

Gone to the Dogs

Canines claim their territory on college campuses

SUMMER HAS FADED INTO FALL AND it's time for dog lovers—and dogs too—to head to college, where dogs are taking their place in the dorm, the psych lab and even the classroom.

While some dogs simply kick back and enjoy campus life at a university with pet-friendly housing, such as Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Fla., or Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., others give their intellectual muscles a workout by participating in research

studies designed to test their ability to think and solve problems.

Dogs are taking their place in college-level human studies as well. At several universities, they dominate the syllabi of courses devoted to companion-animal behavior and welfare. Other schools offer entire classes or majors focused on the human-canine connection.

To a dog lover, the appeal of taking a dog to college is obvious, as is the draw of canine-focused study—but what's in it for the dogs? While it has long

been possible to study animal science, wildlife management or food-animal husbandry, formal study of dogs in academia is a relatively new phenomenon. As recently as the 1990s, academic researchers who wanted to focus on *Canis lupus familiaris* were greeted with raised eyebrows, ridicule or worse. But the nascent fields of anthrozoology—the study of human-animal relationships—and cynology—the study of the domestic dog—are growing quickly in academia.



Applying academic rigor to the study of dogs can increase our understanding of their abilities and deepen our bond with them, ultimately resulting in improving their treatment by society as a whole. These goals spurred the development of the country's first anthrozoology program and the establishment of a university wholly devoted to the study of dogs. Both of these pioneering efforts are part of a growing collection of canine-focused educational options.

When Anne Perkins was head of the psychology department at Carroll College in Helena, Mont., she was dissatisfied with existing animal-focused study options, which were basically limited to animal science and zoology. "These programs were not addressing why we love our animals so much," she says. Perkins spent a 2005 sabbatical designing a new program, anthrozoology, which would "study the value of animals from an academic, scholarly perspective." The new program was first offered as a minor at Carroll in 2007.

"I bit it off in pieces," she says, adding one class at a time. The students wanted more; the minor grew into a major, and Carroll offered the nation's first bachelor of arts in anthrozoology in 2011. The bachelor's degree "embedded the study [of the animal-human bond] in traditional fields," where research is peer-reviewed and published in scholarly journals, Perkins says.

Carroll College anthrozoology students focus on either horses or dogs. Students in the canine track examine theories of domestication and attachment. They study puppy development, socialization and learning, and they practice assessing temperament. Seniors raise puppies, preparing them for a broad range of doggie careers, including scent work, assistance and acting.

Like Perkins, Bonita Bergin, founder and president of Bergin University of Canine Studies (BUCS), argues that academic study is essential to improving the status and treatment of dogs. As BUCS graduates leave the Rohnert Park, Calif., campus to teach or run businesses that model ethical human-

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When the early sun finds the untended rim of the backyard our seventeen-year-old husky sways upright in her luxury foam bed by the kitchen door, stretches as thoughtfully as a ballerina at her barre, steps delicately over the dew damp stones of the terrace and settles herself on that premier patch of brilliant green to resume the long dream of the long-lived.

—Ann Goethe

canine relationships, "we hope to enrich the understanding of the relationship that has inspired and fulfilled so many," Bergin says. "We also hope to help eradicate the horror of euthanasia of unwanted dogs." Offering post-secondary study wasn't enough for Bergin; she also wanted the respect of academic peers. Tenacious as a terrier, Bergin spent three years pursuing her vision: the world's first accredited university focusing on our canine pals and partners. Why? "I believed the dog deserved it," she says simply.

Undergraduate and graduate students at BUCS explore the influence of genetics and heredity on dogs' behavior and temperament. They also analyze the growing body of published research on dogs, and are encouraged to contribute original research of their own. But it's not all books and theory. Puppies and service-dogs-in-training fill the campus with hands-on opportunities. The associate degree program, in particular, emphasizes dog training and socialization; starting the day students help out with the whelping process.

Bergin has revolutionized early-puppy education. BUCS students begin "formally" training puppies as soon as the puppies open their eyes at about four weeks of age. The astonishing result is that most puppies respond eagerly and accurately to more than a dozen verbal cues by the time they are eight weeks old.

On the opposite side of the country, dog-loving students at SUNY Cobleskill choose among a half-dozen dog-focused electives in the animal science department. "[The courses] are designed to give students a solid

understanding of the important factors involved in producing good working dogs and the behavioral basis of popular training techniques, emphasizing positive, reward-based approaches," says Stephen Mackenzie, professor of animal science at the university. According to Mackenzie, a canine management major is in the works. Dog-loving students "can work dogs almost every semester they are here," he adds, training dogs for anything from off-leash obedience and agility to tracking, trailing, air scenting and detector work "under the guidance of someone with good academic credentials."

At some universities, dog scholars have to search for dog-related material buried like treasured bones among more traditional offerings. The psychology department at the University of Michigan, for example, offers "Dog Cognition, Behavior and Welfare," a popular course taught by Camille Ward. The class, described as "for people who love dogs and want to learn about them from many different avenues," has a long waiting list. Also in the psychology department, Dr. Barbara Smuts teaches "Behavior of Wolves & Dogs"; she also offers students the opportunity to participate in research projects on dogs' social behavior.

At Barnard College, in New York City, Dr. Alexandra Horowitz (author of *Inside of a Dog*) teaches a psychology class on canine cognition. At Eckerd College, a course on animal learning and training includes considerable material on dogs, says its instructor, Lauren Highfill. The Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind.,

offers companion-animal welfare and management courses that primarily focus on dogs and cats. Graduate students can head to Tufts University for a master's program in animals in public policy that includes study of companion animals, or to Harvard, where psychology grad students can take a seminar called "Puzzles of the Mind: Humans, Animals, Robots."

At Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y., dogs figure prominently in undergraduate coursework on the social organization of animals, animal learning and applied animal behavior. And the college's master of anthrozoology coursework includes a popular class on companion animals in society. A dog-human relationships expert was recently hired, and Canisius plans to expand its dog-centered offerings, says Michael Noonan, professor of animal behavior, ecology and conservation.

We've come far since 17th-century philosopher René Descartes asserted that animals lacked the ability to feel pain, yet cruel treatment of dogs is still far too common. Canisius prepares animal-behavior graduates to eradicate that cruelty and to "make the world a better place in the way we interact with animals" by providing a "strong, science-based education balanced with critical thinking and ethics," Noonan says. "From the science, we see that

they [animals] are more like us than was thought in the past." Therefore, "most ethics that apply to us apply to them — animals are sentient beings whose concerns matter."

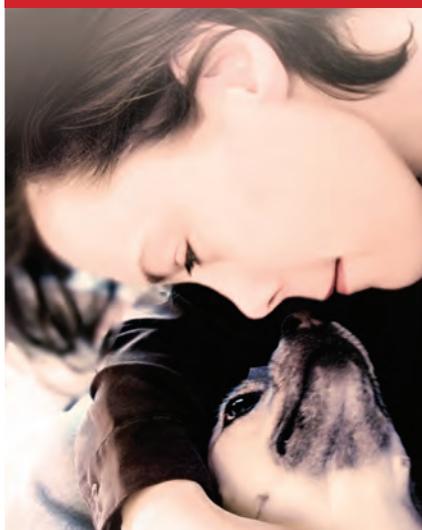
Some schools recognize the importance of the human-animal bond by allowing pets in selected on-campus housing units—about a dozen colleges nationwide have at least one pet-friendly dorm. Other schools conduct research studies that aim to improve understanding of dogs' abilities and view of the world. Indeed, new evidence of dogs' intelligence, creativity and ability to understand and communicate their concerns is uncovered daily at cognition labs, where dogs take center stage.

New York City dogs can join cognition studies in Horowitz's lab at Barnard where anthropomorphic beliefs about dogs are tested with an emphasis on "getting the dog's perspective," rather than a more traditional behavior-focused approach, said researcher and Bark contributing editor Julie Hecht. Current studies examine dogs' understanding of the concept of "fairness" and the way they use their noses in daily life. "We're trying to better understand the dog's perspective, but we are, of course, limited by our human perspective," and sometimes the hardest part is separating the two, she said.

Southern dogs have a choice of schools: Duke University (Durham, N.C.), the University of Florida (Gainesville), the University of Kentucky and Eckerd College all recruit local canine "students" for their research. Current studies examine whether dogs can count, how dogs form trusting relationships with humans, dogs' interpretation of human social gestures, and canine imitation and social learning.

The studies might sound esoteric, but they can lead to real changes in the way people regard and teach dogs: Watching four-week-old puppies learn to sit, lie down and solve problems banishes forever any idea that training must involve force. Discovering that dogs can use pictures to indicate their preferences compels scientists to reexamine human-centered ideas that tie thinking to spoken language. And seeing how dogs' behavior changes when they know that human "observers" are distracted hints at their ability to strategize.

The more we learn about dogs' abilities, the greater the potential for true partnerships based on mutual respect rather than compulsion, says Bergin. "This is crucial in transitioning the dog from a backyard animal we see as disposable to recognizing the key role dogs play in the evolution and continued development of humans." 



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