# PSYCHOLOGY 491 - PROFESSIONAL FIELD EXPERIENCE

West Virginia University - Department of Psychology

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

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Each semester, the Department of Psychology at West Virginia University offers an experience in applied psychology in a variety of settings for 3 to 6 hours of academic credit (with 7 to 13 hours being an option for students ONLY with prior approval from academic advisor and Dr. McWilliams). This program is open to psychology majors only. The department regards this program as an excellent supplement to the regular academic curriculum in psychology for helping students: (a) make rational career choices about psychology, (b) make decisions about pursuing training beyond the baccalaureate degree, and (c) gain “on- the-job” experience that can assist in finding employment after graduation. This course can also meet the requirement for a capstone course.

Practicum students work from 9 to 20 hours a week from the first day of classes to the last day of classes as provided by the University calendar for a given semester or for 12 or more hours per week for up to 12 weeks in the summer. Course credit is based on actual number of hours worked. Supervision for the practicum is generally provided by a licensed or Master's level psychologist or similar professional at the placement site.

Some of the types of placements that are available include mental health centers, programs for children or adults with a variety of emotional and/or behavioral disorders (such as autism, conduct disorder, developmental disabilities, depression, substance abuse problems, etc.), parent training programs, early intervention programs, programs dealing with sexual assault and/or domestic violence, residential care facilities for older adults, testing centers, organizational consulting programs, and school- or home-based treatment centers. A list of placements is available, although students may also arrange their own placement (following a set of provided guidelines) after being accepted into the program.

The specific duties to be fulfilled by the practicum student will vary from site to site, depending upon the age and status of the clients and the nature of the program. Each student develops a Student/Supervisor Internship Agreement with the site supervisor before enrolling in the course. The Student/Supervisor Internship Agreement lists the activities to be engaged in during the placement. Sample activities include assessing clients, applying treatment programs, providing training, participating in workshops, collecting information, visiting clients’ homes, developing educational

materials, conducting literature searches on relevant topics, observing or assisting with therapy, writing case notes, and providing limited clerical assistance. Practicum students also must attend meetings and complete assignments determined by the Psychology 491 course coordinator. Access to the Internet is necessary for completion of these assignments.

Students sometimes live off-campus during the practicum semester, depending upon the location of the practicum site and number of hours of work for which they have contracted. As with on-campus students, practicum students are responsible for their own living and transportation arrangements in the area where they will be working during the semester.

## Prerequisites

There are few absolute criteria for admission to the program and the various placements. In order to be considered for the Psychology 491 program, students must be declared psychology majors and must be in their junior or senior year. Students must also have completed at least 15 credit hours of psychology courses prior to the semester in which they plan to perform the practicum.

## Course Credit and Work Hours

Students earn 1 credit for every 45 hours of work completed at the practicum. Thus, for a normal 15-week fall or spring semester, 3 credits are earned for 9 hours per week of work (3 credits x 45 hours of work = 135 hours of work; 135 hours of work divided by 15 weeks = 9 hours per week). Students enrolling in Psychology 491 during the Summer term typically work for 12 weeks, although some placements may be for shorter or longer periods. Working 12 hours per week for 12 weeks earns 3 credits. Full time work is an option in the Summer term only and would equate to 10 credits for 12-weeks of full-time work. Students may repeat Psychology 491 up to a maximum of 18 credit hours.

During the practicum semester, the student will not work on any state and national holidays that regular employees of the practicum agency receive off. Students may, on occasion, be asked to work during weekends or evenings, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Each placement has somewhat different policies on absences from work because of illness or other personal reasons. Holidays and sick/vacation days will be specified for each placement in the Student/Supervisor Internship Agreement completed at the beginning of the placement. University holidays, such as Spring break, are not automatically provided--these and other vacation or sick days must be arranged directly with the practicum site. **Note, however, that only hours actually worked will be considered in determining the number of credit hours earned.**

Psychology 491 is a formal university course. Students are expected to register for Psychology 491 as they would for any other course (after being accepted and a background check completed). Students must be enrolled in the course at the same time that they complete their hours at their placement. Students must pay regular university tuition for this course.

A background check is required by WVU for all placements that require work with individuals younger than 18 years. In addition, some placement settings may require students to complete another background check, sometimes at the student’s own expense (currently around $50).

Students may, in some cases, receive financial compensation from the placement site as well as course credit for their practicum work. Also, in some cases, with advance planning, it may be possible for students to be employed as work-study students through WVU for their work at their placement. If you qualify for work study, you may be qualified for Federal Community Based Work Study, in which case it might be possible to be paid for your practicum work. More information is available from the WVU Financial Aid Office. Any arrangements whereby a student is paid for practicum work must be approved by Dr. McWilliams. Psychology 491 credit will be given only for the portion of work that meets specified guidelines for the course.

No more than 18 hours of Psychology 491 can count toward graduation. Hours earned in Psychology 491 are treated as elective credits and are not counted in the 42 credit hours of psychology to which a major earning a B.A. degree is otherwise limited (however, see the exception described in the next paragraph). That is, a major may take a total of 42 credit hours of psychology courses other than Psychology 491.

Three credits of Psychology 491 can be used to meet the requirement for a capstone experience. Students taking Psychology 491 as their capstone experience must complete several additional activities as part of the course. The three credits taken for the capstone experience do count toward the 42 credit limit for B.A. students.

Students are expected to adhere to University regulations regarding academic dishonesty, sexual harassment, and other codes of conduct and academic behavior as specified in West Virginia University policies (see [http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office\_of\_student\_conduct/student\_conduct\_code).](http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office_of_student_conduct/student_conduct_code)) Violations of these policies will be addressed for Psychology 491 as they would for any other academic course.

## How to Enroll in the Psychology 491 Field Experience

**1. Read this document thoroughly**, and make some tentative decisions about when and where you would like to do a practicum placement. Discuss your plans with your advisor, if possible.

**2 . Attend the Psychology 491 information meeting** in the semester prior to the semester in which you plan to schedule your practicum. Up-to-date information about available placements and application procedures will be provided at this meeting. In addition, you may be able to meet with representatives from some of the sites you are interested in at this meeting.

1. **Submit an Application and Screening Form.** Return the application form via the webform on the Field Experience website. Recommendations are an optional component you may add to your application. Those are also submitted via webform. You will be contacted if your application is not complete or if you cannot be accepted into the program.
2. **You will receive an e-mail message** letting you know if you have been approved for the program and providing instructions on how to interview for and obtain a placement by the date listed on the Field Experience website.
3. **Arrange to interview with one or more of the site supervisors for whom you are given contact information.** Unless you are setting up your own placement at a site not listed in the list of available sites, you may only interview at the sites listed in your interviewing materials. These initial meetings are conducted like job interviews. You should dress accordingly (casually but neatly) and be prepared to talk about your relevant experiences and professional goals. Also, be prepared to ask each supervisor about the placement and job responsibilities--you will want to leave these meetings with a clear idea of what you would be doing during your practicum. If you have a resume or CV, bring that along with you as well.
4. **Select the site you prefer for your practicum and contact the site supervisor to accept the position once it has been offered to you.** Once you are accepted to a practicum, let the other sites that you interviewed with know that you have obtained a placement.
5. **After receiving an offer of acceptance from the placement site, make another appointment with the site supervisor to complete and sign a Practicum Agreement Form and the Practicum Agreement Form by the date listed on the Field Experience website.** Depending on the site, you may be able to complete these contracts at your interview meeting. Be prepared to do so just in case.This form is available on the Field Experience website and **must be signed by both you and the site supervisor.** There are many blanks on the contract and you (the student) must fill out the forms in their entirety in order for them to be accepted and to be approved for registration.
6. **Respond to request for background check**, as needed. If you are required by WVU to complete a background check (i.e., if you will be working with individuals younger than 18 years old), you should monitor your MIX email account for a message from Sterling (a company partnered with WVU). Respond to the message as soon as possible in order to ensure that your background check will be complete in time for you to begin your placement.
7. **Register online for the course.** The process of applying for the program and arranging for a placement site takes some time, so you should not expect to enroll in PSYC 491 at the same time as you enroll in your other classes. After you have successfully completed this process (which includes application, interview, background check, and completed contracts), you will receive an e-mail message telling you that your practicum placement has been approved, and that you have been given permission to register for the course (meaning your hold has been lifted). Sign into STAR (either directly or through your MIX account) and register for the course. Note that you will not be able to register unless your registration “window” is open. Be sure to enter the correct number of credits for Psychology 491; otherwise you will only be registered for the default of 1 credit. Online registration for Psychology 491 **must** be completed by the end of the first week of classes (earlier in the summer session); late adds are not allowed.
8. **Obtain a course syllabus (and any other necessary forms) from Dr. McWilliams.** These materials will be distributed via email to registered students in the week prior to courses beginning in any given semester. These materials are also available throughout the semester on eCampus.

**Please Note:** Acceptance into a Psychology 491 practicum placement is not guaranteed. Prospective students must first be approved for participation by Dr. McWilliams and then must interview at and be accepted by the placement of interest. As stated above, the entire application process takes some time to complete, so it is important that students note and adhere to the deadlines for applying to the program, submitting a completed Student/Supervisor Internship Agreement, and registering for the course.

## Guidelines on Arranging Your Own Placement

In some cases, students admitted to the Psychology 491 program will find placements at sites listed above. In other cases, however, students may need or want to arrange placements at other sites. Particularly when students are home for the summer, they may prefer placements at sites near their homes. These guidelines are designed to help students arrange appropriate placements.

In general, students should follow the sequence of steps described above. Students may contact potential sites to obtain information about the site and to explore the possibility of a placement before being approved by Dr. McWilliams for the program, but should not formally agree to a placement before receiving approval. Students also must obtain approval from Dr. McWilliams (by submitting the Request for Placement Approval form) for a particular site before making final arrangements for a placement.

The types of sites that are appropriate for this program include any kind of programs or organizations that assist people in dealing with psychological or behavioral problems or challenges. Examples include, but are not limited to, mental health centers, programs for children or adults with a variety of emotional and/or behavioral disorders (such as autism, conduct disorder, developmental disabilities, depression, substance abuse problems, etc.), parent training programs, early intervention programs, programs dealing with sexual assault and/or domestic violence, testing centers, organizational consulting programs, and school- or home-based treatment centers. Some programs involving animal training may also be appropriate.

More important considerations than the description of the program, however, are the actual activities that the practicum student will be engaging in and the nature of the supervision that will be provided to the student. Students should be involved in activities that are clearly related to psychology and that someone with a bachelor’s degree or higher might be hired to perform for the organization. Possible activities include, but are not limited to, assessing clients, applying treatment programs, providing training, participating in workshops, collecting behavioral data, visiting clients’ homes, developing educational materials, conducting literature searches on relevant topics, observing or assisting with therapy, writing case notes, and providing limited clerical assistance.

Menial tasks, such as clean-up, clerical work, and custodial caregiving must be kept to a minimum. The student must be supervised on a regular basis (at least weekly) by someone with at least a master’s degree or license in psychology or a related human services field (or comparable qualifications or experience).