New approaches to teaching the art and science of veterinary medicine

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doi.org/10.2460/javma.22.10.0459

For the first time in the Western College of Veterinary Medicine’s (WCVM) 57-year history, faculty and staff "swept" this year’s teaching awards offered by the University of Saskatchewan (USask) provost. WCVM instructors were selected from cross-campus nominees to win all 4 categories, while a fifth faculty member earned a college-specific teaching award from USask.

These honors demonstrate the caliber of teaching at the WCVM, which has been Western Canada’s center of veterinary education, clinical expertise, and research since 1965. The college has had many gifted teachers during its history, and the next generation continues to introduce novel teaching approaches.

One catalyst for change is the shift to competency-based veterinary education for the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program. Another factor is the college’s collaboration with the USask Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has also motivated creativity in online instruction for WCVM students.

Art-inspired teaching—WCVM associate professor Dr. Nicole Fernandez trained in visual design before becoming a veterinary pathologist. Using her background, she recently worked with colleagues at the WCVM and University of Calgary to introduce veterinary students to observation and description—skills that are especially critical in clinical pathology. The result is a clinical skills lab during which veterinary students study works of art at a Saskatoon gallery and then practice describing these art pieces in group discussions.

Infectious knowledge transfer—WCVM associate professor Dr. Joe Rubin knows most students prefer working with animals than taking his bacteriology and mycology course, but he has found novel ways to highlight how his discipline’s foundational principles connect to everyday practice. When the pandemic forced all courses online, Rubin introduced an assignment requiring students to write sections on Wikipedia pages describing various bacteria. He set up his own YouTube channel (TheRubin-Lab) with instructional videos that are viewed worldwide, plus he curated an open-access collection of microbiology slides and other online images for students’ use.

New simulation model—The WCVM simulation team has created a surgical abdominal wall model that emulates the anatomical layers and action of live canine tissue. Students use the model to practice performing a surgical approach and closure of a dog’s belly wall, while WCVM instructors use it to assess students’ skills before performing live surgeries. The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association has begun using this model as part of its national licensing examination process for international veterinarians.

The WCVM’s Veterinary Medical Centre (VMC) also plays an invaluable role in veterinary education, giving students access to cases, expertise, and technologies all in 1 location. The VMC has a diverse caseload, and the college works closely with its community partners—human societies, northern Indigenous communities, livestock producers, performance sports organizations, and core community health-care groups—to maintain a variety of cases. These community partnerships have inspired WCVM faculty and staff to create meaningful learning experiences that enrich students’ training and can have a lifelong impact on their careers.

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