

Enhancing the role of our furry patients in the veterinary medical curriculum: Animal Instructors Program

Natalia Henao-Guerrero, DVM, MS, DACVAA^{1*}, and Katherine Fogelberg, DVM, PhD²

¹Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences, Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA

²Academic Affairs, Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA

*Corresponding author: Dr. Henao-Guerrero (nguerrer@vt.edu)

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Providing veterinary students with high-quality opportunities to master the necessary skills to achieve a day-1 competence level is part of our mission. Although surgical simulations using tools like virtual reality, silicone suture boards, or even bananas can provide many benefits, surgical skills cannot be acquired with the use of simulators alone. Simulation is simply not the same as “real life.” Exposing students to opportunities to fully develop their surgical skills is ideal, but there are many challenges associated with live animal surgeries. For years, the CVM has partnered with local shelters and animal rescue organizations to provide student-conducted spay surgeries for their dogs and cats. Although this approach met many requirements, we still faced issues that at times interfered with the continuity of the surgical experience.

Challenging times are great opportunities for creating something new and better. Seeking an innovative way to guarantee that our students could have consistent availability of live animals for surgical skill development led to the creation of the “animal instructors” program (AIP). The concept of involving patients in medical education has been growing in the last decades² but due to the absence of verbal communication abilities of our patients, an alternative collaboration was embedded in our veterinary curriculum. This program allows client-owned animals to take part in our teaching mission by providing second-year students with hands-on surgical experience; in return, the animals receive lots of love and a free spay. To make this happen, a team of talented veterinarians, licensed veterinary technicians, and other support staff was assembled. We partnered with our CVM communications group to create a webpage (<https://vetmed.vt.edu/about/animal-care-for-education/animal-instructors-program.html>) and started disseminating the program to our local community through social medial channels.

Once the program was launched on December 8, 2022, we were pleasantly surprised to receive more than 350 dog and cat applications very quickly. To make sure the enrolled animals met the “fully vaccinated” criteria to be in the program, we organized 2 vaccination clinics with the help of SCAVMA student volunteers, who were thrilled to participate. Once fully enrolled, the animal instructors are dropped off at the CVM, and pre-assigned students take them inside to start their 3-day laboratory experience. The AIP team guides our students through a pre-surgical preparation session where many core Entrustable Professional Activities are gained. The next day, the animals are ready to be part of the surgical experience for our students, under the guidance and supervision of experienced veterinarians, residents, anesthesiologists, and licensed veterinary technicians. In addition to anesthesia and surgery skills, the program gives the students the opportunity to learn postoperative management, discharge instructions, case follow-up when the animal instructors return for suture removal, and basic client interactions. Our goal is to make this experience as positive as possible for all involved, but especially to ensure that our furry instructors get love, excellent care, and thank-you bags upon discharge. The program has received very positive feedback from pet owners, students, and staff. We believe we have transformed the way our College provides a vital hands-on learning experience for our second-year students while also given back to our community.

References

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