



# Virginia Institute of Autism

## Placement Description

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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

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- 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 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 created 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.