Curriculum Changes Enhance Learning at Penn Vet

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By Nancy West

From Penn Vet’s old “Classroom A” to the new state-of-the-art Hill Pavilion, from uniform curriculum to the Academic Majors Program, from classroom lectures presented with slides to digitally recorded surgeries available on-line—this is definitely not your father’s veterinary school education.

Over the past several decades, the educational process at Penn Vet has undergone dramatic changes that have greatly enhanced learning. One place this is most apparent is in the School’s curriculum. Students have enjoyed an increasing amount of flexibility since 1970, when the core-elective curriculum was introduced.

“Before 1970, everyone took the same exact courses, no matter what their interests,” recalled Associate Dean Jeffrey Wortman, V’69. “Penn Vet was one of the first veterinary schools that developed a core-elective curriculum to give students the opportunity to expand their knowledge in those areas of greatest interest to them.”

This trend toward flexibility took another giant leap when the academic majors program was implemented in the 1994–95 academic year. Since then, students have a choice of five majors—equine, food animal, small animal, small and large animal mixed, and large animal mixed—along with increased individual flexibility to tailor their clinical rotations to their own professional career goals. Previously, all students were required to take identical 34-week rotations. Academic majors reduced that to 12 weeks of foundation rotations; the rest are elective.

“Another unique feature of our curriculum is that the core pre-clinical coursework is completed in two and a half years,” noted Dr. Wortman. “So the second half of the third year is all elective.”

Jonathan (“J. D.”) Foster, V’07, a small animal major, has maximized this flexibility in several ways. First, he opted for double early entry into clinical rotations in the second half of his third year, skipping both the small
animal and large animal blocks of elective curriculum. “Double early entry enabled me to take eight to 10 additional rotations,” said J. D. “For me, this was the best choice because I’m a very hands-on learner. Seeing patients with a particular disease helps me learn much better than reading about it in a textbook or hearing about it in a lecture. Taking certain rotations two or three times really boosted my confidence in my skills.”

According to Dr. Wortman, the early entry option was limited to about five students before the academic majors program was implemented. “Now half the class is choosing to skip either the small animal or large animal block and extend their clinical year,” he explained.

Students who choose the equine, food animal or large animal mixed majors have the greatest flexibility because no specific rotations are required. As an equine major, Amanda Theodore, V’08, is reaping the benefits. “I was able to create a completely individual rotation schedule that really suits my interests,” she said. “I want to go into equine practice, but I also want to have the capability to care for small animals, so I’ve chosen rotations that will give me the breadth of experience to do both.”

The academic majors program also brought an expansion of extramural rotations and independent study and research opportunities for which students receive credit. Beginning with the Class of 2006, students also have the option to take a two-week private-practice externship that can be used to reduce the number of elective credits required for their graduation. Currently, more than three-quarters of the students participate in extramural opportunities.

J. D. Foster organized an extramural project at the University of Florida’s School of Veterinary Medicine, which has a section devoted to acupuncture and alternative medicine. “Through my two-week independent study rotation, I learned that I’m definitely interested in doing acupuncture and I decided to become certified in it,” he said. Other students have benefited as well. Since his rotation, at least five have gone to Florida for the same independent study.

Last year, Amanda Theodore completed an independent research project in Penn Vet’s Immunology Department. Next year, she looks forward to studying equine behavior along with seven other students as an independent study at New Bolton Center. “Receiving credits for independent study is great,” she stated. “You gain some really unique and valuable learning opportunities.”