

## Is Distance Learning Right For You?

If you're looking for affordable continuing education that fits your hectic schedule, consider distance-learning programs from colleges and online services.

By Wendy S. Myers



Every Sunday at 9:30 p.m., Joan Evinger, DVM, slips into her pajamas and sips a cup of hot tea before she goes to class. But wearing pajamas to class isn't embarrassing because she takes online courses from Veterinary Information Network (VIN). Evinger is a self-proclaimed CE junkie, logging countless hours of online learning for the past three years. Although she still attends veterinary conferences, Evinger gets a daily dose of CE through message boards, courses and e-mails with colleagues worldwide.

"The interaction during an online session is better than listening to someone talk for an hour," says Evinger, owner of Care-Pets Animal Hospital in Sellersburg, Ind. "The information you get from class members, not just the instructor, is amazing."

Evinger represents a growing number of veterinarians who use distance learning. Online courses let doctors learn at their own pace, get immediate feedback from instructors and classmates, and avoid travel costs. About 20 percent of VIN's 6,000 subscribers take online courses, which are approved by the American Association of Veterinary State Boards Registry for Approved Continuing Education.

Colleges and online services began offering distance learning to accommodate the demand for veterinarians' continuing education and the shortage of licensed technician programs. Last year, St. Petersburg Junior College in St. Petersburg, Fla., became the first school to earn AVMA full accreditation for its distance-learning technician program. Skeptics may question the quality of distance learning, but studies show results similar to traditional instruction, according to the United States Distance Learning Association in Needham, Mass.

"Our distance-learning graduates have consistently outperformed on-campus graduates on the national technician exam," says Guy Hancock, DVM, director of the veterinary technology program at St. Petersburg Junior College. "Distance-learning graduates scored 20 percent above the national average. Online instruction involves more dialogue between students and

faculty than what we see on campus. Some on-campus students sit through a lecture without ever asking a question.”

While U.S. veterinary colleges average 2,500 graduates per year, veterinary technology schools churn out half that number. The gap forces private practitioners to train their own assistants or compete for licensed technicians. “We can’t meet the demand for our graduates,” says Pete Bill, DVM, Ph.D., director of veterinary technology distance-learning programs at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. “We average six to seven job offers for every graduate. Our distance-learning program grew out of the need to deliver a top-notch program to people who couldn’t leave practices.”

### Getting started

Colleges and online services offer distance learning for veterinarians, technicians, veterinary assistants and receptionists. You can take courses to polish skills or work toward a certificate or associate’s degree. Here’s an overview of distance-learning opportunities:

- **Veterinary Information Network.** To take online courses, you need a free 30-day trial



subscription or a VIN membership, which costs \$37 per month. Your subscription includes full access to VIN’s library, message boards, journal reviews, rounds and more. VIN charges \$15 per credit hour for its CE courses and instructors post class materials online. Course lengths vary from one session to 21 weeks. Subjects include an organ system and American Board of Veterinary Practitioners core exam review, internal

medicine, OSHA and practice safety, exotic and avian medicine, practice management and more. Classes average 60 veterinarians. For information, visit [www.vin.com](http://www.vin.com) or call (800) 700-4636.

“Online learning appeals to certain people because they get exposed to material over several weeks like you would in veterinary school,” says Katherine James, DVM, veterinary education coordinator at VIN. “You get a chance to revisit and build on material, and you can do so without having to leave the practice.”

- **Veterinary Support Personnel Network (VSPN).** Designed for technicians, veterinary assistants, receptionists and practice managers, VSPN was developed by and modeled after

VIN. The free site at [www.vspn.org](http://www.vspn.org) offers message boards, chat, libraries, industry links, an OSHA center and more. Some CE courses are free while others cost \$15 per credit. For example, “FUN-damentals of Toxicology” is free and worth four credits, while a 10-week OSHA course costs \$270 for 15 credits and materials. Courses feature live-chat sessions and homework on message boards. For information, visit [www.vspn.org](http://www.vspn.org) or call (800) 700-4636.

“Most online services will go out of their way to help you,” says Nanette Walker Smith, RVT, CVT, director of content at VSPN. “A lot of people are very green and that’s OK because we all started somewhere. If you need help, ask. You will never learn anything if you sit back and meekly learn.”

- **Associate’s degree in veterinary technology.** Several colleges offer distance-learning programs that include online classes, clinic mentorship, textbooks and self-study. For a list of AVMA-accredited schools and distance-learning programs, visit [www.avma.org/care4pets/vtprog.htm](http://www.avma.org/care4pets/vtprog.htm). At St. Petersburg Junior College, distance-learning students must work at least 20 hours per week at a veterinary clinic. Classes meet once a week for live chat and students go online for homework, quizzes, tests and lab exercises. They also must prepare case reports such as radiographs and blood smears, and then mail results to instructors for grading.

If a student takes five to seven credits per semester, including summers, he or she will graduate in three years. Distance-learning students must complete 22 credits of general education before enrolling in veterinary technology courses. Fees are \$50.38 per credit hour for Florida residents and \$186.34 per hour for out-of-state residents, plus fees for technology support and a VIN subscription. For information on St. Petersburg Junior College, visit [www.spjc.edu/hec/vettech/vtde/vtde1.html](http://www.spjc.edu/hec/vettech/vtde/vtde1.html) or call (727) 341-3653.



*Because the AVMA accredits on-campus and distance-learning programs separately, Purdue University professors are working toward AVMA full accreditation for its distance-learning program. The university offers 35 web-based courses and enrollment increases 20 percent each year. Students complete 18 clinical mentorships in large and small animal medicine using various equipment. Professors receive a video of the student*

*performing certain procedures. “We must have legal, forensic evidence that the student can complete the task,” Bill says.*

*A class of three credit hours requires nine hours per week of study. Students pay \$189 per course and buy textbooks, which average \$30 each. For information on Purdue University, visit [www.vet.purdue.edu/vtdl/vtdlhome/](http://www.vet.purdue.edu/vtdl/vtdlhome/) or call (765) 494-1776.*

- **American Animal Hospital Association programs for technicians, veterinary assistants and receptionists.** AAHA’s Distance Education Institute for Veterinary Assistants and the Distance Education Veterinary Technology Program lets staff take college courses from home or office. The programs use textbooks, videos, in-clinic exercises and online classes.

AAHA offers its credentialed veterinary technician program through Cedar Valley College in Lancaster, Texas. To earn an associate’s degree, students must complete general education courses and 14 veterinary technology classes. Courses last 12 weeks and require five to 15 hours per week of study, assignments and exams.

To earn a veterinary assistant certificate, students complete seven courses in veterinary technology. Receptionists take three courses in general hospital and clinic information to earn a certificate. Several AAHA books and videos are required for courses. Tuition is \$275 per course for AAHA members and \$340 for non-members, plus course materials. For information, call AAHA at (800) 883-6301 or visit [www.aahanet.org](http://www.aahanet.org).

Since the programs’ inception three years ago, more than 3,200 students have completed courses and 400 enroll each semester. “Many people can’t afford to take off two to three years to earn a degree,” says Janice L. Trumpeter, DVM, director of professional and corporate relations at AAHA. “Distance learning gives staff members an opportunity for career progression, and employers use it as an incentive for staff to stay longer.”

Still not sure whether you should try distance learning? “Jump in; the water feels great,” says Paul D. Pion, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, president of VIN. “Expect more than what you’re getting from CE now. You’ll get out of it what you put into it.”

### About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: [www.csvets.com](http://www.csvets.com). E-mail Wendy at: [wmyers@csvets.com](mailto:wmyers@csvets.com).