

2024 AAFV Scholarship Report

Lauren Staiger, VMD Candidate 2026

AQUAVET I

My name is Lauren Staiger, and I am a 3rd year veterinary student at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. I am honored to be selected as the 2024 Don Abt Scholar, and even more honored to be able to allocate his scholarship to AQUAVET I. AQUAVET is an incredible program that I am grateful to be selected for and able to afford due to assistance from this scholarship. As the only Penn-We of this year's class, I knew I had a big responsibility representing Dr. Abt and all those who came before me! I also knew through local legend that this course would be... pretty intense. With a 48 hour turn around between my last day of second year and first day of Aquavet, I packed all my things and left Philadelphia in pursuit of Bristol, RI.

AQUAVET I packs in 24 young, tired, and broke students (or already successful veterinarians) into one lecture hall or laboratory with a rotating door of incredible faculty instructors who each know more than all of us combined. The traditional veterinary school curriculum doesn't hold a candle to AQUAVET – I thought I was tired *before* I arrived. With roughly 140 lecture hours, 12 hours of student presentations, and almost 50 hours of lab, I can confidently say that this robust program is worth every minute of sleep lost over 4 weeks. Beginning with invertebrates and wrapping up with marine mammals and birds, the curriculum leaves no shell unturned.

The first week of lectures was accompanied by many, many hours spent dissecting. True crabs, false crabs, horseshoe crabs, bivalves – followed later by fish, reptiles, and sea birds. Then, even more hours of histology comparable in material to a vet school histology class. We made a local tank by collecting specimen from the rocky intertidal shores of Rhode Island, looked at them under a dissecting microscope, and then put them back where they belong! True discipline came down to the lecture hall, with hours that made regular vet school seem easy! Although longer in hours, the material was much more enjoyable than anything else I had learned lately. The presentations by my fellow aquavet-ers were all incredible. Learning about topics passionate to each student made them exciting to listen to and gave us all fun facts to bring back to our small and large animal focused friends!

Besides extensive time in the classroom, Aquavet is packed with field trips! Our first day off (one of two), most of us partook in an unofficial field trip to go whale watching off the coast of Cape Cod. We were able to identify whale species, watch them navigate through waters, and manage to not lose any belongings in the wind!



Whale Watching!



Woods Hole Marine Mammal Necropsy Lab

As someone with more fish than marine mammal experience, the marine mammal necropsy lab at Woods Hole was absolutely incredible to be apart of. We had the opportunity to dissect marine mammals, including dolphins and seals, with doctors who are wealth of knowledge. Having these specimens set aside for this program was truly amazing, and I will never forget this opportunity. Around the corner, we visited the Marine Biological Laboratory and MRC where we were able to check out the behind-the-scenes operations and learn what life is like as a lab animal veterinarian.

We were lucky enough to be able to visit Mystic Aquarium, New England Aquarium, and the Long Island Aquarium during this program. We toured all of these facilities and their hospitals, participated in penguin physical exams, watched desensitization demos with marine mammals, learned about various rescue and rehabilitation operations, and watched a sea lion show!

One of my favorite moments occurred after finishing up dinner in Riverhead, Long Island close to 11 PM, when Joe Yaiullo from the Long Island Aquarium exclaims that his reef tank corals may be

spawning right now. A few of us run over to the aquarium, a very short distance from the restaurant, and enter the dark, sleepy ecosystem found inside. We're the only ones in the aquarium, the fish are hiding in their anemones, and when the lights came on, they all left their places of rest and started swimming around for us. It was incredible to witness the ecosystem wake up and watch all of the corals during such a quiet moment.

Needless to say, many hours were spent in the classroom, laboratory, or traveling from facility to facility, and sleep was never a priority. Somehow Dr. Bob Maze, like any good paparazzi, seems to catch you at your worst with his professional camera, whether that be on the road, in between lectures, or while you're running late and lugging around your overnight bags because you *needed* to have a morning coffee before starting another day – hypothetically speaking. If you thought he wouldn't catch you, you're wrong!

Back at our home base, Roger Williams University, we learned about the university's aquaculture/mariculture efforts from Dr. Rhyne, who showed us the culturing operations around his impressive laboratory and let us use his facilities for our fish surgery labs. Under the guidance of guest stars Drs. Grocock, Boylan and Sanders, we all eagerly performed fish splenectomys and neuters. This was not on my 2024 BINGO card, but I am so glad it happened!



Midnight at the Reef Tank



Veterinary Student Exposé courtesy of Dr. Maze



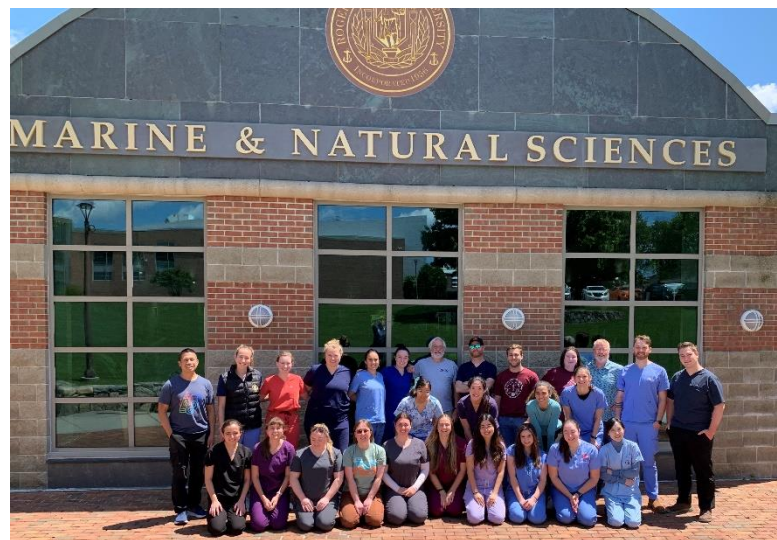
Our Surgical Team with Dr. Groocock

Aquavet was one of the most memorable experiences I've ever had, combining amazing doctors, eager students, every nook and cranny of aquatic medicine, and fun packed into every hour of every day for an entire month. Without the hard work and dedication from Dr. Stremme, Dr. Landeau, and Dr. Maze, this program would not be half as strong as it is currently. Even if they managed to create more hours in the day to pack in more material, I would always choose this program first. I can't give away all of Aquavet's secrets and traditions, but I will forever cherish my time spent in this program and the friendships I have made from it. This experience would not have been possible without the encouragement and financial assistance from AAFV. My love

for aquatic medicine was something I started to lose sight of during my first two years of vet school, since everything we learn is mostly focused on small and large animals. Being able to take Aquavet reminded me why I wanted to go to veterinary school in the first place. I'm forever grateful to the future colleges I met during this experience and AAFV for re-igniting this passion and allowing me this opportunity. I am grateful to allocate the Don Abt scholarship award towards AQUAVET I, and I can't wait to see what my fish future holds!



New York Marine Rescue Center Wet Lab



AQUAVET I Class Photo with Dr. Roy Yanong