A Q&A with a founding faculty member as the College of Veterinary Medicine graduates its first class

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More than 100 Wildcats took center stage at The Linda Ronstadt Music Hall on Thursday when the College of Veterinary Medicine held its first-ever graduation ceremony.

Dr. Walter Klimecki, an associate professor at the college who helped craft the program's preclinical curriculum and accreditation proposal, says he shared in his students' excitement as they celebrated their graduation at the Aug. 24 ceremony – and looks forward to cheering for each "Vet-Cat" as they earn their degrees. Klimecki teaches pharmacology, a summer elective course in pharmacology, and the four-semester longitudinal course Clinical Logic.

Klimecki received his doctorate in veterinary medicine from Ohio State University in 1984, and a doctorate in pharmacology and toxicology from the University of Arizona in 1994. In addition to his position at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Klimecki holds appointments in the R. Ken Coit College of Pharmacy, the College of Nursing, the College of Medicine and the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health. He is also a member of the Asthma and Airway Disease Research Center at University of Arizona Health Sciences and the BIO5 Institute.

As the college celebrates the milestone, Klimecki reflected on what makes the college unique and what he learned from his students.

Why was it important for the University of Arizona to develop a college of veterinary medicine?

The real question is: Why did it take this long? All the pieces have been there for some time. First, there is a statewide and national need for veterinarians in multiple sectors – from companion animals to working animals to food and fiber production animals – and at levels ranging from general practitioners to specialists in diverse areas from food safety to epidemiology to diagnostics to patient care.

Second, there could hardly be a better fit than establishing this college at the Arizona land-grant university. Really, if you could dream of the best university to germinate a new college of veterinary medicine, I doubt you'd think of a better place than right here, given our spirit of innovation, our collaborative, inclusive culture of sharing intellectual and physical resources, and a health sciences center with a strong focus on the "One Health" concept of the interrelationship of all living things with each other and with their environments.

In your own words, what is the mission of the college?

To use the best tools and evidence available to improve our profession through a dedication to inclusivity, the generation of new knowledge and the development of outstanding practitioners making a difference – and to walk the walk ourselves through honest self-reflection and continuous improvement.

Take us back to fall 2020, when this year’s graduating class began. What was your impression of the first cohort?

It was an emotional time. Even though lots and lots had already gone into that moment, seeing those students in my first session really felt to me like the birthing of the program. I was so taken by the work that the dean and Student Affairs had done in assembling a cohort of bright, engaged students with diversity across so many areas. In retrospect, it was the beginning of a stretch of road that was bumpy: a new program, new faculty, and then there was the COVID pandemic. You know, tough times test values, and the cohort graduating this month taught me a lot about bravery, compassion, adaptability and dedication.

What has surprised, inspired or impressed you over the last three years while working with this first crop of students?

In the third semester of my four-semester Clinical Logic course, I require the students to write a short self-reflection on the things that have helped them to become better at clinical diagnostic reasoning and things that have been obstacles to this. I read and replied to each one of these. I’m simultaneously surprised and inspired by the students' stories, which often involve their winding journey to vet school, their moments of joy in finally nailing a tough challenge and the difficulties that life has thrown at them. They are amazing and remind me how lucky I am to have this job.

How has the college approached the challenges it has faced?

I like to think of this experience as a startup business. We were living the exploration, adaptation and determination components of the University of Arizona’s core values in everything we did.

What sets this college apart from other vet schools across the country or elsewhere in the world in terms of its
academic design and culture?

The college is an amazing collection of administrators, faculty and staff who all had the inquisitiveness, bravery and determination to help build a program truly like no other. It wasn’t just taking a job at a startup, it was taking a job at a startup to do something disruptively innovative: build a lecture-free veterinary college using program wide active-learning modalities like team-based learning and peer instruction, and in the only three-year program in the country.

Equally important are the exceptional students the program is built around. I think we deliver great things to our students, but we also ask a great deal. We expect that they attend the class sessions, we ask that they complete homework prior to each class session, and the students are assessed on this in class sessions. We also ask that they engage with their colleagues to work through problems in virtually every class. These things aren’t easy, particularly for students whose educational history has been centered on an individual experience in lecture-based programs. I see our students as brave, compassionate, adaptable and dedicated. Collectively these things set us apart.

When you think about the graduating students in their first few weeks versus now, what stands out most about how they have changed?

During their third year, students are required to present a case they have participated in during one of their clinical rotations. The most profound maturation I see in our first graduating class is the transition from uncertainty and limited confidence to a more measured confidence that they can trust their accumulated toolbox to meet the challenges of clinical practice. Educators, not unlike parents, help students grow roots and wings. My heart skips a beat watching them in flight.

Read more about the college’s first graduating class and graduation ceremony in a story on the University news website.

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