

*The Following is an Excerpt from “Compassion and Intellect: The Goals”
By Lara Rasmussen, D.V.M., Director, Surgery and Clinical Skills,
College of Veterinary Medicine, Western University of Health Sciences*

Western University of Health Sciences College of Veterinary Medicine

Discovery requires looking. In the College of Veterinary Medicine at Western University of Health Sciences, Western University, we are looking for the best way to educate future veterinarians. This includes an education in the medical sciences, clinical skills (examinations, diagnostic procedures, surgery), professional skills (communication, finance, problem solving), veterinary issues, and moral development.

Years One and Two

Given our commitment to student-centered, lifelong learning, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) will serve as our primary educational methodology in the first two years of the curriculum. The design of the Veterinary Issues course and the Clinical Skills Curriculum follows this student-centered learning design as well. The goals of these first two years are to provide the student with a solid grounding in the basic sciences, an introductory level of competence in the clinical sciences and clinical skills, proficiency in professional and life skills, and an understanding of the profession as a whole.

Year Three

The third year of the curriculum begins the transition into applied veterinary medicine. Students will participate as apprentices in 11 different areas of veterinary medicine ranging from small animal clinical practice to population health and production practice to veterinary and environmental public health practice. The group dynamic will carry over into these experiences, with three students spending multiples of two-week blocks in these various arenas emphasizing primary care within a 60-mile radius of campus. For the clinical medicine rotations, students will spend half their time directly interacting with clients, patients, and the management of cases. For the remainder of the time, students will work within their group to satisfy learning objectives set by campus faculty, research current cases using evidence-based medicine principles, and develop their own required junior case report or research project presentations. For the non-clinical rotations, students will be based on campus and participate in appropriate field trip experiences, presentations, projects, and exercises. Given the interactive nature of these third year experiences, successful participation and progress is required in the first two years of the PBL, Vet Issues course, and Clinical Skills Curriculum. The goals of this third year are to prepare the student in primary care veterinary medicine, to introduce the student to the scope of veterinary professional responsibility, to fine-tune veterinary clinical skills, and to make the transition to the practice of veterinary medicine.

Year Four

The fourth year is designed to allow the students the freedom to make decisions based on their career goals and their freedom to travel. In conjunction with the

curriculum committee, students will design their fourth year program with eight four-week rotations in a variety of arenas appropriate to their future aspirations. They may choose to complete this year in the immediate area, or they may choose rotations around the country in other veterinary teaching hospitals, private practices, or governmental organizations. They may also elect to travel internationally to rotations at other veterinary schools or governmental or non-governmental organizations. The goals of this fourth year are to prepare the student in secondary and tertiary care veterinary medicine, to allow career exploration and development, to allow further development in career areas of interest, and to increase professional responsibility and independence.

Each component of our curricular plan impacts the others, so it is difficult to isolate *how* we will teach each discipline or skill or concept precisely. I will give an overview of our approach to clinical skills education as an example of a piece of our curriculum.

Learning a clinical skill requires repetition and gradual development, much like learning to ride a bike or fly a plane. Our approach will be to develop a list of skills for the various species that will require predetermined levels of mastery for successful completion. The majority of these skills will be completed in the first two years of school.) First, we will evaluate a skill and ‘break it down’ into its basic component parts. (For example, IV catheter placement requires anatomy knowledge, animal restraint abilities, fine tactile perceptions, adeptness with catheter handling, etc.) We will provide learning tools (i.e., any device or experience facilitating learning of a skill) that will successfully address these basic parts of each skill. Then we will begin to assemble the parts of the simple skills, providing learning tools for these more complex experiences. We will progress to a compilation of simple skills into complex skills with still more learning tools for these experiences. All training begins in a safe environment (for all parties) and progresses to more ‘dangerous,’ stressful, ‘real-life’ environments with less and less support. Throughout this training experience, students do not move along until they are adept at the lower levels. This model allows an individual approach to training; those students with extensive pre-school experience ‘check off’ their lists rapidly and move on to more complex or specialized endeavors. Those students with little experience are provided the means and the time to train themselves to the required level.

The learning tools will range through inanimate and animate models, computer simulations, play-acting/real-time simulations, cadaver exercises, healthy animal volunteers (non-invasive procedures), and animals in need of care. Appropriate levels of mastery are verified to maintain the quality of the graduate.

Where we are going

WesternU-CVM as an educational institution will continue to learn and grow with each subsequent year of graduates. We are committed to evaluating our students and making curricular adjustments in all areas of professional development, not just the development of knowledge. Our ethical motivations are with honest intent, although implementation will be a daily challenge. No one at WesternU-CVM intends to shrink from that challenge but, rather, use it as an impetus for positive, progressive, innovative change.

People supporting WesternU-CVM will see their contributions making distinct changes to the veterinary profession and its impact on the non-human animal world. Students attending and graduating from WesternU-CVM will be the vehicles of this inspiring change.