

TRACKS

MAGAZINE

WINTER 2020

VIRGINIA-MARYLAND REGIONAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE



Taking CARE
of our own



Virginia-Maryland
College of **Veterinary Medicine**

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Each new year heralds the potential for a bright future, which is especially true for our college in 2020. As we settle into this new decade, many exciting initiatives are underway, and a new dean will soon be joining the college.

Daniel Givens, who currently serves as the associate dean for academic affairs in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Auburn University, will become the fifth dean of our college, effective June 1, 2020 (learn more on page 4). We are thrilled to welcome Dr. Givens, a highly respected researcher, clinician, and academic leader, to our community.

This year, we also celebrate another important milestone for the college: the 40th anniversary of the matriculation of our charter DVM class, whose members graduated in 1984. This occasion provides an ideal opportunity for our community both to celebrate the achievements and commitment of those who helped make us the institution we are today and to chart a new vision for our college and its role in advancing the veterinary and public health professions.

Looking to our future, we have embarked on the development of a new college strategic plan that will align with Virginia Tech's strategic plan, which was approved by the Board of Visitors in June 2019. Through holistic collaboration with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and college partners, the process aims to define our goals for the next five years and to inform the final plan that will be completed by May. As we move forward, Dr. Givens, who is knowledgeable of these efforts to date, will be actively engaged in the strategic planning process.

This summer, the college will open and begin operations of the Virginia Tech Animal Cancer Care and Research Center, formerly referred to as the Comparative Oncology Research Center, located on the Virginia Tech Carilion Health Sciences Campus in Roanoke, Virginia. The center will accommodate the relocation and expansion of the medical and surgical oncology services from the Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Blacksburg and will house the region's only radiation oncology service for pets.

Growing the capacity of our clinical research program, this state-of-the-art clinical and research hub will integrate researchers investigating a range of human and veterinary biomedical interests that seek to advance comprehensive cancer care across species.

In October, we will welcome alumni, other practitioners, and friends for a special weekend of connection and camaraderie, featuring the annual mentor workshop and a career fair, as well as a continuing education program and reunion events highlighted by alumni awards presentations at The Inn at Virginia Tech. Stay tuned for forthcoming details about this unique opportunity to inspire, learn, and network while celebrating our college's 40 years of excellence and bold plans for the future.

On behalf of our college community, I extend sincere gratitude to our donors, alumni, and friends who share our passion for and commitment to animal and human health. Their generous support makes possible our continued growth and progress. In these pages, you will learn about some of our friends who have made a significant impact on our students and our programs. From lessening the burden of student debt and other potential barriers to wellness, to providing critical support that funds facility improvements, cutting-edge equipment, and pioneering clinical research, their generosity empowers our college to advance knowledge, improve health, and save lives.

As I approach the completion of my service as interim dean of the college and reflect on this privilege—truly the highlight of my career—I am filled with pride in the achievements of the college's dedicated faculty, staff, students, alumni, and supporters. The teamwork and collective accomplishments of our community have propelled the college and our programs forward, ensuring the bright future ahead of us at this dynamic time in the college's history.



Gregory B. Daniel, Interim Dean

IN THIS ISSUE



14

6

WELLNESS INITIATIVES CARE FOR VETERINARY STUDENTS, CLIENTS, AND PRACTITIONERS

Work is ongoing at the college—and across Virginia Tech—to create a supportive culture that reduces stigma and encourages people to access the resources they need.

- 4 M. Daniel Givens named dean of the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine

GIVING TO THE COLLEGE

- 10 The gift of better health
- 12 The Mary Sue Collins Foundation provides critical scholarship support for DVM students
- 13 Donors enable new neurologic stall at Equine Medical Center
- 13 Clinical trials advance cancer care in pets and people

PHYSICAL REHABILITATION ENHANCES PETS' QUALITY OF LIFE

The college's rehabilitation service works with geriatric, neurologic, post-surgical, and orthopedic patients, many of whom are referred to the Veterinary Teaching Hospital for treatment.

ONE HEALTH

- 22 Research Symposium highlights college's study of chronic disease and aging
 - 22 One Health Case Competition showcases student expertise
- ### ALUMNI NEWS
- 23 Changing of the guard
 - 23 Continuing education for our community

VA-MD College of Veterinary Medicine
205 Duck Pond Drive • Blacksburg, VA 24061
540-231-7666 • vetmed.vt.edu

TRACKS MAGAZINE | Winter 2020

A publication of the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine

Editor

Juliet Crichton

Art Director

Megan Quesenberry

Writers

Sarah Boudreau, Alison Elward, Julia Hurley, Mindy Quigley, Annie Raab, Sandra Torget, Cassie Wedd Wagner

Photographers

Hope Bradbury, Lee Friesland, Julia Hurley, Emily Koth, Shawn Kozlov, Andrew Mann, Alexandra Morrison, Theresa Pancotto, Megan Quesenberry, Devon Rowland, Silas Zee

Illustrator

Megan Quesenberry

Tracks Magazine is produced by the Office of Advancement in the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine.

Director of Advancement

Sandra Torget

Director of Major Gifts

Stacey Ahner, Equine Medical Center

Director of Communications and Marketing

Alison Elward

Director of Alumni and Referring

Practitioner Relations

Cassie Wedd Wagner

Interim Dean

Gregory B. Daniel

Associate Dean for Research and

Graduate Studies

S. Ansar Ahmed

Associate Dean for Professional Programs

Jennifer Hodgson

Associate Dean for Maryland

Xiaoping Zhu

Assistant Dean of Administration

April Hylton

Send comments and story ideas:

vamdvetmed@vt.edu

Subscribe to the college's monthly digital

newsletter: vetmed.vt.edu/news/vs

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter: [VaMdVetMed](https://www.facebook.com/VaMdVetMed)

LinkedIn, YouTube: [VA-MD Vet Med](https://www.youtube.com/Va-MD-Vet-Med)

Flickr: [VA-MD-VetMed](https://www.flickr.com/photos/Va-MD-VetMed/)

Virginia Tech is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution.



AROUND THE COLLEGE

+ **M. DANIEL GIVENS** named **DEAN** of the **Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine**



By Alison Elward

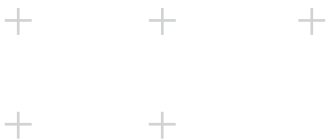
Following a national search, M. Daniel Givens has been named the fifth dean of the veterinary college, effective June 1, 2020. The appointment was announced on Dec. 4, 2019, by Virginia Tech Executive Vice President and Provost Cyril Clarke, who served as dean of the veterinary college from 2013 to 2017.

A diplomate of both the American College of Veterinary Microbiologists (virology specialty) and the American College of Theriogenologists, Givens currently serves as the associate dean for academic affairs in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Auburn University, where he is also a professor in the Department of Pathobiology.

Since joining Auburn in 2000, Givens has served in various roles, including acting head of the Department of Pathobiology and interim associate dean for academic affairs, before assuming his current position in 2013.

“ I am **VERY EXCITED** to **CONTINUE** and **ADVANCE** the college’s pursuit of **EXCELLENCE** by serving stakeholders in this leadership role at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine. ”

- M. Daniel Givens



“Dr. Dan Givens is a highly respected researcher, clinician, and academic leader who brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine,” Clarke said. “His collaborative approach to working with university leaders and his commitment to excellence in regard to veterinary medicine and public health missions of the college will play a key role in helping to advance Virginia Tech’s strategic partnerships and priorities.”

Givens will succeed Gregory B. Daniel, interim dean of the college since 2017, who will return to his faculty position as professor of radiology in the Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences.

“I’d like to sincerely thank Dr. Greg Daniel for his outstanding leadership as interim dean and his steadfast advocacy in support of faculty, staff, and students,” said Clarke. “His intimate knowledge of our veterinary medical programs and personal commitment to serving the college have advanced its national reputation and facilitated the formation of productive partnerships with other colleges and institutes at Virginia Tech.”

Givens’ efforts in applied research in infectious diseases that affect reproduction of cattle have resulted in more than 85 peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts, five book chapters, two international patents, and numerous national and international presentations.

For his work in the classroom, Givens has received multiple teaching awards, including the Carl J. Norden-Pfizer Distinguished Teacher Award and the Student Chapter of the American Veterinary Medical Association Teacher of the Year. Employing a philosophy rooted in a respect for the individual learner and a desire to improve the quality of human and animal health, he continues to teach selected topics in food safety, theriogenology, vaccinology, evidence-based medicine, and virology.

An American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education site visitor since 2014, Givens values opportunities to better understand factors that impact animal health and disease, and the competency of graduating veterinarians.

He completed undergraduate studies at Western Kentucky University and earned a DVM and a Ph.D. in biomedical sciences, both with academic distinction, from Auburn University.

“I am very excited to continue and advance the college’s pursuit of excellence by serving stakeholders in this leadership role at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine,” Givens said.



M. Daniel Givens | Photo by Silas Zee (Auburn University)

A GROWING CULTURE OF WELLNESS

In recent years, the college has experienced significant growth in its academic, clinical, and research programs and facilities, including the launch of a new bachelor of science in public health.

The Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program, which welcomed its 40th class this past fall, has earned a reputation for excellence among prospective students, ranking second nationally in the number of veterinary program applicants for five consecutive years. The Class of 2023 received 1,853 applicants for 120 available spots.

Construction of the Virginia Tech Animal Cancer Care and Research Center—formerly referred to as the Comparative Oncology Research Center—on the Virginia Tech Carilion Health Sciences Campus in Roanoke, Virginia, is slated to be completed in early June.

In addition, renovations of facilities and growth in services continue at the Marion duPont Scott Equine Medical Center in Leesburg, Virginia, while plans are underway for an expansion and remodeling of the Veterinary Teaching Hospital on the Blacksburg campus.



PHYSICAL REHABILITATION ENHANCES PETS' QUALITY of LIFE

By Juliet Crichton

A retired Saint Francis service dog, Saint loves baby food.

Frozen baby food.

And the 11-year-old black Labrador retriever gets plenty to encourage him during physical therapy at the college's Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

After developing hind limb weakness from neurologic causes, as well as general soreness and decreased mobility because of arthritis, Saint was referred to the college's physical rehabilitation service by his veterinarian, Virginia Tech alumnus Thomas Blaszak (biological sciences '05, DVM '09).

"Even taking joint supplements and various forms of pain medication and having undergone therapeutic laser treatments, Saint still endured arthritis," said Blaszak. "Referring Saint for rehab at the veterinary college has helped him regain some muscle and strength in his legs, ultimately improving his mobility and quality of life."

Saint's owner, Krista Sinnott, a realtor who volunteers for Saint Francis Service Dogs of Roanoke, Virginia, adopted the Lab when he needed a new home upon his retirement at age 8. He's now a member of the family.

"Saint goes to work with me almost every day. He's in his second career in commercial real estate," she said. "We want him to be as active as he can be, but he began having trouble on his walks. He would stumble, and there was weakness in his rear end. He had a hard time getting up off the floor."

Although Sinnott was unfamiliar with physical therapy for dogs, she was entirely receptive when Blaszak recommended it for Saint. "It has made a huge difference," she said. "He plays a lot now. He's taking longer walks, and he's much more stable. We have stairs in our house, and he is much more confident going up and down and has far fewer spills. His quality of life is much better."

Since his initial evaluation by the veterinary college's rehab team in July 2019, Saint has visited the service regularly, first undergoing treatment twice weekly, then moving to weekly and now bimonthly.

During his first appointment, "Saint had no spunk," said Florence "Flori" Bliss, a licensed veterinary technician who completed the Canine Rehabilitation Certificate Program. Having worked with him for several months, she definitely sees a change. "He has a job again," she said. "He really lights up."





A typical rehab session moves at a good clip, progressing from one exercise to the next to keep Saint interested and on his toes. First, short hurdles are lined up to form a mini-obstacle course on two long mats.

Saint steps over the hurdles willingly, one by one, up and back, all the while prompted by Bliss' encouraging words—"Focus. Good boy. Good job."—and the jar of frozen baby food she holds before his nose. The multiple repetitions of the exercise help his strength and balance, requiring him to pick up his feet at various times and shift his weight.

Bliss next leads the Lab through a series of sitting and standing exercises, "sit, sit; up, up; down, down," which helps strengthen his hind-end muscles to offset the effects of neurologic issues and arthritis.

"This good boy, he knows exactly what to do," said Bliss. "When we first saw Saint, he wasn't able to do any of this. At home, he was having trouble with routine tasks like getting from a sit to a stand. Our focus was to improve his strength, balance, and core to help him go about his day with independence. For example, we started with some modified/assisted sit-to-stand exercises with low repetition; as he strengthened, we were able to progress to doing 10 reps independently now."

Then, a rubber balance ball is brought out, and Saint places his front paws upon it, still licking at the jar. "This is another huge development," Bliss said. "When we first assessed Saint, he would have fallen off or refused to do this exercise, which requires a lot of core work, balance, and confidence. Now, he has all three."

Tracking the baby food, Saint steps off the ball and is led for another go over the hurdles and then returns to stand on a larger ball. Though his back legs are shaking, he tolerates the exercise. "That was really good, buddy," Bliss tells him. He has already licked his way through three jars of baby food.

The gradual repetition of the exercise has allowed Saint both to grow stronger and to develop his confidence, and he has finally graduated to putting his back legs on the ball. "We switch things up to keep him entertained," Bliss said. "Repetition is good, but preventing boredom and targeting different muscle groups is important for these guys."

In addition to floor exercises during his visits, Saint is also given an acupuncture treatment by fourth-year veterinary student Savannah Giannasi, who completed the CuraCore Medical Acupuncture for Veterinarians certification course and the veterinary college's course in complimentary medicine/physical rehabilitation. Highly popular among students, the rehab course was reinstated last year by Associate Professor of Neurology Theresa Pancotto, a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner in the Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences.

Saint is in good hands with Giannasi, last year's American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians student member winner of the AARV/Royal Canin grant, enabling her to travel

“
Referring Saint for rehab at the veterinary college has helped him regain some muscle and strength in his legs, ultimately improving his mobility and quality of life.”

- Thomas Blaszk '05, DVM '09



Above: When Saint, a retired service dog from Saint Francis Service Dogs of Roanoke, Virginia, began experiencing mobility issues and hind limb weakness, his new owner, Krista Sinnott, sought out physical rehab to improve the 11-year-old's quality of life. Left: Flori Bliss, a licensed veterinary technician who completed the Canine Rehabilitation Certificate Program, works with Saint on balance balls during physical rehab sessions.



Above: Saint, a retired service dog, participates in physical rehabilitation at the college's Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

Bottom: Saint relaxes during his acupuncture treatment by fourth-year veterinary student Savannah Giannasi, who completed the CuraCore Medical Acupuncture for Veterinarians certification course.

SAINT FRANCIS SERVICE-LEARNING

Fourth-year veterinary students are given the opportunity to complete clerkships at Saint Francis Service Dogs of Roanoke, Virginia, where they learn about operating a non-profit, dog training and behavior, and how to conduct hip and elbow checks.

The students also participate in partnering ceremonies, a special event during which the dogs, who have undergone two years of training, are paired with the person they will serve. Saint Francis presents the dogs to partners free of charge.



to the 2020 VMX Conference to present her case report, "Physical Rehabilitation Exercises, Laser Therapy, and Acupuncture on an 11-Year-Old CM Labrador Retriever with Osteoarthritis and Suspected Geriatric Onset Laryngeal Paralysis and Polyneuropathy," during the AARV lecture track.

"I have a couple of goals for Saint today," Giannasi said. "I definitely want to focus on the weakness in his hind limbs. And I'm going to do some range of motion beforehand as I also want to check on his joints for signs of pain and inflammation."

Saint sprawls comfortably on a colorful mat during the session, hardly lifting his head to lick the baby food that Bliss offers while Giannasi inserts the needles with precision.

"These needles are super-tiny, and patients usually don't feel much until after about five or 10 minutes," said Giannasi. "They'll let you know when they're starting to feel a little sensation."

When Giannasi has completed the acupuncture, it's time for a more conventional spa treatment to close out Saint's session. Bliss rises and walks over to the underwater treadmill, adjusts the ramp, and leads Saint into the tank.

"I remember the first time he went into the treadmill," Bliss said. "He just flopped down as if he knew exactly what was going to happen." She explained that many patients are uncertain when being introduced to the treadmill: a closed-in space with loud noises and a moving floor.

"We use a lot of positive reinforcement, and the owners are always present to reassure their pets," she said. "We have several different techniques when introducing patients to the water, depending on their personalities, and we never force anything. Most patients will acclimate within two or three sessions, but Saint was a pro after the first time."

Once Bliss flips the switch, the holding tank quickly fills with warm water, some 400 gallons, and the treadmill begins moving. The machine makes a racket, but Saint walks in comfort because most of his weight is supported by the water, which helps take pressure off his joints. The exaggerated range of motion maintains joint health and the elasticity of surrounding muscles and tendons.

The water is kept between 78 and 82 degrees, so the tank time is truly therapeutic. Saint walks for nearly half an hour, intermittently offered a few licks of baby food to keep him on task. "He loves the water treadmill. This is when we get to know each other," said Bliss with a big smile.

After the tank has completely drained, Saint is led back down the ramp to be dried. "We should scent the towels so it's really like a spa in here," said Bliss, who admitted that she'd purchased a hair dryer specifically for the heavy-coated Lab. Saint then receives a granola snack for his final reward.

“Both physically and mentally, Saint is just a brighter dog,” said Virginia Corrigan, assistant professor of community practice in the Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences and a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner who also works in the rehabilitation department. “When he shows up, I always think to myself, ‘You look just like a puppy.’ He gets so excited, and it really warms everyone’s heart because he has lived a tremendous life of service.”

Having participated in scores of rehab sessions, Corrigan added: “Not only do these older patients get physically better, their mental status improves because they have something to think about, something to work on, something to learn. Old dogs can learn new tricks. Look what Saint has learned in two months’ time.”

REHAB IN THE ‘SPECTRUM OF CARE’

Corrigan explained that, besides geriatric patients, the rehabilitation service also works with neurologic, post-surgical, and orthopedic patients, many of whom are referred to the Veterinary Teaching Hospital for treatment.

“Though first and foremost an educational institution for students, the veterinary college also serves as a referral base for local veterinarians,” Corrigan said. “We have the equipment and expertise in specialized areas to achieve the high level of care that our clients ask for. We’re happy to work hand-in-hand with our referring veterinarians, such as in Saint’s case, to provide services that they can’t necessarily provide in their own hospitals.”

Not only are patients helped by way of referrals to the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, veterinary students benefit from exposure to a variety of different cases, what the college calls “a spectrum of care,” said Corrigan. “Our students are getting to see different options that are available to them after they graduate so that they can provide a breadth of different services and options, whether at their own clinics or as referrals.”

Rehabilitation services, Corrigan noted, “can be part of a comprehensive wellness plan for older, senior patients that commonly suffer from mobility issues, which can significantly impact their quality of life.” Besides medications and

supplements, rehabilitation goes a step above and beyond: Targeted exercises, time in the water treadmill, acupuncture, and laser therapy all help senior patients feel more comfortable.

“It’s a very rewarding environment, but we certainly do always have needs in terms of keeping our equipment up to date,” Corrigan said. Although the rehabilitation center has gone through some transition and continues to grow, its personnel wants to keep the ball rolling.

As plans are ongoing to expand the Veterinary Teaching Hospital to meet space needs and modernize the facility, Corrigan said that the rehab space, which is currently tucked into a small room downstairs, deserves particular attention.

“Our current space was not originally intended for rehab services, but it has been repurposed,” she said. “The goal is to move the service upstairs by the hospital’s entrance, both for visibility and to facilitate access for older, less mobile patients.”

In addition, Corrigan said that the rehab service’s underwater treadmill is “reaching the end of its lifespan. We do have needs to replace that and the shockwave equipment and to expand other equipment, which could be really helpful for the service. There’s always something that we’re working on and striving for.”

As expected, the benefit of having state-of-the-art equipment is twofold: Students learn to work with the latest equipment, and cutting-edge services and efficient equipment allow the Veterinary Teaching Hospital to offer the highest-quality patient care.

“With equipment like the newest MRI or CT machine, our doctors are getting the best images possible so that they can diagnose appropriately,” Corrigan said. “In rehab services, we’re able to provide the best types of exercises and therapy that are available.”

“As a university, we’re always striving to be the leader in the community,” Corrigan added. “We want everyone to know that they’re getting the best of the best at the veterinary college.”

VIDEO > vetmed.vt.edu/rehab-saint



Zoie, an 11-year-old pug, began physical rehabilitation in June 2018, after a second back surgery for intervertebral disc disease.

Although Zoie officially “graduated” from her post-op physical rehab program after 10 weeks, her owner, April, noticed that the pug was still weaker and more lethargic at home.

Zoie returned for additional physical rehabilitation, bringing her sister, Kiwi, to encourage her while working on an alternating program of underwater treadmill and ground exercises.

Physical therapy has been a bolstering experience for both Zoie and her sister. Zoie benefits socially and physically from her rehab exercises, and serving as a cheerleader has brought Kiwi out of her shell.

Above: When Zoie exercises on the underwater treadmill, her sister, Kiwi, cheers her on.

The gift of better health

By Mindy Quigley

Within five hours of moving to Fairlawn, Virginia, in 2011, Laura and Michael Hewitt were introduced to the veterinary college—dramatically.

After the couple's adventurous Cavalier King Charles spaniel, Duffy, found his way into a cache of rat poison at a neighboring house, the Hewitts rushed him to the Veterinary Teaching Hospital for emergency treatment. "They saved him, 100 percent," Laura said. "He wouldn't have survived otherwise."

Two years later, when Duffy's regular veterinarian detected a heart murmur during a routine checkup, the Hewitts didn't hesitate to return to the college. Their appointment with the cardiology service confirmed what they had feared: a diagnosis of mitral valve disease.

"Mitral valve disease was always on our minds because we knew about the heart issue with the breed before we even got Cavaliers," said Laura, referring to the breed's genetic predisposition to developing heart disease. "At our annual visits, we were always holding our breath."

The Hewitts were grateful to learn that, in most dogs, mitral valve disease is a slowly progressive condition that can be managed through medication. Such knowledge helped cushion the blow when their other Cavalier, Baxter, was diagnosed with the disease later that same year.

Michael credits the cardiology service with ensuring that the Hewitts' spaniels maintained a good quality of life. "They kept us aware of what to look for as the disease progressed," he said.



When Duffy died this past October, the Hewitts were the first owners to take advantage of the bereavement services offered by the college's recently hired veterinary clinical social worker. (Learn more about the veterinary social work program on page 14.)

"Staying connected through the dogs' whole life cycle made it that much more meaningful to me," Laura said. "I think we're the vet school's biggest cheerleaders in existence."

Over the years, the Hewitts have supported the college in various ways, from donating a veterinary-themed HokieBird statue, to making generous contributions that support clinical research, to allowing veterinary students to study both Duffy's and Baxter's hearts post-mortem.

More recently, the Hewitts also made a substantial gift to the college's Jump crowdfunding campaign, "Whole-hearted Help for Cavalier King Charles Spaniels." The campaign supports a cardiology research project using 3D echocardiography to evaluate the mitral valves of healthy Cavalier King Charles spaniels.

Directly supporting research of a condition that affected their beloved Cavaliers appealed to Laura. "I loved the idea of that study because it could really be beneficial to the breed," she said.

Owners like Michael Zimmerman of Bedford, Virginia, couldn't agree more. Both of his Cavaliers, Cooper and Lacey, are enrolled in the 3D echo study.

Even though Zimmerman and his wife previously owned Cavaliers with heart disease, they didn't hesitate to adopt Cooper and Lacey. "I've had other kinds of dogs, but Cavaliers' personalities are something else. That's why we were willing to stick with this breed even after heartbreak."

So far, Cooper and Lacey are both heart-healthy. And with the right care, more research, and generous support from donors like the Hewitts, the breed as a whole should thrive.

Mindy Quigley is the clinical trials coordinator for the veterinary college's Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences.

Left: Michael and Laura Hewitt with Duffy and Baxter

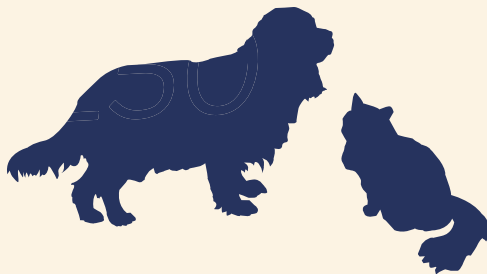


Clinical Research *in* 2019

\$2.4 million

Cumulative total raised by the Veterinary Memorial Fund supporting clinical research to improve animal health

\$1.5 million



30

Clinical trials conducted

250+

Patients who participated in clinical research

Total clinical trials funding in 2019

TRANSFORMATIVE GIFT ADVANCES COLLEGE RESEARCH

Inspired through the years by the love of their dogs—from small toy breeds to large working dogs—one couple decided to make a difference in the lives of dogs and cats across the region: by supporting research at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine with a deferred \$10 million gift.

Although the gift will remain anonymous at this time, its incredible generosity and transformative nature are acknowledged, and the college celebrates these donors who have placed their trust in its research, both now and in the future.

Of particular significance is that the couple's animals had never received treatment at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital. Instead, conversations with

their local veterinarian, who spoke of the college and its leading-edge care and top-notch veterinary training, inspired the couple to reach out for further information.

Once they had become members of the veterinary college family, the couple decided to create an endowed fund to support research benefiting dogs and cats. For many years now, the fund has made a difference in the lives of beloved companion animals.

The couple then elected to grow the endowment through an estate gift, the size of which was not revealed until this past fall, timing that perfectly aligned with the launch of Boundless Impact: The Campaign for Virginia Tech—and the veterinary college's far-reaching goals.

As part of its strategic aspirations for the next five to 10 years, the college plans to grow its research programs, including clinical research trials that offer innovative treatment options for pets. This couple's generosity well positions the college to enhance its clinical trials program in the coming years, creating expanded opportunities for many more dogs and cats to benefit from groundbreaking research.

Besides supporting research, this \$10 million gift not only will enable the college to recruit world-class researchers, but also will inspire other animal lovers to give generously in support of the college's pioneering work that improves the lives of animals and the people who love them.

GIVING TO THE COLLEGE



“**What would I say to Ms. Collins? First and foremost, I would thank her and give her a huge hug. I would tell her that without people like her, many students may never see the potential they have at such a young age. I would thank her for inspiring the next group of professionals, whether they are teachers, doctors, engineers, or veterinarians.**”

- Stephanie Lees, DVM Class of 2023
Mary Sue Collins Scholarship recipient, 2019-20

Ensuring financial support for our students

Beyond its commitment to educating the next generation of veterinary professionals, the college is ever mindful of student debt—and the outsized need for scholarship funding to alleviate financial burden.

The cost of a first-rate education is substantial, and the veterinary college is grateful for a variety of student scholarships funded by generous benefactors, including foundations, that provide transformative support.

Beginning this academic year, the Mary Sue Collins Foundation has provided approximately \$30,000 for merit-based scholarships that are awarded to DVM students who have demonstrated interest in small animal medicine. The inaugural recipient of the Mary Sue Collins Scholarship is Stephanie Lees, a member of the DVM Class of 2023.

A native of Richmond, Virginia, Lees graduated from Virginia Tech in 2019 with a B.S. in biochemistry. At the veterinary college, she serves as a Student Ambassador and as the president-elect of the Companion Animal Club; she is also a member of the student chapter of the Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Society and the student chapter of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine.

“Student loan debt is something we all struggle with,” Lees said, “and I think the biggest way the scholarship has helped is by allowing me to decrease my loans. Decreasing them by any amount helps, especially for an entire year. The scholarship also allows me to focus more on studying. Even though I still work at a vet clinic in the area, I am able to work fewer hours and spend more time studying or take more time for myself.”

As a kid, Lees always loved animals, but she said that her interest in veterinary medicine sharply came into focus when she “started to lose animals” as she grew older.

“A few of them got really, really sick and stayed many days at the emergency hospital,” she remembered. “I kept asking the vets questions about why it had happened and how it could have been prevented. I became fascinated with how animals’ bodies worked and when things went wrong. I also watched so many owners with the same defeated look that I had when my pets were hospitalized, and I knew I had to help other people understand what was going on and get them through the worst time in a pet owner’s life.”

THE MARY SUE COLLINS FOUNDATION

Southwest Virginia native Mary Sue Collins, who died in December 2016, established her foundation “to ensure her continued support for animals, children, education, community, and the betterment of life for all.”

Each charitable gift from the Mary Sue Collins Foundation carries with it “her gentle touch of welcome and her kind words of encouragement.”

Born in 1932 to physician William F. and Janelle Wilson Collins in Roanoke, Virginia, Collins was a graduate of Roanoke’s Catholic High School and then attended Randolph-Macon Woman’s College in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Talented in music, dance, writing, art, and photography, she settled in her hometown as a kindergarten teacher, first at Mrs. Shackelford’s Kindergarten, then Dean’s Kindergarten, and later opened a kindergarten of her own.

Throughout her life, Collins supported those in need, with a special focus on children and animals, and she campaigned for the importance of art, history, genealogy, and community involvement. Among her many philanthropic gestures, she provided funding to establish a habitat for Mill Mountain Zoo’s famous tiger, Ruby, in Roanoke.



Mary Sue Collins



A patient in the Equine Medical Center's new neurologic stall

New neurologic stall enhances quality of care for equine patients

Made in memory of a beloved family horse, Just Java, who succumbed in 2015 to laminitis, a generous gift from Karen Jones Squires and James Squires supported a much-needed renovation and expansion of a neurologic stall at Virginia Tech's Marion duPont Scott Equine Medical Center (EMC) in Leesburg, Virginia.

To acknowledge the Squireses' vision, commitment, and generosity—and to memorialize the horse who inspired the gift—the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors approved naming the stall the "Just Java" Neurologic Stall.

Completed in spring 2018, the new stall replaced a makeshift stall located in the center's intensive care unit. Small and cramped, the former stall not only made it difficult for clinicians and staff to comfortably treat patients, but also did not fully secure contagious horses.

The new stall was created by combining two stalls in the center's isolation unit, a critical necessity because neurologic horses often carry a contagious disease. Now, besides being secure, the stall is both private and quiet, greatly improving patient well-being.

Dedicated members of Virginia Tech's Ut Prosim Society, which recognizes leaders in the philanthropic community that sustains the university, the Squireses have long championed the vision and plans for EMC's expansion to better serve patients.

"Having lost a once-in-a-lifetime horse, Just Java, to chronic illness, we thought that funding a first-rate, purpose-built neurologic stall at the Equine Medical Center would be a meaningful way to honor him while supporting the excellent work of EMC," said Karen Jones Squires, whose daughter, Eleanor, was inspired to pursue a career in equine medicine in her horse's honor.

College's clinical trials advance cancer care in pets and people

Virginia Tech faculty have long been engaged in frontline, boundary-breaking research to advance cancer treatments that help people—and animals.

From cutting-edge technologies to more-effective drugs, the innovation and inspiration, energy and commitment, of Tech's cancer researchers were highlighted during the celebratory announcement of the university's most ambitious fundraising campaign to date, Boundless Impact: The Campaign for Virginia Tech.

As a presenter at this historic event, John Rossmeisl, the Dr. and Mrs. Dorsey Taylor Mahin Professor of Neurology and Neurosurgery in the college's Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences, described significant progress in wide-ranging efforts to combat glioblastoma, the

most common malignant brain tumor, determinedly resistant to even the most aggressive treatments.

"Thanks to collaborations between veterinary medicine, biomedical engineering, and cancer biology at Virginia Tech," Rossmeisl said, "we're on the cusp of the next truly big breakthrough." Playing a critical role in these advancements have been clinical trials involving companion animals.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Rossmeisl was joined by Laura Kamienski and her dog, Emily, who was diagnosed with a glioma brain tumor in early 2018. As of January 2020, no growth of the tumor has been detected in Emily's last four MRIs, a testament to the deep impact and efficacy of collaborative research across the university.

Right: John Rossmeisl and Laura Kamienski with her dog, Emily, on stage at Virginia Tech's campaign kickoff event at the Moss Arts Center



THE COLLEGE

THANKS YOU

Your support of our students, research, teaching, and clinical care is humbling. Contact us to learn how you can help:

Office of Advancement

540-231-0465 | cvmadvancement@vt.edu

Make a gift online at

vetmed.vt.edu/development

College's wellness initiatives care for students, clients, and practitioners

Work is ongoing to create a supportive culture that reduces stigma and encourages people to access the resources they need

By Juliet Crichton and Sarah Boudreau

Illustrations by Megan Quesenberry



Breathing noisily, a 14-year-old dog stood in the corner of an examination room at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine's Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

The dog's owner, motionless in a chair against the wall, wept openly. Crouched before her, a resident looked directly into her eyes. "You've made the right decision," he said gently. A veterinary student standing by the examination table lowered his head in agreement.

At that moment, the dog approached and licked his owner's hand. The resident rose and backed away to give them space. The owner rested her forehead on the dog's head and caressed his sides. A few quiet minutes passed.

Then, with great care, the resident led the dog out of the room, followed by the student.

In human medicine, when a patient is facing death, a chaplain might be brought in and a social worker called to guide the grieving, bewildered family. Likewise, pet owners facing health care decisions for their beloved companions need direction, compassion, and support—as do the caregivers themselves.

In veterinary medicine, ever-intensifying stress and compassion fatigue among practitioners handling case after case have begun to take a heightened toll on clinicians and vet students alike. Within this climate of hard work, suffering and pain, fatigue and despair, veterinary wellness burst into the public consciousness and became an issue of national significance, especially at teaching hospitals.

"Increasing rates of suicides, depression and compassion fatigue, and decreasing personal and professional satisfaction among veterinarians emphasize the importance of creating a wellness culture within veterinary professional programs," said Jacquie Pelzer, director of admissions and student services at the veterinary college.

Responding proactively to a growing body of research and a culturally evolving willingness to acknowledge the need to care for one's physical and mental health issues, Virginia Tech's veterinary college has followed in footsteps laid by successful programs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville—which established the country's first program in 2002—North Carolina State University, and The Ohio State University: A veterinary social work program is available to support not only pet owners considering treatment options and navigating end-of-life care for their pets, but also clinicians, caregivers, and students who daily encounter health crises and profound grief.



“Increasing rates of suicides, depression and compassion fatigue, and decreasing personal and professional satisfaction among veterinarians emphasize the importance of creating a wellness culture within veterinary professional programs.”

- Jacque Pelzer (DVM '97)
Director of admissions and student services

Critical care

A licensed clinical social worker who treated students from all walks of life at Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center for the past five years, Trish Haak has moved seamlessly onto the Veterinary Teaching Hospital (VTH) health care team to facilitate communication and well-being among the hospital's clinicians, staff, students, and clients.

“Three years ago, I started working with Trent Davis' yellow Lab, Moose, providing animal-assisted therapy,” Haak said, explaining how her clinical focus shifted. “I identified clients whom I thought would benefit from Moose's presence, and it was truly remarkable how his presence would break down barriers in the sessions. Through my work with Trent and his growing animal-assisted therapy program, I was inspired to pursue veterinary social work.”

Her interest fully piqued, Haak discovered the Veterinary Social Work Program at the University of Tennessee and has gone on

to pursue an extensive post-graduate certificate that requires coursework in compassion fatigue, animal-assisted therapy, bereavement and grief, and the link between human and animal violence, along with a keystone project, hands-on workshops, conferences, and participation in an international summit.

As her first order of business at the VTH, Haak is establishing a comprehensive veterinary social work program to address wellness issues at the college, providing support, crisis intervention, and grief education; hosting wellness workshops that serve the college's staff, students, and clients; and leading a biweekly animal loss support group that meets in the Hahn Horticulture Garden on campus.

She plans, as well, to introduce animal-assisted therapy at the VTH, having already begun working with Virginia Corrigan, an assistant professor of community practice in the college's Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences. Aligning well with Haak's program, Corrigan's research interests span such areas as the human-animal bond and veterinarian-client communications.

Available five days a week, Haak maintains regular office hours at the VTH; and with her open-door policy, anyone can consult with her as the need arises.

“Because this is a new role, I have visited each of the hospital’s services to acclimate myself,” Haak said. “Now, I am spending some time discovering the best ways for that particular service to refer clients. Every clinician has his or her own preferences, and each service works a little bit differently.”

In order to best assist hospital clients, Haak is also working with the services to land upon the most-viable methods to determine which clients may benefit from her support. Even in her first few months in the position, clients have been referred by VTH clinicians who are already familiar with veterinary social work programs.

to help mitigate compassion fatigue and provide support in whatever capacity will assist people in their day-to-day work.”

Sometimes, Haak explained, an outside perspective is exactly what’s needed; however, if more support is called for, she is able to share resources that are available locally. In many respects, she is an adjunct to Virginia Tech’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which is a vital part of the university’s health care benefit program. “I can refer to an EAP provider here,” she said, “or I can provide a similar consultation and referral service depending on the need.”

In an effort to further enhance the benefits and better assure the success of the VTH program, Haak also has been in conversations with social worker Neely Conner, practice manager of Carilion Clinic’s EAP. Conner has expressed



“
Social work support services
have been in hospitals
for a long, long time,
but veterinarians have been
doing it all on their own.
Now, people are becoming
aware of the many hats that
veterinarians are wearing.”

- Trish Haak
Licensed clinical social worker

“So far, most clients have come to me from emergency situations,” Haak said. “I suspect that emergency services and oncology, given their roles in health care, will continue to be the largest referral source for clients who might need extra support.”

Going forward, Haak’s plan is to “get out there, build awareness of this resource, and offer support every day.” She explained that the VTH’s veterinary technicians have been particularly helpful in her onboarding: “They’re the boots on the ground to gauge client needs. I think that the more they see me, the more they’ll understand the services I offer.”

Haak is equally dedicated to announcing her availability to support the hospital’s caregivers. “I’ve been talking one-on-one with people to explain how I can be of help,” she said. “Although I’m not here for ongoing counseling or therapy, I am here

a deep interest in veterinary social work and believes that Carilion’s wellness approach is transferable to the program at the veterinary college. “We’ve been talking about how we can align our programs more closely and work together to address compassion fatigue,” Haak said.

Because veterinarians often juggle busy schedules and multiple roles, the timing of such a collaboration couldn’t be better, in Haak’s estimation. “Social work support services have been in hospitals for a long, long time, but veterinarians have been doing it all on their own,” she said. “Now, people are becoming aware of the many hats that veterinarians are wearing.”

Contributing to veterinarians’ compassion fatigue, Haak explained, can be the long hours, the more-intense cases, the ethical burdens and moral stress surrounding euthanasia,

and the attention directed to owners responsible for their pet's care.

"I see veterinarians wearing this counselor hat because they're very empathetic," she said. "So, I do understand the benefits of my role as another team member, if the program can be modeled that way: to absorb some of that human-to-human aspect of the veterinarian's responsibilities."

Fulfilling precisely that role is crucial to the well-being of the veterinary profession, according to Janice Neumann, a health and wellness writer in Chicago. In her story, "Need to make tough decisions about your pet? A veterinary social worker can help" in a mid-September 2019 edition of *The Washington Post*, Neumann explained that veterinary social workers are essential because of the "changing relationship between humans and their animal companions. ... Many people treat their pets like children and expect them to be treated accordingly by veterinarians."

It stands to follow, then, that in the face of clients' high expectations, veterinary social workers can ease some of the burden experienced by caregivers, as well as support owners who are shouldering the stress and anxiety of their pet's illness.

As the program continues to evolve, Haak is regularly in the company of students, residents, and interns during rounds, focusing on communication and wellness. Her role allows her to contribute to discussions about difficult cases and to help young practitioners establish boundaries and interact appropriately with each other and with clients who are having trouble understanding their pet's treatment.

Not unexpectedly, the services that Haak has introduced at the veterinary college have been embraced as both necessary and timely.

"Care of animals depends upon the physical and mental well-being of our clients, students, staff, and clinicians," said VTH Director Terry Swecker. "As a mental health professional, Trish has strengthened our efforts in such critical areas as grief counseling, dealing with compassion fatigue, assessing and promoting work-life balance, and, in general, destigmatizing mental health challenges. Trish is a valuable asset, and we are very fortunate to have her on our team."

Pelzer agrees: "Having a social worker in the clinical setting will help with

cultivating students' emotional and social health. Additionally, our social worker will increase student awareness about wellness and resiliency. We hope to produce veterinarians who are more self-aware and better able to engage in their personal and professional lives."

A veterinary state of mind

In light of the wide-ranging demands of their work, veterinarians are squarely at risk to experience intense stress, a dangerous situation that, borne out by recent research, has attracted much-deserved attention, followed by an array of restorative mental health resources aimed at reversing the tide.

Five years ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released the results of the first-ever mental health survey of U.S. veterinarians, which was conducted by researchers with the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Auburn University, and the CDC.

According to an article in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, respondents were "more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders, experience bouts of depression, and have



43%

**INCREASE IN NUMBER OF VIRGINIA TECH
STUDENTS WHO RECEIVED COUNSELING
IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS**



suicidal thoughts compared with the U.S. adult population.” In addition, the data suggested that “nearly one in 10 U.S. veterinarians might experience serious psychological distress, and more than one in six might have contemplated suicide since graduation.”

In early September 2019, another study published in JAVMA, “Suicides and deaths of undetermined intent among veterinary professionals from 2003 through 2014,” revealed that male and female veterinarians, in comparison to the general population, were 1.6 times more likely and 2.4 times more likely, respectively, to complete suicide.

In response to such disturbing findings, efforts are already in place at Virginia Tech to both assess mental health needs and forge solutions to ensure the well-being of the campus community.

In fall 2018, the Virginia Tech Mental Health Task Force, appointed by Executive Vice President and Provost Cyril Clarke—the former dean of the veterinary college from 2013 to 2017—was charged with studying mental health resources on campus and devising initiatives and strategies for their implementation in order to improve services and promote mental health. Led by Chris Wise, assistant vice president for student affairs, the task force released its recommendations in March 2019.

A member of the task force, Laura Hungerford, a professor of veterinary

health and epidemiology and the head of the veterinary college’s Department of Population Health Sciences since 2016, now shares leadership of the newly formed Mental Health Initiatives at Virginia Tech with Executive Director Christopher Flynn, who has served as the director of the Cook Counseling Center since 2006.

While Flynn will lead the campus-wide implementation, Hungerford will join him in convening working groups of students, faculty, and staff to address the task force’s recommendations, which are related to mental health awareness across the university, mental health education and prevention, ongoing support for and intervention with students, and effects of policies and procedures on student functioning.

Most significantly, the task force noted a dramatic increase in the demand for mental health services on campus: The number of Tech students receiving counseling increased by 43 percent in the past five years.

On the heels of this finding and the task force’s recommendations, immediate changes that were instituted include the addition of more counselors at the Cook Counseling Center, provisions for annual tracking of students’ mental health to allow for comparisons nationally, the planned hiring of a director of financial wellness in Hokie Wellness, and increased efforts to identify and engage trained aides and mental health advocates in student groups.

Well-being at Vet Med

Not only did the task force’s report laud steps taken by the veterinary college to reduce students’ grade anxiety by way of a change to its grading system, the college has several initiatives in place to support student well-being, raise awareness of mental health issues, and connect the veterinary community with mental health resources.

Before they even begin classes, incoming veterinary students receive QPR (“question, persuade, refer”) training during orientation. Often compared to CPR in its speed and urgency, QPR teaches students how to identify suicidal people and guide them to the resources they need.

Along with free counseling services at the Cook Counseling Center, Virginia Tech’s Psychological Services Center, a behavioral and mental health training clinic for the university’s clinical psychology Ph.D. program, offers low-cost mental health services to all students.

With extremely busy and frequently changing schedules, veterinary students often find it difficult to make time to visit the counseling center, especially when they’re in clinical rounds. Both to encourage their participation and to simplify the process, Cook counselors and their therapy dogs are embedded in the college during the five-day work week, ensuring that their services are readily accessible.

This fall, counselor Trent Davis and therapy dog Moose, named the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association's Animal Hero in 2019, have been joined by counselor Sarah Dunleavy and therapy dog Wagner. Both teams provide on-site animal-assisted therapy to veterinary students: Davis and Moose are in the building on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, while Dunleavy and Wagner can be seen on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

It should come as no surprise that Dunleavy has noticed that the college's aspiring veterinarians respond particularly well to animal-assisted therapy.

Beyond their love of animals, the veterinary community also benefits from the "physiological and emotional reaction that happens when you connect with an animal," she explained. Interacting with Wagner can release oxytocin, as well as lower blood pressure and anxiety levels.

“ I know grounding techniques, and they're helpful, but Wagner can do it in a fraction of the time that it takes me. It may take me 15 minutes. It takes Wagner about 15 seconds.”

- Sarah Dunleavy
Cook Counseling Center counselor

Because of his calming abilities, Dunleavy has used Wagner to help students with trauma and also during exposure therapy. "I know grounding techniques, and they're helpful, but Wagner can do it in a fraction of the time that it takes me," Dunleavy said. "It may take me 15 minutes. It takes Wagner about 15 seconds."

Therapy dogs like Wagner also help reduce stigma while raising awareness of mental health services. When the counselors walk the dogs through the building, students are more likely to stop and chat, allowing the counselors to build rapport and spread awareness of available resources. Perhaps as important, the dogs also thoroughly normalize the counselors' presence in the school.

Even with counselors—and therapy dogs—in their midst, many veterinarians and veterinary students are nonetheless hesitant to seek assistance when they're experiencing mental health issues.

Proactive protection

Aligned with the pervasive idea that asking for help is a sign of weakness, the fear of exposing their vulnerability keeps many from reaching out or expressing their distress, a conundrum that deepens a potentially dangerous situation. Such reticence obviously obscures others' ability to discern that someone is struggling, which in turn makes interventions more difficult.

In an effort to counteract these sorts of situations and help those who may be suffering, the veterinary college has partnered with Jody Russon, assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Science in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences.



From left: Fourth-year DVM students Miranda Baker, Jillian Gimmy, and Alexandra Giosa and Virginia Tech counselors (standing) Trent Davis and Sarah Dunleavy with therapy dogs Derek, Moose, and Wagner

"Veterinarians are more than two times as likely to die by suicide than the general public," said Russon, a suicidologist who focuses on factors that contribute to suicide and on prevention and intervention practices that should be deployed to address suicidality. The daughter of two veterinarians, Russon points out that a range of realities potentially contributes to this unpleasant statistic, the most significant of which may be that veterinary medicine is the only profession that euthanizes its patients.

As the principal investigator on a research project, "Addressing Suicidality among Veterinary Students," funded by a seed grant from the Advancing Transdisciplinary Communities in Rural Health Research initiative at Virginia Tech, Russon set out to determine how to best implement a suicide and mental health screening tool into the context of the veterinary college

as a means to mitigate suicide. “The whole goal of this study,” she said, “was to determine if a suicide screening tool would be feasible and acceptable and to identify what barriers might prevent putting such a tool into place, one that could catch suicide ideation early and then allow triage in an effective way.”

Self-identifying as a “community-engaged researcher” who “cannot be an outsider,” Russon enlisted three co-investigators based at the veterinary college: Terry Swecker, VTH director; Jenni Zambriski, assistant professor of epidemiology in the Department of Population Health Sciences; and Kathy Hosig, associate professor in the Department of Population Health Sciences, director of the Virginia Tech Center for Public Health Practice and Research, and Virginia Cooperative Extension public health specialist and State Program Leader for Health.

“The first thing we did was engage a transdisciplinary advisory board that included organized veterinary medicine, practicing veterinarians, research veterinarians, and public health specialists to help us design the way we would conduct this research and design the actual questions in order to receive more responses,” Russon said.

“**If we teach people that it is acceptable to struggle and receive help, that they can be helped in an effective and confidential way, then maybe different strategies will be used later in life.**”

- Jody Russon

Assistant professor, Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences



The ensuing step involved preliminary research, interviews, and focus groups with students, house officers, staff, practicing veterinarians, and administrators to explore wellness and health needs as expressed by the veterinary college community.

Using mixed methods, several quantitative questions were asked first, for example, “What is your comfortability asking about suicide? If you were struggling, would you seek help?” These questions were followed by several qualitative questions: “Talk about the stressors at the veterinary college. If there were a screening tool put into place, would you like that?”

Russon noted that the results returned multiple themes, including the frequent mention of programming already in place at the college, such as wellness courses, yoga, and stress-management activities. “Across veterinary medicine in general, and specifically at the veterinary college,” she explained, “there has been a recurring focus on addressing stress and addressing nutrition, but nothing fully focused on mental health, suicide, and direct prevention strategies.”

Just as Russon had anticipated, an even stronger theme surfaced, one that could be considered a barrier to implementing a screening process.

“Because no one is immune to the stigma of mental illness, one of the core themes we detected in our qualitative interviews was this concept of mental toughness,” Russon said. “If we show vulnerability, our struggles, we may be perceived as being too weak or not having the grit to succeed in this intense profession. Or, we would perceive ourselves as not having the grit to deal with this difficult profession.”

Beyond potentially undermining the successful deployment of a screening tool, this prevailing attitude may already destabilize the effectiveness of the college’s use of QPR training with incoming students. “Students put on a front,” Russon said. “They save face, which undermines the identification of their struggles.”

In response to this deep-seated culture of mental toughness, Russon’s most significant recommendation is that screening should be conducted by the veterinary college’s social worker and kept confidential. She also advised that faculty and staff be

called upon to collectively normalize the screening tool among students in an effort to offset the stigma. “Although we cannot force everyone to complete the screening tool,” she said, “we can create a culture in which it is acceptable to complete this wellness screening.”

Along with the strong themes that surfaced, Russon was pleased that the majority of the interviewees revealed positive perceptions. “Students, faculty, staff, and administrators were overwhelmingly excited about and accepting towards this kind of intervention and screening tool,” she said. Put plainly, most respondents said that the tool was important and a good idea.

Having presented these preliminary results to the veterinary college in November 2019, Russon said that the next course of action is to secure funding to implement the screening tool at the college. “The tool under consideration is very comprehensive,” she said. “It asks about nutrition, sleep, depression, anxiety, suicidality, relationships, safety behaviors, access to means, and a variety of different considerations.”

Following the tool’s implementation and testing, the research team will then determine if the tool promotes help-seeking behavior or reduces the amount of mental health distress during the course of the year. If successful, the tool will be expanded and disseminated to other veterinary colleges that may be interested.

“Suicidality often occurs later in one’s veterinary career,” Russon said, “so the idea is that early intervention is essential. If we teach people that it is acceptable to struggle and receive help, that they can be helped in an effective and confidential way, then maybe different strategies will be used later in life.”

Co-author Sarah Boudreau is a student in the M.F.A. program in creative writing.



PELZER RECOGNIZED FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT WELL-BEING



Jacquelyn Pelzer (DVM '97), director of admissions and student services for the college's Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program, was recognized with the 2019 Supporter of Student Well-being Award from the Student American Veterinary Medical Association. The SAVMA Wellness Committee reported that Pelzer’s student nominator had described her as “a champion of student rights, wellness, and mental health in our student community.” Pelzer will receive a travel stipend to attend the 2020 SAVMA Symposium at Cornell University and a plaque to commemorate the award.

RESOURCES

Veterinary Social Work

www.vetmed.vt.edu/veterinary-social-work

Cook Counseling Center

www.ucc.vt.edu

Employee Assistance Program

www.hr.vt.edu/benefits/discounts/health-wellness/eap.html

Psychological Services Center

support.psync.vt.edu/centers/psc

Not One More Vet

www.nomv.org

Podcast: Vet Med After Hours

carlisleveterinarian.com/vet-med-after-hours



ONE HEALTH



Annual Research Symposium highlights college's study of chronic disease and aging

In November 2019, master's and Ph.D. students in the Biomedical and Veterinary Sciences program presented their research at the college's 30th annual Research Symposium.

Held each year both to support the college's mission of educating a diverse population of professional and post-graduate students preparing for careers in veterinary medicine, biomedical sciences, and public health and to showcase the research of its graduate and training programs, the daylong event featured oral presentations, poster sessions, and two keynote speakers.

Steven Austad, director of the Nathan Shock Center of Excellence in the Basic Biology of Aging at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and scientific director of the American Federation for Aging Research, presented "Methuselah's Zoo: What We Can

Learn from the Natural World about Extending Healthy Life." In his work, Austad compares animal and human aging to explore why animals age differently—and better—than humans.

Timothy M. Fan (DVM '95), assistant director for shared resources and professor of veterinary clinical medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, delivered "The Role of Veterinary Medicine in Convergent Science—From Discovery to Impact." Fan's lab evaluates novel drug therapy for cancer treatment, collaborating with basic scientists with the goal of applying canine findings to humans.

Top left: The college's 30th annual Research Symposium was held on Nov. 6, 2019. Top right: Award winners (from left) Brittanie Partridge, Sarah Kuchinsky, Alessandra Franchini, Melissa Mercer, and Blake Everett. Bottom: Zoetis Award recipient Michele Borgarelli, professor of cardiology



AWARD WINNERS

Outstanding M.S. Poster Presentation
Michelle Greer, Kayla Waler

Outstanding M.S. Oral Presentation
James "Blake" Everett

Outstanding Ph.D. Poster Presentation
Brittanie Partridge, Melissa Mercer

Outstanding Ph.D. Oral Presentation
Sarah Kuchinsky, Alessandra Franchini

Outstanding Co-Worker Recognition Award
Catherine Caldwell

Zoetis Award for Veterinary Research Excellence
Michele Borgarelli



The 2019 One Health Case Competition winning team was (from left) Caroline Marti (MPH), Jackie Abramson (MPH), Teace Markwalter (MPH), and Mitch Meyerhoeffer (DVM).

Annual One Health Case Competition

In early November 2019, the college's One Health Working Group held its annual One Health Case Competition, funded by the Student American Veterinary Medical Association.

Students in Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, Master of Public Health, Biomedical and Veterinary Sciences, Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine, and Doctor of Medicine programs formed 12 interprofessional teams that

presented their cases to faculty and staff judges from Virginia Tech, the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, and the New River Health District.

As part of their cases, the student teams developed a response plan for the emergence of a new tick species in Virginia, created policies to address nutritional insecurity in the face of climate change, and designed a surveillance system for methylmercury toxicity.



Changing of the guard

by Cassie Wagner (DVM '13, MPH '13)
Director of alumni and referring practitioner relations

At the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA) meeting in February, the college's Alumni Society Board of Directors gathered for its semiannual meeting where, for the last time, President Adam Henderson (DVM '11) called the proceedings to order.

Having dedicated six years of service to the board, Henderson closed out his two-year term as president and passed the title, along with a gavel already weighted with determination, to Jesper Lorentzen (DVM '04), who has served on the board since 2015.

"As I reflect back over the past several years, I have a great deal of gratitude," said Henderson. "I trust Jesper will do a remarkable job carrying the momentum forward. I would challenge each and every alum to reconnect with classmates and the college, for I cannot stress the benefits of these connections enough. We are in this roller coaster of a profession together, and together we can do great things."

"As president, Adam has been working extremely hard to try and get alumni reconnected with the school," said Lorentzen. "One big thing he has accomplished is getting alumni in front of current students, from personalized notes placed in pockets for the white coat ceremony, to speakers representing the Alumni Society during the ceremony and at commencement."

Henderson clearly recognized the importance of reengaging alumni with the college and its students and brought about significant positive change to the Alumni Society's interface with its alma

mater. Everyone at the college sincerely thanks him for his service as president and his drive to improve the visibility of the Alumni Society in connecting with its future alumni.

The board will continue its upward trajectory of connecting alumni to each other and to the college. The current members' goals include creating and inspiring regional events for alumni to gather outside of Blacksburg, as well as working together to create a signature event in October that will also serve to celebrate the college's 40th anniversary.

The Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine Annual Event: Connect 2020 will include the VVMA's Mentor Day, a career fair, reunion events with alumni awards, and a continuing education program at The Inn at Virginia Tech. "I am very excited about the upcoming 40th anniversary of our college and the events that have been planned for the year to show alumni and the public these improvements," Lorentzen said.

PAST CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Veterinarians who are interested in receiving information about the college's upcoming continuing education programs should contact Amy Winemiller, alumni and constituent engagement coordinator, at awinemiller@vt.edu.

Renata Ramos

Assistant professor of ophthalmology
"Dealing with Non-Straightforward Superficial Ulcers in Dogs"
October 2019 | Winchester, Virginia

Tim Bolton

Assistant professor of internal medicine
"Clinical Case: To refer or not refer"
November 2019 | Bedford, Virginia

Sherrie Clark (DVM '96)

Associate professor of theriogenology
"The Basics of Mini Pigs"
November 2019 | Blacksburg, Virginia

Joanne Tuohy

Assistant professor of surgical oncology
"Developments in Diagnostic and Treatment Modalities for the Veterinary Cancer Patient"
December 2019 | Roanoke, Virginia

Large Animal Continuing Education Conference

January 2020 | Blacksburg, Virginia

Sophie Bogers (Ph.D. '17)

Clinical assistant professor of large animal surgery
"Upper Airway Diagnostics and Surgery"

Renata Ramos

Assistant professor of ophthalmology
"Equine Ophthalmology"

Chris Byron

Associate professor of large animal surgery

Linda Dahlgren

Professor of large animal surgery
"Equine Surgery Literature Roundtable"

Virginia Buechner-Maxwell (DVM '87, M.S. '91)

Professor of large animal internal medicine
"Equine Welfare"

Katherine Wilson (M.S. '06)

Clinical assistant professor of large animal medicine
"Probiotics Used in Equine Gastrointestinal Disease"

Harold McKenzie (M.S. '99)

Professor of large animal medicine

Sharon Witonsky

Associate professor of production management medicine, Equine Field Service
"Current Medicine Literature Roundtable"

Jennifer Davis (DVM '98)

Associate professor of clinical pharmacology
"Appropriate Antimicrobial Use"



VA-MD College of Veterinary Medicine
205 Duck Pond Drive
Blacksburg, VA 24061

vetmed.vt.edu



24 HRS OF GIVING

VT.EDU/GIVINGDAY | [#VTGIVINGDAY](https://twitter.com/VTGIVINGDAY)

MARCH 18-19

ARE YOU IN?

For 24 hours, alumni, students, faculty, staff, families, and friends have the opportunity to come together and make a powerful, joint impact on the future of Virginia Tech. Gifts of any size on Virginia Tech's Giving Day can make a big difference.

