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The virtual fruits of education

Sometimes, when looking for the fruits of education, one must go 'shopping' at the farm. While attending the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science national 'farmers' market' in Baltimore last year and perusing the educational choices made available, I talked with the 'purveyors' of the recently revamped Drexel University graduate program for laboratory animal managers, which now offers an online version of its Master of Laboratory Animal Science (MLAS) 'produce.' Here, I present some insight from 'farmers' Rick Huneke, DVM, and Erin Vogelsong, MS.

The traditional face-to-face MLAS program at Drexel University (Philadelphia, PA) was created 27 years ago in response to demand from local academic and pharmaceutical institutions for highly trained individuals to be involved with managing the operations of their institutional laboratory animal care and use programs. Dr. Pierre Conti recognized that opportunity and built a rigorous academic program to provide learners with the scientific knowledge needed to adequately manage the operations of animal research facilities. The program is equally successful as a means to help students gain admission into veterinary medical school.

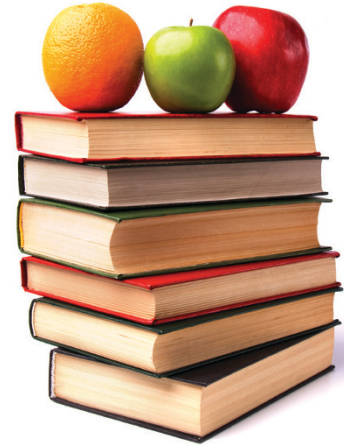
In 2009, the faculty of the MLAS program, under the direction of Dr. Julian Mesina, responded to a call for more flexibility to accommodate the needs of working professionals within the laboratory animal science field. These non-traditional students were working full time for academic institutions, hospitals and pharmaceutical companies while raising families but still had the desire to continue their education and advance both professionally and financially in the field of laboratory animal science. Drexel University's online MLAS program was created to satisfy that need.

The online MLAS program is a graduate-level program, which means that students must have completed a bachelor's degree prior to matriculation. Like the

original curriculum, the online program includes a variety of courses created to develop a specific combination of skill sets that are instrumental to the laboratory animal professional: management of animals, personnel and vivaria. The program also offers additional coursework to give online students more options to satisfy their individual career goals. For example, online courses on the IACUC, on animal nutrition and on occupational health and safety programs are now available.

Students in the online MLAS program have the freedom to work anywhere in the world while they complete their degree. Current students hail from New Jersey, Michigan and Texas. Faculty members consist of laboratory animal managers, scientists and veterinarians who have dedicated their lives to the field of laboratory animal science. As a result, they are great mentors for the students in the program. Because all of the teaching materials are housed in an online learning management system, instructors, much like students, can be located anywhere in the world.

Learning in an online environment can be very convenient; coursework can be completed at home, at the office or even while commuting. But success in an unrestricted environment requires motivation and drive. For students who are accustomed to managing their own time, an online program can be the perfect opportunity to earn a graduate degree without compromising their existing household and work-related responsibilities. For students who are used to having their time managed by someone else, however, this environment can be challenging. Because there is no scheduled class time, students alone are responsible for completing assignments within the allotted timeframes. Faculty members do monitor participation in their courses, but the onus is on the students to approach the instructor if they are having trouble with the course material. Many adult learners thrive in this



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type of environment, but there are a few students who might prefer the structure of a traditional classroom environment.

Graduates of both the face-to-face and the online MLAS programs are working in all realms of the animal science world across the US. They are employed as regulatory compliance associates, facility supervisors, sales representatives, training coordinators, operations managers, biosafety training consultants, veterinary technicians and veterinarians. It is unusual to interact with any company or educational institute within the laboratory animal science field without meeting an MLAS graduate.

Just as there are many varieties of apples in the orchard, there are many ways to become trained in lab animal science. The Drexel University MLAS program is just one of the fruits of education to savor. Here are a few of the other resources that can be found in the virtual orchard: Veterinary Bioscience Institute, Animal Behavioral Institute, University of Guelph Introduction to Lab Animal Medicine (for veterinarians), Eastern Virginia Medical School (online master's program) and the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science Learning Library. Learning is an ongoing endeavor, and online courses like these are one way to satisfy the tastes of the lifelong learner.