

Mercy's Veterinary Technology Program Meets COVID-19 Challenges

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a spotlight shone on the role of health care workers serving valiantly amidst a dire public need. For those in the veterinary care world, still working through the crisis, recognition was significantly muted, yet the demands of this profession became more intense than ever.

For Mercy's Veterinary Technology program, the career world and classroom applications were impossible to ignore. Throughout the pandemic, the program worked to ensure a standard of academic excellence while faculty, many of whom are practicing veterinarians and licensed veterinary technologists themselves, navigated a rapidly intensifying demand for their services. In the weeks following the nationwide shutdown, pet adoptions soared. Amidst the crisis, shelters and pet stores emptied while many people shifted to remote work and seeking furry companions for their abundant free time. Demands on veterinarians and veterinary technicians, already in short supply, were overwhelmed by this surge.

"Every veterinary community felt it," said Assistant Professor and Program Director Lisa Schenkel, DVM. "The pandemic in a way highlighted a lack of public recognition for the work being done [in animal medical care]." She explains the challenge for her faculty team became two-fold: to impart lessons in real time amidst the rapidly changing environment of the profession, while also ensuring the richness of students' academic experience as classes shifted to an online format.

Mercy's program, which is currently the area's

only fully accredited Bachelor of Science veterinary technology program, relies heavily on the hands-on learning of laboratory and clinical hours. Those experiences had to be put on hold as Mercy's campuses physically shut down. The equivalent virtual tools readily available to human medical educators were largely non-existent for veterinary care educators. Associate

Director and Associate Professor Sabrina

Timperman said it was inter-collegiate collaboration which came to the rescue for the suddenly shifted curriculum.

"Our colleagues in the veterinary profession know the need and were supportive in letting us use some systems they developed."

Mercy's faculty worked tirelessly to adapt these borrowed online tools to their own curriculum.

"Our students showed amazing courage and flexibility," said Schenkel. To accommodate for the pause placed on in-person learning, students had to return during the summer to complete their clinical hours. "They did this

without complaint. They demonstrated the critical skills of adapting that are needed in their

profession. They stood up to the task," said Schenkel.

In-person learning for these students returning to campus operated in highly coordinated, distanced small-group settings designed to minimize risk. "This whole group had to come together to adjust as a team," said Assistant Professor Amanda Colon, DVM.

Abiding COVID-19 safety protocols and ensuring an adequate supply of a personal protective equipment became essential in their education plan. In addition to the teamwork of full-time faculty, Colon said adjunct professors, many of whose work schedules in animal clinics mirrored the heightening crisis, rose to the



A dog's eyes being examined during a physical exam

Photo provided by the Veterinary Technology Program



Photo provided by the Veterinary Technology Program

A shelter dog waking up from anesthesia after free dental services provided by Veterinary Technology Program students in Applied Clinical Veterinary

challenge of summer instruction.

“We all had a cohesive vision to maximize their learning experience, and we just realized we had to have teamwork to do it,” said Colon.

The pandemic further instilled the importance of self-care for students preparing for this challenging profession. Schenkel explained that a foundational component of Mercy’s curriculum is helping students prepare mentally and emotionally for the profession. “We emphasize the importance of coping skills in the classroom, and incorporate this piece starting right from our introductory courses,” added Schenkel.

Mental health is increasingly more critical as a career readiness strategy, in light of an alarming statistic among veterinary professionals. In May 2021, the American Veterinary Medical Association reported that 1 in 6 veterinarians reported contemplating suicide, and veterinarians are 2.7 times more likely than the general public to die by suicide.

Since the pandemic, the term front-line worker or essential worker became commonplace. Schenkel said those in veterinary care often felt left out of a dialogue of appreciation for mental health strain faced in health care. “Compassion fatigue and burnout are under-addressed in our profession,” said Schenkel. She and her colleagues are unyielding in preparing Mercy students to recognize and implement self-care throughout their future careers.

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Associate Professor Sandra Bertholf LVT ’97, M.S. ’18 feels students are initially drawn to the field out of a love for animals, but quickly learn science and critical thinking skills are essential factors for long-term success. “I tell students, ‘You’re going to be the

one who needs to be there in that animal’s worst moments,’” said Bertholf, who cites euthanasia as just one of the significant obstacles to on-the-job training – training further mastered during externships and clinical placements.

Mercy’s Veterinary Technology program incorporates service learning throughout a student’s four-year journey. Although annual global service trips to assist animals in places like Costa Rica were suspended during the pandemic, community-based service continued during 2020 and beyond. Even in lockdown, Mercy’s program offered free spay and neuter clinics, vaccine administration, presurgical blood screening and infectious disease screening to animals throughout Westchester.

Citing Mercy’s commitment to service, Schenkel says Mercy students, faculty and staff were instrumental in leading the way for the patients who can’t speak for themselves. “Together we rise to the challenge.”