

Veterinary Scientist Training Program

A Winning Combination: Clinical and Research Education

Veterinary student Brian Leonard possesses many talents—he sings and plays guitar. At the School of Veterinary Medicine, it's Leonard's ability to work in two scientific worlds that sets him apart.

Scheduled to graduate with his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree in 2010, Leonard is also working toward a doctorate in comparative pathology.



Brian Leonard, DVM class of 2010, is working toward a PhD in comparative pathology and an academic career.

To prepare future faculty members and other researchers to fill a growing need in the workforce, the Veterinary Scientist Training Program (VSTP) began with four students in 2002.

The program provides financial support for up to seven years and a flexible course of study to students pursuing concurrent DVM and PhD degrees. Twelve veterinarian-scientists, including six accepted in 2006, are enrolled.

“We have a great pool of highly competitive applicants with a wide variety of experiences and backgrounds,” says Professor Fern Tablin, VSTP director.

Funding comes from several sources, according to Kent Lloyd, associate dean for research and graduate studies. “The school has been fortunate. We have been able to provide graduate support from government (NIH), industry and philanthropic individuals for veterinary students on the research path.”

Students may enroll in any graduate group and find mentors in more than

25 departments and centers. Leonard's work involves studying viruses, specifically the herpes virus, in multiple animal species.

VSTP graduates are entering the workforce at the right time.

In addition to coursework and research, regularly scheduled colloquia and retreats promote interaction and insight, says Leonard. “The UC Davis collaborative environment provides a great opportunity to learn a tremendous amount just by knocking on someone's door. I have gotten a chance to meet with emergency and critical care veterinarians, oncologists, pathologists, virologists, hematologists and wildlife veterinarians. All have provided unique and interesting points of view into my research in cats.”

With their mentors' guidance, dual-degree students lay out their academic plans and switch DVM program tracks for the selected years during which they concentrate on their research.

As the program develops, Dr. Tablin notes that, besides identifying DVM candidates with research interests, program officials hope to recruit PhD students to enter the DVM program. “With their demonstrated academic orientation, these are logical people to fill positions in veterinary schools in the basic sciences,” she says.



Dr. Lisa Miller (left), human health scientist at the California Regional Primate Research Center, is VSTP faculty mentor to Debbie Chou (DVM 2005), who is working to complete a PhD in comparative pathology.

Dr. Chou's doctoral studies focus on how asthma develops in infancy, when most lung development takes place, using the rhesus monkey as an animal model. She says, “I want to combine clinical and research work as a faculty member at a teaching hospital.”

Several students have completed both degrees and moved on to clinics, research institutes and universities. For example, Cara Field, whose interest in marine mammals guided her research, is working at Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut.

Sarah Thomasy and Joyce Riehl, with their advanced training in pharmacology/toxicology, are now seeking clinical experience and academic positions, while both Joyce Riehl and Kristin Evans are directing their careers toward laboratory animal medicine.

Veterinarians choosing research careers... are increasingly in demand.

VSTP graduates are entering the workforce at the right time, says Dr. Lloyd. “A wave of veterinary faculty is retiring across the country. Many are leaders in research fields related to diseases shared by animals and humans. With many societal needs for solutions to complex health problems of people and animals, veterinarians choosing research careers as an alternative to private practice are increasingly in demand.”

Leonard says, “Through all of my education and experiences, becoming an academic veterinarian is the best career for me. I enjoy interacting with animals and their owners as well as investigating their ailments in a very involved fashion.”