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Moraine Park veterinary technician program instructor Kelly Mowell (right) instructs a student on properly wrapping a horse's leg during a clinical experience.

Vet training combines hands-on, online learning

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The online veterinary technician program at Moraine Park Technical College (MPTC) in Wisconsin is only in its third semester, but it already has a lengthy waiting list.

Still, it wasn't easy to get a traditionally face-to-face program to work online. The college did so out of necessity, said Pete Rettler, campus and community partner for MPTC's

West Bend and online campuses.

Despite an industry craving for vet techs, MPTC didn't have the brick-and-mortar space to offer a face-to-face program. To make it work online, the college collaborated with technical specialists, instructors, area veterinary clinics and hospitals, as well as the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Worldwide Instructional Design System (WIDS).

An advisory board of educators and professionals in the veterinary field worked with "vet tech" instructor Laura Lien to develop the program curriculum, along with other industry collaborators. While students were to take theory courses online, all hands-on skills were to be practiced and mastered at partnering veterinary clinics.

One of just nine accredited programs of its kind in the nation, the vet tech program—accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities (CVTEA)—currently has 33 enrolled students and a 72 percent retention rate.

A unique component of the program is that students videotape themselves performing various tasks while at partnering clinics. They then upload the videos to a

file transfer protocol (FTP) site provided by MPTC. From there, MPTC instructors download the videos and assess students' performance.

"It is important to offer both face-to-face and online courses and programs whenever possible," Rettler said. "Online isn't for everyone because some people are not comfortable in that environment. But online learning does allow many more people the chance to participate in college classes."

The shortage of skilled veterinary technicians in Wisconsin prompted MPTC to develop the program. At the time, Madison Area Technical College was the only college in the state to offer a vet tech program, and it was solely on campus.

As part of its assessment of the state's needs for vet techs, MPTC conducted a survey that showed 75 percent of participating veterinary practices had a "strong need" for vet techs, said Josh Bullock, an institutional research and quality improvement partner. Researchers projected that there would be more than 420 new vet tech positions in Wisconsin during the next four years.

Vet tech jobs were already the sixth fastest-growing career path in the state requiring a two-year degree and the fourth-fastest growing in the nation, Bullock said.

Every course in the vet tech program has online components, and some are entirely online, said Lien, who created the curriculum with help from software developed by WIDS.

Because the software generates documents such as syllabi, learning plans and assessment tasks in HTML, it works seamlessly with MPTC's online platform, making online delivery simpler and more consistent, college officials said. The software was also used in the accreditation process to document that AVMA standards were met.



An alpaca oral exam is demonstrated to veterinary technician students at the London Dairy Alpacas (Wisconsin).

MPTC developed two sets of assessment scoring guides. The instructor used one when assessing student videos, and the clinic supervisor used the other one. The college put special emphasis on engaging learners online with "synchronous" and "asynchronous" activities. Asynchronous activities include discussion threads and e-mails; synchronous activities are lessons completed by students and the instructor

simultaneously while online.

The vet tech program uses online synchronous methods to capture students' attention and reinforce collaborative learning, Lien said. For example, to help vet tech students learn to take X-ray images of animals, a synchronous virtual classroom provides digital images, interaction and discussion simultaneously.

"To shoot an X-ray image of an animal's body part, students need to know anatomical land marks and select the right machine setting," Lien said. "So we put the digital images online and asked the students what was wrong with them and how to correct them. Everyone interacted at the same time, which helped the students realize what was lacking in their knowledge."

As with any online program in which assessing hands-on work is necessary, logistics and technology come into play. In the case of MPTC, students are required to practice hands-on procedures multiple times at participating vet clinics before videotaping themselves for instructor assessment.

"People in the veterinary practice are not the evaluators; that must be done by the faculty," Leff said. "But the people in the veterinary practice need to confirm completion of the coursework."

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