

Submission date: 2/5/2020

Program/s in this review: Veterinary Assisting OEC \_\_\_\_\_

Specialized accrediting agency (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Campuses where the program is delivered: Mat-Su College \_\_\_\_\_

**Members of the program review committee:**

Kathleen Nevis, Assistant Professor of Biology, MSC  
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**1. Centrality of Program Mission and Supporting Role (700 words or less)**

The Veterinary Assisting Occupational Endorsement Certificate (OEC) program is essential for the state of Alaska's veterinary community as it is the only college level Veterinary Assisting Certificate program offered in Alaska. This program is taught exclusively by area experts, all of whom are licensed, practicing Veterinarians or Veterinary Technicians. This pool of skilled practitioners' develop both a demanding and unique educational environment enriched with high impact/experiential learning opportunities which support the employment needs of our state. With 67 registered veterinary clinics in Alaska (Alaska State Veterinary Medical Association), numerous rescue organizations, multiple wildlife sanctuaries, a zoo, and an educationally focused sea life center, this is the only postsecondary training program in the state of Alaska training students for entry level positions in the veterinary field. Additionally, from an economic perspective, over 73 million dollars are spent annually in the USA on our pets, with veterinary costs reaching over 18 million dollars per year (American Pet Products Association 2108 statistics). Producing well-educated, skilled applicants for a growing industry is not only relevant to the community needs but an essential niche that the university fills for the state.

In addition to contributing to the growing needs of the state veterinary community, this program supports other academic programs within the University of Alaska by offering an educational foundation for students pursuing advanced degrees in Biology, Natural Sciences, Wildlife Sciences, Health Sciences and Pre-Veterinary studies. The OEC is also often taken in conjunction with an Associate of Arts (AA) degree. The OEC fills 21 of the 27 open elective credits in an AA. This provides students with a General Associates degree paired with a marketable area of expertise. The data illustrates this bridging of degrees, showing that approximately 55% of students enrolled in the veterinary assisting classes are out-of-major students.

From the launch of this program, MSC has collaborated with outside agencies, businesses and associated organizations, including the Alaska State Veterinary Medical Association in the formation and development of the curriculum. On an on-going basis, the OEC partners with clinics and animal care facilities throughout the state, from Southeast to Fairbanks, with heavy focus in the Mat-Su Valley and Anchorage area. Each semester our faculty collaborate with local organizations such as the Reindeer Farm, the Alaska Wildlife Refuge, Sunderland Ranch equine facility, local large animal farms, area dog mushing kennels, and the Mat-Su Animal Shelter to provide hands-on learning opportunities for our students. This program has been a win-win not only for students, but the community as well. Students gain exposure to professions in and outside traditional clinical settings, and at the same time our community gains awareness of this program while benefiting from a trained workforce pool. Additionally, the program has joined with the Mat-Su Borough School District to highlight health related fields in our annual Allied Health Forums program.

The Veterinary Assisting OEC directly addresses the University's Strategic Priorities by: providing successful and sustainable programs that support student success, workforce development, high demand careers, and high student demand programs through cooperative partnerships that work closely with the public and private sector. About 90% of our graduates are offered employment upon completion of this program. On average, about 60% accept these offers with a significant number of the remaining 40% progressing on to Technician degrees out of state and/or continuing on to their AA/BS.

Our extramural support comes predominantly through State Veterinary Clinics and Animal Care facilities who consistently invest their time, resources, and money in sponsoring our practicum students. Once again, the majority of these interns are subsequently offered employment opportunities making the clinics investments come full circle and self-sustaining.

Vet Assisting is considered a high demand career. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Career Explorer data: Vet Assisting employment opportunities are projected to increase by 19% in the next 10 years, which is much faster than the average growth of projected employment. There is a high turnover rate often observed in entry-level positions, which creates a consistent demand for educated candidates. Our students have shared that they not only have been able to find jobs, but many have been offered at a higher starting salary due to their education.

**2. Program Demand (including service to other programs), Efficiency, and Productivity (7 year trend; 1400 words or less)**

When evaluating the past seven years of data, it is important to note a consistent drop is observed in a majority of the data points during the fiscal years 2015-2017. This very successful program was suspended in summer 2014 in anticipation of the development of a Veterinary Technician AAS. Due to the University's financial climate at the time, the launch of the AAS program was postponed. To fill the educational void and industry need, the Veterinary Assisting OEC was reinstated in Fall 2015. Because of the last-minute reinstatement of the program, courses were not published in the fall schedule and consequently the traditional sequence of classes were displaced. This displacement of course was not immediately addressed, making it hard to both attain enrollment and complete the program in one year. Additionally, due to the timing of events, advertising of the OEC's reinstatement to the state partners was delayed. Thus, the program shows an understandable and precipitous decline during the closure and reinstatement period as we initiated the teach-out plans and subsequently rebuilt the enrolment.

In response to our previous program review (AY2018), a new course sequence was adapted that allowed students starting in the Fall semester to be able to complete the program in 12 months. In addition to the resequencing of courses, new course prerequisites were established ensuring the rigor of the program was held to the standards of other programs in the University.

As can be observed in the seven-year enrollment trends, our 2019 enrollments are now comparable to our numbers prior to the suspension of the program (AY 2013 & 2014). AY20 shows a similar trend, demonstrating the program has rebounded and is now at high capacity. We are currently experiencing the program stabilization back to its former success. It is important to note that 9 students have already graduated from this program this Fall 19 and we expect to have more (an additional 6-10) graduating by the end of AY20.

When reviewing the data points, it is also helpful to factor in the inherent design of practicum classes and their intentionally low class capacity, the cap is held low in order to accommodate the demand for individual instruction and collaboration with site coordinators. These practicum classes systemically lower our overall

class size averages, our FTES/FTEF ratio, and Enrollment of Fulltime Equivalent Faculty data points. With this in mind, the graphs show that the program has built back up to the 2013 rates, which illustrate a successful vibrant program. Current enrollment shows a consistent demand for this unique program, which serves both students' interests and the state employment needs.

Currently, 100% of courses within this OEC program are taught by adjunct faculty. Due to our strong enrollment, the cost of faculty is covered through student tuition and fees. Note that during the teach-out years we understandably did not cover the cost of the program.

### **3. Program Quality, Improvement and Student Success (1500 words or less)**

There is currently no specialized national accreditation process for Veterinary Assistants, therefore we solicited input from local practitioners as well as gathered feedback from the AK State Veterinary Medical Board and used the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) as a guide for curriculum development and essential skill requirements.

The curriculum for the Veterinary Assisting OEC was developed by a team of local veterinarians, veterinary technicians, clinic managers, science instructors, and academic advisors. They began by reviewing the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) guidelines and essential skills required for veterinary technology. The team chose to adopt the guidelines for technicians as their educational backdrop, thus holding the program standards high to match the mission and values of our institution and better meet the needs of potential employers. With the goal of building a rigorous and quality program, the group also consulted with numerous outside institutions that offered veterinary assisting programs. They polled State clinics for input regarding critical content to be covered and worked with other UAA OEC programs to help guide the curriculum development. After months of collaboration, a 21-credit program was developed.

As mentioned previously, AY 2018 initiated a revision of our course prerequisites, sequencing and assessment strategies to ensure rigor and relevancy of our curriculum. We also rely on feedback from our practicum sites to ensure that we are staying abreast of current research and practices.

We are unique within the UA system and the state. Our curriculum incorporates innovative program design and combines rigorous instruction paired with essential hands-on training and high impact practices through our handling and practicum classes.

The Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) Veterinary Assisting OEC are provided below and are assessed in a class dependent manner, through a variety of methods.

- Knowledge of veterinary practice administration
- Basic ability to handle and restrain large and small animals
- Understanding of basic medical terminology
- Introductory understanding of animal anatomy and physiology
- Entry-level skills for laboratory procedures
- Effective customer service and communication skills

Annually we review and revise our classes to incorporate our assessment findings, student feedback and industry input. Recently in response to our findings, we have increased our hands-on activities offered in our Handling classes (VETT A122 & VETT A123) and incorporated more group scenario work in our Office Procedures class (VETT A103).

As mentioned previously, in regards to our SLO's and program assessment, combined with our ongoing strategies for continued improvement, the program recently has added course prerequisites and altered the course sequencing to effect a better progression of knowledge acquisition, advancing skill development, and efficient program completion.

Our practicum class (VETT A295) is a key point in our assessment. It integrates and evaluates all the student learning outcomes, therefore it provides a comprehensive opportunity/course to examine the proficiency of our students.

In AY 19, a total of 12 students were enrolled and completed the practicum class (1- FA18, 2- SP19, 9-SU19). Students were assessed on skills evaluated during internship practicums in community veterinary clinics. The low number in enrollment during the Fall 19 and Spring 19 semester is due to previously mentioned change in class pre-requisites as well as a resequencing of the classes to better align with students completing the program in a single academic year. All 12 students' demonstrated mastery of the associated Student Learning Outcomes stated above. The primary assessment method was facilitated through the Practicum Skills Evaluation conducted by the practicum supervisor at each of the clinics. This assessment tool evaluates a comprehensive list of acquired knowledge, demonstrated skills, and professional conduct. It also provides personalized feedback for the student and for the program. All of the students received strong scores on their evaluations affirming successful demonstration of the associated Student Learning Outcomes. These outcomes reflect the notion that students are acquiring the proper skills and knowledge from the courses currently taught within the program.

From the practicum feedback comes one of our key findings- We constantly are producing well-educated, highly competitive, job ready students sought after by local industry. This is demonstrated by our high employment rate and low turn-over rate of our practicum students.

Academic advising and student support considerations were integrated from the conception of the program; to insure this an advisor was seated on the OEC's founding program development committee. MSC places a strong emphasis on student success and the role academic advising serves in support of this goal. Weekly, advisors field inquiries about the program from interested students and agencies in and out of the state. Advisors meet regularly with students to map out their plans and course loads. All of the advising staff are well versed in the program requirements and take a whole student approach to advising.

At this time, we do not have an official, systematic method of tracking or keeping long-term statistics on the students who have completed this program, however, we do know from interaction with area clinics and program faculty, that this OEC is often a stepping-stone for many to go on and pursue higher degree's in the veterinary field. Here are a few highlights of student accomplishments that we have tracked:

- 60% of our practicum students are employed from their internship, with more being offered jobs.
- We graduate an average 7.8 students a year in spite of the fact the program was suspended
- Mary K was a student in our very first veterinary assisting cohort (2010). She completed the program and went on to work as an assistant in a local veterinary clinic. While working she acquired her veterinary technician license through an online program. She advanced in her job to the head surgical tech in that clinic and has now come full circle, as today she is our current practicum site coordinator and an adjunct professor in the program.

- Emily O, completed the program, subsequently obtained her LVT (Licensed Veterinary Technician), and worked in Eagle River until leaving the state in 2018. Emily is just one example of many students that has followed this pathway from assistant to licensed technician.
- Autumn J, completed the program and is now pursuing a bachelors in pre-vet at Kentucky and will soon be applying to a Vet School to become a DVM.
- Recently one of the area clinics had five generations of OEC students working at their clinic. This is a testament to the success of the program and available job opportunities.
- In addition to these specific students, of the 9 students who completed their practicum in the Summer 2019; 4 were hired by their practicum site clinics and 3 would have been offered a job had there been a position available at that particular clinic. The job offer rate is representative of what we observe in other semesters, demonstrating the proficiency of these students upon completion of this program and the demand from area clinics for students who have completed this OEC.

**4. Program Duplication / Distinctiveness (300 words or less)**

There is no program duplication with in the UA system. The Career and Technical Education High School, located in the Mat-Su Borough School District, offers classes to high school students in veterinary assisting. However, we do not see this as a duplication as this program targets a limited population and does not offer the expanse, AVMA derived curriculum. We do however see a number of the High School students from this program come to UAA to pursue advanced degrees in veterinary science/ pre-vet as well enroll in our OEC program upon High School graduation. Mat-Su College is the only institution in the entire university system providing this program.

**5. Summary Analysis (500 words or less)**

The Veterinary Assisting OEC brings to the university system a plethora of expertise in the field of veterinary medicine: as of AY 20 it has 2 licensed veterinarians and 4 LVT's teaching all program courses. This OEC provides clinics in Alaska, educated students with a strong foundation in the veterinary field and an understanding of the job responsibilities of an entry level position. This profession historically has a high turnover rate, probably higher in Alaska due to the transient nature of the population. Clinicians have shared with us that they see less turnover of students who have completed the Veterinary Assisting OEC and they find that they are much more committed to their jobs. Resequencing of this program in AY18 has allowed students who start in the Fall semester to complete the program in 1 year, with most being offered a job upon completion of the program. We concur with statements from the Provost in our AY18 program review that "Funding for a full-time faculty member is critical to the success of this program moving forward and to re-proposing the AAS Veterinary Technology degree." Currently, every veterinary assistant who has a desire to pursue their Veterinary Technician License, either goes out of state or online, often through Penn Foster. In order to expand a wider net and increase the contribution to the community, our long-term plan is to re-propose the AAS Veterinary Technology degree.