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ADVANCING VETERINARY EDUCATION

BY KAREN GROSS

FOUNDED IN 1884, PENN VET IS THE FIRST VETERINARY SCHOOL BORN FROM A MEDICAL SCHOOL—HENCE ITS SINGULAR VETERINARIAE MEDICINAE DOCTORIS (VMD) DEGREE. AND, IN 1969, PENN VET WAS THE FIRST TO SHIFT AWAY FROM TRADITIONAL, LOCKSTEP VETERINARY TRAINING TO A UNIQUE CORE-ELECTIVE CURRICULUM, WHICH ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO EXPLORE THEIR INTERESTS, FOCUS ON MAJORS, AND EVEN PURSUE A DUAL DEGREE.

Today, change is again afoot as Penn Vet examines the way it trains both students and faculty. With the recent appointments of Dr. Kathy Michel and Dr. Mary Bryant—as Associate Dean of Education and Executive Director of the Office for Students, respectively—the School is developing new ways to ensure excellence in veterinary education while supporting overall student well-being.

Additionally, with an accreditation review this year, “There’s an opportunity to say, ‘Are we doing the best we can?’ So, we’re trying to embrace it that way,” said Penn Vet Dean Joan Hendricks.

EDUCATING EDUCATORS

Dr. Kathy Michel is approaching her 30th year at Penn Vet, and she’s known as a trailblazer. As Penn Vet’s only small animal clinical nutritionist, she created the School’s curriculum for that field. She is also responsible for bringing communications training to the curriculum beginning in 2006.

“Curricular design and education have always been interests of mine,” she said. Named Associate Dean of Education in January 2014, Michel is charged with assessing Penn Vet’s curriculum, creating professional development opportunities for faculty, and ensuring that the School maintains its accreditation by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education. To help inform her work in this important role, she completed a master’s degree in medical education last year from Penn’s Graduate School of Education—all while maintaining her duties as Professor of Nutrition.

Michel knows first-hand that, even if a veterinarian is a leader in her field, she may not be trained in the fundamentals and best practices of teaching.
“There’s no question that our faculty are very committed to doing the best job they can at being educators,” Michel emphasized. “One of my goals is to give [faculty] the professional foundations for becoming good educators, or taking their expertise as educators to the next level. Whether it’s a lecture, a laboratory, or an entire course, they need fundamentals to help them design it to be the most effective at conveying whatever knowledge and skills are appropriate for the training of our students.”

Despite very busy schedules—which often involve research and clinical duties, along with teaching—Penn Vet educators have been embracing new opportunities to learn these fundamentals as well as innovations. Last year, Michel organized a professional development seminar series for faculty in conjunction with Penn’s Center for Teaching and Learning, as well as a summer retreat. Topics included the creation of learning objectives, assessment of learning, active learning in lectures, peer observation strategies, and controversies of using lecture capture. There were workshops on instructional technologies and opportunities for faculty to share teaching strategies that they have found effective.

Among the attendees was Dr. Ray Sweeney, Chief of the Section of Medicine and Ophthalmology in the Department of Clinical Studies at New Bolton Center. A Penn Vet educator since 1982, he has garnered a remarkable 19 teaching awards including the SCAVMA Excellence in Teaching Award (five times), the Norden North American Outstanding Teacher Award, and the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching.

Although he’s a seasoned educator, “I’m always trying to get better,” said
Sweeney, who attended the entire faculty seminar series.

He spoke by phone along with wife Dr. Corinne Sweeney, Associate Dean for New Bolton Center, who over the past four decades has also received numerous teaching honors including the Executive Board of Alumni’s Excellence in Teaching Award and the Lindback Award.

She attended last summer’s educational retreat for faculty. “It’s been refreshing and exciting to have someone bringing to the faculty and the School some methodologies, opportunities, and science to the teaching part of what we do,” she said.

The Sweeneys are known for different teaching methods; she provides thorough handouts, while he uses the blackboard and chalk. Yet, he quipped, “I always make Corinne listen to all my jokes before I tell them in class.”

According to Dr. Rose Nolen-Walston, Associate Professor of Large Animal Internal Medicine, “Ray Sweeney has been the most remarkable teaching and personal mentor. He creates an ambience of collegiality and respect. I think that type of role model changes the whole way a hospital works and creates an environment where it’s safe and easy to learn.”

Nolen-Walston received the coveted Lindback Award for 2013-2014. “It was such a remarkable feeling. And it almost felt like a set of shoes I had to grow into. It felt as much inspiring as rewarding.”

She is known for infusing humor and case-based role-playing into the classroom.

“I want to cultivate independent, analytic, scientific problem-solvers, not just users of cookbook approaches,” she said. “West Nile virus was first identified by a vet. That was something truly novel, and you can’t solve that by reading a book or looking it up.”

She called the new professional development opportunities for faculty “fantastic,” noting, “Kathy [Michel] is doing an outstanding job offering programs we never had before.”

STUDENT DEVELOPMENTS

Students ultimately reap the benefits of effective teaching, as well as courses designed to be cohesive and compelling. At Penn Vet, students are also benefitting from curriculum developments such as veterinary communications training with simulated clients.

A decade ago, Michel integrated communications training into the curriculum as part of the Introduction to Clinical Veterinary Medicine (ICVM) course series. In 2012, simulated clients were added to the required first- and third-year labs.

“I reached out to the School of Medicine, where they had been using simulated patients for many years. They helped us create cases with trained actors to play clients,” Michel said.

In the first-year ICVM lab, students work on core communications skills such as taking medical history. In the third year, students practice more advanced communication skills involving diagnosis and treatment.
“The ‘client’ may be upset, angry, or in shock, and the student has to be able to answer the client’s questions and help decide what kind of treatment they are going to pursue,” Michel explained.

In each two-hour lab there are four students, instructed by a trained faculty or alumni communications coach. The client/actor is also trained to provide feedback.

“The students love it. And what really pushed it to the next level was to be able to train a whole bunch of faculty and alumni on communication skills and the basics of coaching,” Michel said. Early on, she had to raise around $40,000 to bring in an outside training workshop for the coaches.

Now overseen by Dr. Erika Krick, Assistant Professor of Oncology, Penn Vet’s communications program has grown sophisticated enough to train its own coaches. There are around a dozen faculty and alumni participants, and “the people who are involved get so much out of the experience,” Michel said.

Another exciting development is Penn Vet’s state-of-the-art Electronic Medical Records (EMR) system known as VISION, which went live in several Ryan Hospital and New Bolton Center laboratories last fall. In addition to integrating client, patient, and research information, the EMR is intended to serve as an important tool for student learning.

Michel is developing a rubric for educators. “The person who’s reading the student’s work in the EMR will be able to evaluate that competency and then provide feedback,” she said.

Also on the horizon is a new Clinical Skills Lab, expected to open this year. “We are envisioning it as a drop-in space, where there will be a variety of models for students to practice all kinds of clinical skills,” Michel explained. Those might include surgical skills, drug and fluid administration, anesthesia, and animal handling—allowing the students to practice with models and develop basic skills before they work with a live animal.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Last fall, *The Washington Post* highlighted how veterinary schools are addressing the unique stressors faced by veterinarians, such as the emotional toll of euthanasia. The article cited a troubling CDC report, which revealed that veterinarians experience suicidal thoughts at a significantly higher rate than the average population.

Penn Vet is working to address such issues. As part of the ICVM series, students discuss euthanasia with a bereavement counselor and both small and large animal veterinarians. The goal is to avoid burnout and better communicate with clients about the end of life.

The School has also expanded its relationship with Penn’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) center. As of last fall, a CAPS counselor is onsite two nights a week. (*For more information about CAPS counselor Dr. Dana Lehman, please see page 42.*)

This arrangement—unique among Penn’s professional schools—was originally brokered by Michel and has blossomed under the leadership of Dr. Mary Bryant, who was appointed last May.

“Part of the education should be how you cope with stress. We need to give students coping and anti-anxiety skills. It’s important to know where your resources are,” Bryant said.

An accomplished Penn Vet graduate, Bryant has taught a career development class at the School for nearly 15 years. She has a unique window into the pressures students face. In fact, it was a student wellness survey that drove increased access to mental health services.

In her newly created position, Bryant oversees the recently consolidated Office of Admissions and the Office of Student and Curricular Affairs. In addition to encouraging student input, she’s open to staff ideas—for instance, renaming the Office of Students as the Office for Students. “When I first started, we had a team-building retreat for the new combined offices, and it was they who suggested the name change,” she said, joking that they may possibly rename it again as the “Office of Happiness.”

She considers it her job to “make sure students have an awesome experience” at Penn Vet. And she firmly believes that the Penn Vet faculty shares the same goal. “The faculty is absolutely student-centered. They are here to make sure students succeed,” she said.