Western State Hospital

Placement Description

- Work with an inpatient population and engage in mental health research
- Participate in a full spectrum of psychological services: Individual, Group and Behavior therapy
- On average, there are between three to six slots available for field placement students at WSH

Responsibilities/Opportunities

- Observation of intake interviews
- Observation of psychosocial rehabilitation groups
- Co-lead psychosocial rehabilitation groups
- Develop lesson plans and activities for psychosocial rehabilitation groups
- Attend staff meetings and training events
- Administer and score tests
- Compile data from structured interviews and tests and put it into computer
- Help design and administer pre and post test measures for clients
- Do behavioral assessment and intervention

Placements Within Western State

- Forensic Unit – focus on persons with mental illness who are also charged with crimes or have been adjudicated Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity
- Acute Care – focus on newly admitted clients who require stabilization on medications.
- Extended Care Wards – focus on clients who have been in the hospital for more than a month and are challenging to place in the community.

Contact Information

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Read about students’ experiences at this site below:
My field placement was at Western State Hospital (WSH) in one of the forensic units with Dr. Curry-El as my supervisor. WSH is a state run hospital whose mission statement is to provide safe and effective treatment in a recovery focused environment. There are several different units within the hospital each with their own specific goals. Overall, the goal is to help patients work through their mental illness. The forensic units have their own specific goals. On my unit, the goal was to restore people to be competent for trial, combat emergency mental health issues of forensic patients, and to help treat a few civilly committed patients.

Most of our patients were hospitalized because they were incompetent for trial. In order to pass a competency exam they must have a rational understanding of their charges, a factual understanding of court proceedings, and the ability to work with their lawyers. Other patients were there for emergency treatment from jails and prisons. Examples of emergencies include: not eating due to catatonia, threatening/harming correction officers due to paranoia and so on. Once they were deemed competent or the emergency subsided they were discharged back to jail/prison. We did help treat a few civilly committed patients as well. Some common diagnoses on our unit are: schizophrenia, bipolar, schizo-affective, and personality disorders.

One of my duties was to attend rounds with patients twice a week. Each patient had one day of the week where they would meet with the treatment team to discuss their progress and make any changes to their treatment plan. During rounds, I could ask patients questions, but I mostly took very detailed notes. I took notes on what was said, how the patient looked, and any other important information.
I would use my notes from rounds to write clinical SOAP notes. SOAP stands for subjective, objective, assessment and plan. For the subjective part, I would write direct quotes from patients. For objective I would describe their physical presentation. Assessment is stating how the patient is progressing. Lastly, the plan was to encourage patients to attend rounds. It was incredibly beneficial learning how to write clinical notes as an undergraduate.

I also attended group therapy twice a week. I got to observe and participate in several different groups such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) and Positive Psychology. Depending on where and what the group was the time can last from thirty minutes to about an hour. The goal of all therapies was to educate patients on different issues such as coping skills, court proceedings and so on. For my contribution project I led my own DBT group. I created the lesson plan and the handouts for the session on opposite action. It was very helpful to learn and practice effective facilitator skills in a group therapy session.

Another one of my duties was meeting one on one with patients. I got to meet with several different kinds of patients by myself such as catatonic, paranoid, and homicidal. For some, I would help educate them on what to prepare for with the competency exam. Some I would just be check in with to see how they’re doing. These meetings would typically last fifteen to thirty minutes. Sometimes it was just talking with them and other times we would play card games.

I also observed a few competency exams. They lasted about an hour or two. We would check to see if they had a rational understanding of their charges, if they know the facts about how the court works, and if they could trust working with their lawyers.

There are several advantages to this field placement site. It was eye-opening to see psychopathology in real life. Abnormal psychology shows psychopathology in a clear-cut textbook way; however, in real life it is much different to see how different disorders present and progress. I enjoyed the quick turn-over rate on my unit. Our patients were typically there for a few days to a few months. This allowed me to get to see a lot of different patients and their presentations. In addition, my supervisor gave me tremendous opportunities. Leading group therapy, writing clinical notes, and meeting with patients has provided me with exceptional experience as an undergraduate. I believe this experience will help propel me into graduate school and help me achieve my goal of becoming a clinical psychologist.

One disadvantage to this site is the commute. It does take about thirty-minutes to get to and from the hospital. I used that time to prepare for the day or relax after a busy
day. This site does expect a lot from their students, but provides such a valuable experience.

I was able to learn key clinical psychology skills by working at WSH. I was able to learn how to write clinical notes as an undergraduate. I increased my use of psychology terminology. I also saw the dynamics of working in a team full of psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, nurses and mental health workers. I was able to practice developing rapport with patients. As a result, I believe that this unique undergraduate experience will help me achieve my career goal.

Spring 2015 – Erin Lee

Western State Hospital is a state run psychiatric hospital that aids in the recovery of mentally ill patients. Western State’s mission statement is to “provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment. I spent my semester at Western State Hospital on a forensic admissions unit under the supervision of Dr. Curry-El, a licensed clinical psychologist. A forensic patient is someone who was admitted to the hospital from a jail, and is there for emergency treatment, restoration of competency, or another legal order. Being on a forensic unit allowed me to learn more about the legal side of psychiatric treatment, and how a psychologist interacts with the court system. I appreciated the experience because I do not think I would have had hands-on experience with forensic issues and mental health anywhere else.

On the forensic unit under Dr. Curry El’s supervision I was able to sit on weekly treatment team meetings with patients, and learned how to record psychology notes for the treatment plan. Treatment team meetings allowed me to see the interactions between the psychologists, psychiatrics, and social workers on different teams, and how different people interviewed patients. I also was able to observe many new patient staffings, and see patients as they were arriving on the unit. I also attended different group therapies available to the patients on the short-term care units, as well as a couple of long-term care groups.

One group I attended several time was Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), which is co-lead by Dr. Curry El. She and a partner run a revised version of DBT because patients do not have time to do a regular DBT program. We did several activities on mindfulness, emotion regulation, and how to handle stressful situations. I was actually allowed the opportunity to co-lead DBT group on increasing positive emotions. Co-leading groups is a great opportunity available to students at Western State Hospital.

Another thing I did on my unit was meet with a patient one on one to help prepare them for a competency to stand trial (CST) evaluation. I helped them to understand the court system as well as their legal charges, and the importance of helping their lawyer for their case. I also was able to sit on a CST evaluation done by Dr. Curry El in order to learn more about the process. Another learning opportunity at Western was attending educational Grand Rounds every week on varying topics. Grand Rounds are continuing education lectures available to staff during lunch hour on Wednesdays at Western State. I
had a very well-rounded experience at Western State and was able to participate in several different activities that allowed me to get an idea of how the hospital runs.

I had an amazing experience at Western State, and it was the greatest learning opportunity I had while attending JMU. There was an overwhelming amount of advantages to participating in field placement at Western over disadvantages. Working in a psychiatric facility gave me the opportunity to see severe mental illness up close, and taught me a lot about the difference between book definitions of symptoms and symptoms in real life. It is a very unique experience to be able to interact with such acute patients at an undergraduate level, and taught me a lot about care for mentally ill patients. All of the staff at Western are very welcoming, and willing to aid students if they are in need of help. Western State was a great experience because it involves a lot of interactions among different professions, and there are many students receiving various training at Western. The staff at Western trusts students with sensitive information, and makes sure students learn as much as possible in their time at the hospital. The drive to Western does take about thirty minutes, but it goes by quickly, and carpooling with another student going to Western helps pass the time.

I enjoyed being able to observe patient rounds, and see how each team member would interview the patients. I also enjoyed talking one on one with patients and learning about their lives, and how they were doing while at Western State. One of the things I enjoyed the most at Western was attending group therapies available to the patients. Observing group was interesting because I could see each instructor’s different style of leading group, and see how patients outside of my unit interacted with one another. This experience made me feel more comfortable working with individuals with severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and schizoaffective disorder. It has helped to solidify my goals for after I graduate from JMU. I am attending a master’s in counseling program in the fall, and this program helped to be sure that I really do want to work in the mental health field.
Dr. Stout – Long Term Care Unit

Fall 2017 – Cerella Chandra

Western State Hospital (WSH) is an inpatient facility that is funded by the Commonwealth of Virginia. They provide short-term and long-term care for individuals suffering from severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, and personality disorders. WSH aims to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment. They also strive to help individuals reach their highest level of functioning within the least restrictive environment.

My placement was specifically in the extended care unit, which is for patients who remain at WSH for more than a month. I shadowed Dr. Jason Stout, the clinical psychologist on the 1PINE ward. I attended treatment planning conferences with 1PINE’s core treatment team, which consists of a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, social worker, and registered nurses. These meetings occur about once a month with each patient to check in on their symptoms and the side effects of their prescribed medications. This is where I conceptualized different psychological disorders and corresponding psychiatric medications. I was able to use my knowledge of abnormal psychology, biopsychology, and behavioral methods from classes and transfer them into the real world. I have improved my ability to determine diagnoses based on symptomology. I have learned from my placement how mental disorders can manifest differently in various individuals.

I spent the majority of my time in various psychosocial rehabilitation groups. In the extended care unit, patients are required to attend all four groups during the day. The goal of these groups is to improve well-being and functioning so that patients can successfully reintegrate back into the community. In different groups, patients learn relevant information on their disorders, positive coping mechanisms, independent living skills, social skills, and vocational skills. I observed and participated in groups that focused on stress management, anger management, substance abuse recovery, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and reality testing. For my contribution project, I planned lessons and lead a group called Music Appreciation; I used music therapy methods to get patients to speak up more during the session. Through facilitating this group, I developed organizational, communication, and leadership skills.

I also attended Grand Rounds while at WSH. Every Wednesday, professionals from outside of the hospital give presentations on clinically-relevant topics to the staff at WSH. These lectures have educated me on a wide variety of practical issues in the field. For example, I have learned about how to best interact with patients with autism, how to approach difficult ethical dilemmas, the validity/reliability of modern measures of psychopathy, and the importance of the allocation of government funding within the mental health field. I really enjoyed listening to these lectures.
In my spare time, I went to the ward or common area and talked to patients. I played pool, ping pong, and card games with them as well. One time, I was able to accompany an off-grounds trip to a park to play Frisbee-golf with a group of patients. These casual interactions are not to be underestimated, as I was able to connect with the patients in a different way than when in groups. I learned how to build rapport with specific individuals and empathize with their situations.

One of my favorite experiences of my internship was observing a court hearing. Dr. Stout occasionally gets called to testify as an expert witness in Not Guilty By Reason of Insanity conditional release hearings. Since I have an interest in forensic psychology, he let me attend court with him. It was my first time in a courtroom, which was exciting and eye-opening. I was able to see multiple mental health workers testify on the stand. From this, I learned a little bit about how the court system works, especially with cases concerning the mentally ill.

Along with an abundance of different opportunities, WSH also has other advantages. I was granted a lot of independence during my field placement, which I enjoyed. Dr. Stout gave me the schedule for groups on my first day, and I sat in on the groups that interested me throughout the semester. If I wanted to help lead a group, it was up to me to approach the facilitator and plan the lessons myself. At the beginning of each day, Dr. Stout would let me know about any scheduled treatment planning conferences or grand round lectures. I could attend any of these if I chose to, and I took advantage of this. This kind of freedom allowed me to get exactly what I wanted out of this experience; it helped me become more assertive and self-assured.

The staff at WSH are extraordinarily warm and hospitable. Students are treated like staff from day one. Many of the facilitators prompted me to participate in groups at the beginning of my internship, which made me feel welcomed and valued from the start. I have made many meaningful connections with staff members which have opened doors to several unique opportunities. In addition to my duties within the hospital, I was able to take notes for a forensic consultant during competency to stand trial evaluations in jail settings. Also, a position on a different ward was recommended to me, so I may be able to continue to work at WSH next semester. This placement is an incredible experience on its own, but it can also hold additional opportunities if you keep your eye out for them.

The only possible disadvantage of this site is the commute. A car is necessary to get to WSH. It takes about 30 minutes to get there, but it is a very straightforward drive down I-81. I scheduled my classes so that I could have two whole days devoted to my placement; this made the drive more worthwhile. Also, another intern and I took turns carpooling in order to save gas money. I highly suggest that future WSH interns consider these options.

This placement was very relevant to my career goals. I have always been interested in clinical psychology, but I never had the opportunity to work directly with
the mentally ill until I worked at WSH. Technically, I did not need to participate in field placement, because I am already fulfilling my capstone requirement with an honors thesis. However, I really wanted to intern in a clinical setting, and this was the perfect opportunity to do so. There is not any part of me that regrets devoting extra time to this endeavor, as it has been completely worthwhile. I have enjoyed every moment at this site, and I am now able to say with confidence that I want to pursue clinical psychology as a career. I have applied to PhD programs in clinical psychology in the hopes of becoming a clinical psychologist one day. My goal is to work in a psychiatric facility similar to WSH.

**Fall 2017 – Kathia Bonilla**

Western State Hospital is a state psychiatric facility located in Staunton, Virginia under the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. The hospital’s mission is to provide safe and effective individualized treatment to patients in a recovery focused environment. This is accomplished through inclusion of patients in the development of their treatment plan. Other distractions that could slow down recovery such as smoking are not allowed within the hospital environment. Patients are expected to actively engage in their treatment plan in order to improve symptoms of their disorder. Western State serves patients in Virginia with a wide range of psychiatric disorders from depression to schizophrenia.

During my field placement, I worked with my supervisor, Dr. Stout on 1-Pine, one of the long-term care units. This team is made up of a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, social worker and registered nurse. On my first day, Dr. Stout asked me if I was able to stay for the treatment planning conferences. Although I was unsure of what to expect, the nature of the meetings were a pleasant surprise. In these meetings, the team discusses medication, treatment, a patient’s progress, and possible discharge. The patient can request changes to medication and other parts of their treatment plan such as groups. There are many therapy groups patients can choose from. If patients prefer another group, the clinical psychologist works with them to change their group schedule. Patients would also express any concerns or symptoms that they were experiencing. When the patient is ready for discharge, often a Community Service Board’s member will join the team to discuss housing options. Through this experience, I improved my ability to recognize psychiatric disorders. After a meeting, Dr. Stout would ask what disorder I thought the patient was diagnosed with. This helped me apply my knowledge from abnormal psychology. Whenever I had difficulty arriving at a conclusion, Dr. Stout would help me think through the patient’s symptomology.

As previously mentioned, the treatment team is composed of various professionals. The interdisciplinary nature of this team helped me learn about the many aspects of recovery. The hospital is dedicated to providing all the resources necessary to promote recovery in patients. By working with these professionals in these meetings, I was also able to expand my knowledge of medication. The psychiatrist would always talk to patients about their medication and its purpose. Through this process I was able to learn the purposes of different medications and how they work together. As an aspiring clinical psychologist, I think that this is important knowledge to have given the vast
majority of patients with a disorder are taking medication. It is important to understand its effects and how it works conjointly with therapy to help reduce patient symptomology.

In addition to attending treatment planning conferences, I also attended and participated in therapy groups. Western State Hospital offers many options to patients for group therapy including recreational groups. While at Western State, I attended Men’s Issues, Substance Abuse Education, Let’s Talk about Culture, Mental Health Education, Advanced Art, Positive Psychology, Forensic Issues and Reality Testing. These are only a small subset of the many groups available to patients. When attending groups I would contribute to discussions and observe how the facilitator guided discussion. I also observed how the facilitators managed disruption from patients and built rapport with them. Through observation I was able to learn techniques that I could apply when leading a group on my own. As part of my contribution project, I created materials for the group Let’s Talk about Culture. My goal for this group was to create a structured environment where patients could learn about others through multicultural education. I used multicultural education as a tool to instill empathy in patients. Empathy promotes prosocial behaviors which can aide patients in interacting with other people either within the facility or in the community once discharged. By learning about other cultures, patients are able to take the perspective of others and engage in cognitive empathy.

The materials I created focused on different aspects of culture. I structured the group in a way where patients would learn about a different culture and also learn about research addressing topics that could prevent us from engaging in empathy. For one group we discussed the country of Japan, I taught patients about the culture and also brought in a Japanese desert called mochi. Patients appreciated being able to experience the culture through food. Once I taught the patients about the culture, we would watch a Ted talk on a topic such as implicit bias. Patients would apply the topic to their initial perceptions of the culture we discussed. Through this experience, I was able to enhance my presentation skills. I was also able to further develop my ability to create materials for psychosocial rehabilitation groups. Leading this group was one of my favorite experiences at Western State. The group facilitators were very welcoming and open minded to the type of approach I wanted to implement in the group. They also helped me think of ways to manage the group when patients were not cooperative. Leading this group was challenging at times. Given the debilitating nature of some of the illnesses patients have, they would sometimes lack motivation to participate in discussions. A few patients in my group also had schizophrenia and they would disrupt the group by vocalizing their delusions. At first I was unsure of how to respond to patients without making them feel ignored. The more I led groups, the more easily I was able to redirect their attention and relate their comments to the topics discussed in group. Through this experience I was able to learn how to work with patients with severe disorders. This exposure will help me in the future as a clinician.

Another great opportunity my supervisor offered me at Western State was the chance to work with a patient on restoration to Competency to Stand Trial. I worked with a Hispanic patient in Spanish on educating him on court room procedures and his current charges. This experience was very rewarding because I was able to observe the progress of the patient. He was the only Hispanic patient on the unit and did not speak English so I
worked with him often. I learned how to provide restoration services and gained experience in forensic psychology. My goal in the future is to become a clinical psychologist with a forensic focus. Through this experience I was able to confirm my passion for clinical psychology and my desire to work with forensic populations.

Dr. Stout and all the staff at Western State were very supportive throughout my field placement. Dr. Stout offered me many amazing opportunities and I was able to learn through him many aspects of a great clinician. He was also very receptive to my desire to return to Western State next semester in a different capacity. I was fortunate enough to receive a student engagement grant from JMU and I will be conducting Art Therapy with patients in the Advanced Art therapy group. Working at Western State has been one of the most fulfilling experiences in my undergraduate career and it has exceeded my expectations.

**Fall 2016 - Gabrielle Reimann**

By definition, Western State Hospital is an adult state psychiatric inpatient facility operated by the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. By mission, it is a recovery-focused facility which emphasizes individualized treatment in a safe and effective environment. While Western State Hospital admits patients with a range of psychiatric and mood disorders, it also opens its doors to students from local universities who are interested in applying classroom knowledge and gaining perspective on the mental health profession.

As a student intern at Western State Hospital, I worked directly with schizophrenia, depression, borderline personality disorder, and other psychiatric and mood disorders. I was able to interact with the patients in a one-on-one setting and hear stories of their lives. The rapport I built with patients was one of the most rewarding parts of the placement. It was very interesting to have an interpersonal perspective, and then observe patients in treatment planning conferences. Treatment planning conferences are a time for patients and their respective staff team to discuss medication regimen, rehabilitative groups and other aspects of current treatment plans. This was also a time to discuss potential for patient discharge. It was interesting to see the administrative work that goes into patient discharge, including orchestrating living arrangements, services, and conditions for release. A patient’s treatment planning team is made up of the head of the treatment team, a clinical psychologist, social workers, a nurse coordinator, and anyone else who may be involved in the patient care. As a student, it was extremely fascinating to observe multiple disciplines in the mental health profession playing into a patient’s treatment plan. I have worked with my supervisor, Dr. Jason Stout, to cultivate my ability to conceptualize diagnoses, deliberate on patient cases, and understand treatment strategies. These aspect of placement at Western State Hospital makes for a well-rounded experience encompassing critical thinking and analysis on treatment approaches for psychiatric cases.

A large part of my experience has been observing, assisting, and facilitating the many psychosocial rehabilitation groups Western State Hospital offers to patients. I assist with a symptom/stress management group called Interpersonal Coping Skills. The objective of this group is to cultivate ability to cope with stressors, situations, and people. Topics covered in this group range from communication techniques to the importance of gratitude. I had the
opportunity to design my own series of lessons regarding working with individuals who have personality traits that make it difficult to engage in cooperation. The characteristics discussed in the lessons were based on the ‘Big Five’ personality traits. I was excited to implement my knowledge of psychology into context. One strong advantage of a placement at Western State Hospital was the freedom to get creative and take groups in a direction that was of personal interest to me. Another group I took part in a trauma-specific group called Seeking Safety. This group tailors its lessons to individuals who have experienced trauma and partake in some sort of risk behavior, such as substance abuse, aggression, or unsafe sex. Unlike Interpersonal Coping Skills, Seeking Safety is an empirically-supported intervention tactic which utilizes pre-designed lessons to guide patients away from negative behaviors. In this group, I led lessons distinguishing constructive and destructive behavior, and the harms of a static recovery. It was very interesting to see different layouts and objectives for rehabilitative groups. I was also grateful for this experience because it improved my public speaking. This site is advantageous for anyone who would like the chance to work on personal goals such as presentation skills.

This experience has been very relevant to my career goals. As someone interested in pursuing Clinical Psychology, working with psychiatric disorders gave me the opportunity to apply information from classes like Personality Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, and many others. Western State Hospital also allowed me to observe the inner workings of an inpatient facility, and see the differences between admissions and extended care. With this information, I am able to discern my main populations of interest. This is a very valuable experience for anyone who is interested in exploring the mental health profession.

My experience at Western State Hospital has been extremely positive and well-rounded, but this does not mean I came into the site without reservations. Before my first week, many of my worries came from not knowing what to expect from a placement in a psychiatric facility. Although I was not nervous about interacting with patients in a psychiatric hospital, my first few days reassured me that I was safe in this facility. Also, I did not know how an undergraduate student would be received by patients and staff alike. However, much of my anxieties were reduced after the first day. While I was new to this site, Western State Hospital has welcomed many students before. As a result, staff had plenty of groups, activities, and other suggestions for me to engage in while I was determining how I wanted to individualize my experience. My first day jitters did not overwhelm me or last very long. I immediately felt comfortable at Western State Hospital. While the site had numerous advantages, the distance between James Madison University and Western State Hospital was not ideal. Located in Staunton, Virginia, Western State Hospital is about a thirty minute drive, resulting in an hour round trip commute for one day’s work. While I did not like the commute, the trip is a straight drive down Route 81 and could not be easier. One other significant thing to note is that most of the activities, including groups and treatment planning conferences, happen between 9:00 am and 3:00pm. This semester I had a morning class and left immediately afterwards for my placement. In hindsight, I would have adjusted my schedule so I could dedicate the whole day to Western State Hospital, especially because the commute makes it hard to catch up on hours if need be.

Ultimately, Western State Hospital has allowed me to apply my classroom knowledge and flourish as an aspiring clinician. My interactions with mental health professions, as well as patients, have afforded me the confidence to continue in this field with vigor and excitement.
Spring 2016 – Mikala Morrow

At Western State hospital, we strive to provide individualized care to persons with a mental illness. We have a strong focus on recovery and a strong emphasis on hope. We work towards recovery through a number of ways. One of the biggest methods we use is through therapy, both group and individual. The group therapies offered go over concepts that encourage mental health and how to live in the community with a mental illness. The staff also offer individual therapy. This is usually with patients who request individual therapy. They discuss more specific problems and how they can be resolved out in the community.

The therapy we offered was a great opportunity for me to get involved. The mental health workers were extremely inviting and encouraged my input. I really enjoyed the group therapy experience because it was discussion based. Each therapy topic was extremely relevant to mental health and was also relevant to each of the patients in the group because it was recommended by the treatment team. Therapy was my primary way to get involved but I was also given the opportunity to shadow and be exposed to almost everything that my supervisor was exposed to. I truly felt that I was a fellow employee and was given opportunities to observe something new every day. I was able to observe treatment planning conferences where I watched the treatment team work with their prospective patient. The team was there to listen to the patient and provide the assistance the patient wanted. They spoke to the patient about their recovery rate and whether or not discharge from the hospital would be a possible option.

I also attended outings with the patients. The patients with the higher levels of freedom were able to go off grounds to different areas. I went bowling with the patients and also had the opportunity to go with the patients to a park. This is where I was truly exposed to the stigma surrounding mental illness. Many families were protective over their children and chose to stay farther away from us. Western State really gave me a lot of freedom to explore a clinical hospital setting. I had discussions with patients and eventually formed great relationships with them. Western State helped me grow professionally as well as I grew to know the faculty and eventually work with them on some things as I became more independent. I am truly thankful for the opportunity to be so independent and the opportunity to take initiative. I was able to take initiative with relationships with patients and initiative in my input whether in therapy groups or in TPCs. I felt that my opinion was respected and honored.

Independence was just one of the advantages of my site. This was one of the most obvious advantages. I was given a full range of duties and freedom. Something else that I appreciated from Western State was the respect I was given from the other employees. As a student, I do not think we always know how we will be perceived. Before I began at Western, I had the impression that I would have to earn respect based on my knowledge
and abilities. This did not hold true at Western State. Throughout my first day at Western State, I felt respected by all. I did not have to earn a place; I was given a place. The staff were there as a resource for me. I asked them endless questions and spoke with them on numerous topics. Each time, they welcomed my conversation and took my questions seriously. Another advantage was working with the patients. The patients were also extremely respectful. I also had the impression that some patients would try to take advantage of me as a student. I thought they would try to convince me to let them break hospital rules. This impression was also entirely wrong. I made wonderful relationships with the patients. I spent a lot of my time getting to know them and just spending time with them. We often had long conversations and I really felt respected by them. I enjoyed working with this population, they truly are wonderful people.

I was very anxious going into my practicum experience. I felt that I would not be able to do it or do it well. I had the idea that I would have to know everything as soon as I walked in the doors. I felt I would have to be able to handle any situation by the first day. This was not true. All staff and patients were extremely helpful in my experience and helped me grow as a student and as a professional.

The only limitation I had was myself. Since I was anxious going in and was not as confident as I could have been, I limited myself. I did not meet as many patients as I feel I could have because I did not feel confident enough to strike up a conversation with a quiet patient. This is the only limitation I felt throughout my time at Western but I am thankful for the awareness of this and am looking forward to gaining more confidence in myself.

At this site, I learned what it meant to be an empathetic clinician. By the end of my time at Western, I looked at each patient as an individual person and did not first look at them as a mental patient. I appreciated their whole identity and not just the part of them that got them into the hospital. I felt this really helped my perception of the world and my perception of those in need of health services. I began to appreciate the individuality of each person. This will help in my profession as a therapist for many reasons. When I am helping my clients, I need to look at them with empathy and with the perception that they are an individual. They are not a project that needs to be fixed nor is their identity completed by the problems they are going through.

I also learned how to work in a team. I learned this from observing the 1Pine treatment team work together. They stayed in constant communication regarding each patient. They also had the ability to confront one another when they felt someone was not making the best choice. Stemming from this however, I admired their ability to be patient with each other as well. They truly respected each other and worked very well together. This in turn, really helped the patients have a positive time in their ward. This will really impact my ability to receive constructive criticism in grad school as well as in my profession. I really admired how they worked as a team and this inspired me to strive for that cohesiveness in my next team experience.
Western State has been a wonderful experience. I have grown exponentially as a woman as well as a student. I feel much more confident to enter a workplace and have just as much respect as the male I am working beside. I also feel very comfortable in working with male patients. The staff as Western State were warm and welcomed any questions I had. They went further than just answering them but also offered explanations as well. I am so glad I was able to take advantage of this opportunity.

**Spring 2016 – Shannon Malloy**

At Western State Psychiatric Hospital I had the incredible opportunity to work in the extended care ward under the guidance of Dr. Jason Stout. Western State’s mission is to provide individualized treatment in a recovery-focused environment. The extended care ward itself caters to patients who have been a part of the hospital system for 45 days or more. During my tenure at the site I had the chance to engage in a variety of experiences working with all levels of staff and I could not have been more pleased with my overall experience.

The large majority of my time was spent shadowing the facilitators of different psychosocial rehabilitation groups. Western State offers a plethora of different groups to allow each patient to find a group schedule that interests and benefits them every day of the week. Groups differ in their therapeutic value with some providing more direct utility for patients while others serve as a recreational outlets. As an intern I was afforded the opportunity to choose the groups that I wanted to be engaged in as well. During the semester I attempted to try as many different groups as possible in order to get a greater sense of the programs provided by the hospital.

One of my favorite groups, and the one that I spent the largest amount of time over the fifteen weeks was the Mindfulness Group. This group attempts to teach patients the powers of observation, description, and participation in the present moment of their daily lives. The objectives of the course are to cultivate self-awareness and compassion (both for the self and others) and to learn emotional regulation. While I was a part of this group I was awarded the chance to lead the group which I incorporated into my contribution project.

For the session that I led patients had the opportunity to engage in a guided chocolate meditation. The patients focused on the present moment and learned the benefits of mindful eating as they engaged in their snack with all five senses. At the conclusion of the meditation we discussed an article I had brought about five ways to bring mindfulness into daily life. The patients discovered easy ways that they could bring mindfulness to their daily routine in order to practice mindfulness outside of group. I also created a mindfulness journal that included guided meditations, art activities and music that they could use to practice their skills of observation, description and participation.
I participated in many other groups besides the Mindfulness group. These ranged from groups such as therapeutic laughter, to Seeking Safety (a trauma recovery group), to WRAP (wellness recovery action planning), to a community outing group (where patients had the opportunity to go bowling). There seems to be a group for every sort of interest that a patient (and future interns) could hope to have. Additionally, group leaders try to alter the content and structure of their groups to fit the needs of the current patients of the group emphasizing the hospitals mission of individualized treatment.

Besides shadowing I was able to attend conferences, administrative meetings and lectures held at the hospitals. Treatment planning conferences were one of my favorite aspects of working in a hospital atmosphere. The treatments teams (psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, and social workers) for each ward are required to meet with a patient once a month to ascertain the patients’ current health, question the patient as to any changes in their care they feel are needed, and in some cases to determine plans for discharge. It is during this period that patients really get to voice their concerns and I truly appreciated the level of focus and concern that was given to each patient during these meetings.

I only had the opportunity to join one behavioral management conference as these meetings are reserved for high-risk patients. This meeting involves the higher-ups of the hospital along with the treatment team of that ward. It seems the goal is to ascertain if any changes (beyond the normal level) can be made in order to lower the violence or aggression exhibited by these patients. Another meeting that was quite enlightening about the functioning of a state hospital is the weekly levels meeting. During this meeting the treatment team determines if any patient on their ward needs to have their level changed. Hospital levels determine the amount of freedom and privilege that patients have in where they can go in the hospital and when they can be there. Having a level raised or dropped is determined by the behavior of each patient relative to their individual levels of functioning.

Finally, during my time as an intern at Western State I attended multiple different Grand Rounds lectures. These lectures act as professional development opportunities for the staff and were actually one of the highlights of my time at the hospital. Speakers come from other hospitals, agencies, and community programs to present on different topics. I attended programs on physician burnout, ethical responsibilities during active shootings, and even one on medical toxicology. I really enjoyed the community of learning and the desire for edification that was generated within all the staff members that attended these lectures.

There are many obvious advantages to being an intern at this site. The level of direct interaction that comes with being an intern cannot be undervalued. The high expectations of the treatment team pushes you out of your comfort zone and mandates that you learn how to interact effectively with this population. I think perhaps the only
downside (and this may be personal preference) is the vast array of programs offered. Wanting to get involved in each group makes connecting with patients more difficult as an intern. And in some cases it may be overwhelming to try and get a sense of the dynamics of each group to find one where you can beneficial. However, once you find your niche I think even this “disadvantage” disappears.

My placement at this site was the driving force in my graduate study decision. I will be entering into a doctoral level program intent on studying clinical psychology. Prior to my internship I was on the path to earn my masters in counseling to become a licensed professional counselor. However, after working with the seriously mentally ill population I couldn’t see myself doing anything but clinical psychology. Before being an intern as Western State I had shied away from the more extreme abnormal part of psychology, instead wanting to focus on the more “mundane” issues of human existence. However, after working with patients with diagnoses from schizophrenia, to borderline personality disorder, to bipolar disorder I realized how little difference there is between the “normal” and the “abnormal” in psychology. Although all of the textbooks we’ve read as psychology students say the same thing (that a person isn’t their mental illness) it wasn’t until I connected with patients on a personal level, in this environment, that I realized the depth of that truth. And I sincerely believe that by working with this population I will carry that sentiment with me as I become a clinical psychologist.
Western State Hospital is a psychiatric hospital that provides a variety of recovery services for mentally ill patients. Their mission statement is to "provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment". My semester at the facility was spent in a variety of ways. I worked on a mainly forensics admission unit with Dr. Gallagher which allowed me to experience not only mental health services but how they also interacted with the legal system. This interaction is never something that I had considered; however it is something that is very prominent in mental health and it was a great opportunity to learn more about it. I also worked with my supervisor by attending patient treatment team meetings. Here I was able to observe single patient meetings and the interactions between the psychiatrists, psychologist, and social workers and how they worked with the patients. Also during these meetings I had the opportunity to sit in on the staffing of new patients. During these staffings I helped my supervisor with initial psychological assessment and practice writing mental status exams on these patients. I was also able to sit in on different groups throughout the week including those catered towards the long-term patients and new admission patients in all parts of the hospital.

I had the opportunity to visit groups for lower functioning patients as well. I was able to regularly attend some of these groups as well as had the freedom of trying new ones throughout the week to see the different approach presented in each. One of the main things I focused on was working one on one with patients to help restore competency in the court system. I met with several patients on the days that I was at WSH and helped them to understand the court system process as well as comprehend their own legal charges. I also had the opportunity to be able to work with the neuropsychologist and observe neuropsych testing on a patient. I was also able to read neuropsych assessments on several patients that I was working with. On multiple days I was at WSH I was also able to sit in on staff meetings including a psychodynamic group with several psychologists throughout the hospital as well as sit in on educational Grand Rounds meeting that is available to all of the hospital staff. Overall I was able to get a taste of everything that Western State had to offer as well as focusing on several services that I thought were particularly interesting.
I really enjoyed my time working at Western State and it has been one of the best opportunities I have had during my college experience. I would have to say that having my placement at Western State definitely had many more advantages than it did disadvantages. Working in a strictly mental health hospital was an interesting experience in itself. Being able to be around the patients at all times allowed me to have a very unique experience. I was able to see a variety of interactions including how patients interacted with each other as well as how they interacted with staff. Nothing really fazes you after experiencing some of the things at Western State. All of the staff were friendly and were always willing to help me out when needed and help me experience a variety of things. They allowed me to have the best experience at WSH. I was, at first, shocked at how much they trust you with patient information, however it made the experience even more worthwhile. As the semester continued the 30 minute drive to Staunton didn't seem as long.

I liked being able to work one on one with patients and get to know them and their illness. Attending and helping out with groups was something that I also enjoyed because I was able to interact with patients as well as get guidance from some of the other staff members. I also enjoyed being able to sit in on patient meetings with the treatment team and see how that aspect of patient care worked. Some of the things that you are able to do are limited, especially in the hospital, because you are an undergrad student, but that is probably the nature of most sites. I think overall this experience has helped me feel more comfortable working with the mentally ill population. Along with being a psychology major I am also pre-Physician Assistant and had been considering becoming a mental health PA. After this experience I have solidified that mental health is the field I want to work in.
Dr. Showalter – Civil (Short-Term) Ward

*Spring 2017 – Brooke Bowie*

Western State Hospital is a state-run psychiatric hospital located in Staunton, Virginia which was founded in 1828. The mission statement of the hospital reads “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment” and during my time there, they upheld this in every aspect. Within the hospital, there are acute, long-term, and forensic wards in order to be able to serve any type of patient successfully. The new location for the hospital, which has only been used for three years now, is absolutely beautiful and gives off a vibe of success and treatment that is hard to explain without walking through the door and seeing it for yourself.

My supervisor, Dr. Kenneth Showalter, is a psychologist who had worked at Western State for twenty-four years. After my experience, I can firmly say that this man is an amazing role model and I was lucky enough to be able to observe, learn, and grow from his advice and willingness to help me during my time there. An unusual coincidence that happened during my placement was that my last day actually ended up being Dr. Showalter’s last day as well. He was able to take on a new job opportunity which showed me that it’s never too late to take new chances, even if you’re comfortable where you are. I am so grateful I was able to have the chance to work with Dr. Showalter before he left, it was the best experience I could have ever asked for.

At Western State, I was a part of a treatment team on an acute ward. The team consisted of a psychiatrist, psychologist (my supervisor), and a social worker. Within each ward there were multiple treatment teams in order to ensure that each patient was given enough time and opportunity to build up rapport with the team during their stay. While I was a member of the team, I was able to sit in on new admissions, progress rounds with the patients that were held each week, and observe how each role of the staff impacted the treatment for the patient. During each meeting with the patient, I was responsible for writing mental status exams and taking notes which provided information about the patient’s state of mind at the current moment, which I would then present to my supervisor at the end of the team meeting. This was the best skill that I was able to develop during my time at the hospital since it is something that I know will one day be a part of my professional duties that I hadn’t previously had the opportunity to explore.
In addition to team meetings, I was also able to attend group therapy sessions that took place four times a day. Some examples of these groups include arts and crafts, discussion, seeking safety for substances and risky behavior, nursing education, and many, many more. These groups were assigned by the patient’s psychologist for what would best fit their needs in order to promote treatment for the patient. I was also able to create my own group on visual journaling and present it to patient’s multiple times which gave me an incredible opportunity to build my presentation skills in a setting with mentally ill patients.

The best part of my experience at Western State was that I was able to meet one on one with my regular patients I was assigned to. I was able to build up rapport with the patients, learn from their experiences, and also understand how they perceive treatment from their viewpoint. Not only were the patients welcoming to working with me, but they also felt comfortable enough to tell me about their illnesses and their life experiences that allowed me to gain more insight of what impacts the development of illnesses and how they affect the person’s everyday life. Seeing the illness in person is much different than reading about it in a textbook and hit me harder than I had expected it to.

Not only was I able to have the inpatient hospital experience, but my supervisor also has a private practice centered around forensic psychology that I was able to partake in as well. Being able to see how he conducted both competency to stand trial and sanity evaluations was very eye-opening to the whole process and reaffirmed that forensic psychology is a specialty I want to be involved in. I was able to see what the notetaking processes and evaluation steps were in cases like this in comparison to what we were doing in the hospital on a daily basis.

One thing that I really enjoyed about my experience included the relationships I was able to build. Not only with the patients, but also with the staff at the hospital, I developed great relationships that I am very thankful for. The environment was extremely welcoming and comfortable and because of this I knew that the staff would have my back in any given situation or if I ever had a question or concern. After my time in this hospital setting, I can say that there is a very good possibility that this is what I want my future to look like. Before this placement, I was still pretty lost about my career goals, besides the fact that I wanted to one day be a psychologist, I didn’t know where else I was headed. After diving in to this experience, I can understand the operations of a psychiatric hospital and what the responsibilities were for different members of the staff.

Some of the best skills that I developed during my placement were the growth of my independence and confidence. I was given the responsibility and guidance necessary to learn, but I was also given the space to grow and do things without my hand being held the whole way. My independence and confidence used to both lack since doing tasks I wasn’t familiar with wasn’t always something that I felt comfortable doing without someone being there to doublecheck I wasn’t doing something wrong. What was different here in this setting was how at home I felt which allowed me to believe in my abilities and take care of my duties on my own.

Overall, this was by far the best experience I have ever had in regard to my education and job outlook. The skills and relationships that I will take away from this placement are ones that I know will build up my confidence and abilities to work in such
a demanding field. The only struggle of being in a setting like this is the emotional drain this can take on you that tends to lead to high burnout rates. After seeing the operations in action, I can fully understand why this is. Seeing patients come in and out of the hospital, meeting with them and listening to their life stories and struggles, and trying to give them the best treatment possible for them to live out in the community can eventually take its toll. Being able to see this firsthand would help anyone going into the profession to have a small amount of insight to what their future might hold.

Spring 2016 – Grace Johnson

My placement was at Western State Hospital, a state psychiatric hospital located in Staunton, Virginia, that is operated by the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. The hospital’s mission is “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment.” In first exploring their site, their philosophy really stood out to me, which begins as, “We believe in the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of the individual, and their potential to participate in the development of treatment.” In my view, patient empowerment, and the maintenance of their dignity and worth despite their mental illness, is vital to any successful therapeutic environment. Individuals served at WSH primarily include those that suffer from serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. These individuals also often have comorbid diagnoses like substance-use and personality disorders. Patients receive treatment from an interdisciplinary treatment team, which includes a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, registered nurse, and often times students. The patients are active in helping the treatment team create an individualized treatment plan, as well as participating in psycho-social rehabilitation groups. Patients meet with the treatment team weekly to discuss where they are in their recovery process, make any medication adjustment, and express their concerns, until they are ultimately ready for discharge.

The opportunities afforded to me at Western State Hospital were vast, and I was given much more responsibility than I had anticipated. My placement was in the short-term civil unit on ward 2-Oak. In this type of ward, there are multiple admissions weekly and patients are in and out in a few months typically, either discharged from the hospital or committed to a long-term ward at Western State. I shadowed Dr. Kenneth Showalter, the treatment team’s licensed clinical psychologist, who has been a wonderful mentor, teacher, and supporter. He placed me in very challenging opportunities that I feel have greatly furthered me as a psychology student. Each day at my site would begin with a morning report, which I would attend. Here, the nurse would present report on each patient to the treatment team, which gave us information about how the patients had been doing the previous day or weekend. After report, I would either stay with the treatment team for “staffings” or go to groups. Staffings are intake interviews conducted by the treatment team that are done when there are newly admitted patients. It was my job to take notes and then give a verbal report on the intake to Dr. Showalter. When I wasn’t at a staffing, I would attend morning and afternoon groups. Dr. Showalter made sure I got
exposure to each group offered to our ward’s patients. Some of my favorites included Dialectal Behavior Therapy, Problem Solving, and Community Life Skills. During these groups, I would help the group leaders with any facilitation needs that they had, participate with the patients, and offer any input that I thought might be helpful. Eventually, I got to co-lead Problem Solving. This involved me creating a lesson plan for the group, implementing it, and facilitating the activity and discussion. In addition to groups, I got to meet one-on-one with patients that my supervisor assigned to me. This was one of my favorite parts of my placement. The meetings with patients could take many forms including private conversations in an interview room, or simply spending time together on the ward playing cards or catching up. I was so surprised that I actually felt like I was making an impact on many of the patients I met with, just by listening to their struggles, and offering them support during this difficult time in their lives. However, since these patients are just beginning to receive treatment, almost all of them are severely psychotic, showing strong symptomology, making it one of the most challenging parts of my day. Although it was challenging, it taught me how to adequately communicate with individuals with serious mental illnesses.

One of the best parts of my experience, which was unique to my supervisor, was exposure to forensic psychology. Dr. Showalter has a private forensic practice, and he gave me the option of working with him in this to obtain some of my hours. His practice involves evaluating defendants for competency to stand trial, mental status at the time of the offense, and NGRI acquittedee assessments, providing expert opinions regarding these evaluations, and sometimes testifying in court. We would travel to jails, outpatient centers, and other state inpatient hospitals to evaluate the defendants. Once, I even attended court with Dr. Showalter and watched him testify. This was a fascinating experience and I took every opportunity to go on as many evaluations as I could. At first, I would attend the evaluations and take notes that my supervisor would use to help write his reports. Eventually, after practicing, Dr. Showalter actually allowed me to conduct a large portion of the competency evaluations. This was easily the most exciting part of my experience. Additionally, I had the responsibility of writing up many of the official reports regarding these evaluations that are sent to the judges and lawyers. The skills and experience I gained in conducting interviews and report writing are invaluable, especially at this early stage in my training.

I cannot express enough my positive view of Western State as a hospital, and my appreciation for the experience I had there. I believe Western State is an effective and necessary mental health facility that really works to live by its mission and philosophy. Besides the help and services it provides to its patients, it’s a welcoming professional environment, with talented staff and team members that are happy to be doing the work that they do. The treatment team members and other staff deal with a very sick population, and receive the patients that outpatient facilities and private hospitals cannot handle, but they still maintain the focus of getting these patients back to a standard of wellness. When some of these patients are too ill to ever truly achieve discharge or recovery, Western State provides a safe place, comfort, and a purpose to people that suffer with something more difficult than most of our society could ever imagine. It is truly a place I would want to work one day. I’m so grateful for all I have learned at my
site, including how to work with professionals in the field, how to interact and help patients with serious mental illnesses, how to speak with a clinical vocabulary, how to facilitate a therapeutic group, how to write a forensic report, and how to conduct a forensic interview. My time at Western State affirmed to me that I want to be a clinical psychologist for people with serious mental illnesses. Getting to see what it would be like to work at a place like Western State is what is going to motivate me throughout graduate school and internship in these next five years of my future. I cannot sum up my field placement experience at Western State Hospital in any way other than recognizing it as not only one of the most impactful experiences of my college career, but of my life so far.

Dr. Law— Short-Term Ward (2 Hickory)

Spring 2017 – Meg Gravely

The mission of Western State Hospital is “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment”. WSH is a public, in-patient psychiatric hospital for adults in the state of Virginia. There are approximately 260 beds, spread over 9 Units, at WSH and the hospital receives a little under 5,000 admissions per year on average. The Units are divided by type of care administered, with long-term care, acute care, and forensic wards available to patients based upon their needs. A wide variety of diagnoses and circumstances are treated/addressed at WSH and each patient seems to bring an entirely unique presentation to the hospital.

This semester I worked on 2 Hickory Unit, an acute care ward, with Mary Kate Law, Ph.D. The purpose of an acute care ward in a psychiatric hospital is to provide short-term, crisis-centered care to individuals experiencing severe episodes or psychiatric emergencies. Often times, individuals are admitted to the hospital experiencing their first episode of mental illness, and many others seem to be “regulars”, cycling in and out of psychiatric hospitals for many years. On 2 Hickory Unit, there are approximately 30 beds, which mostly stay filled, and although length of stay varies widely (from less than 48 hours to many months), the average stay is one month.

Throughout my semester spent at WSH, I had the opportunity to experience far more than I ever anticipated in an intern position. I was able to observe and actively participate in many levels of care, from morning nursing reports to Treatment Planning Committee meetings (during which I had the chance to interact with several different clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, psychopharmacologists, nurses, and of course, with patients). In addition, I had the opportunity to participate in, co-facilitate, and even facilitate group therapies, which varied in nature from recreational to psychoeducational, and also observe individualized one-on-one therapy with my supervisor and patients, and even work with several patients independently. Another major skill I was able to develop throughout my field placement semester was that of clinical writing. I consistently had opportunities to write summaries of weekly Treatment Planning Committee meetings and mental status examinations of new admissions for
hospital records. Through this opportunity, I learned a great deal about clinical language and writing that I could not have otherwise hoped to develop in a classroom setting.

In addition, I also had several opportunities throughout the semester to experience extremely valuable aspects of clinical psychology and psychiatric in-patient care that were outside of my ordinary experiences at WSH. For example, this semester, I had the opportunity to travel with my supervisor, Dr. Law, to Central State Hospital in Petersburg to conduct a forensic evaluation. CSH is a maximum-security forensic facility (which is a vastly different environment than Western State, and especially 2 Hickory), and interview an NGRI patient in order to evaluate competency and safety. I was able to observe and assist in the interview and then to read my supervisor’s evaluation for the state once it was completed, giving me a glimpse into the world of forensic psychology to add onto my view of acute care. I also had the chance to participate in an off-grounds group therapy with many patients from my unit, going to a nearby regional park with a number of high-privilege level patients. Each of these experiences served to expand my view of the field of clinical psychology and the potential roles of a professional in a similar setting to WSH, and only enhanced my overall learning experience this semester.

I certainly understand the stigma that surrounds the population with which I worked at Western State, but I cannot stress enough how consistently patients disproved this stereotype to me—I worked with a number of very ill and very difficult patients, and although many circumstances certainly placed me outside of my comfort zone, I never felt remotely unsafe or seriously uncomfortable at WSH. In addition, Although Western State Hospital is about a 30-minute drive from JMU campus, I did not have any problems with making this commute for my field placement. In terms of other potential “disadvantages” when considering a placement at Western State, I believe it is also important to consider the basic implications of working on an acute care unit—many patients are not committed to the hospital long enough to build rapport with or even to receive adequate care, many are extremely challenging and symptomatic (often times it’s the “sickest of the sick” that end up in acute care of a psychiatric hospital), and many seem to remain acute for long periods of time—never getting better for long enough periods of time to hope for discharge, or even transfer. These are difficult circumstances to work in, but any individual with an interest in clinical psychology and in-patient care will learn a great deal from experiencing these challenges, and although they can be exhausting, they will surely result in immense growth for a field placement student.

Prior to my field placement experience, I had the chance to intern in a private psychiatric hospital for children in New Kent, VA. Through this experience, I had determined that my passion lay in the in-patient, high-risk population that I was able to work with both that summer and this past semester at WSH. When I was lucky enough to be offered a field placement at Western State Hospital, I chose this site in order to gain experience in the in-patient setting with an entirely new population (adults). My desire to continue my education and work in this type of setting increased ten-fold during my field placement at Western State, and I felt that throughout my experience I gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills—an increase in my understanding of hospital operations, a far deeper understanding of psychiatric diagnoses, the ability to build rapport and increase comfort in interactions with individuals with serious mental
illnesses (SMI), group therapy leadership, and most importantly, an entirely new sense of flexibility, patience and acceptance. 

I could not have possibly chosen, or even imagined, a better supervisor than Dr. Mary Kate Law. She consistently demonstrated unwavering faith in me, challenged me to learn and experience more each day, and made me feel comfortable, safe and valuable throughout the semester. Western State Hospital truly embodies the spirit of a teaching hospital—not only did I learn a great deal all semester from Dr. Law, but also from each and every member of staff I had the privilege of encountering, and from others students as well (both in my field placement program and from other schools and programs). Every member of the interdisciplinary team on 2 Hickory welcomed me warmly, always happy to go out of their way to teach me something new, engage me in an experience, give me advice on my future in the field, or just to ask me about my experience at WSH, and because of these people I had the privilege of working with and the experiences they offered me, I had the greatest learning experience of my undergraduate career at Western State Hospital this past semester.

Spring 2016 - Lauren Alexa Gambrill

I was lucky enough to get one of my top choices and had my Psychology Field Placement experience at Western State Hospital (WSH). To understand what you have to look forward to at this placement it is important to understand their mission statement: “Mission: To provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment” (taken from their website: http://www.wsh.dbhds.virginia.gov/).

The population treated in this Mental Health Hospital is primarily made up of individuals dealing with symptoms or disorders classified under the umbrella term serious mental illness (SMI) and those with complex or co-occurring substance abuse disorders. Their commitment to quality care extends, as a State funded institution, to the citizens of the commonwealth of Virginia. They utilize interdisciplinary treatment teams to address patient needs and work to create an “integrated and collaborative service system(s) which involves linkage with consumers, families and community health care providers” (taken from their website).

My placement in particular was primarily within what is called a “short-term ward”, that unit being 2 Hickory Hall, under the truly superb supervision of Dr. Mary-Kate Law. The difference in these types of units (as opposed to “long-term”, or “forensic”) is that they are typically the first to see the patients after admissions is done, and can have a few more surprises as they attempt to treat and stabilize patients to make more informed decisions about what should happen next. The length of stay is varied for each patient on this ward and can range from a couple weeks to a few months, depending on a range of details needed for discharge or relocation.
When I started out was nice to learn ward rules, and observe protocols at work and daily functioning on the unit. My supervisor scaffolded safe interactions with patients on the Ward, to learn from them about their own experiences. She had me involved in planning and implementing approved interventions and discussion for planning and educating patients about treatment plans and about their specific diagnoses and presentation of symptomology.

Along with various worksheets and safety plans I was able to attend groups covering an array of topics and skills. Eventually I was able to design, lead, and co-lead groups for Music and Coping, Recovery Wisdom, and Outing Groups to name a few. I was also able to refine and put into practice a great deal of the terminology learned in classes by assisting in paperwork for patient staffing’s and mental health status notes.

My time at WSH has been one of the most beneficial and influential opportunities I have ever experienced and helped me grow both personally and professionally. It is impossible to write the warm welcome I received that carried on, and the awe at the proficiency of the staff that formed into the staunch admiration I hold for the entire WSH family. Though they are all people with busy lives outside the hospital walls it was clear that they believe in the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual patient who comes through their doors. Using protocols in place to maximize their patients’ potential to participate in the development of treatment and emphasize achieving the individuals highest, safest, and most sustainable level of functioning.

I cannot truly pinpoint any ‘negative’ limitations or disadvantages from my time at WSH, but I do caution students that are considering this placement that having your own transportation and funds for gas is preferable and certainly something to consider before accepting the position.

For my own personal vocational path I was able to reassert where my interests are directed. In my time at JMU I was able to complete both a BS in Psychology and a Bachelor’s in Social Work (BSW), and was able to be in placements for both degree tracks. My time at WSH was invaluable as it truly solidified the fact that I am more personally inclined and academically interested in pursuing more education in clinical psychology.

Last word of advice from someone who spent several wonderful months learning and helping at WSH, you may hear rumors of unpleasant stories about what has gone on in the past, don’t let these deter you if you want experience with fantastic in-patient clinical settings. If you get the interview go and gage how comfortable you are. It may not be the place for everyone, but no one I’ve come across has been anything less than ecstatic with all they got to experience and a touch melancholy to see it end.
Dr. McLain – Admissions (2 Hickory)

Spring 2016 – Natalie Hicks

Western State Hospital is a state-funded psychiatric hospital located in Staunton, Virginia; it serves individuals ages 18-65 who have severe and debilitating mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, and personality disorders. The mission statement of Western State is “To provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment”. Western State provides this treatment in a variety of ways, including psychotropic medication, group therapy, and recreational therapy. There are three types of unit on the hospital: forensic, long-term, and admissions. Each unit has a treatment team composed of 1-2 psychologists, 1-2 psychiatrists, 1-2 social workers, one head nurse/nursing coordinator, and several registered nurses (RN), licensed practitioner nurses, and professional nursing assistants (PNA). I did my Field Placement on one of the admissions units, 2 Hickory, under the supervision of clinical psychologist Dr. Carol McLain.

Working with and learning from Dr. McLain has easily been one of the greatest experiences I’ve had during my time at JMU. The first task I would have each morning was to go to morning staff meetings- these were a nice way to see how the staff interact with each other, and taught me that you can have a sense of humor and joke with your colleagues while being professional. These meetings would then often transition into treatment planning conferences (TPC meetings) in which patients meet individually with their treatment team (psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, and sometimes a nurse or the OT would also sit in). In these meetings, the patient discusses how treatment is going for him/her, changes made be made to medications or groups, and any other comments, questions, or concerns are brought up. I also got to sit in on staffing meetings for new patients in which the treatment team meets with a newly admitted patient to go over his or her medical and mental health history, job, education, and family history, and what brought him or her to Western State at the time. Initial medications and groups are also prescribed/assigned, and a treatment plan involving goals is designed by the team with input from the patient. In each of these types of meeting (but especially staffings), I
learned how to take concise notes and fill out mental status checklists, which I then used to help Dr. McLain write her official notes following the meeting.

As Dr. McLain’s student, I was able to attend the groups she leads. On Wednesdays, Dr. McLain co-leads Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) with Dr. Curry-El, another psychologist. I had the opportunity to observe and participate in this group as a student, but I never co-led or led a lesson. On Fridays, Dr. McLain and Dr. Law lead Music, Mood, and Coping and Recovery Wisdom. I did have the chance to co-lead Music, Mood, and Coping with Dr. McLain and with Lauren-Alexa, a fellow JMU psychology student, and I led alone on coping with anxiety through music towards the end of the semester. I also co-led Recovery Wisdom with Lauren Alexa, and individually gave a class on stigma as part of my contribution project.

Another opportunity/responsibility I had was to meet patients either with Dr. McLain or by myself, though more often than not, I went with Dr. McLain, as safety was often an issue on the unit. Dr. McLain likes to meet with her patients outside of TPC meetings to check in with them in a more personal and private way because she wants to give the patients a chance to speak up more about treatment- it can sometimes be nerve-wracking for patients to talk freely in TPC meetings with so many people. Doing this also helps Dr. McLain to develop rapport, and gave me the chance to meet patients I may not have otherwise. Going to groups and meetings and seeing patients made up most of time at Western State; however, I did get to do a few other things here and there. Dr. McLain arranged for me to visit other groups, such as an art group, Seeking Safety, and Discovery group. The art and Discovery groups are more recreational, unlike the groups Dr. McLain leads, so it was fun to see groups that were geared more towards letting the patients do things that interest them. I also got to do one-on-one behavioral observation for a patient who has difficulty following rules and staying on-task. I was given a list of appropriate/target behaviors, as well as inappropriate behaviors, for the patient, and went to groups with her to monitor and take note of her actions.

In my opinion, Western State is a great Field Placement site for anyone interested in clinical or forensic psychology. Most of the experiences I had were hands-on, meeting with patients and working with the multidisciplinary treatment team. This was a great learning opportunity to have, as most healthcare and forensic settings involve a lot of team work and keeping in contact with people in other professions; I thought it was good to see this firsthand and notice how the different disciplines interact. All of the staff that I worked with are very friendly and knowledgeable, and have a lot to teach any student interested in the field. Dr. McLain in particular has a lot of knowledge to offer- she has been at Western State since she did her doctoral residency there in 1989. She was always able to answer my questions, and often went above and beyond to find an answer for me if she couldn’t immediately come up with one herself (for instance, she contacted colleagues a few times to get answers to some of my questions). We also had an excellent mentor-mentee/teacher-student kind of relationship- Dr. McLain is very nurturing, offers feedback in a constructive way, and teaches by example. She allowed me to get
comfortable at Western State before increasingly getting me out of my comfort zone; this helped me to develop more self-confidence.

The one overarching “disadvantage” to doing a Field Placement at Western State is that it is about half an hour from JMU; however, the drive is very straightforward, and I never hit heavy traffic coming or going. Another possible downside is that a student may have to arrive to Western State “early” (by student standards); I usually got there around 8:30 in the morning, but this wasn’t much of a problem for me. On the admissions unit in particular, the only disadvantage I noticed was the difficulty (and sometimes impossibility) of developing rapport with patients. Given the nature of an admissions unit, patients are often not there for very long—about a month and a half at most. Only two patients out of about 28 were at Western State the entire time I was there, from early January to late April. Occasionally, some of our patients were transferred to long-term units in the hospital and I would still see them around, but most were discharged to go home or to a halfway home or assisted living facility. I interacted with the patients on the unit as much as possible, but I would have liked to have had more professional relationships with the patients.

I really enjoyed my Field Placement at Western State because I hope to someday work as a clinical psychologist. This opportunity gave me excellent clinical experience and greater knowledge of abnormal/counseling/clinical psychology and confidence in applying that knowledge. I also gained skills that will be applicable and a great benefit when I go to a doctoral program this Fall; for example, I further developed my communication skills, both in writing and in public speaking, and I learned how to take clinical notes, from meetings with patients to updates in treatment plans, and so on. I am not sure what type of setting I would like to work in after I receive my doctorate, but after the experience I had at Western State, I am considering working in an inpatient setting (though I have a few years before I have to make that decision). Doing my Field Placement at Western State was literally a dream come true for me; I had wanted to have this experience since I was a sophomore just getting into the psychology major. I am so glad and grateful to have gotten to do this, and my choice to study clinical psychology was further inspired and solidified during my time at Western State; now I am even more excited to learn more and gain additional experience from graduate school and its practicums/internship.
Dr. Bass - Long-Term Ward (1 Hickory)

Fall 2017 – Amanda Thompson

Western State is a state-funded psychiatric hospital, serving multiple types of patient needs in terms of mental health treatment. The overall hospital mission statement is “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment.” There are three main types of treatment units within the hospital, including admissions, forensic, and long-term or extended care units. The hospital serves admissions needs, where patients stay shorter term, and need stabilization on medications, long-term care needs, where patients need to stay longer than a month’s period and are more difficult to place in the community, and forensic care needs, where patients are in the hospital for reason of Not Guilty By Reason of Insanity (NGRI). The admissions units in the hospital tend to be faster paced, and experience a quicker turn around of admitting and discharging a patient, whereas the long-term care units spend more time working on developing relationships with patients in order to help the patient achieve their goals for treatment and placement in the community upon discharge readiness. While there are some units that are solely consisting of forensic patients, there are long-term care units who have NGRI patients. I know I had a misconception about this prior to getting involved in my field placement at WSH, until I began learning about the patients and inner workings on my unit.

In this Fall Semester 2017, I spent the majority of my time on a long-term care unit downstairs, 1-Hickory, under the supervision of Dr. Lee Ann Bass, a licensed clinical psychologist. On a long-term care unit, there are 28 beds, and one treatment team, including a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, and sometimes nurses or other aides. I did attend staffing meetings that included the treatment team, which is when we would interview a patient new to our unit coming downstairs from an upstairs admissions unit. This was a more infrequent experience that would ebb and flow with frequency of taking on new patients during the course of the semester. Based on staffing meetings I attended, there were three new patients on separate occasions that I wrote background, brief hospital course, and patient strength reports for, based on getting the opportunity to
write from Dr. Bass. I enjoyed practicing writing these types of reports on new patients, and got more comfortable over time gathering the information I needed to include in these three categories of a report for my supervisor to review and put into hospital records. While these staffing meetings and writing opportunities were important parts to my experience, they were more irregular in terms of routine. More regular parts of my experiences and daily schedule included attending group therapy sessions.

I spent the first few weeks in the hospital attending a number of group therapy class sessions, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and Developing Healthy Partnerships. After attending groups for the first few weeks of the semester and getting a better idea of how a group often runs, I got the opportunity from Dr. Bass to begin planning and facilitating group sessions. I began by planning an idea for a topic and activity, and would then run it by my supervisor or respective facilitator of the group on a regular basis, before implementing my plan into the session. I facilitated CBT and DBT a couple of times each, but spent the most time planning for and facilitating Developing Healthy Partnerships. I really enjoyed this group in particular because there was more of a wide range of the types of topics we could cover within contexts of friendships, family, dating, and marriage. I led this group about 5 to 6 times over the course of the semester, including topics such as empathy, domestic partner violence, disclosure when dating, and the implementation of my contribution project regarding interview skills and preparation in new social contexts. Covering a variety of topics within developing healthy partnerships group was probably one of my most favorite and satisfying experiences in my semester spent at Western State. Sometimes participants will share significant moments in their lives pertaining to the topic, and other times they can show a fun sense of humor to keep the group lively. I have a strong interest in seeking out more training in counseling and therapy with my career goals, so this opportunity was reinforcing in confirming what I would like to do in the future.

While group therapy opportunities were confirmation of seeking out a career in the mental health field, specifically in the context of counseling, there were features to the working environment in this hospital that, while valuable learning experiences, gave me more pause about choosing future workplaces. One of the realities of working in a psychiatric hospital is that there will be patients who struggle with behavioral difficulties, and may need to spend time working with security and staff deescalating their behavior, whether that be resolved on its own, or needing to put someone in seclusion or restraints until they are better able to settle and relax. I think that future students should be aware that this is something they may encounter in their placement since it can sometimes be surprising or a little unsettling when they may not previously be used to this kind of dynamic from their prior experiences. Even though I was more taken by surprise with some of these incidents initially, this dynamic would not have changed my decision to do my placement at WSH, and one largely rewarding aspect of the job includes many ways in which I found the staff and patients to be enjoyable, warm, and caring.
Western State is a psychiatric hospital located in Staunton, Virginia. It is one of several state funded psychiatric hospitals located in Virginia. The hospital provides in-patient treatment for individuals with severe mental illness with the goal of eventually discharging the patients. There are many different kind of units at Western State including: forensic units which deal with people who need restoration to competency and those found NGRI (not guilty by reason of insanity), short term care and long term care. The mission statement at Western State is “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment”. Every unit at Western State has a treatment team comprised of a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist and social worker. Nurses and nurse practitioners are also sometimes present for the meetings. The treatment team meets with each patient weekly or monthly depending on the type of unit they are in to create a treatment plan and to keep track of the patient’s progress. I was placed in 1-Hickory, a long-term care unit. This means that the patients generally spend more than a couple of weeks in the psychiatric facility and need long-term care.

When I first started at Western State I was not sure how much I was actually going to be allowed to do. I was really surprised at the scope of the activities I was allowed to observe/participate in. My mornings usually started with attending morning meeting with the patients and the mental health workers. Here, they gave out announcements and money to those who had gone to their groups the day before. After morning meeting, the patients go to their group therapies and I would sit in on treatment planning conferences with the treatment team. This is when the treatment team meets individually with patients in the unit. I really enjoyed these because it gave me insight into the patient’s thoughts, their progress and the treatment team’s thoughts. Sometimes, if there was a new patient I would sit in on the staffing. Usually, these patients came from the short-term care units, but the treatment team still has to do a full interview. I also really enjoyed this because I got to see what kinds of questions the treatment team asked, how the patient acted and why they were there and I also got to see them return back to their baseline because they were in the unit for a while. I would then go to groups. I went weekly to Dr. Bass’s Developing Healthy Partnerships group and eventually helped facilitate and co-lead this group. I also was able to go to other groups including dialectical behavior therapy, a men’s issues group, and a leisure group. I really enjoyed going to all different types of groups. I was also able to sit in on different units’ treatment planning conferences so I was exposed to the short-term units, including the forensic units, as well as other long-term care units to see how they differed from the one I was in. I also was given the task of monitoring some of the patient’s internet usage to use in recommitment hearings as well as given the opportunity to write some of the background sections for new patients which really helped me with my writing abilities.

I wanted to do my field placement at Western State because I have always loved the field of mental health but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to pursue it as a career. The best thing that this field placement has given me is confirmation that I want to become a
mental health provider. I thought that I wanted to go into the field of clinical psychology mainly to do research and teach at the university level. I was dreading leading groups because I thought that I was going to hate it. I led my first group and it turns out that I absolutely enjoy and get satisfaction out of leading group therapies. The more groups I attended and led the more it confirmed that therapy is definitely something I want to pursue as a career. This experience has helped me decide to pursue becoming a licensed clinical social worker.

I really enjoyed a lot of aspects of Western State such as attending groups, treatment planning meetings and staffing new patients. I also really enjoyed being in the environment of a psychiatric hospital. I think a lot of people view psychiatric hospitals as dark, scary places but Western State is the opposite of that. The staff cares so much about every patient and will go out of their way to make sure they get the best treatment possible. They also care about the patients when they leave the hospital, making sure that they have adequate support with housing and money. It has really provided me with insight into the inpatient settings of hospitals. Dr. Bass really helped develop my knowledge about mental illness and the different careers that are available in the mental health field. The only downside I can think of to Western State is the drive. Staunton is 30 minutes away and the field placement generally involves getting there early. The actual drive is pretty straightforward and I’ve never encountered traffic while going there or coming back. Overall, I think Western State is the best field placement option for anyone who is thinking about pursuing a career in the mental health field. It provides so much insight into mental illness, the people that suffer from it and the jobs that are available in this field. I am so glad that I was able to have this opportunity because it has really shaped the direction of my career.

Spring 2016 - Megan Paul

Western State Hospital is a state psychiatric hospital with a mission to provide safe and effective individualized treatment to all patients admitted. Within the hospital, patients are treated with medication, individual therapy, and group therapy where they learn new coping skills to help them manage their illness and any challenges they might face once they are eventually discharged. During my time at Western State, I worked on the long-term unit, 1 Hickory, with Dr. Bass. The majority of patients on this unit have been in and out of Western State or similar hospitals for many years. Because their illnesses are usually more difficult to treat or to control on their own, they require the services of a long-term unit. In addition, a decent number of patients on the unit are NGRI, meaning that they committed a crime but are not guilty by reason of insanity.

Over the course of the semester, I was able to have many experiences that I probably never would have had without this field placement opportunity. The most important one to me was getting to know people with severe mental illnesses. Getting to know the patients helped me understand their illness more than any abnormal psychology textbook could ever do. Another very important experience to me was being able to facilitate and eventually lead group therapy sessions. While intimidating at first, I quickly
grew to love being in the position of a group facilitator. Some of these groups included Developing Healthy partnerships, Cognitive behavioral therapy, and Dialectical behavior therapy. As part of my contribution project, I was able to research new therapeutic techniques to use in groups, especially Cognitive behavioral therapy. I was also able to attend groups with other doctors as well, like Seeking Safety, Substance Abuse, and Positive Psychology. Other experiences included attending treatment plan meetings for individual patients in various units. This meant working with a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, and nurse to develop a plan to help treat an individual patient. During these meetings, patients could talk about any problems on their unit, their medication, the groups they are attending, and any future plans for discharge. Other experiences I had at the hospital were attending group outings with the patients, visiting Central State Hospital to assess a patient, and studying the files of patients on the unit to better understand their history and onset of illness.

Before my initial interview at Western State, I was very nervous. Due to movies and literature describing psychiatric hospitals as scary, dark places, I wasn’t sure this would be the right fit for me. I could not have been more wrong. Many people have a negative view of psychiatric patients, however, I was able to see the side of them that not many others can see from outside the hospital. I was able to understand that for most, their illnesses did not define them. Being able to spend time with the same patients on the unit and getting to know them throughout the semester was a big advantage to working on a long-term unit. The only disadvantage I can think of is the half hour drive there on early mornings. But even then I was excited to get to the hospital and see the patients. Although I followed a similar schedule most days, each day was different than the last depending on how the patients were doing each day.

I think the most important thing I learned during my time at Western State was how to build rapport with patients and how to interact with them individually as well as in a group setting. My supervisor, Dr. Bass, could not have been more helpful in my development of these skills. As a psychologist, she treats all her patients with the utmost respect and compassion. In addition, she uses appropriate humor with the patients in order to build rapport. With her help, I was able to realize what it is I wanted to do with my degree in psychology. I initially chose Western State as a top choice because of the opportunities I would have observing and engaging in counseling with the patients. After helping Dr. Bass facilitate groups and eventually lead my own, I was able to realize that counseling was the career path that I wanted to follow. Specifically, I decided I wanted to go to graduate school for social work to become a licensed clinical social worker. Once I made this decision, Dr. Bass encouraged me and helped me get in touch with social workers at the hospital to talk with them about the process. Taking this field placement class and interning at Western State Hospital was definitely one of the best decisions I made while attending JMU for both academic and personal reasons. I cannot recommend field placement enough to any psychology major who is considering it, especially a placement at Western State Hospital.

Dr. Lacey – Extended Care Unit
The mission at Western State Hospital is “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment.” This site is focused on helping patients recover from mental illnesses as much as possible in order to stand trial or help them adjust back into the community. The patients admitted to the hospital are there for a wide variety of reasons as some are involuntarily committed by family members or the court system, some may be sent to restore their competency so they’re able to stand trial, and a small percentage voluntarily admit themselves. Typically, patients are admitted into a unit and their mental status is assessed by the treatment team of that unit. Based on this assessment, background information, and other observations, the treatment team creates a treatment plan that identifies the patient’s main problems and addresses these concerns with possible solutions and expectations.

If the patient has not shown significant improvement within a month or two, they can be transferred to extended care wards that are able to help them improve over a longer period of time. However, some patients may remain on the acute care wards based on how stable they are in their recovery process. While at Western State, patients are expected to attend group therapy sessions that their psychologist has assigned to them based on their needs. There are typically two morning sessions and two afternoon sessions Monday through Friday. If patients attend group, they receive points from the group leaders and these points coincide with the amount of money they receive at the end of the week. Therefore, attendance is incentivized with money as well as helping them in their recovery process. Western State has three treatment malls: Webb and Harvest are for higher-functioning patients with groups that last about 40-50 minutes while First Step is for lower-functioning patients with groups that last about 20-25 minutes.

As a field placement intern at Western State Hospital, I was given the opportunity to observe patients in group therapy, sit in on treatment team meetings, play games with patients on the unit, and plan and facilitate group therapy sessions. I was also able to write mental status reports, treatment plans, and transfer assessments to work on my clinical report writing skills. I also appreciated the wide variety of activities I was able to be involved in during my placement at Western State. While I had a typical routine of groups, treatment team meetings, and helping with afternoon activities, I was also able to observe a number of other interesting situations. During my time there, I attended two Behavior Management Committee meetings, one competency evaluation, half a dozen grand rounds presentations, and a number of other meetings that the treatment team was involved in. In order to see what things were like on a different unit, my supervisor arranged for me to observe admissions on a different unit, where I saw patients that were a lot less stable than the patients on my unit.

I really enjoyed the chance to improve my writing skills since I will be writing clinical reports in the future. It was also really challenging for me to facilitate group therapy sessions. I hadn’t worked with this population of patients before and it took me a little while to get used to the environment. Leading group therapy pushed me out of my comfort zone, especially since the patients in the ACT group I led usually had a hard time contributing to the discussion. I had to get used to a lot of silences and calling on patients to offer up some opinions or answers to the questions and ideas I posed to the group. As I learned more about the process of group therapy and more about the patients, I really
started to enjoy facilitating more and I wasn’t as nervous as I’d initially been. I’d built a stronger rapport with some patients and they seemed to feel more comfortable approaching me and talking to me the longer I was at Western State.

Being placed at this site was a big deal for me because I’m interested in working in a hospital setting in the future and I knew this would be a good way to see how hospital operations can work. In terms of the advantages of this site, I know I really appreciated the chance to work with patients and interact with them in meetings and in group therapy. It was also really nice to be able to play games and participate in activities with them because it gave me the opportunity to get to know them better. I would say that while interacting with patients was one of the most challenging parts of my experience, it was definitely my favorite. Getting to know patients in this population allowed me to appreciate the struggles that mentally ill people go through and just how difficult it can be to manage these severe illnesses. It was important to me to really try to understand how disorders impact the behaviors of our patients and how detrimental they can be to the patients and their loved ones. The only opportunity I wish I was able to take advantage of but couldn’t was observing neuropsychological assessments. Since I’m interested in neuropsychology, my supervisor tried to set up times where I could meet with the neuropsychologist on staff, but unfortunately there weren’t any tests going on during the days of the week that I went to the hospital.

During my experience, I learned a lot about myself and what I wanted to do with my future. Working in this setting confirmed my interest in working in a hospital or clinic where I could continue to see patients and monitor their progress. Getting to know their backgrounds and personalities helped me understand their situation better and I’m hoping to be able to use that ability in the future. I observed a lot of self-growth over the past few months as I became more comfortable in this setting and with conversing with patients. I learned a lot about the way group therapy can be presented to clients, different styles of patient-staff relationships, and the protocols and processes of how a state mental hospital works. I also learned how to relate to patients in appropriate ways and how I can utilize this with my own patients in the future.

My time at Western State was very informative, interesting, and helpful. I appreciated the efforts my supervisor made to make my experience both educational and safe. She was able to set up a variety of opportunities for me to learn in and consistently checked in with me about my impressions of patients, any thoughts I had about group, and how I was feeling during certain situations. While teaching group was out of my comfort zone, I’m glad she put me in that position because I was able to grow as a clinician and as a person. I’m very grateful for this experience because not only did I learn a lot about myself and the hospital, but I had fun doing it as well.
This semester I fulfilled my field placement hours at Western State Hospital (WSH) on 2 Elm, one of the forensic units, under the supervision of Dr. McFarland and Dr. Rowe. WSH is a state psychiatric hospital located in Staunton, Virginia. It is a medium security facility that houses long-term, acute, and forensic patients. The mission of WSH, as stated on the official website, is “to provide safe and effective individualized treatment in a recovery focused environment.” On the forensic units, the primary goal is to restore patients to competency to stand trial so that they may attend court and move forward in the criminal justice process. I spent a lot of my time aiding the staff in these specific efforts, but was also able to participate in a variety of other activities that contributed to a more comprehensive learning experience.

The standard proceedings that I took part in every day at WSH included attending morning meeting, listening to the morning nursing report, and participating in treatment team meetings. During morning meeting one of the staff members (usually accompanied by a couple medical students) asked the patients trivia questions and took note of any requests. I tagged along to observe and converse with patients upon arriving and leaving the common area. It was a nice way to start off every day. Immediately following that, the staff gathered into the conference room to listen to the nursing report on each patient’s behavior and activity patterns for the last 24 hours. Once that was finished, the treatment team (which consisted of a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a social worker, and a nurse) began pulling in patients from the unit for their weekly meeting. During this meeting we addressed any misbehaviors, assessed the current mental state, and discussed the plan for moving forward. Sometimes adjustments were made to their medication regimens or group schedules.

Groups were another important part of the daily structure and my experience at WSH. Many different types of classes are offered, and patients are placed in ones most relevant to their needs and interests. The group I observed most frequently was the “Forensic Issues” group, during which patients were either provided with some type of puzzle or game that tested their knowledge on legal information, or there was an open forum for lecture and discussion of these topics. Another group I was fortunate enough to take part in several times was the dog therapy group. This took place every other week with my supervisor’s therapy dog named Blue. Everyone in the hospital knew who Blue was and expressed great excitement whenever he came to visit. It was amazing how much positive energy one friendly animal could bring to the hospital. Lastly, every Thursday I was able to attend an off-site group with my supervisor, another psychologist, and three long-term patients. We also were able to pick up a former WSH patient from his group home to accompany us. The activities of this group varied, and included things like going to a glassblowing shop or playing with goats on a farm. This group was special to me because I was able to form close connections with these patients by interacting with them outside of the hospital setting. I think it provided them with opportunities that will make their adjustment back into the community much easier.

One of my favorite responsibilities at WSH, however, was the one-on-one meetings with patients. During these meetings I essentially tutored patients on the factual trial information (e.g. definitions of major court actors, different plea options, types of charges, etc.) and tested their rational understanding of this information as it related to
their case. In order to aid in this process I created a booklet containing questions about this material for the patients to fill out. I often asked the patients to explain how they ended up at WSH and how they planned on getting out to get a sense of how their thinking patterns were progressing. Over the course of the semester I met with about seven patients individually, four of which ended up being discharged and going to trial. I was able to observe several of the competency evaluations that were ultimately the culmination of my one-on-one efforts with the patients. It was a great feeling to see patients succeed in becoming competent to stand trial, especially when I played a direct part in helping them get there.

Either upon admission or after competency evaluations I was given the chance to practice some clinical writing as well. My supervisors frequently asked me to edit their writing, and even used parts of my notes in their official documents. I was provided with all the files available for several patients, from jail records to prior hospitalization notes, and then I was able to condense all this information into either an initial mental assessment report or a competency evaluation letter. Writing in a clinical context helped me discover new terminology and professional ways to discuss a person’s mental health status. It also allowed me to analyze psychological material in a more applicable way than I could classroom setting. This is a skill I don’t think I would have been able to practice prior to graduate school if I had not been granted the position at WSH for field placement.

I loved being able to have such a hands-on role at my site! The staff on 2 Elm truly welcomed me in and treated me like a valued member of the team. They never hesitated to reach out to me with opportunities to help them and enhance my learning experience. A huge advantage of this site was the diversity in these opportunities. I feel like I got such a strong understanding of how the hospital works because of the variety in activities that I was able to participate in. Additionally, I didn’t feel the need to stay by my supervisors’ sides the entire time. I had the freedom to choose which staff member I wanted to shadow and when I wanted to do this. Everyone was open to answering my questions and I enjoyed hearing the different perspectives throughout the unit. My schedule was largely dictated by an ideal compromise between what my supervisors thought would be helpful and what I was interested in doing. Often times, our goals overlapped.

Being able to see the way that different disorders present themselves in real life and the variation from individual to individual really expanded my knowledge of abnormal psychology. Getting a taste of what it is like to work in a hospital setting also helped me think about the kind of career I might want to pursue. Although I am not positive that working in a hospital setting is for me, this is something I would not have realized had I not been given this opportunity. The only downside about this site placement was the long commute (30 minutes from Harrisonburg) and the early mornings (8:30am start time). The days were long, tiring, and frustrating at times, but my patience and mental stamina gradually grew stronger. I did not expect to feel so emotionally involved in my work, and by the end of my time there it was hard for me to leave both the patients and the staff members who I had formed close bonds with. Ultimately, I have gained so many valuable skills at WSH that I know will better prepare me for graduate
programs, and am even more eager now to move forward in my education in clinical psychology.