



# Virginia Institute of Autism

## Placement Description

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

## Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

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

## Contact Information

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**Read about students' experiences at this site below:**



*Fall 2021 - Samantha McQuillan*

During my fall semester of 2021, I had the opportunity to be an intern at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in Charlottesville, Virginia. VIA's mission "is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." I worked specifically at the Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) branch of VIA, which specializes in providing Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) to children ages two to twelve who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their use of ABA expands to the fields of behavior analysis, childhood special education, speech-language therapy, clinical psychology, and occupational and physical therapies. VIA is divided into three separate service areas that cater to the different needs of families. Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) provides occasional support for children who need help with social skills, school readiness, daily tasks, or management of problem behaviors. They provide diagnostic evaluations for children with ASD as well. The James C. Hormel (JCH) School provides full-day, year-round services for individuals who are looking for help relating to communication, behavior, learning, and social interaction. Students may attend JCH when public school settings are not the right fit for them or if they simply need more personalized educational services. The Adult Services branch serves autistic individuals of 22 years of age and older who are seeking services for developmental or intellectual disabilities. Their services range from learning meaningful engagement to personal growth and individual choice.

During my time at OBS, I had many opportunities to spend time with and observe the staff while they worked. I specifically spent a lot of time with the Registered Behavior Technicians (RBT's) by shadowing them during their one-on-one time with clients. Clients come in at 9:00 AM and either stay at OBS until noon or 3:00 PM. I really enjoyed the routine of saying good morning to the staff and the clients in the morning. I did this as a way to see who was there on that day and to remind that I was there that day as well. The RBT's spend the most time with the clients, so I was given the chance to see ABA in action quite often. I was also able to spend a lot of time working with my supervisor. We had daily meetings where I was able to tell her what I had been working on recently. During these meetings, she also provided me with feedback and direction so that I could get working on whatever else she needed me to do. My supervisor also let me sit in on team meetings every Friday afternoon. Each team cares for a different set of clients, so each team has a meeting at the end of each week to get caught up on how everyone's weeks went with their clients and to discuss any questions or concerns that they might have. Finally, I had the opportunity to present my contribution project to the entire OBS staff. This was my first big presentation in front of a professional staff, so I felt very accomplished.

For my contribution project, I worked on creating and implementing a Circle Time program for OBS' newly created preschool schedule. Circle Time is a program that is normally ran by preschools and kindergartens in order to teach young students about how school classrooms work. It is aimed at exposing children to a normal classroom setting before they enter



elementary school, so that they already know the basic information that they are expected to learn by the end of preschool or kindergarten. My supervisor came to me with this idea, and I made it happen. She had me read a scholarly article entitled Evaluation of a Classwide Teaching Program for Developing Preschool Life Skills. Within this article, the author Gregory P Hanley discusses how Circle Time programs for children who exhibit problem behavior normally focus on four preschool life skills: information following, communication, friendship skills, and delay tolerance. We based a lot of what we did off of this article.

One major disadvantage with being placed at VIA is the hour-long drive that you will have to make to and from Charlottesville. This was something that I was hesitant about before I started, but it really was not as bad as I thought it would be. There were a handful of times where there were accidents that made me a little bit late, but I would just make up the lost time at the end of the day. I had a nice routine of listening to music and podcasts during my drives, which made the time go by faster. Other than that, I do not have any other disadvantages to this experience. Practically everything about my internship was an advantage to me. I was instantly taken in under everyone's wing and I felt accepted the whole time I was here. They have created such a positive, supportive environment at VIA, and it is a treasure to spend time there.

I have many takeaways from my time with VIA. However, I primarily have learned a lot about myself and what to look for in my future career. I have always wanted to work with children, so being able to interact with young children with autism has taught me that I am suited to do this kind of work in the future. Communicating with children on the spectrum is not something that I have had much experience with, so I learned by observing the ways that the staff interacted with the learners. Unfortunately, I do not want to do ABA specifically like I used to in the past. I now want to be a school psychologist in an elementary school. With this career, I will be able to use my experience at VIA to my advantage. I had so many positive interactions with the learners here and I look forward to the learners that I will get to work with in the future.

I have briefly learned about ABA in my psychology classes at JMU, but not nearly enough to start speaking in ABA terms at my first day on the job. I had some general knowledge of the more well-known aspects of ABA in psychology, such as extinction, reinforcement, generalization, and shaping. I quickly picked up on newer terms like manding, probing, prompting, pairing, and tacting. The general knowledge that my major classes have taught me made it easier to learn these terms and to associate them with their function after I observed them in action with our clients. This experience has really shown me that psychology is what I was always meant to do.

### ***Spring 2021 - Emelie McElroy***

During the Spring 2021 semester, I've had the privilege to intern at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in the Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) section. The Virginia Institute of Autism is a non-profit organization that provides a wide variety of therapeutic services to people



diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. VIA's mission statement is as follows, "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." VIA's programs and services are built around applied behavior analysis (ABA) principles and provide behavior analysis, childhood special education, speech-language therapy, clinical psychology, along with occupational and physical therapies and services. VIA has three different sections that serve different populations of people diagnosed with autism. The Outpatient Behavior Services section, which is where I've had my field placement experience, provides early intensive interventions and parent training programs for children, adolescents, and their families. The James C. Hormel School is another section of VIA that provides year-round day school services to students between the ages of 2 and 22 who are diagnosed with autism. The JCH school also partners with local school districts to serve students whose needs for learning, communication, behavior, or social interaction are too intensive for a public-school setting. The last section of VIA is the Adult Services section. Adult Services provides learning and personal growth opportunities for adults with autism in environments that promote success. I spent my field placement experience solely at OBS, where I got to experience ABA-focused therapy first hand, while working directly with clients, registered behavior technicians (RBTs), coordinators, and supervisors.

During this past semester at the Virginia Institute of Autism, I've gotten a lot of valuable, first-hand experience. I had many opportunities to shadow RBTs, the people who provide direct care to the clients. I observed many assessments and programs that were run to improve each individual client's skills. I learned so much about autism spectrum disorder and ABA throughout this semester, that I wouldn't have been able to elsewhere. I learned about vocabulary words that are commonly used in this field of work along with the meaning behind each program, assessment, and activity that was run. Along with observing therapy sessions, I was able to increase my knowledge and experience through research and data tracking for my contribution project. My contribution project focused on Natural Environment Teaching (NET), so I was able to learn about this ABA technique more in depth as well. Most of my time at VIA has been dedicated to my contribution project, which focused on observing the RBTs and their incorporation of NET into therapy sessions. I took baseline data, implemented materials throughout the site that served as reminders for various NET-focus points, and took post-implementation data to track whether or not the materials were helpful. After the post-implementation data was taken, I created a treatment development program that will be used as a training to remind RBTs on the importance of NET. I've really enjoyed seeing things in person that I've learned in a classroom. It's such a cool experience to be able to put things into practice that you've read about in a textbook.

Along with working with clients and RBTs at the site, I've also had the opportunity to work with someone from the Human Resource department throughout this semester. I've assisted with transferring RBT training PowerPoints from the old VIA format to the new one. Working with Julie has helped me see a different side of VIA that I've really enjoyed. By working on these PowerPoints, I've been able to learn about the RBT training process and see what onboarding is like for new RBTs is. Julie has also invited me to sit in on multiple RBT training sessions, so it's been really cool to participate in those. Along with updating PowerPoints, I've



also been able to join the weekly team meetings. These meetings have been valuable because I've been able to see more of a behind the scenes perspective about what goes on at the site and I have the opportunity to learn more about each client and their individualized treatment plans.

Overall, my field placement experience at VIA was better than I could have expected. I've learned so much over this semester that will be helpful for my future. One of the most eye-opening parts of my experience has been the shadowing I've done of the RBTs working with clients. I've been able to form relationships with both the RBTs and clients, which is reflective of what a future job may look like. One thing to keep in mind about VIA is that it's in Charlottesville, so it's about one hour a way. If VIA is of interest to you, I would suggest arranging your schedule to have a full day available to go to the site. This semester, I went once a week and arranged for my Wednesdays to be completely free so I could dedicate it to VIA. Another thing I would suggest when working for VIA is that you have patience and flexibility. There are a lot of moving parts at VIA, especially OBS, with the clients, families, meetings, and more that go on. It's important that you're patient with your supervisors, because they're very busy, especially with the constant adjustments that occur because of COVID-19 guidelines. There are a lot of opportunities for you to take initiative with how you make the most of your days at the site, so be prepared for that as well. I enjoyed this part of my experience, because this was an area that I needed to grow in. After this experience, I'm very comfortable making my own schedule, talking to various people about their schedules and adjusting from there.

After interning at the Virginia Institute of Autism for a semester, my perspective on this field of work has increased immensely. The main thing I learned from VIA was about ABA, in general, and ABA-focused therapy when working with children with autism. Before this experience, I've never working with anyone with autism. The only experience I've had working with people with special needs was with someone my age with Down syndrome. Working with people with special needs is something that I want to incorporate into my future career. Now that I have had this experience of working directly with children with autism and expanding the types of special needs I've experienced working with, those feelings are definitely validated. This field placement internship was a learning experience for me and I grew a lot from it. I'm so thankful for all of the learning and professional growth opportunities this experience has brought me. If working directly with children with autism in a therapy-focused environment is something that interests you, I highly recommend interning at the Virginia Institute of Autism. If you're looking for an environment where you'll learn a lot and have hands-on experience, I also recommend the Virginia Institute of Autism. VIA, especially OBS, promotes learning and growth opportunities for their staff, clients, families, and community. My experience at VIA has definitely provided me with all of those things and has helped me form a better idea of how I want my future to look.

*Spring 2021 - Kate Foley*



This semester I had the honor of interning with the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in Charlottesville, VA. The organization's mission states that "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services." To accomplish this mission, the Virginia Institute of Autism uses the principles of applied behavioral analysis in order to address the core symptoms of autism within the services they offer. VIA offers three core services which include Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS), the James C. Hormel School (JCH), and the Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, interns have been able to observe each of the core services, however this semester I had the wonderful opportunity of working with the staff and clients at the Outpatient Behavioral Services clinic. OBS provides clients Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy, Parent Training, Psychological Evaluations, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and Speech and Language Therapy in home, the community, and the clinical setting. Most of the clients who receive services at OBS are young children with autism.

I spent most of my time working alongside one of my supervisors, Caroline Salzman, a BCBA at the OBS clinic. Due to COVID-19, the number of clients and staff present in the building when I first started was limited, however as the semester went on more clients were able to come into the clinic. Over the course of my experience, I was able to learn common ABA terminology, become familiar with the Competent Learner Model (CLM), observe numerous ABA therapy sessions and parent training sessions. Before interning with VIA, I honestly was not sure how effective ABA therapy was, but after learning and observing ABA sessions I realize how valuable this type of therapy is. I was overwhelmingly impressed by how the Registered Behavior Technicians (RBT) worked with the clients, and how much the clients would progress week to week. Some of my favorite moments while interning was watching clients overcome challenges and show improvement. In addition, I learned and became familiarized with alternative communication systems such as PECs that some clients use as an alternative form of communication. I was able to observe one client learn how to use PECs for the first time. It was exciting to watch the client's progression of being able to communicate through PECs.

One of the projects I completed involved finding pictures, printing, and laminating them to be used for lessons of the CLM. In addition, I organized the materials in boxes for lessons 4-11 of the CLM. This helped me learn more about the lessons in the CLM such as listener (adhere- to-touch), Observer (matching-sorting), and observer (tact). For my contribution project I created sensory bins filled with sand, and kinetic sand, ladles, sand toys, and shovels. Through creating the sensory bins, I was able to learn a lot about play. I learned that play, especially active play, does not come naturally to all children. Play is essential in children's development, so the RBTs and my supervisor would often help the children engage in play. It was fascinating to observe how the children played and interacted with the toys.

I was a sophomore when I first heard about the Virginia Institute of Autism. One of my professors knew I was interested in working with children with autism and shared information about VIA with me. It was honestly my dream to have a field placement experience with them, and I feel so honored to for the opportunity to intern with them. It far passed my expectations and everyone was welcoming and friendly. On the first day I interned the staff and my



supervisors made me feel like part of the VIA family. I really enjoyed working with the kids and staff. Everyone was eager to teach me anything about VIA, ABA therapy and autism in general. In the beginning every staff member was eager to learn who I was and include me. I am so grateful for my supervisors who answered every question I had and took the time to explain terms to me that I didn't understand or was unfamiliar with. One of my favorite parts about VIA was getting to work directly with the children. I also always looked forward to talking with staff members as well. VIA is an hour away; however I absolutely felt the drive was well worth the experience. I felt inspired each time I left the clinic because of how passionate all of the staff members were about working with the clients.

My internship at the Virginia Institute of Autism allowed me to expand my knowledge of ABA therapy and autism. Interning with VIA helped me realize that I would like to become a RBT and eventually a behavior analyst. In addition, I am interested in opening up an organization similar to VIA in my home state of New Jersey. After interning with VIA, I see how important their services are to the autism community. I am so impressed by the amount of services they offer within the same organization. From experience, I know how hard it can be to find services for individuals with autism. VIA makes it easy for families and individuals with autism because they have all the services an individual with autism may need. I would highly recommend VIA to future field placement students.

### ***Spring 2021 – Brooklin Davis***

My field placement at the Virginia Institute of Autism this past semester allowed me to not only gain experience in the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA) but also grow as an individual in the workplace. Their mission statement is “helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services. VIA applies the principles of ABA to meet their clients’ and families’ needs. Their organization provides services through their 3 branches of programs which are: Outpatient Behavior Services, the Adult Academy, and the James C. Hormel School. The past semester I was placed at the James C. Hormel (JCH) School. The school is a year-round day school that serves individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) between the ages of 2 and 2. Their services employ specialists in the fields of behavior analysis, special education, speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. The students are separated into classrooms based on age. This semester I was placed classroom 1, where the students ranged from 5 to 8 years old. Within the classrooms there is a 1-to-1 student to teacher ratio. The teachers paired directly with the students are registered behavior technicians (RBT). Each classroom is overseen by a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA).

During my time at the James C. Hormel School, I was given several experiences and opportunities. I spent the majority of my time observing a BCBA and several RBT provide services for students. This opportunity allowed me to take the knowledge that I have learned through other internships and psychology classes, especially Learning Psychology, and see the principles of ABA performed in-person. After a few weeks of observing, I was able to pair with students myself and eventually run programs myself. I thought that running programs allowed



me to achieve my idea of what I want to obtain out of this field placement. I was able to not only gain hands-on experience working with children with autism using the principles of ABA but also be coached through the process by RBTs. I learned a lot from the staff in my classroom through observing them run programs and also through the feedback I was given from them after running programs.

In addition to observing and running programs, I was able to participate in working on a course of study for my supervisor, John Prickett. This course of study was on the Competent Learner Modules (CLM). These modules are a multi-component instructional package containing solutions for solving major problems faced by educators and parents of children with autism and other significant learning challenges. CLM contains learner assessments, curriculum, and staff training components. The modules were found online, which allowed me to gain hours while completing these modules at home. Since VIA was an hour commute for myself, my supervisor and I decided this was the perfect opportunity for me to earn all my hours by completing these modules on days that I wasn't coming into the school. After I completed a module, I would perform a check-off list with a RBT at the school to make sure that I understood the material in the module. This was an amazing opportunity for myself because the CLM was something that I hadn't heard of until coming to VIA and I was able to gain so much from the program. I think this program is upcoming in the field of ABA and I'm glad that I had the chance to learn so much about it.

Within the CLM curriculum, there program used called observer sorting. Which allows students the match identical and similar objects to on another to improve their discrimination and generalization. For my contribution project I put together an observer sorter kit for all the classrooms at VIA to use. My supervisor had me focus on the first 13 lessons. Each lesson the materials needed changed depending on the curriculum. The kit I created separated each lesson into bins that included all the materials need and format sheets to go along with each. This made finding the appropriate materials more convenient for the staff. Researching on the CLM and making the kit allowed me to dive deeper in the CLM material and get a grasp on the "why?" behind implementing this within the schools.

I chose this site because of my plans to earn my BCBA certification in a few years. I believe that my experience working at VIA was exactly what I was hoping it to be. I feel like this experience gave me the hands-on experiences that I need to help me become a better therapist. I'm still not sure which path I want to take after becoming a BCBA, but this experience definitely gave me a positive look on what to expect from working at an ABA-based school as a BCBA. My field work this year definitely prepared me for my practicum that I will be starting next semester for graduate school. Overall, I recommend any student wanting gain experiences in the field of applied behavior analysis or working with children diagnosed with ASD to apply to this site. The experience allowed me to not only expand my knowledge in the field I'm pursuing, but it also allowed me to grow as an individual in the workplace. I'm extremely grateful for this experience and each person that I interacted with during my time working at VIA. I can't wait to carry the knowledge I gained through this experience with me in graduate school and in my career.



*Fall 2020 – Jacky Kennedy*

My field placement experience at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) this last semester taught me a great deal about applied behavior analysis (ABA), the workplace, and my future career goals. The mission statement of the organization is that “The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services.” To accomplish this goal, the Virginia Institute of Autism employs applied behavior analysis in the treatment of their clients. Structurally, VIA has three branches, which include Outpatient Behavioral Services, the Adult Academy, and the James C. Hormel School. In previous semesters, the interns have had the opportunity to observe operations in each of these three divisions, however, with the COVID-19 pandemic, I enjoyed my time this semester at the Outpatient Behavioral Services clinic. Operations at the clinic were also a bit different this semester due to social distancing guidelines, so my small-group experience will likely be unique to this semester. However, I think that working in a smaller cohort provided me with the opportunity to really get to know the staff and to focus closely on the skill development of the two children that were allowed in the clinic.

During my time at the Virginia Institute of Autism, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in direct ABA services with clients under the supervision of a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT). It was exciting to watch the children grow and develop their skills over the course of the semester. In each session, we used token boards and other tangible rewards to encourage each child’s participation. Just a few of the skills we worked on included: manding for an item, matching pictures to a sample, identifications of objects and their features, and problem-solving puzzles. It was a connective experience to use token boards with the children at the center as this was a strategy I learned about in my coursework at JMU. Learning about something in the classroom and seeing it used in real life was a very rewarding part of my field placement. If a student enjoyed taking Learning Psychology at JMU, I think that they would enjoy this field placement as many of the class concepts are implemented at the Virginia Institute of Autism.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to observe the clinical psychologist in session with her clients. With my interest in school counseling, it was very interesting to me to observe the delivery of counseling services to children with autism. I learned that some children with autism can be more literal thinkers, therefore, counseling services may need to be designed a bit differently. A great deal of the focus in these sessions was also on social and emotional learning, which can be particularly challenging for children with autism. I hope that this experience will help me in developing appropriate materials for social and emotional learning activities in my future capacity as a school counselor.



Finally, I spent a majority of my semester interacting with the assessment materials used to determine the baseline skill levels of clients. Throughout the semester, I created five bins for the Competent Learner Repertoires Assessment (CLRA) and the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP). These are both common assessment kits in applied behavior analysis that are used to develop behavioral programs for certain skills, such as manding, listening, observing, problem-solving, participating, reading, and writing. For these projects, I created materials to be used in the assessment, and I consolidated all of them into organized bins. Toward the end of my field placement, I was also able to participate in the delivery of these assessments. Previously, assessments could take up to a couple of weeks to complete, but with the use of one of my bins, an assessment could be completed in as little as two days. Overall, working through the assessment guides, creating appropriate materials, and participating in their execution really expanded my knowledge of applied behavior analysis therapy and its goals.

The Virginia Institute of Autism was both an exciting and welcoming field placement site. The staff were wonderful to work with and were very involved in my field placement experience. My first day started immediately with observing one-on-one sessions with an RBT so that I could begin to learn about the foundations of applied behavior analysis. This immediate immersion into the outpatient clinic functions allowed me the opportunity to learn a great deal throughout the semester about ABA principles and their practical application. While the one-hour drive to Charlottesville required waking up fairly early, I was always excited to arrive at the clinic to start my day with the kids. I am extremely grateful that my field placement allowed me the opportunity to work with children in this capacity.

My internship at the Virginia Institute of Autism confirmed to me that I wanted a future career that involved advocating for children from all different walks of life. It was evident from their office functions that they do an excellent job of supporting both their clients and their families, so I wanted to study familial relations for my contribution project. The Virginia Institute of Autism already offered parent support groups pre-pandemic that fostered the mental health of the parents, however, it made me wonder what services the Virginia Institute of Autism may be able to offer the children in the family unit. This sparked my interest in sibling relationships among children with autism. Thus, I researched and created materials for group therapeutic interventions for siblings, which involved mindfulness techniques and self-acceptance activities. Due to the nature of the pandemic, group sessions were not feasible during my internship, however, I hope that these materials prove useful to the Virginia Institute of Autism in the future if they were to start a sibling support group.

Overall, I feel that the Virginia Institute of Autism has helped prepare me to enter the field of school counseling through my extensive knowledge of autism spectrum disorder, my



creation of assessment materials, and my observation of clinical sessions. All of these experiences will make me a more knowledgeable school counselor and advocate for children with autism in the public school system one day.

*Spring 2020 – Kelly Wyman*

The Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) provides evidence-based Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) services to individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). VIA is dedicated to “helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services.” This mission is accomplished through their three main services: The James C. Hormel School (JCH), Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS), and Adult services. The JCH School provides education and clinical programs to children and young adults. OBS provides individual and group therapies in the home, community, and clinical setting. The adult services are dedicated to providing employment opportunities and behavioral consultation for adults. Within the Adult services, VIAble Ventures is a program that provides an employment opportunity for the adults. Currently, there is a candle making assembly line set up where the adults are paid to make candles that will be sold in stores. In addition, VIA offers a program called Strengthening Families which focuses on helping families nurture and support their children/siblings.

During my time at the Virginia Institute of Autism, I worked alongside my supervisor, Tonya Delp, in the OBS clinic. Tonya is a clinical psychologist who conducts Psychological Evaluations and provides Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). Under Tonya’s supervision, I was able to observe the evaluation process for diagnosing ASD, including an intake with the parents/legal guardians, the actual evaluation, and the debrief after. Prior to the evaluation, Tonya asked many questions covering a range of topics to gain insight into the individual’s childhood, likes/dislikes, eating habits, attention span, family history, problematic behavior trends, fixations, etc. allowing her to develop a background of knowledge. As I observed the actual evaluation with the child, I saw a glimpse into the many different activities and questions that make up this process. It was fascinating to see Tonya interact with the individual, take notes, and assess the behavior all at once. After the evaluation, Tonya showed me how the scoring worked and finished grading the assessment with me. The final process of the evaluation was a debrief with the parent/legal guardian, which was more emotional to watch than expected. The mother broke into tears and thanked Tonya because her child will now be able to receive the appropriate therapy and treatment. I was humbled by the debrief and developed so much respect for parents who have children with disabilities, which further strengthened my desire to enter into this profession and help in any way I can.

In addition to observing Tonya, I was also given the opportunity to observe and assist many different Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs) during one-on-one sessions with



children in the OBS clinic. During these sessions, I developed proficient knowledge of ABA therapy and assisted in collecting live data on client's progress as I observed their behavior. When I first started observing sessions, it seemed like we were just "playing" with the client. However, as the RBT's explained ABA further, I realized how meticulous everything becomes. Every phrase had purpose, and every movement and response were precise. ABA works mainly through reinforcement of the client's behavior, therefore; RBTs work hard to make sure they never miss a chance to reinforce a desired behavior (i.e. eye contact, mands, tacts, echoes) or correct a behavior (i.e. grabbing instead of asking, kicking, screaming, self-injurious behavior). As I learned the phrases the RBTs used and became comfortable with how ABA worked, I began to run some of the programs with their supervision. I worked with clients on receptive identification, which involved asking the client, "what's this?" while holding up a picture of an animal, object, or food. If they identified the picture correctly, I reinforced them with a skittle. I ran motor imitation programs which included touching my head while saying "touch head" which commanded them to copy my movement. This behavior was also normally reinforced by providing a skittle, or another desired edible. Additionally, I ran eye contact programs where, on the client's level, I looked into their eyes, followed their head movements (making it hard for them to look away), and reinforced their behavior of eye contact with verbal praise. Throughout my time with the clients, I quickly began to love them and genuinely felt excited when they made progress. I even teared up a few times watching them say a new word, use a new command, or make eye contact more than normal. It only took one week of working with the clients to become convinced this is the career I want to pursue. I learned the power of early intervention and how valuable ABA therapy can be when started at a young age for children with Autism. I saw a glimpse of this when I met a child that just turned nine years old, who normally did not come into VIA, but was there one day when I was there. This boy had been going to VIA since he was little and now only does home sessions. I was blown away by his ability to hold a meaningful conversation with me and was speechless when an RBT told me he started at VIA as nonverbal. I now want to get my masters and become a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) so I can make this same kind of impact on children with ASD and be able to equip them with needed skills to be successful when they grow up.

The Virginia Institute of Autism was a warm and welcoming site and I found myself fitting in from the very beginning. The staff was friendly and included me from day one. Employees met with me regularly and explained their role and responsibilities at VIA as well as shared valuable information about ABA and ASD. They saw me as someone of value and importance and allowed me to contribute to their mission. For example, I made Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) for the speech pathologist which will be used to assist clients who have not developed language acquisition yet and need an alternative way of communicating their wants and needs. I also assisted one of the staff members at the JCH school with an organizational management project by inputting data and survey responses which will be used to



make a token system for the staff, to increase workplace moral and motivation. The staff at the Adult Services clinic also included me in running group activities with the consumers.

The only disadvantage during my site experience was that my time was cut short due to the coronavirus pandemic. I would do anything to get just one more day with those sweet children and caring staff members. However, my time away from VIA was still extremely valuable. My supervisor sent me RBT training videos to watch, allowing me to strengthen my knowledge of ABA even further. I met virtually with Tonya to discuss the videos and how they related to what I saw during my time at VIA. I was grateful that Tonya was able to provide me with a fruitful experience, even during the midst of the pandemic. Overall, I am very thankful for this internship experience and positive impact working at VIA had on my life.

### ***Fall 2019 – Emily Shah***

The mission of The Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) states that, “VIA is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services.” In order to reach their mission, VIA partners with institutions who inform the agency of the best, evidence-based practices for children and adults with autism. The three major branches of services that are offered at VIA are: The James C. Hormel School (JCH), Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS), and Adult Services. Throughout my experience, I spent most of my time serving at OBS, where I worked alongside the clinical psychologist, Tonya Lambert Delp. OBS provides children with autism with Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy, Parent Training, Psychological Evaluations, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and Speech and Language Therapy. The psychological services branch of OBS was started in 2017 by Tonya, and is aimed at providing services to children and adolescents whose challenging behavior is a result of the experience of negative emotions.

Over the course of my experience, I was able to work one-on-one with Tonya, who is responsible for providing psychological evaluations and CBT services. While VIA’s focus is providing services to individuals with autism, Tonya’s branch is more flexible with who she is able to serve. Tonya can provide psychological evaluations for virtually any child under the age of 21, and can provide CBT services to any child who has a diagnosis and under the age of 18. During my placement at VIA, I was able to work with children and adolescents who have been diagnosed with autism, anxiety, depression, panic, gender dysphoria, and selective mutism. This allowed me to gain a better understating about how CBT is modified for use to best treat a certain problem. I was also given several opportunities to take part in the psychological assessment process, which included sitting in on parent intakes, observing the evaluations, and learning how to score assessment materials. Tonya even took the time to teach me how to administer a cognitive assessment (the WISC), because she knew that I was interested in learning about psychological assessment in graduate school. I really enjoyed being able to see everything that goes into giving a child a diagnosis, because I got to see how information provided from



multiple sources throughout the process often complemented or contradicted each other. It showed the complexity of diagnosis, and the importance of having good clinical judgement.

One thing that I observed during my first day at VIA was how extensive the waitlist for ABA services was, while Tonya had the ability to provide more clients with CBT. It was frustrating to see that so many children were not able to receive services due to the limited capacity of children that OBS is able to serve through ABA. When I was told that the extensive waitlist was preventing VIA from reaching its mission, I saw this as an opportunity for my contribution project. In an effort to provide VIA with a system for placing each child in the most appropriate treatment, developed a checklist of questions to be asked during initial consultation calls with caregivers that will help determine whether a child should be placed on the ABA waitlist or the CBT waitlist. I also created a database of all of the CBT interventions that are used at VIA, which included the characteristics of the types of clients that the particular intervention should be used for. While I was not able to directly implement my contribution project during my time at VIA, I was reassured that my project would make a positive and meaningful contribution to the future of VIA.

I have had nothing but a positive experience while working at VIA. From my first day, everyone was warm and welcoming and eager to teach me just about anything about the agency. Tonya was an amazing supervisor who provided me with ample opportunities for professional and personal growth. My favorite part of the experience was able to make meaningful connections with the clients that I consistently saw across each week, and being able to see them grow over the course of the semester. I enjoyed being able to watch the process of CBT, and how the techniques used in the therapy can effectively help clients work through certain problems/difficulties. Even though my main responsibilities took place within the psychological services branch, Tonya made sure that I was able to gain exposure to all of the different services offered at VIA. I was able to sit in on ABA sessions and leadership meetings, and even got the opportunity to speak with one of the founders of VIA. Every single day was different and exciting, and even though the drive wasn't ideal, I woke up excited to come to Charlottesville every Wednesday and Friday morning. Because of the variability of the experience, the one thing that I wish I gained more practice in was actually facilitating CBT sessions. We had a group of kids who were pretty unpredictable, and for that reason it was difficult to plan materials for sessions. However, I very quickly learned the importance of having tools and techniques in your back pocket during unpredictable situations.

I picked VIA as my site for field placement because I knew that I wanted to work with children and adolescents in clinical practice, but I did not have a lot of experience working with kids with autism. I went into the experience knowing the complexity of autism spectrum disorder, and really wanted to further my understanding on the diagnosis and treatment of it through first-hand experiences. I am also interested in studying autism and anxiety comorbidity, diagnosis, and treatment during my graduate study, and the work I was able to do at VIA complemented those interests. My experience at VIA erased any doubts that I had about my future career goals, and solidified my passion for providing children, adolescents, and their families with assessment and therapy services during such a crucial period of development. My



experience at VIA significantly exceeded my expectations, and in the future, I could see myself working at an agency just like it.

*Fall 2019 – Rebecca Miller*

The Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in Charlottesville, VA is an organization that provides various services to both children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). VIA utilizes applied behavior analysis techniques to modify behavior and promote their students' learning. Their mission statement is "The Virginia Institute of Autism is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of Autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach, and adult services." Specifically, all of the staff at VIA have passion for their work and compassion for the clients. VIA serves clients through three main capacities, the Outpatient Behavioral Services, the James C. Hormel School and Adult Services. I spent my time in the Outpatient Behavioral Services (OBS) where parent training, speech therapy, clinical services and ABA services are provided. OBS provides services to primarily younger children through the use of targeted early intervention, specifically focusing on behavioral and social problems. By working on such skills, the hope is that the students with ASD can transition into a typical school system and successfully learn and behave in that environment. At OBS, the behavior technicians provide direct service to the students through one-on-one sessions in a clinical setting; however, services are also provided to some children at home. Each session is about two hours long, yet a student may stay for two sessions within one day. A typical session may include circle time, table work to run independent programs, group play to promote peer interactions and functional play, snack, and gross motor activities.

I applied to VIA's site placement because of my interest in furthering my education in the ABA field. I was provided with various learning opportunities and wonderful experiences. Most applicable to my future plans, I mostly observed ABA sessions throughout my time at VIA. On my first day, I learned about the Competent Learner Model (CLM), read many lessons and became aware of common terms and repertoires. Although difficult to grasp at first, I learned a lot about the theory behind the ABA sessions and why and how technicians run certain programs. Because I spent so much time working with the students, I became to care for them and truly enjoyed getting to know them. There were times where I genuinely got excited and felt proud because I watched a student progress from 50% correct (basically, luck) to mastery in a week. I have learned about behavior theory in classes at JMU, but actually seeing such concepts be applied through a hands-on manner has been useful to my understanding. One of the most meaningful experiences I gained at VIA was when I independently ran a program for a child and they successfully completed the task. After seeing such success and gaining these valuable experiences, I became certain that this was the career for me.

One noticeable problem at VIA was the lack of a productive schedule for the preschool block and correspondingly, the circle-time was also lacking in functionality. I therefore created weekly themes to relate to a monthly theme and created SMART Board lessons to exemplify them. I also developed ideas and prepared materials for weekly crafts for students to do, based on



the week's theme. My contribution project was intended to help alleviate the problems associated with a lacking preschool schedule. Therefore, I spent five weeks observing the schedules, revised previous schedules and took data on how well they were followed. I later created new schedules to allow for sufficient time to run programs. Similarly, the hope was with an efficient schedule, there would be equally distributed time for both individual programs and peer programs, and allow for transitioning time between activities. By working on this project, I improved various personal skills like my ability to take initiative, communication skills and creativity. Because I was not always given explicit direction when I got to VIA, I had to learn to grow my leadership skills and autonomy. By doing so, I am confident that I learned how to behave professionally in a workplace, collaborate with others, and accept feedback. Towards the end of my time at VIA, I had the opportunity to attend a company-wide staff training day where I sat in on the information session and listened to speakers who discussed current important information at VIA. I then participated in a smaller workshop on discrimination training. By gaining this experience, I felt that my field placement had come full circle. Moreover, I got to see a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes of VIA, and more specifically, the staff training involved.

My placement at VIA has directly impacted my decisions in my continuing education and future career. After speaking with behavior technicians and BCBA's, I have learned that my passion is in the right place. Although very few disadvantages, a clear disadvantage is the distance of VIA from JMU. However, I do believe that this experience greatly outweighs the drive to Charlottesville. In fact, my supervisor and the OBS director, Ashley Stonemetz-Walding has been very supportive and understanding of the distance from JMU and has allowed me to complete some hours at home. She has been extremely welcoming and compassionate, which is also evident in her work ethic. Something I greatly appreciate is that she made me feel comfortable to come to her with questions, suggestions and ideas. Overall, the staff at VIA has been very friendly and open to questions. Thankfully, they want me to learn about the student and the programs that they are running. Because the staff has had various training experiences, I have had a wonderful learning opportunity that is conducive for my interest in ABA therapy.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my internship at VIA and am sad that it is coming to an end. Thankfully, I plan to continue similar work and practicums within a graduate school curriculum. Not only does this internship look wonderful on a resume but it has taught me so much that I can talk about the knowledge and experiences I have gained in future interviews. I would highly recommend VIA as a field placement to anyone who is interested in ABA, working with children or would like to gain a clinical experience. This has been an invaluable learning opportunity that I am extremely grateful for and I would suggest anyone interested in this position to highly consider it.

### ***Spring 2019 – Londyn Gentry***

The Virginia Institute of Autism's mission states they are "dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative evidence based-programs in education, outreach, and adult services". VIA is made up of three major components which include their



VIA school, outpatient behavioral services (OBS), and their adult academy. VIA outpatient behavioral services provide evidence-based therapies, parent training, speech therapy, and consultation services to address a variety of needs. The staff includes psychologists, board-certified behavior analysts, speech pathologists, and registered behavior technicians. OBS provides both clinic and home services.

VIA provided me with a number of experiences and opportunities as a field placement student. Upon arrival, my supervisor sat me down and asked how this site was applicable to my career goals and what she could do to provide me with a well-rounded grasp of working in this specific field. I explained that I plan to further my education and become a BCBA myself and eventually open my own practice for low-income families. I wanted to observe every aspect that goes into therapy services for a child, both hands on and behind the scenes. I really appreciated my supervisor's emphasis on how she could help me make the most of this experience and it immediately made me feel comfortable and encouraged me to truly make sure I gave my all. I began my time there by simply observing the RBTs throughout their sessions with children. During these sessions, programs designed by the BCBA's were implemented directly with the children. I was able to get a first-hand look at what providing therapy services looked like. Prior to working at VIA, I assumed that the BCBA's implemented the programs, I soon learned that it was actually the RBT, with the occasional help of the BCBA that implemented the programs. This introduced me to a career field I didn't know existed and realized the importance of being an RBT before going straight into a graduate program. Before making any major decision it is important to do some sort of test run or experience before committing; you wouldn't buy a car without doing a test ride. And that is exactly what being an RBT is – it provides you with a glimpse in the field of special needs before going on to make it your career. I now will be working as an RBT at a clinic in northern Virginia before continuing next year to earn my Master's in applied behavioral analysis. Another opportunity provided at VIA was watching therapy techniques I learned in my psychology classes being used, such as functional analyses and preference assessments. I found this important to note because you can read in a textbook about therapy techniques but until they are applied to an actual person it's harder to understand how they actually work. This again emphasizes my point above – the importance of experience – since I was able to gain knowledge in my classes and real-life examples at my internship. VIA also provided me with the opportunity to conduct research. As a part of the field placement program, you are asked to complete a contribution project at your site that helps solve a problem either you observed yourself or your supervisor asked you solve. My supervisor came to me with a need for the clinic and asked that I come up with ways to address it but also include a research component into it to track if my solution was actually making a difference. This included taking a baseline measurement, creating a proposal, and presenting my treatment plan to the entire leadership staff. I felt this was an amazing opportunity because it allowed me to use again the skills I learned at school in the real world. Lastly, I find it important to note that I felt my experience at VIA didn't feel limited or confined to one thing. When I told my supervisor I wanted to gain the maximum amount of observation hours in all areas of the clinic and VIA itself she made sure to do just that. I was able to visit the VIA school and observe the daily life of the staff there and discuss with the leadership staff there wait separates them from the clinic. I also



was allowed the opportunity to attend two home sessions. This was really important for me because I got to see the other side of programs implemented at homes due to the fact a lot of problem behaviors mostly occur there, as well, my observations of the home sessions prepped me for what I will be doing myself as an RBT since most of my sessions at my new job will be done in home.

In all, I felt my expectations as a field placement student at VIA were not only met but were surpassed with the opportunities provided. All members of the staff were encouraging and warm immediately upon my arrival. I feel I can only speak of the advantages of being a field placement student at VIA due to the fact my supervisor did everything in her power to make sure I was not only enjoying myself but learning and growing during my time there. As I stated before, a major advantage of my field placement at VIA was the experience I gained that led me earning my current position as an RBT post-grad. One limitation of VIA is that it's located in Charlottesville, which is about 55 min to an hour away. For me, this only affected my hours when the weather inhibited me from attending and I struggled toward the end to make up those hours. The only disadvantage I can truly think to state is that I have to leave.

My time at VIA has taught or emphasized two things: patience and that the little things matter. I'd like to think my patience has increased when it comes to giving myself time to learn new things. I was given multiple opportunities to lead programs with children and sometimes I didn't do it correctly right away or messed up and would let that occasionally get to me out of fear. I was nervous that if I couldn't lead a program now, how I would be able to do it as an actual RBT? As I spoke with a lot the RBTs at VIA, their comments about when they first started implementing programs and messed up all the time reminded me that things take time and that I should not stress out just because I didn't get it right the first time. Lastly, I say the little things matter in regards to a child's progression during sessions and that the everyday tasks we complete are sometimes monumental steps for children with ASD. One specific story comes to mind as an example: a child who was working on manding during instructional time raised his hand without prompting to answer a question and the whole room lit up because this was a skill his BCBA and RBTs had been working so hard to get him to acquire. To a person who has no experience working in the field, this could seem minuscule, but to us it was a reminder of why we even want to work in this field – to improve the life of a child or adult with ASD by even the slightest amount.

***Spring 2019 – Samantha Frain***

The Virginia Institute of Autism's (VIA) mission is to help individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder overcome the challenges of Autism through innovative and evidence based programs in education, outreach and adult services. The services offered at VIA are centered around each adult and child that are treated. More specifically, VIA implements programs that are designed to help the families in ways that are specific to them. My experience at VIA was different from other field placement students in that I was one of the first to participate in their



adult services program. I found that I really enjoyed my experience within the adult program and I could see myself potentially working with this population later on. During my experience within adult services, I was able to observe a Functional Behavior Assessment for the first time. I was also trained in how to implement functional communication programs and how to run group activities. I had the opportunity to take data on a variety of behaviors such as verbal stereotypy, aggression, self-injurious behavior and more.

My experience at VIA was overall really great. At first, I was unsure about what my place was. However, when I began in the adult services I felt that I had found my place. It was really nice to feel needed and like I was actually making a difference at my site. I know that some people often overlook VIA because of the commute to Charlottesville, but I would encourage them not to. Driving an hour was worth the experience and I think that it is one that can direct people towards a career that is very rewarding. I think that most people would automatically assume that working with adults is not as fun as the kids. Although I love working with kids, I found that the adults are just as fun. Applied Behavior Analysis is contingent no matter the age that you are working with.

Working with the adults was definitely an adjustment for me, as most of my experience has been with kids. I was able to catch on pretty quickly and the staff was extremely supportive the entire time. I will admit that the behaviors of the adults can be a little bit intimidating and sometimes frightening at first. With that being said, it is also extremely important to understand and learn how to treat those behaviors. I think that is definitely one of the most important things that I have learned thus far. I am really happy that I found I like all areas of ABA. I knew that going into VIA I wanted to become a BCBA, but I never suspected that I would enjoy working with the adult population. I think that this window allowed me to see new opportunities in the field of ABA. I hope that one day I can return to working with the adult population. I am really excited to see how I can use what I have learned in my career and future.

### ***Spring 2018 – Veronica Wood***

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

My days were typically split half and half with session observation and working on projects for VIA. I was able to observe sessions with almost all of the children that regularly



attended VIA during the days/hours I worked. I was also paired with one client and his behavior technician and was able to attend their sessions together every morning. During their sessions I was able to learn more first-hand how ABA techniques are used in a hands-on way, and I was even able to practice using some of them myself. It's one thing to learn about these techniques in a classroom, but being able to see and practice them hand-on is a much greater learning experience and gives you a deeper understanding.

I also helped with the creation and implementation of a staff wide incentive program "VIA Bucks". I created a fake currency, which could be earned by employees for doing various behaviors that improved the work environment (getting session notes in on time, keeping office spaces neat and tidy, and meeting billable hours). They could then exchange these "VIA Bucks" for various rewards located in the "VIA Store" I created as well. Along with these two experiences I was also able to help with the creation of any materials behavior technicians may need for their sessions.

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

I have truly enjoyed each day of my field placement at VIA and I'm so sad for it to be coming to an end. Everyone who works there is so welcoming and genuinely wants to help you learn. My supervisor Julie was extremely helpful and was sure to set me up with interesting opportunities day to day and was always there to answer any questions I had. She also offered me many opportunities to challenge myself and attempt the use of various ABA techniques with the children. Another great advantage to taking a field placement at VIA is that there are very few opportunities like it. This opportunity looks amazing on a resume and gives you irreplaceable hands-on experience in the field of ABA. The only obvious disadvantage to this placement is the distance from JMU. The drive takes about an hour there and back. This disadvantage, however, is greatly outweighed by the numerous opportunities it provides you with. The employees at VIA make the work environment very fun and welcoming. If anyone were at all considering this position I would tell him or her to go for it! It's an amazing opportunity you wouldn't want to miss out on.

***Fall 2017 – Jessica Hiter***

Virginia Institute of Autism in Charlottesville works with individuals diagnosed with autism using behavior analysis techniques. The mission at Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) is



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

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

I acquired and practiced many skills at my placement. Some most prominent are professional development, experience in a clinical setting, experience working hands-on with kids who have autism, facilitating group activities, and data collection. At VIA, I worked among a group of Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, clinical psychologists, and other professionals in order to develop a comprehensive treatment for the client. Additionally, I worked with and led parents during the parent training sessions with the clinical psychologist. In a clinical setting, I observed how to set up the environment to gain the child’s attention, create and use supplies available, and collect data during the session. I learned more about how to take precise data in a behavior analysis setting and which types of data is appropriate across different settings. I then used inter-observer reliability with the behavior technicians to check for accuracy. I was able to complete these tasks independently after some practice. Experience working with children with autism in this kind of career path is so important. Each child is different, and I was able to learn how to work with them better in a



behavior analysis clinical setting. I was even able to lead a few of my own trials with the children on skills such as feeding, peer interactions, and using words for communication. Additionally, I facilitated some of my own planned activities such as the craft sessions. I had learned enough about each of the children that I could incorporate what ABA skills they were working on into the craft time. This placement has definitely impacted my future career. I really enjoyed working with the kids, but it surprised me how much I also loved working with the parents in the Jumpstart program. As with most placements, this placement is also a great resume builder. I was just recently offered a job with a company that was very impressed about my internship at VIA and the experiences I had during my time there. Not only do I feel as though that will continue in the future, I feel more confident about working in this setting and with this population. It solidified my desire to work with children with autism, however, I would love to look into more treatment options and models before I decide on a definite career path. I am considering ABA, school psychology, or clinical psychology after working with the clinical psychologist for the Jumpstart classes.

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

### ***Fall 2017 – Kimberly Bianco***

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



social and behavioral problems in the hopes to transition children with ASD into the typical school system. OBS helps clients in the clinic, in their homes, and in the school system, and is the location I spent my semester.

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

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

My contribution project consisted of me transferring the paper version of Language for Learning to an interactive SmartBoard version. It was an intense process that involved a lot of planning and trial and error since the SmartBoard was fairly new at VIA. I was given the opportunity to engage my creative side when developing these lessons, which I found incredibly rewarding and exciting. I improved on my autonomy and independence skills throughout this process as well. When confronted with various issues that arose regarding my contribution project, I felt like it was my personal responsibility to discover a solution individually. This not only dramatically improved my ability to figure out problems without asking others for assistance, but it helped me gain confidence in myself and what I was capable of completing. My supervisor, the OBS Director, Ashley Stonemetz-Walding, facilitated an environment that allowed me to embrace my individuality and implement this program that I felt incredibly passionate about. Not only did Ashley facilitate this environment for me, but she also encouraged me the entire time. It was incredibly reassuring to hear from her and many other staff members



that my contribution project would be used at VIA for years to come because it ensured that my hard work and dedication paid off.

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

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

### ***Spring 2016 – Rose Morlino***

My field placement was at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA), which is located in Charlottesville, Virginia. VIA helps individuals overcome the struggles of autism using evidence-based interventions. VIA provides educational services through a school program for individuals 2-22, outpatient services to improve social and behavioral function, and adult services for individuals older than 22. These services can be provided one on one or in group settings. For all services, VIA uses applied behavioral analysis because research shows this



intervention method is the most effective. VIA assesses the needs and individualized goals of every family and dedicates their work to accomplishing those goals. I specifically worked with Outpatient Behavioral services addressing social and behavioral problems through one on one or group sessions.

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

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

There are many advantages to interning at VIA. As mentioned above, there are a plethora of opportunities to gain experience and knowledge in the field of applied behavioral analysis. These opportunities include learning how to create and implement intervention lesson plans, learning to collect data while working with a client, and learning to assess a client's progress. Along with these opportunities, my supervisor, Julie Patterson, allowed me to dictate the different aspects of VIA that I wanted to experience. For example, I am really interested in Functional Analyses (FA). I was able to meet with a coordinator who has a lot of experience



with FAs to learn about their purpose and the different modifications available. I was also able to sit in on meetings to discuss an FA being run with one of the client's. I was able to see the client's data charts and watch videos of the actual FA. Interning at VIA also provides you the opportunity to experience many different types of services.

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

### ***Fall 2015 – Taylor Livesay***

My field placement was at the Virginia Institute of Autism (VIA) in the Outpatient Behavioral Services. VIA is located in Charlottesville, Virginia, near the University of Virginia and approximately one hour away from James Madison University. VIA is dedicated to helping people overcome the challenges of autism through innovative, evidence-based programs in education, outreach and adult services. The organization's core values include strategic leadership (LEAD), innovation and evidence-based (CREATE), and systems transformation (CHANGE) into planning, program development and operational activities. These services and programs produce individual, family and community outcomes. These outcomes are then analyzed to enlighten consequent program development and improvement. These services reach out to both children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I specifically worked with children receiving direct one-on-one services in the outpatient building. I also worked directly with my supervisor to lead a social skills program named Pathways, which services kids from ages 7 all the way to 22. Pathways focuses on enhancing significant social skills in a group



setting where the kids get to interact with their peers and develop specific social skills. Each client has specific goals and are assigned to programs that they are working towards during each session. During my time at VIA, I was able to help clients work towards their specific goals and implement programs with these goals in mind.

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

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



could not leave, so I applied for the entry-level position, Behavior Technician. I am so excited that my internship lead to the first step in my career and my first job in the field of ABA.

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