

VLab Research Assistantships (RAships) Prepared by Dr. Angelino Viceisza

Background

Dr. Angelino Viceisza is Associate Professor of Economics at Spelman College and Research Associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research. Dr. Viceisza's primary expertise is in behavioral and experimental economics, with applications in development, household finance, and entrepreneurship. Dr. Viceisza has extensive experience conducting field experiments in a variety of countries, e.g., El Salvador, Ethiopia, Peru, Senegal, the United States, and Vietnam.

VLab is a virtual lab that serves as the umbrella for research and/or teaching assistantships conducted with Dr. Viceisza. Since 2012, more than 30 Spelman students have collaborated with Dr. Viceisza as research assistants (RAs) at VLab, www.angelinoviceisza.com/vlab. They have placed at a range of graduate or predoc programs such as Brookings Institution, Columbia University, Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, Georgia State University (GSU), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, New York University, and University of Maryland, College Park as well as organizations such as Accenture, Atlanta Community Food Bank, CARE, Delta Airlines, Dropbox, Mathematica, and Wells Fargo. For more about the types of research we conduct at VLab, see the "grants" or "papers" sections of www.angelinoviceisza.com.

Expectations

VLab RA-ships are ideally intended for students who (1) are considering graduate school in economics or a related discipline (especially, a Ph.D. degree) and (2) would like co-curricular research experience during their time at Spelman. To get a sense of the tasks that VLab RAs tend to be responsible for, please watch the following video, <https://youtu.be/vtYW-sibENY>. In a nutshell, RAs may be asked to (1) conduct literature reviews; (2) collect, enter, clean, and analyze data (e.g., using software such as Stata and Google Sheets); (3) design survey and experiment instruments (e.g., using software such as Qualtrics); (4) attend or present at internal and external conferences (e.g., Spelman College's Research Day); (5) collaborate with researchers at Spelman and elsewhere; and (6) travel to attend conferences, visit other campuses, or collect data.

Dr. Viceisza will typically set deadlines for completing tasks in consultation with RAs. While RAs should do their utmost to meet such deadlines, it is even more important that tasks be completed well, i.e., diligently, thoughtfully, creatively, and successfully. In other words, it is better for an RA to contact Dr. Viceisza and ask for some additional time to complete a task than to meet a deadline but submit low-quality work. This said, requests for deadline extensions should be exceptions rather than the rule. Moreover, some projects will have truly "hard" deadlines, e.g., when a submission is due to an external party. In short, RAs are expected to complete tasks in a timely and quality manner. **Note that the best RAs are independent problem solvers!**

VLab RAs are typically provided with a "loaner" VLab laptop, containing key software such as Stata and an external hard drive. It is expected that the latter is routinely used to back up the former, in order to avoid loss of any data or important information. Each semester, RAs evaluate their experiences using [this anonymous survey](#).

Benefits: Stipends, letters of recommendation, etc.

To repeat, VLab RA-ships are ideally intended for students who (1) are considering graduate school in economics or a related discipline (especially, a Ph.D. degree) and (2) would like co-curricular research experience during their time at Spelman. So, while VLab positions carry a stipend (details will be discussed in due course), this should NOT be the main reason for why a student joins the lab. I.e., RAs should NOT see VLab as “just another job or opportunity to make money”. This mindset will quickly lead to unsatisfactory performance and termination.

Instead, VLab RA-ships should be seen as a means to:

1. Develop rigorous research skills.
2. Build an academic network, e.g., by interacting with researchers beyond Spelman.
3. Obtain a letter of recommendation from Dr. Viceisza, particularly for graduate school.

Thus, any stipends and/or sponsored travel paid by VLab should be seen as a “bonus”.

Typically, Dr. Viceisza only writes letters of recommendations for students with whom he has significant positive interactions. One such instance is when a student has performed well as a VLab RA for a prolonged period of time. In fact, the best letters of recommendation are reserved for students who have done well in VLab as well as two or more courses with Dr. Viceisza.

Miscellaneous

1. VLab communications will typically occur via email. Timely response to email requests as well as acknowledging receipt of emails is expected. Dr. Viceisza will periodically also send text reminders or updates, especially when those concern urgent requests.
2. Major issues such as task assignments will typically be discussed via calls (e.g., cell, Zoom, or Skype); however, email tends to be the initial mode of contact.
3. Preference may be given to students who are in their first or second year, since experience has shown that such students have ample opportunity to see research projects develop over time. This in turn enhances their learning and skills.

Other advice (also see the VLab website)

Given most VLab RAs are thinking of graduate school, here is some general, related advice:

1. Start conducting research experiences early, i.e., in the first year of your trajectory at Spelman if possible.
2. A suggested course of action is to follow the Ph.D. in economics curriculum sheet and:
 - a) Take math courses such as real analysis, logic, and linear algebra.
 - b) Take a coding course.
 - c) Conduct summer research experiences (SREs) in addition to experiences during the fall and spring semesters. For example:
 - i. End of year 1: On-campus SRE at VLab.
 - ii. End of year 2: Off-campus SRE (discuss options with Dr. Viceisza).
 - iii. End of year 3 or year 4: [AEA Summer Training Program](#).
 - iv. Beyond Spelman: Consider predoc positions prior to applying for Ph.D. programs.