Students in AWE: Vet Med's Reimagined Orientation Week

Ethan Brightbill

09/06/2022



Vet Med students at the USU Challenge Course.

Students in AWE: Vet Med's Reimagined Orientation Week

This year’s class of incoming veterinary medicine students at Utah State University were the first to experience the Aggie Wellness Experience (AWE), a multiday orientation program designed to foster the skills and community needed to thrive in vet school. The schedule included time on the ropes at the USU Challenge Course, a scavenger hunt aimed at familiarizing students with the Logan campus, and icebreaker activities.

Before this year, students participated in Cougar Orientation Leadership Experience (COLE), a similar event usually held at Washington State University with students from all four universities in the WIMU Regional Program. While AWE carries over many of the goals and activities of COLE, the new program emphasizes building relationships and trust between students.

Amanda Willett, the director of wellness for USU’s College of Veterinary Medicine, believes that student connections are essential for navigating the challenges of vet school.

“The main thing I want them to get out of the experience is that they have friends here,” said Willett. “It’s a lack of community that leads to mental health issues the most. They need to know they can reach out to faculty, second-year students, and their peers for support.”

To that end, AWE has made important changes to the orientation process. Instead of traveling to Pullman, Washington, USU vet med students stay in Logan where they can focus on bonding with the people they will work with for the next two years. Instead of staff and faculty running small groups, second-year students guide activities throughout the week and share their experiences in the program. And once orientation ends, small groups continue to meet throughout the first year to find mutual support and learn new skills as they become relevant during the semester.

For Melissa Hayhurst, a first-year student from Tempe, Arizona with a passion for responsible pet ownership, AWE was a success.

“I feel like I know everyone's name here,” Hayhurst said. “There's 32 of us, but I already know little pieces of information about pretty much everybody. And I'm already excited about forming study groups and finding out who I'm going to sit next to every day.”

Nick Morrow from Lehi, Utah was already accustomed to long hours working with animals in his job as an exotic animal trainer and owner of Hooves, Humps & Horns LLC. He applied to Utah State and the WIMU Regional Program to expand his qualifications and expertise, but AWE gave him a chance to relax and make friends before the semester begins in earnest.

“It's been awesome,” said Morrow. “Over the last few years, I just put my head down and worked and went to school, so I haven't had much of a social life. I probably had more fun this week than I’ve had in the last five years. It's been really different for me, but it’s been a good experience.”

Aaron Rice of West Jordan, Utah said AWE prepared him to begin the school year.

“I was nervous the first day, but I think everyone was. What I’ve loved is that everyone is on the same page. We all want to become friends so that we can support each other, and that attitude was carried throughout orientation. We’re all here to be veterinarians, so let’s build a team and be the best we can be.”