

An Inter-Institutional Collaboration to “Make Teaching Matter”: The Teaching Academy of the Consortium of West Region Colleges of Veterinary Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Veterinary medical education is a relatively small community with limited numbers of institutions, people, and resources widely dispersed geographically. The problems faced, however, are large—and not very different from the problems faced by (human) medical education. As part of an effort to share resources and build a community of practice around common issues, five colleges in the westernmost region of the United States came together to form a regional inter-institutional consortium. This article describes the processes by which the consortium was formed and the initiation of its first collaborative endeavor, an inter-institutional medical/biomedical teaching academy (the Regional Teaching Academy, or RTA). We report outcomes, including the successful launch of three RTA initiatives, and the strategies that have been considered key to the academy's success. These include strong support from the consortium deans, including an ongoing financial commitment, a dedicated part-time Executive Coordinator, regular face-to-face meetings that supplement virtual meetings, an organization-wide biennial conference, an effective organizational structure, and a core group of dedicated leaders and RTA Fellows. The western consortium and RTA share these processes, insights, and outcomes to provide a model upon which other colleges of veterinary medicine can build to further leverage inter-institutional collaboration.

Key words: educational methods, leadership, outcomes, professional education, inter-institutional collaboration, teaching academy

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, the deans of five veterinary schools [Colorado State University (CSU), Oregon State University (OSU), University of California, Davis (UCD), Washington State University (WSU), and Western University of Health Sciences (WUHS)] partnered with an industry collaborator (Zoetis) to explore ways the colleges might collaborate to address shared problems. Together, the deans formed the Consortium of West Region Colleges of Veterinary Medicine (“the Consortium”). In forming this regional consortium of schools, the deans were acting in response to recommendations of the North American Veterinary Medical Education Consortium's (NAVMEC) 2011 report, *Roadmap for Veterinary Medical Education in the 21st Century: Responsive, Collaborative, Flexible*.¹ This report identified five strategic goals, one of which was to “share resources to ensure veterinary medical education is of the highest quality and maximally cost-effective.”^{1(p.5)} The deans intended that the Consortium support research or education-focused projects that would leverage regional strengths and meet

specific needs of the member institutions. The schools in the Consortium were limited to those in the western United States to facilitate inter-institutional communication and collaboration (personal communication, Phillip Nelson, Dean of WUHS CVM).

The first project that emerged from the Consortium was establishment of an inter-institutional (regional) teaching academy (the Regional Teaching Academy, or RTA) (see [Figure 1 https://teachingacademy.westregioncvm.org/](https://teachingacademy.westregioncvm.org/)). Specific problems the founders envisioned the academy could address were (1) the lack of training in education of veterinary school faculty, (2) the lack of rigorous, evidence-based methods to evaluate teaching effectiveness and teaching faculty, (3) the need for a more scholarly, evidence-based approach to teaching and curriculum design, (4) the need for educational research in veterinary medical education, and (5) the current dearth of collaborative interactions between teaching faculty and educational leaders across the five campuses.

Medical teaching academies are still rare in schools of veterinary medicine; only two existed in North America



Figure 1: Original institutions and contributors to the Consortium of West Region Colleges of Veterinary Medicine

The founding deans of the Consortium were Lance Perryman, Colorado State University (current dean, Mark Stetter); Cyril Clarke, Oregon State University (current dean, Susan Tornquist); Michael Lairmore, University of California, Davis; Bryan Slinker, Washington State University; and Phillip Nelson, Western University of Health Sciences.

in 2011 (WSU and the University of Tennessee). The LIVE Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, established in 2005 as the result of a government mandate and funding at the Royal Veterinary College (University of London, United Kingdom), is an important example of a teaching academy that supports excellence in veterinary education internationally.² On the other hand, teaching academies are relatively common in human medical schools, where they are recognized as a *best practice* for ensuring educational excellence.³ Irby et al.⁴ described a medical teaching academy as an organizational entity focused on teaching improvements, which can influence both structural and behavioral change. Likewise, Dewey et al. described a medical teaching academy as “a formal organization of academic teaching faculty recognized for excellence in their contributions to the educational mission of the

college and who serve specific functions on behalf of the institution.”^{5(p.359)} The general characteristics of a teaching academy include (1) “a mission that advances and supports educators,” (2) “a membership composed of distinguished educators,” (3) “a formal organizational structure with designated leadership,” and (4) “dedicated resources that fund mission-related initiatives.”^{4(p.730)} Steinert⁶ noted that a teaching academy can influence institutional change “by helping to develop institutional policies that support and reward excellence, recognize innovation and scholarship, and enable career advancement.”^{6(p.718)}

However, all these descriptions refer to a “local” teaching academy, embedded within a single medical school and working across departments. The concept of an inter-institutional teaching academy was (and still is) novel. Nevertheless, the founding Consortium members

hypothesized that there could be similar outcomes and that the regional, inter-institutional entity might eventually become an amplifying link between local teaching academies at each member college. They anticipated that the inter-institutional teaching academy would provide a supportive collaborative culture, or “community of practice,” described as a network of like-minded individuals all working toward a common goal to enhance teaching.⁷ Participating in a community of practice can change the teaching culture from an isolated, individual process to one that is viewed as a more collaborative and connected environment.⁸ These communities provide individuals with a sense of belonging to a larger network and an avenue for social support.⁸ Thus, *community of practice* served as the foundational theoretical framework for the RTA, and for the Consortium as a whole.

REGIONAL TEACHING ACADEMY: A BEST PRACTICE FOR VETERINARY COLLEGES

In this article, we describe the processes by which the Teaching Academy of the Consortium of West Region of Colleges of Veterinary Medicine was initiated and subsequently shaped. The RTA was conceived as a way to address shared problems within the Consortium, modifying the current best practice of the institutional or college-based teaching academy to create a multi-college academy with enhanced efficacy through pooled resources and collaborative efforts. Recently, other veterinary schools have begun to follow the RTA model and develop regional teaching academies with similar goals in mind. Therefore, we also identify what we believe are the most important lessons learned along the way. Our hope is that sharing these experiences and our reflections will benefit other inter-institutional groups. For these reasons, we recount the history of the West Region RTA and highlight some of our most significant outcomes.

Beyond the creation of an inter-institutional community of practice, the RTA founders envisioned specific products designed to address what the member colleges considered to be the most important shared problems. These products were to be created by an RTA initiative process and dedicated inter-institutional working groups. We report on how the key issues were selected and the development of four RTA working groups. More detailed information on each of the three mature RTA initiatives and the ensuing products is provided in companion articles in the *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education's* (JVME) Special Issue.

FORMATION OF THE REGIONAL TEACHING ACADEMY (2011–2013)

Working with two faculty representatives chosen by the deans from each institution, and with a partner from industry (Zoetis, previously Pfizer Animal Health), the Consortium deans met in San Francisco in the fall of 2011 to discuss ways in which their colleges might work together to address shared problems. Under the direction of a professional facilitator over 1.5 days, the group brainstormed, debated, and ultimately came to a consensus around a single idea for an inaugural project—enhanced teaching, and the formation of the Regional Teaching Academy (RTA). It was envisioned that the RTA would serve as a de

facto *department of veterinary medical and biomedical education*, a shared entity which none of the individual colleges had the resources to otherwise support individually. The WSU CVM Teaching Academy (which was 2 years old at the time) and the medical education literature on which it was based served as the initial model.^{2,4,5,7,9–11}

“... one of the reasons that the RTA was unanimously chosen as our first initiative was all the [Consortium] deans recognized the void to uniformly reward the faculty or recognize those faculty who chose to focus on instruction. We all recognized the need to come up with reliable tools that adequately assess the efficacy of instruction.”

– Phillip Nelson, Dean,
WUHS College of Veterinary Medicine

Each dean designated two representatives, chosen for their educational leadership, educational scholarship, and/or excellence in teaching, to form a steering committee to work out the mission, organizational structure, and operations of the new academy. Although originally named the Academy of Veterinary Medical Education, the name was quickly changed to the Teaching Academy of the Consortium of West Region Colleges of Veterinary Medicine. The five founding deans committed to continued financial support of the RTA via an annual membership contribution of \$10,000 US per member college, with some additional initial financial support (in the first 2 years) from Zoetis. Over the next year, the Steering Committee worked via a series of face-to-face and videoconference meetings to define the mission statement, vision, and goals of an inter-institutional academy dedicated to veterinary and biomedical education, stated as:

The *Mission* is to ensure that the members of the Consortium collaborate to develop, implement, and sustain the best practices in veterinary medical and biomedical education in our colleges, and to establish veterinary medical educator/biomedical educator as a valued career track. Through these efforts, we hope to meet the needs of society and the profession.¹²

The *Vision* of the RTA is *Making Teaching Matter*, and the Goals are (1) Generate innovative concepts for the advancement of veterinary education, (2) Develop, review, and disseminate best practices in veterinary education, (3) Contribute to and promote the development of instructional/teaching scholarship, and (4) Provide, promote and develop educational/instructional leadership.¹²

In January 2013, the Steering Committee approved the initial RTA bylaws,¹³ thereby establishing the RTA's initial leadership, membership, and operational structure (Figure 2). The bylaws also established membership eligibility and expectations. The criteria to become a Fellow of the RTA included demonstrated accomplishment in at least two of six possible education domains and a stated commitment to the collaborative work of the academy.¹³ Importantly, these criteria established membership as having both an honorific component and a clear expectation to actively engage in the work of the RTA. Fellows could be faculty at any stage of their academic careers who play a significant role in the



Figure 2: Regional Teaching Academy organizational structure

The Steering Committee (SC) consists of two members from each member college, with leadership by a Chair, Chair-Elect, and Treasurer. Committees and working groups have representation from all institutions, and members from the SC also serve as liaisons to each of these groups. The Executive Coordinator serves as an administrator for all committees and working groups, ensuring continuity of actions between the groups.

teaching mission of the participating consortium schools. A nomination/application process to become an RTA Fellow was established. The term of the membership initially was set at 3 years, and then later changed to 4 years so that all Fellowship terms would span two biennial meetings. To remain a Fellow after the initial term, members were expected to participate actively in the collaborative work of the RTA.

The RTA bylaws also created two additional standing committees—the Membership Committee and the Biennial Meeting Planning Committee. The Steering Committee members took on the roles of both committees initially, convening during the second year to review and approve the Founding Fellows of the RTA and to plan the first RTA biennial conference. The bylaws further provided for *ad hoc* “working group” committees that would be responsible for the work related to specific RTA initiatives. Initiatives were to be identified via a collaborative process of all participating RTA Fellows as part of the biennial conferences.

THE FIRST TWO RTA INITIATIVES (2013)

The 1st Biennial Conference of the RTA, held at OSU (Corvallis, OR) in July 2013 (Table 1) was attended by 44 new RTA Fellows and several guests who spent 3 days learning about education and faculty development, sharing ideas, and discussing potential directions for projects and working groups. During the conference, Fellows participated in a 2-day collaborative process to identify the highest priority issues that the RTA wished to address

first. By the end of the meeting, two important initiatives had been adopted: (1) External Peer Review of Teaching (EPRT), and (2) Faculty Development (FD). Working groups consisting of members from each of the five colleges were formed to support the two new initiatives.

External Peer Review of Teaching

The EPRT working group was formed to address one of the three issues identified by the RTA as having highest priority during the 1st Biennial Conference. This issue, the *Recognition of Excellence*, was defined as:

The academy will develop mechanisms to recognize creativity, innovation, and outstanding performance in instruction, educational research, educational leadership, development of enduring educational materials, or other areas relevant to teaching and learning.¹²

RTA Fellows realized that the strongest contribution they could make toward recognition of excellence in teaching and education would be to strengthen that recognition for the purposes of promotion and tenure. Likewise, they identified that the greatest needs were for an established set of metrics and a respected process for external peer review of teaching, educational scholarship, and leadership.

“It was quite obvious—for me it was a great opportunity to come in with my eyes wide open and determine what was working well and what was a challenge at CSU. One [of]

Table 1: Biennial conferences of the Teaching Academy of the Consortium of West Region Colleges of Veterinary Medicine (RTA)

RTA Conference (host college)	Action on initiatives
<p>2013—1st Biennial RTA Conference (OSU) <i>Making the Teaching Academy Matter</i> • 57 participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopted External Peer Review of Teaching (EPRT) initiative • Adopted Faculty Development (FD) Initiative
<p>2015—2nd Biennial RTA Conference (WSU) <i>Building a Culture of Excellence in Teaching & Learning</i> • 53 participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FD initiative workshop • EPRT initiative pilot of Educator Promotion documents • Adopted Local Peer Observation of Teaching (LPOT) Initiative
<p>2017—3rd Biennial RTA Conference (CSU) <i>Paradigm Change in Teaching: Leveraging Cross-Institutional Collaboration</i> • 72 participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FD initiative delivery of Veterinary Educator Teaching and Scholarship (VETS) 1.0 program • EPRT initiative workshop on Educator Promotion packet • LPOT initiative workshop on local peer observation process • No new initiatives adopted
<p>2019—4th Biennial RTA Conference (UCD) <i>The Cognitive Integration of Basic and Clinical Sciences: Beyond the Buzzwords</i> • 70 participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FD delivery of VETS 1.0 and pilot of VETS 2.0 programs • EPRT initiative workshop on implementation strategy • LPOT panel discussion on progress at member colleges • Adopted Quantifying Teaching Effort (QTE) Initiative

RTA = regional teaching academy; OSU = Oregon State University; WSU = Washington State University; CSU = Colorado State University; UCD = University of California, Davis

the things I heard loud and clear was that in the promotion and tenure process where we recognized our outstanding faculty, we had some easier metrics for research components rather than the teaching components."

– Mark Stetter, Dean, CSU College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences

Faculty Development

A second issue prioritized by the RTA, *Faculty Development*, was described as:

By “educating the educators” and bringing faculty from member colleges together, the academy will disseminate evidence-based best practices, develop the next generation of veterinary medical and biomedical educators, build cross-instructional collaborations, and encourage scholarship in teaching.¹²

The FD working group was formed to assess the educational development needs of Consortium faculty and then develop training programs to address those needs.¹⁴ Expertise in educational theory and practice was provided by Fellows with advanced training in education, with additional guidance from distinguished medical and biomedical educators through workshops at RTA biennial conferences and other educational venues.

Scholarship

A third issue was also prioritized by the RTA; however, it was anticipated that this issue would be addressed through

the forum provided at biennial conferences of the RTA, and thus was not the focus of a separate initiative:

The academy will provide mechanisms (and a venue) to disseminate and make public scholarly works on teaching and learning, local experiments in teaching, best practices, and educational materials.¹²

KEYS TO EARLY SUCCESS AND LESSONS LEARNED (2014–2015)

Several factors were crucial to the early success of the emerging RTA (Box 1), including financial support from the college deans and industry along with some administrative resources from the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC). Each dean committed an equal share of funding to the RTA’s initial budget. This commitment was renewed each year as the RTA demonstrated its ability to meet or exceed expectations. The Steering Committee determined that the bulk of the RTA budget would be dedicated to three main areas: (1) salary costs for a part-time Executive Coordinator to provide administrative support, (2) travel expenses for face-to-face meetings of committees and working groups, and (3) programmatic and travel expenses for biennial conferences (including support of a distinguished keynote speaker or educational workshop leader).

A key factor that was instrumental in the success of the RTA was the part-time administrative support of an Executive Coordinator (Rachel L. Halsey) who provided

Box 1: Key elements for success and lessons learned by the Teaching Academy of the Consortium of West Region CVM (RTA)

Consortium deans—strong, sustained support from leadership at each member college (*especially as dean positions turn over*)

- **Equity of member colleges**—rotation of organization leadership and hosting responsibilities among member schools
- **Financial support**—sufficient, sustained (*to fund biennial conference, travel, wages for Executive Coordinator, etc.*)
- **Dedicated Executive Coordinator**—paid, part time administrative support (*essential for sustained progress in a volunteer organization*)
- **Face to face working meetings**—annually to supplement videoconferencing (*Steering Committee, committees, and working groups*)
- **Successful academy-wide conferences**—currently biennially (*learning together; networking; sharing outcomes, teaching innovations, and educational scholarship*)
- **Internal leadership**—consistent, strong leadership from Steering Committee and its chair
- **Core group**—a core group of members dedicated to the organization's mission and outcome with all Consortium schools represented
- **Effective onboarding of new Fellows**—via Biennial Conference, effective communication and mentoring
- **Empowerment of members**—a facilitated, collaborative process for identifying and prioritizing initiatives

CVM = Colleges of Veterinary Medicine; RTA = regional teaching academy

support to all committees and working groups. Duties of the Executive Coordinator included (1) coordinating, managing, and assisting the RTA with all face-to-face and virtual meetings; (2) organizing and managing all FD workshops and biennial conferences; (3) designing, developing, and distributing RTA communication material (newsletters, emails, and other needed material); and (4) developing and maintaining the RTA website. The Executive Coordinator is paid through the RTA account, which is administered by the AAVMC rather than at a Consortium institution.

A lesson that RTA Fellows learned very early in the process of initiative development was that annual to semi-annual face-to-face meetings were critical to maintaining the momentum of the working groups. Much of the communication between group members occurred through emails and over monthly videoconferences, but because all members were also busy faculty at their respective colleges, competing priorities often overshadowed RTA work. The face-to-face meetings, often held in a regionally-accessible location rather than on a college campus, offered dedicated time for members to focus on working together to achieve RTA goals and make progress on the RTA initiatives.

Founding RTA Fellows also recognized the importance of providing a forum for Fellows and other faculty from Consortium colleges to share ideas, form collaborations, report scholarly activities, and network. The decision was made to organize biennial conferences that rotate in location between the colleges. Biennial conferences were to be scheduled in years that alternate with the biennial meeting of the Veterinary Educator Collaborative (VEC).¹⁵

The 2nd Biennial Conference of the RTA was held in July 2015 at WSU (Pullman, Washington). To encourage optimal attendance, Fellows were offered a partial travel stipend, and over 70% of Fellows attended. Both working groups reported on their progress with the two initiatives and held workshops or training sessions. Once again, RTA Fellows engaged in a 2-day collaborative process to consider additional RTA initiatives. The EPRT group noted that, for many faculty, local peer evaluation or observation of teaching was an element that was lacking in

the information available in promotion packets. Fellows in attendance also noted that teaching effectiveness was largely being gauged using student evaluations, a measure that has known limitations.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Recognizing the need for more peer review of teaching and the potential formative impact of peer feedback, RTA Fellows chose to develop Local Peer Observation of Teaching (LPOT) as the RTA's third major initiative.¹²

"The deans have all been really pleased as the Regional Teaching Academy is not just a source for enthusiasm and support for each other, which certainly it is, but actually tackling development of some tangible products from the collaboration. That's not easy to do among five or six institutions, and I think this is a really good example of how this can happen if you have really good people who are committed to doing it."

—Susan Tornquist, Dean,
OSU Carlson College of Veterinary Medicine

TEACHING ACADEMY GROWTH AND MATURATION (2016–2019)

Over the next 3 years, the RTA concentrated efforts on developing and implementing the three initiatives. Each year brought additional progress toward goals and strengthened collaborative bonds between the Fellows at Consortium colleges. However, the maturation of the academy also clarified the challenge of maintaining a sustained effort with volunteers—that is, faculty who do not have time officially allocated to RTA endeavors. To address this challenge, the RTA focused on recruitment and integration of new Fellows on a regular basis (done every 2 years, to coincide with the biennial conferences) in order to bring in fresh energy and perspective. The Membership Committee refined and standardized a process for inclusion of new Fellows based on the criteria defined in the bylaws and developed a process for renewal of Fellows' terms based on active engagement in RTA activities. An important lesson learned as the number of Fellows grew from the initial 10 to more than 60 was that

new Fellows often need assistance or direct invitations to join ongoing RTA activities. The Steering Committee worked to increase communication to all Fellows to raise awareness of the efforts of committees and working groups across the RTA. In addition, the Membership Committee established a program of partnering current Fellows with new Fellows to facilitate involvement in the RTA.

During the 3rd Biennial Conference at CSU (Fort Collins, Colorado) in 2017, the RTA Steering Committee chose not to develop a new initiative, but rather to have new Fellows join in to assist with implementation of the first three initiatives. The conference focused on leveraging the ongoing RTA initiatives, strengthening the community of practice, learning together, and sharing work from each college. The two-part keynote workshop on teaching clinical reasoning and critical thinking was designed to bring together clinical educators and basic scientists to address a shared educational goal.

In spring of 2019, the Consortium welcomed a sixth college, Midwestern University (MU) College of Veterinary Medicine (Glendale, Arizona) into the collaborative, and MU faculty were invited to attend the 4th Biennial Conference at the UCD (Davis, California) to learn more about participation in the RTA. The conference theme, "The Cognitive Integration of Basic and Clinical Sciences: Beyond the Buzzwords," was designed to appeal to the broad membership of the RTA, which includes faculty teaching basic and clinical sciences in undergraduate, graduate and professional education programs. At this conference, the RTA's fourth initiative, Quantifying Teaching Effort, was adopted with strong support. The working group supporting this initiative will seek to develop methods to consistently and fairly quantify teaching effort across a wide variety of settings (large classrooms, laboratories, problem-based learning groups, clinical rounds, one-on-one clinical interactions, etc.).

"I think it has been a fabulous success. ... All the participating partners have benefited locally and then the national synergies with the various [RTA] products and projects that have developed, I think they've actually exceeded our expectations."

– Michael Lairmore,
Dean, UCD School of Veterinary Medicine

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Detailed information on each of the three mature RTA initiatives and the associated products is provided in companion articles within this issue of *JVME*. Publication of the processes and preliminary outcomes associated with the RTA and its first three initiatives is an important step in validating the work of the group as it matures. Moving forward, implementation, data collection and publication on the effectiveness of the RTA products (faculty development, peer observation of teaching, and external peer review of promotion packets) will be a primary focus. Likewise, the fourth and newest RTA initiative (to develop methods to more fairly quantify teaching effort) has been chosen to address what RTA Fellows consider to be a persistent

problem at all six member schools, and the RTA will approach this problem with the same enthusiasm and rigor as the first three initiatives.

"Publishing is a critical step so that people begin to understand how these things work and the potential benefits: Not only the teaching academy approach but the cooperative approach where multiple institutions who each wish they had more resources could combine forces and achieve more than they could on their own. That's a key thing here, the synergism that comes from the resources that we do have that become something bigger."

– Bryan Slinker, Dean,
WSU College of Veterinary Medicine

The RTA looks forward to continuing to build an effective inter-institutional community of practice. We hope this will include growing the friendships and collaborations already in place, welcoming new members to the committees and working groups, and nurturing a whole new generation of dedicated educators. As resources allow and pending the engagement of RTA Fellows, new initiatives will be identified, and some current programs may be broadened. The LPOT working group will be phased out as member colleges gain experience in using the initiative's instruments.

The RTA also faces ongoing challenges, notably associated with sustainability of an inter-institutional entity in which significant effort is required and yet members are basically volunteers. Sustaining such an organization is likely to be more difficult than starting a new one. With time, the excitement of fresh ideas and new colleagues fades, Founding Fellows retire or move on, and the pride of ownership associated with being a "pioneer" is no longer a factor. It will be essential to inculcate young faculty into the academy, make sure their voices are heard, and invite them into leadership roles. Continued support of the Consortium deans will be essential. The RTA has recognized another limitation to this model of inter-institutional collaboration, and that is the difficulty encountered in developing processes such as EPRT that can be applied effectively across several diverse institutions with different promotion and tenure requirements. Nevertheless, we believe the RTA provides a model for educators and administrators in veterinary colleges by which resources, expertise, and a strong sense of purpose can be leveraged to bring about much-needed institutional change. An emerging opportunity may be to interact with other nascent inter-institutional veterinary medical teaching academies to further advance our mutual goals.

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