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Internship Essay  
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### My Experience with the Whole Self Center

The Whole Self Center (WSC), established in 2002, is a Maryland Medical Assistance Autism Waiver Provider. The program provides services for children and adolescents who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum. As an Autism Waiver Provider, the WSC offers Family Training, Intensive Individual Support Services (IISS), and Respite Care. I have been employed with the Whole Self Center as an IISS technician and a Respite Care worker since August of 2010. I was able to turn this opportunity into an internship, as approved by the Career Development Center, so that I may take the time to coordinate with the Clinical Director to receive and respond to direct feedback, become more informed about the program, career opportunities, expectations, and specific information regarding my clients.

As an IISS technician I implement intensive, one-on-one supportive interventions with children who have autism. Intensive Individual Support Services is based on a treatment plan specifically designed for a child. The treatment plan is created by the assigned Family trainer, the family, and the Clinical Director. The responsibilities that I must perform involve the implementation of the treatment plan within the home and community of the family I have been assigned. These responsibilities can include; preventing or diffusing crises, promoting developmental and social growth, providing the child with behavior management skills, giving the child a sense of security and safety, assisting the child with maintaining self-sufficiency and impulse control,

improving the child's positive self-expression and interpersonal communication, improving the child's ability to function and cooperate in the home and community, reversing negative behaviors and attitudes, and fostering stabilization and structure. As a Respite Care Worker, I must take on the role of care-giver by keeping the child safe in whatever environment he or she is in. The primary goal of Respite is essentially to keep the child well-cared for in natural settings, and can include overnight stays in the child's home while the parents are away.

By becoming an intern for the Whole Self Center, I was able to achieve several of my initial goals. Academically, it was important for me to intern so that I may fulfill the requirements necessary to graduate. Meeting this goal will be rewarding, however, not as rewarding as the amount of experience and satisfaction I have gained since working with my clients and coordinating with my site supervisor. My main personal and professional goal as an IISS technician was to become as effective as possible. I have always been passionate about supporting my clients to develop their abilities in the areas that they are lacking. I personally feel that all people, regardless of disability, can reach a potential that exceeds expectations if they have the right amount of guidance, warmth, encouragement, and belief in themselves. I have been able to observe and directly assist in the growth of my clients towards reaching their highest potential in every session that I conduct. By interning as an IISS and Respite Care Worker, I was able to learn more about what it takes to be an excellent employee and found that I possess the majority of these qualities.

A concern that I had prior to beginning my internship was learning that I was not fulfilling all of the responsibilities as a technician. After meeting with my site supervisor and doing research independently, I clarified my responsibilities and found that I have been accomplishing the goals of my career. Additionally, I was concerned about the availability of my clients and more experienced technicians and Family trainers. People employed with the WSC are only expected to work up to 1 hour a week with each client and schedules are always flexible. Therefore, getting shadowing opportunities and acquiring all the necessary hours for this internship is a difficult process. Most of the expectations that I had for the internship were met during my actual experiences. I expected to speak to and receive feedback from both my site supervisor and my faculty sponsor about ways in which I could improve.

Specifically, my learning objectives included; gaining information about the Whole Self Center, discovering career options within the field of working with youth with disabilities, researching about autism spectrum disorder, gain information about how to become a better observer and take more effective session notes, learn about different behavioral techniques applied within the WSC, shadow under more experienced technicians and family trainers, and explore employment opportunities within the agency. My site supervisor was able to provide me with the majority of information regarding these learning objectives. She was able to supply me with documents explaining the Whole Self Center in depth (including other job opportunities within the organization), and also shared her personal experiences she has had with the company. In sharing her experiences, I learned how she ended up in the career position

she has attained. She has received several degrees and around my age worked as a camp counselor for youth with disabilities. She felt that I am on the right path by gaining experience through working with children at the Boys and Girls club and with the Whole Self Center. My site supervisor also explained how to make effective observations and notes by depicting countless examples and scenarios to help illustrate what I should be looking for in the sessions with my clients. In a meeting we had, my supervisor explained in-depth the behavioral techniques IISS technicians are by opening up the whole self monitoring system, which is used to document sessions electronically. With the monitoring system, I enter data related to the level of prompting my clients needed to complete a task to develop a skill outlined on the Treatment Plan. The goal is that The Whole Self Center supervisors will use the answers provided by IISS technicians in the IISS fill-in-the-blank summary questions to create a variety of informative reports, including Functional Behavior Assessments, to better monitor the individualized intervention strategies and our clients' progress. The entry of session notes I have completed serves as evidence for the achievement of this goal.

Another goal I accomplished was exploring other career opportunities in the field of working with children with disabilities. I have researched Occupational Therapy consequently due to my experiences with the WSC. In this field I can assist people with disabilities across their lifespan to participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations). I learned that Towson University has both an Occupational Therapy master's program and an Autism Studies post-baccalaureate certificate program. My plan after graduation will be to continue

working with the same clients for a year or so, and then apply to the programs at Towson. Also, I am fortunate enough that the WSC allows me to work with families all over Maryland, so I will be able to remain employed as a technician and continue to help families and their children in my pursuit. Unfortunately, I have been unable to complete the goal of gaining shadowing experience under more experienced technicians and family trainers due to confidentiality reasons schedule conflicts.

Several classes that I have completed have provided me with knowledge to support my success in my internship. Learning disabilities set the foundation for my education about autism. I learned about the diagnosis, accommodations for, and the behaviors of children that have autism. I also learned about its' function as an "umbrella" disorder, meaning that the spectrum of disabilities seen in autism is broad (can range from high functioning to low functioning). Working closely with children that have autism helped bring this information to life. I have been able to apply knowledge from classes such as educational psychology, counseling, and exceptionality within the internship as well. For example, I learned about operant conditioning, a behavioral technique used to encourage and discourage behaviors through the implementation of positive and negative reinforcements. Both of my clients are under plans which include behavioral techniques similar to operant conditioning in order to promote acceptable behaviors. I am naturally able to bring comfort to, listen and understand individuals. I am able to receive more information about individuals and therefore become more able to offer assistance and relief. In that respect, the counseling course I have taken has introduced me to variety of techniques to draw out and interpret

emotions of clients. My experience at this college has helped me to gain confidence in speaking to the parents of my clients and employees within the career. In every class I have had, opportunities to discuss my opinions are granted and encouraged. Oral presentations are also a large factor in every class I have completed and helped me to overcome the anxiety of public speaking. The presentations gave me the opportunity to practice sharing my knowledge with others. Many of my classes also stressed the critical analysis of articles and ideas. This has helped me to think more abstractly so that I may use more creativity when generating activities for my clients. Examples of creativity in activities include role-playing and story telling assignments. Furthermore, I have learned about theories of development by Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, and Piaget in several of my classes. Theories of development assist me in understanding and considering where my clients' thinking and interest lies according to their age. This is important as I need to understand how to relate to each client to make their assignments and experiences with me memorable and life changing.

Prior to working with the WSC, I had an interest in entering the field of guidance counseling. I liked the idea of individually helping students to grow in their career/academic achievement, assisting in the regulation of their behaviors, and emotions in order to get the best out of their lives. I have worked at the Boys and Girls club for almost two years and enjoyed working with young children, guiding them, supporting them, engaging in activities and getting to know them. My interest in working with people who have autism sparked when I met my first roommate at SMCM. People "warned" me before meeting her that she was strange and hard to live

with. She had aspergers, a high functioning form of autism and was socially isolated. She had bad experiences with previous roommates because she has a difficult time understanding social cues, had a speech impediment, and hobbies that are not considered average. She also had repetitive patterns of behaviors which confused others, causing them to distance themselves from her. She was also easily irritated by things that might be considered minor by others. I refused to judge her based on what others said and actually found her to be very unique, intelligent, creative, and well-intentioned. I spent time with her; talking, listening, playing games, engaging in activities she enjoyed, and going places with her. I found that she became more outgoing and less anxious around others. I felt that, simply by being a genuine friend, I made a difference in her well-being and I enjoyed that feeling. I also saw a more empathetic, intimate and interpersonal side to her. We still keep in touch though she has graduated. The next event that moved me to become more interested in working with people that have autism was when my co-worker was hired at the Boys and Girls club where I am currently employed. She began to bring her son, who would later become my client, and I was given the opportunity to interact with him on a regular basis. When I met my second client after being employed with the WSC, my eyes were opened even more to the broad spectrum of the disorder which made me more curious and interested in the disorder. I became very passionate about helping my clients to develop in areas that would benefit them in their future endeavors. My interests changed from guidance counseling to working with youth and adults who have learning disabilities as a result of my interactions and experiences with people who have autism.

People with autism are often isolated and I started to feel that this was because some people do not have the patience or tolerance to socialize with them. People may doubt their abilities or misinterpret their behaviors, which may simply make a person with autism less comfortable and less interested in interacting with others. I found in my experiences, that people diagnosed on the autism spectrum have much to say but may have not had enough positive social experiences to develop in that area. I also find that, regardless of how “low-functioning” they may be, each person with autism has a special niche which can either be nurtured or ignored. I have become very close with my clients and wonder what will happen to them when they grow to be 21, and are unable to receive assistance from the WSC. Autism is a disorder that requires ongoing support. I feel that people with disabilities have the aptitude to succeed in several areas and deserve to be involved in their communities so that they can be more independent and get the most out of life.

My experiences with the WSC have inspired me to work individually with people who have disabilities. If I could have done things differently, I would have prearranged meetings from ahead of time so that I may gain more shadowing experiences as this would help me to become better prepared for the field of my interest in the future.



