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NEWS & EVENTS

In Tenth Year, VET Orientation Thrives

The clock is ticking.

On a hot summer day at the Lake of the Ozarks, a group of MU College of Veterinary Medicine students struggles to complete an activity called Search and Rescue. Using only a few supplies, including a rope and two long, wooden boards, the students have a limited amount of time to navigate an obstacle course composed of horizontal telephone poles with large gaps between them. If that isn't challenging enough, they must carry a fellow student, representing an injured victim, in a rescue basket.

Students walk across a narrow board, holding onto a rope overhead for balance.

"You've got it, Abby," one calls out. "You've got it, girl."

With one second to spare, the final group member reaches the end of the course. The team erupts in cheers.

It probably doesn't sound like your typical veterinary school lesson. But for the past 10 years, incoming University of Missouri veterinary students have come together before classes begin for the Veterinary Enrichment and Teambuilding (VET) orientation.

The program provides students the opportunity to develop their leadership, teambuilding and communication skills. Students travel to Windermere Conference Center, which hosts conferences, camps and seminars at its large resort on the edge of the Lake of the

Learn more about VET

View a [video](#), [photos](#) and [testimonials](#) from the 2014 VET orientation



A Windermere staff member supports James Lee of Chicago while he and other students from the MU College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2018 work to complete the Search and Rescue activity during the 2014 Veterinary Enrichment and Teambuilding orientation.

Ozarks. Through 3 ½ days of obstacle courses, other small-group activities and discussions, students bond with their peers and learn to trust each other before classes begin.

Building a Better Veterinarian

In 2004, Ron Cott, DVM, associate dean for Student and Alumni Affairs, attended the Veterinary Leadership Experience, a national retreat for veterinary students and faculty that helps develop skills in servant leadership, self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Upon completing the program, he asked himself, "Why can't we do this at Mizzou?"

"I've always felt like the scientific program that we offer the students here at the University of Missouri is extremely well done, a very good, balanced program, but when you have that type of a program it is so full you don't have time to put into it the nontechnical portion of training to become a professional in a career that is so respected as veterinary medicine is," Cott said. "Over the years organized veterinary medicine and many involved with promoting the profession have recognized that we needed to emphasize the nontechnical side because it's so important when you get out in practice, when you get into industry, when you get into research. Every component of our profession has a nontechnical side to it."

Cott and Rebecca Jones, a business and management consultant who focuses on communications, leadership and training solutions, began developing a curriculum that would ease incoming students' anxieties about veterinary school while also teaching them important nontechnical skills such as communication techniques and self-awareness.

"The desire was growing to graduate professional DVMs that were more than just technically astute," Jones said. "Seasoned practice owners and their clientele wanted more in a DVM than just the ability to spay a dog or assess a disease. They wanted a vet that made them feel good about themselves, their pet and the experience."

In the summer of 2005, the college hosted its first VET orientation.

Life Lessons

In addition to obstacle courses and other group challenges, the program features a "Wellness 101" session and a discussion about students' communication styles.

Wellness 101 addresses ways to balance life during veterinary school. As Cott explains, the schedule is similar to a full-time job, which many of the students haven't experienced.

"We're asking them to change their lifestyle," he said.

In addition to information about maintaining balance, the students learn about available resources at the college, including a financial aid adviser and a counselor.



Class of 2018 students work together to cross an imaginary river using wooden tiles. Although nontechnical skills in teamwork, leadership and communication are essential to the veterinary profession, they are difficult to teach in a classroom setting.



MU veterinary students work as a team to complete the helium stick activity. The challenge, in which all students must hold the rod as they place it on the ground,

The communication session focuses on helping students understand their own styles of communication, as well as other styles they may encounter. Prior to attending VET, students complete a DiSC assessment, a test that measures their communication and behavioral styles. DiSC profiles describe human behavior in various situations, such as how people respond to challenges, how they influence others, their preferred pace and how they respond to rules and procedures.

encourages students to think about how they deal with frustration and communicate under stressful conditions.

The students discuss characteristics of the styles, how to be more effective communicators and how to collaborate successfully with people who have different styles. Not only will that knowledge pay off as they embark on their careers, it also helps them prepare for the frequent group work they encounter in school.

"They think it's an individual effort here, but there's a lot of teamwork, so setting that tone of working as a team and knowing the people you're going to be working with is very important for their academic careers and beyond, when they become practitioners or any other part of the profession," said Chuck Wiedmeyer, DVM, PhD, associate professor of veterinary pathobiology. Wiedmeyer is a facilitator for VET.

VET facilitators, composed primarily of faculty from the college, are each assigned a small group of students throughout the orientation. After each activity, they lead a debriefing session in which the students reflect on the lessons they learned and how those apply to veterinary school.

"A lot of (being a facilitator) is understanding the group dynamics, making sure that one student doesn't necessarily dominate whole activities, making sure that everyone participates and really can gain what they need to out of this experience and that they develop the leadership, the bonding and the communication that is going to be so critical when they start their (classroom work) as well as in their clinical rotations and out in the real world," said facilitator Ruthann Lobos, DVM, a senior manager of training for Nestle Purina in Austin, Texas.

Students aren't the only ones who grow from the experience.

"They're walking in with a lot of anxiety but also a lot of enthusiasm," said facilitator Craig Franklin, DVM, PhD, professor of veterinary pathobiology. "They've worked all their lives to get to this point. So that enthusiasm is sort of a nice little refresher. It keeps me enthusiastic as well."

Lobos echoed that sentiment.

"These students — having their perspective, their passion and their excitement every year reminds me of why I got into this great profession in the first place," she said.

Measuring Success

It isn't easy to assess outcomes for a project like VET, Cott said, because many of its benefits are non-tangible. However, student surveys taken after completing the orientation show, among other improvements, increases in knowledge of communication styles, understanding of what to expect in veterinary school and familiarity with their peers. Student feedback given during this assessment is overwhelmingly positive.

Another indicator of success is its growth in popularity. Incoming students are increasingly hearing about the benefits of attending VET from current students. One student in the Class of 2018 said she heard about the orientation when she was interviewing for admission to the college. This year, for the first time in VET's 10-year history, every student in the class attended the program.



Laura Fogg gives a thumbs-up while taking on the high-ropes course during VET. Student feedback about the program has been overwhelmingly positive.

"For this to be our 10th year and to have 100 percent (participation), I think it speaks highly of the momentum of the program and its success," Cott said. "It's sticking around. It's not slowly going away. I do believe that it is probably one of the strongest orientation programs in the

country.”

When citing the positive changes VET has elicited in students, Cott points to a telling anecdote.

“The phone calls I got prior to VET taking place indicated to me that a lot of our graduates were really uncertain about their careers and what they wanted to do with them because the practitioners and the alumni calling me would say, ‘Ron, I just interviewed three of your new graduates, and none of them know what they want to do,’” he said.

After the first VET class graduated, the context of those calls changed.

One practitioner called Cott and told him, “I interviewed three of your new grads. I would hire all three of them if I had a spot,” Cott recalled. “They’re determined, they’re goal-oriented, they know what they want to do. They know how to communicate. They can talk to my clients. They can work with my team.”

Class of 2018 Takes on the Challenge

Sponsored by the College of Veterinary Medicine, Merial, Purina, Hills, Zoetis and the Missouri Veterinary Medical Association, the Class of 2018’s orientation in August brought together 120 students with diverse backgrounds. Half of the students come from outside Missouri, including two from Puerto Rico. They range in age from 21 to 31.

Some of those students, such as Kathryn Notch of Chesterfield, Missouri, knew several other students in the class before attending VET. Notch received her undergraduate degree at MU.

Others, such as Chad Landes of Waunakee, Wisconsin, knew none of their classmates before the orientation began.

“I was really excited for this week just to start to meet people in my class and start building friendships and relationships that will last strong for the next four years and then beyond,” he said. “I know after today I’ll be leaving with a few friends.”

Several students said they were nervous about attending VET and meeting so many new people. During the past 10 years of VET, the students’ DiSC profiles have revealed that a large percentage of them tend to be introverted.

Jackie Burrell of Chicago, who knew only one of her classmates before VET, said she and her friend were apprehensive about the experience.

“We were kind of nervous, like, ‘Oh, are we gonna talk to anybody?’ or ‘Are we gonna get to know other people?’” she said.

In the end, Burrell achieved one of the primary goals of VET: making new friends and becoming comfortable with her classmates.

“I’ve learned that I’m not as shy as I thought I was,” she said. “I’ve learned that I have great classmates. Everyone’s easy to talk to, and I’m really excited to go to vet school with these guys and spend the next four years with them. I think it’s gonna be a pretty awesome four years.”



The Class of 2018 comes together for a group hug during VET. “They’re going to be together as a family for four years,” said Ron Cott, DVM, associate dean for Student and Alumni Affairs.



All 120 members of the Class of 2018 attended the 2014 VET orientation. It was the first time in VET's 10-year history that all students participated.

VET 2014



What Students, Facilitators Say About VET



"I really enjoyed meeting my fellow classmates before classes start, getting to know them. That way, you kind of already feel like a family."



"I know we're all scared. I know I sure was coming into this, so I'm just glad that we have that useful information. This is a tool to prepare



"It's a great leg up being able to know a lot of our classmates and being able to trust each other going in instead

— *Jerica Moore, Class of 2018 student*

ourselves."

— *Ben Sims, Class of 2018 student*

of having to figure everyone out while you have your studies packed on top of it."

— *Jeremiah Conn, Class of 2018 student*



"(VET is) not about just sitting in a lecture room and saying, 'You're gonna do this, this and this in the curriculum.' It's giving them a chance to grow while they're there, to understand who their classmates are, to know that the faculty are humans and are normal people and they're not people to be scared of."

— *Ron Cott, DVM; associate dean for Student and Alumni Affairs*



"I think that these types of programs are so crucial to our profession, to the future of our profession, but also to those of us who are currently active as veterinary colleagues, and I just wish that we as a profession would spend more time and invest more money and resources and ourselves into making sure that we're focusing on these skills along with our technical, our scientific and our medical acumen."

— *Lauren Olavessen, DVM; VET facilitator and Merial technical service veterinarian*



"VET is a fabulous program. I think it shows in our students and our faculty. We have a culture here that, in talking to other veterinary schools, this is very unique. It's sort of a family environment, and that's what we embrace and promote. It really sets the University of Missouri apart."

— *Craig Franklin, DVM, PhD; VET facilitator and professor of veterinary pathobiology*

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