique experiences and skills I have developed or improved on have helped me with several of my undergraduate courses and my knowledge of the field of Behavior Analysis. These skills will also help me with the next step in my career, which will be furthering my education in an Applied Behavior Analysis Master's program. Both my internship and my new position at VIA will help me attain my goal of becoming a Board Certified Behavior Analyst after I complete graduate school. VIA has inspired me to further pursue my passion to help children with autism and helped me solidify my interest in applied behavior analysis. After my site experience I am sure that I want this to be my career, and I am so excited to have that assurance while applying to graduate schools. Although this site requires a much further commute than other sites, it is well worth the drive. Everyone at VIA is compassionate, welcoming and supportive. Every staff member is willing to help in contributing to the development of skills and knowledge. They are enthusiastic about what they are doing and instill inspiration in others. I was able to work directly with the kids and attain knowledge of the work that goes into developing the programs that are implemented. The Virginia Institute of Autism is absolutely wonderful and anyone who has the opportunity to intern at VIA would be extremely lucky to experience this site.