Necessity and Opportunity: the 1-Year Master's ABA Program at Auburn University

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Abstract The Auburn University Master of Science program in Applied Behavior Analysis was designed to accommodate not only the requirements of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board for approved course sequences and practicum training, but unavoidable limitations in faculty and other resources. These limitations were incompatible with the more traditional 2-year curriculum model, so a 1-year program was designed that met the necessary conditions. This article describes the resulting academic and practicum curriculum, the key funding mechanisms that allowed the program to develop, and the opportunities and benefits that this model afforded.

Keywords Behavior analysis · Graduate training programs

The Necessity of a 1-Year Master's Program

The original features of the Master of Science program in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) at Auburn University were dictated by existing circumstances. The blessing of the department chair in 1999 to start such a program came with nothing other than that approval. There was no promise of faculty lines, budgetary largess, or even the permission of the graduate school. The latter was not difficult to secure, given that the department already had state-university system approval for a terminal master's degree the department was not using. Otherwise, there were only two faculty members who might be persuaded to teach relevant courses, and that was it. There were no relationships with potential practicum sites or funds to cover any expenses.

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The first step was to address these last two challenges. The author had previously collaborated with the state's Division of Mental Retardation, as it was then named, to improve its capacity to deliver ABA services. This relationship provided the opportunity to seek financial support from the state by arguing that an ABA program at Auburn University would increase the state's badly needed internal capacity for expertise in this field. (In 1999, there were only two Board Certified Behavior Analysts [BCBAs] in Alabama.) The Division was willing to offer an annual grant of \$72,000 to the proposed ABA program, though it was understood at Auburn that such generosity would not last indefinitely.

Gaining the cooperation of a local human services agency that contracted with the state to provide services to adults with intellectual disabilities required considerably more negotiation. The eventual agreement allowed students in the ABA program to obtain practicum training at a 12-bed group home in town. The students were not considered employees and were not paid for their time. However, the agency benefited from their growing expertise and time on site, as well as the involvement of the ABA program's practicum supervisors. The agency also found a way to generate state funds based on the student's hours.

The next step was to develop a curriculum model. The key constraint was that all coursework would for the most part be the responsibility of only two faculty members, though both were trained in behavior analysis and had long experience in developmental disabilities. This limitation discouraged consideration of a 2-year curriculum model. Scheduling Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) specified courses over a 2-year period would have meant enrolling a new class only every other year to avoid needing to teach a selection of both first and second year coursework each year, thereby exceeding typical faculty teaching loads. Furthermore, a 2-year program that might arrange practicum training only in the second year would have made it more difficult to develop relationships with service agencies because practicum students would not be continuously available from year to year.

There were additional considerations that precluded a 2-year program model. For example, requiring a 2-year commitment from students forces a greater financial burden than a 1-year program, which in turn limits the pool of potential applicants—a concern when starting a new graduate program. Many applicants would be able to enroll only if they were able to concurrently earn money through some kind of employment. Although some might find a job that afforded professionally relevant experience, others would be distracted from their studies by part-time jobs unrelated to ABA. Whatever the source of employment, students would be spending considerable time each week not directly engaged in the academic program.

All of these factors encouraged a 1-year curriculum, although it was not without challenges as well. Teaching all of the required courses in 1 year was logistically feasible, but an overriding goal of the program was to prepare graduates who were fully qualified to take the BCBA examination. This required offering at least 750 h of practicum training during the program's 12-month period. The BACB's intensive practicum option was achievable on paper but demanded a relatively high level of supervision. Given the full teaching load the two faculty members would have to shoulder, they would not be able to meet this additional instructional obligation. Furthermore, the provider agencies offering a practicum site did not employ personnel qualified to serve as supervisors, aside from whether such an arrangement would be

suitable in other ways. In other words, a 1-year curriculum model meant that the program would have to employ its own practicum supervisors.

It was also clear that a 1-year model would not allow the program to require students to conduct a master's thesis. Such a requirement is barely compatible with even a 2-year program because some students often take 3 years or more to complete thesis requirements. Not only is this discouraging to students, it requires ongoing allocation of faculty resources that conflict with obligations to new students. As it happens, the faculty members did not view a research thesis as a sufficiently important feature of practitioner training to justify these costs. Furthermore, the graduate school accommodated a nonthesis option, although it demanded some sort of capstone activity.

The decision to design a 1-year curriculum had its own risks. Although it might be appealing to potential applicants—thereby helping to generate a good number of strong applicants each year—it was not clear they would be able to handle a 12-month, three semester program involving a full load of graduate courses interspersed each day with hours of practicum training. Would students have adequate time to study? Would they be able to meet academic expectations in the classroom? Would they perform well at the practicum site? After all, for at least the first portion of the first semester, they would have little to offer. Would they be able to handle the stresses of such an intensive program—essentially a 2-year program compressed into a single year?

Classroom and Practicum Curricula

The basic features of the initial curriculum changed little over the next 8 years. Students took three regular graduate courses in each of three successive semesters as a group. Although course content and sequences varied somewhat over the years, the first semester typically included a basic principles course, a research methods course, and the first of two ABA courses. The second semester included a second ABA course, a course in developmental disabilities or in autism spectrum disorders, and a course in behavioral pharmacology. During the summer semester, students took a course in radical behaviorism, one in ethics (although some ethics content was necessarily taught at the beginning of the year), and a capstone course. The capstone course provided credit for a clinically oriented practicum project that had thesis-like features, including a brief written proposal, a field project usually involving a behavior-change effort of some sort, and a written report that included a limited literature review and methods, results, and discussion sections. Students started these projects halfway through the spring semester and concluded them by the end of July with class presentations.

These nine semester credit hours each term were supplemented by a six credit hour practicum course, which included a weekly 2-h classroom meeting that included content bridging the gap between classroom and practicum training. Practicum training involved an actively managed effort to balance the demands of a systematic classroom curriculum and the day-to-day circumstances at practicum sites. Academic classes were scheduled to accommodate the need for students to be at practicum sites at times that were useful for the agencies. Students were scheduled for 20 to 25 h of practicum work each week, not including small group and individual supervision hours. (This schedule allowed limited time off for school breaks, illness, and other disruptions, and students typically finished the year with about 800 practicum hours.)

Over time, the original practicum agency was replaced with five others, which provided the opportunity to experience different kinds of agencies, consumers, and behavioral needs. All sites were within 45 min driving time of campus. Students were assigned to either two or three agencies for 6 months and then switched to the other two or three agencies for the remaining 6 months, so that each student had substantial training with all five agencies. This meant that when not in class, students were scheduled to be on site at one or more agencies each weekday. These daily schedules were initially made for them, but a systematic plan gradually gave students increasing responsibility for their own scheduling and other duties.

Together, the classroom and practicum components of the program were quite demanding, but standards were kept high for every student. Even a single poor classroom exam or weak performance in practicum work quickly led to remediation efforts. Students were not given an opportunity to do poorly or fall behind because there was no time for gradual self-discovery and improvement. It turned out that there were important benefits to this intensity, however. For example, there were no distractions from total immersion in all aspects of behavior analysis, and it was easy to integrate curriculum topics in a way that would have been more difficult if exposure to all of the curriculum topics had been spread out over 2 years. The relation between classroom course material and practicum activities was experienced every day. Students learned about hard work, careful scheduling, and self-management. They also learned to depend on each other in preparing for classes and exams, in all aspects of their practicum work, and at a personal level.

Arranging Program Funding

Program Funding The aforementioned features of the program curriculum were made possible by two important funding mechanisms. The annual grant from the Division of Mental Retardation was an important source of core funding, but these dollars were not sufficient to meet all program needs. Supplementary funding was therefore sought from the agencies providing practicum opportunities. The rationale for seeking this kind of financial support was that the program was providing agencies with many hours each week of rapidly growing ABA expertise that directly enhanced its services. In addition, the practicum supervisors, who were BCBAs, were at each practicum site for hours each week. In total, depending on the agreed upon level of involvement, each agency site could benefit from up to 175 to 200 h each week of meaningful expertise in ABA. The allocation of these hours to various tasks on site (as well as to associated off-site work) was an actively managed balance between the service interests of the agency and the training interests of the program.

This approach to the relationship with practicum agencies brought in significant funds. A contract with a local school system for consulting services was modest in scope and weekly hours, but it accounted for about \$20,000 annually. On the other hand, a multifaceted relationship with another state agency focusing on training foster, adoptive, and biological parents involved annual contracts of as much as \$175,000. Another agency provided two practicum sites, though it did not contribute funds to the program. Instead, it supported the program by starting a school for children with autism that was largely staffed by program students.

Outside funding permitted the program to hire up to three full-time BCBAs to serve as practicum coordinators. This arrangement solved the challenge of meeting the intensive practicum supervision requirements without fully placing this responsibility on the academic faculty. The faculty members were still very much involved in the practicum component of the program through developing and managing relationships with agencies, supervising the practicum coordinators, and establishing and monitoring the practicum training curriculum. However, the practicum coordinators bore the daily obligation of handling the daily relationship with the agencies, supervising students on site, and conducting individual- and small-group supervision sessions.

The practicum coordinators were recruited from the top graduates of the program. Although this approach risked passing on any weaknesses in the program curriculum, it had the balancing advantage of employing supervisors who were well known to the faculty, had mastered the program curriculum themselves, understood the program's organizational features and instructional objectives, and brought high standards to their supervisory role. These individuals were valued colleagues and contributed as much to student training as did the faculty in the classroom.

In sum, these contracts with practicum agencies provided the means for employing practicum coordinators, which allowed the program to meet the BACB intensive practicum requirements. BACB approval of both the course sequence and the practicum component meant that graduates were able to apply to take the BCBA examination immediately following graduation. In fact, careful planning allowed most to take the examination during the August window within a week or so of graduation. Having just completed their training, students engaged in little preparation for the exam and in most years all passed on the first attempt.

Student Funding A second funding initiative was no less critical to the program's viability. The 1-year curriculum model depended on attracting students who were able to attend a campus-based program on a full-time schedule. It was made clear to applicants when they were offered admission to the program that students were not permitted to work or otherwise be engaged in any activities that were not part of the program, even on weekends. For the first 2 years of the program, students were responsible for meeting this obligation without help from the university. Then, the university changed its assistantship policy so that graduate students who held quarter-time (10 h per week) assistantships were eligible for not only the usual monthly stipend, but a full waiver of tuition—whether in-state or out-of-state. Although the department was not able to offer such assistantships, this revised policy meant that if such funding could be found students could enroll in the program tuition free and receive a modest stipend as well.

Funding for student assistantships was generated by inviting service delivery agencies to sponsor one or more students by contributing the direct costs of quarter-time assistantships, initially about \$7200 for a full year. This “fellowship” program—a label that was easier to explain than the technicalities of university assistantships—depended on two agreements: one with agencies and one with students. First, practicum agencies, other service delivery agencies in the state, and even some out-of-state agencies were approached with the following opportunity. If an agency contributed the necessary funds to support a fellowship, a specific student would be assigned to that agency and would be obligated to work for the agency for 1 year immediately following

graduation. The agency had to guarantee that an appropriate professional position would be available at the end of the year at an appropriate salary. This arrangement meant that an agency could secure the future employment for at least 1 year of a graduate who met the requirements for taking the BCBA examination, an outcome not easily achieved in the competitive national BCBA marketplace. Students who accepted such a fellowship had to agree to accept an assignment to an agency and work for it for 1 year following graduation. (Students holding these assistantships were not assigned any additional work during the school year.)

This arrangement had obvious risks but nevertheless worked quite well. Agency sponsorships were recruited in the spring and early summer, and it was generally not difficult to fund as many fellowships as needed. Fellowships awards were made when students were offered admission to the program, and they were required to accept or reject the option at that time. Most happily accepted the support, even though they did not know what agency might be assigned. The assignment process occurred late in the fall term. Agencies were invited to send a representative to campus to describe their company, the position that was being offered, and the salary and interview interested students. Sometimes students visited an agency or two that interested them, but there was little time available for such travels and students were cautioned not to develop strong preferences. Agencies were especially discouraged from presenting limited preferences of students. After all, they knew little about each student, even after an interview. Once agencies and students had expressed any preferences, the program director, with the advice of faculty and practicum coordinators, made the assignments. These assignments tended to be biased toward student preferences and focused on the best match between agency and student characteristics. Assignments were announced by the end of the fall term and were considered final. Only once did an agency not follow through on its obligations to have a job waiting, and students always met their obligations, sometimes staying with the agency beyond the mandated year.

The fellowship arrangement meant that the program could reasonably require students to commit to a full-time curriculum without the option of outside employment. It also allowed the curriculum to be compressed into a single year, a feature that was appealing to applicants, not to mention necessary to accommodate available faculty teaching hours. The option for stipend support and a full tuition waiver also helped attract a large pool of applicants and gave the faculty the opportunity to select the strongest candidates.

The Opportunities of Efficiency

This description of the Master's ABA Program at Auburn University summarizes a gradual evolution over a period of 8 years. The program began small by design—the first class had only seven students, largely already known through undergraduate coursework at the university. By the third year, there were 11 students, and by the sixth year, there were 15 from all over the country, which was as many as the practicum sites and other features of the program model could accommodate. The mean GRE scores of the entering classes often exceeded those of the department's doctoral programs.

Over the years, a total of five faculty members taught various program courses, but no more than two were substantially involved at any one point. The courses were demanding, and regular in-class examinations encouraged good performance. In some

of the courses, advanced doctoral students from the department's experimental and clinical psychology programs joined the ABA master's students, but at least some of the master's class typically outperformed them.

Although the coursework was intensive, the program's effectiveness depended no less on the equally intensive practicum component. The BACB supervision requirements were organized into a systematic practicum curriculum explicitly coordinated with classroom material to the extent possible. In addition, during the year students had to individually demonstrate mastery of each of task on the BACB's task list, a teaching opportunity enthusiastically met by the practicum coordinators and faculty.

There was some variation in practicum sites over the years, but the arrangements were surprisingly stable. The sites were selected in part because each offered not only training with different consumer populations, but different agency characteristics. Some sites offered more challenges than good opportunities to focus on changing client behavior, but such sites represented the "real world" of service provider agencies and gave students opportunities to learn how to handle nonclinical problems, arguably an important aspect of the responsibilities they would likely face in their careers.

As a 1-year program, it was necessary to address some of the less formal aspects of training ABA practitioners in a carefully planned way. For example, the pace of the program meant that there was little time for students to adjust to the academic demands of graduate school, especially one focused on professional training. Allowing students the first couple of months to figure out for themselves how to prepare for a seminar, study for an exam, or manage their time at a practicum site was too costly academically. The faculty and practicum coordinators therefore organized a progressive sequence of training experiences ranging from simple (how to always be on time) to more complex (how to prioritize obligations or schedule practicum time at different sites). As each semester progressed, students were systematically given more demanding expectations and responsibilities. For instance, practicum coordinators initially set practicum schedules each week, but as the months passed students were given increasing freedom to make their own schedules, although their decision-making was closely monitored. Teaching the students what it meant to be a professional was an ongoing instructional theme.

Although the original design of the Auburn ABA Master's Program's "two years in one" curriculum model was unusual, it worked quite well, as measured by the performance of graduates on the BCBA examination, as well as by less objective criteria. The necessary focus on efficient use of faculty resources, accommodated by an entrepreneurial approach to generating funding support, appeared to strengthen rather than sacrifice the quality of the training experience. The unavoidable integration of classroom and practicum training required by this 1-year model encouraged an effort to fill all waking hours with training opportunities. Although this approach was arduous, it was also an invigorating way to become a behavior analyst.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, working within the limits of faculty teaching hours available at the time, the Auburn program was developed as a comprehensive 1-year professional ABA training experience for as many as 15 students annually. The key features included a three-

semester schedule of nine courses (including a nonthesis capstone project) and a concurrent schedule of practicum training meeting the intensive practicum requirements of the BACB. Funding from state and provider agencies (some of which also offered practicum sites) allowed up to three graduates of the program holding the BCBA credential to be hired as full-time practicum coordinators, and a fellowship program provided assistantship funding from outside agencies for students. The pace of the program did not permit students to participate in any nonprogram activities during the year and required careful design and coordination of classroom and field instruction and close monitoring of student progress. The result of these organizational features was a program that provided students with a comprehensive, highly organized, and intensive professional ABA training experience.

Compliance with Ethical Standards Human or animal participants were not employed for this manuscript, so informed consent was not necessary.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that he has no conflict of interest.