Building on its world-renowned leadership in researching the aging process, the College of Veterinary Medicine at North Carolina State University (NC State) is establishing a Center for Healthy Aging led by Dr. Natasha Olby, the Dr. Kady M. Gjessing and Rahna M. Davidson Distinguished Chair in Gerontology.

The center will bring NC State faculty members from multiple disciplines under the same umbrella to collaborate on 4 missions: innovative research, cutting-edge education, excellence in clinical practice, and support for pet owners.

“As we continue to break new ground in geriatric medicine, I work more and more with people across the school who are all quite passionate about aging as well,” says Dr. Olby, a professor of veterinary neurology and neurosurgery. “The Center for Healthy Aging will allow us to articulate our goals, pull people together, maybe leverage funding and improve our call for adding more things to the student curriculum that will provide more opportunity for us to reach out to those catalysts.”

Dr. Margaret Gruen, an associate professor of behavioral medicine, and Dr. Katie McCool and Dr. Allison Kendall, both assistant professors of small animal internal medicine, will serve as the center’s executive committee.

Dr. Olby had been recognized primarily as a leading expert on canine spinal cord injury and intervertebral disk disease before she began blazing new trails in studying the aging process upon receiving NC State’s largest endowed professorship in 2017.

A gift from Dr. Gjessing (a 1994 NC State DVM graduate) and her philanthropic mother, Davidson, helped establish the chair in gerontology, which is the first of its kind at a US veterinary school.

As Dr. Olby began to dig into veterinary research on the neuro-aging process, she realized there were little longitudinal data about what happens to the sensory, motor, and cognitive systems in dogs as they age.

In 2018, she began a long-term project to develop ways to describe and measure the changes in cognition, mobility, and vision in older dogs so that her team could potentially devise ways to intervene with treatments or preventative measures.

“And we have done it with great success, being able to look at everything from sleep quality to postural stability, to simple measures of gait speed, to new measures of smell,” she says.

Dr. Olby’s research now looks at the intersection between an aging nervous system and neurodegenerative diseases in dogs in ways that could serve as a model for evaluating cognitive decline progression in humans with Alzheimer disease.

Some of the long-term goals for the center include applying for grants to create fellowships in geroscience and starting a hospice service for pets.

The NC State College of Veterinary Medicine has already introduced geriatric medicine into its curriculum. Dr. Olby has offered a selective in geriatric medicine since 2019, and it is always full. Selectives are fast-paced, intensely focused classes held during a miniterm after final exams that are kept small to offer individualized attention.

“They’ll see lots of older pets who are medically complicated, and education on how to approach them is important,” Dr. Olby says. “It is also heartwarming to see how many students are really thoughtful and passionate about the care of aging pets.”

Dr. Natasha Olby is the Dr. Kady M. Gjessing and Rahna M. Davidson Distinguished Chair in Gerontology at the NC State College of Veterinary Medicine.