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Demystifying the Senior Year: Are the Rumors Really True?

LISA DE NAULT

As we all go through our first three years here at ISU CVM, rarely does anyone speak about “the senior year”. Sure, we all hear the myths and rumors about how awful this clinician is to work with and oh, never, never take that rotation or you will never see the light of day and become a vampire. The gossip runs wild and somehow makes its way upstairs to the underclass students. But what is fact and what is fiction? I decided to investigate this matter and was lucky to find several eager senior students to straighten out this whole mystic experience called “senior year”.

Considering all the bad stuff we hear about clinicians, I thought it best to start investigating this first. Twila Seefeldt Robb stated, “Don’t expect to go home at night and don’t have any preconceived notions or attitude when you come down here”. Mark Troxel agreed about that point and further added, “Don’t have a bad attitude towards certain clinicians just based on what you have heard about them. Because, until you actually work with them, you have no clue. There was one clinician that I really didn’t think that I would get along with and thought that it was going to be awful, but, in reality, we got along great and it was really fun working with that person.” Roxanne Fish added to the question about clinicians by stating, “Everybody has bad days including clinicians and other students. You should not take it personally because the frustration is not directed at you. If you do take it personally, your rotations are going to be really awful.” So the best advice is to come into your senior year rotations with an open mind and not everybody is as bad as rumor may have it.

Mark Troxel’s other advice when asked to comment about senior year was to work hard, read a lot, and that it is not impor-
tant what your grades were your first three years of school, it is your attitude and work ethic that are the important skills during your senior year. Roxanne Fish also reiterated that a positive attitude is really important and if something does go bad, just use it as a learning experience and get right back on track. Roxanne seems to think that the people who have the hardest time with their senior year are those people who do not have a positive attitude. Jen Thompson added, “Your first couple months in the clinics, you are new in clinics and you’re senior students and you are not or shouldn’t be expected to know everything. So, you are down here (in the clinics) as a learning environment. Any clinician or person therefore, that expects you to know everything or every right answer, is not being reasonable. This advise goes for yourself too. Don’t be too hard on yourself when you don’t know something.”

All three years of class work are supposed to prepare you for senior year but, you will forget and need to look up information but most of the seniors reassured me that by the end of your senior year, students do know the basics.

Mark also commented on those elusive things called preceptorships. You hear bits and pieces during your first two years. Then, in your junior year, as you are scrambling around trying to develop your senior schedule, you realize that “wow, I should have started sooner”. So, Mark’s advice is to start early in contacting places where you would like to go senior year, especially if you are interested in exotics. In the end, good planning, organization, and pursuing contacts early will help you land in some great places and have some good learning experiences. Mark also added a comment about classes that he took during his first three years. He took a lot of species specific electives which he said, “For me, that was probably the most beneficial thing I did during my first three years”. Also, he advised to try and not stress out about classes and that grades really do not matter when you get out into practice.

Jen Thompson had some interesting advice to underclassmen. She said, “Try to get down into the clinics prior to your senior year. Getting to know clinicians, where things are located, more details about procedures, and in general, just hanging out and spending time down here (clinics) is really beneficial when you start your rotations.”

Most of the seniors interviewed said that they have been able to get to know classmates that they barely spoke to during the first three years of school. Dana Hall added that classmates should work together, that you need to remember that you are not the only one scared and confused. It is new to everyone else too and you are not the only one who does not know what they are doing. She also added, “Have fun and enjoy it cause you will soon be out in practice.” Dana smiled and commented that the senior year is so much fun and it is important to work together because it really helps to have others helping you out. I asked Dana about previous competitiveness between classmates during the first three years of classes and if that competitiveness continues through your fourth year. Dana answered, “It kind of naturally happens that competition is no longer an issue. When you are working on a rotation together with five other people, you start helping other people because one person maybe really busy and overwhelmed, and if you can do the forms, draw blood or do anything else for them when you have a free moment, they, in turn, will do that for you.” She also added that you get to know people that you never talked to before and that is part of what makes it fun. Mark also added that you find out who you can and can not work with in a rotation. Mark was surprised to find out that classmates that he did not like during the first three years are absolutely great to work with in a rotation. Dana then added that you find out really quickly who helps everybody and who does not help and that people who do not help are really just out for themselves. Sean Harte jokingly replied, “You will learn to like people you thought you never would and you’ll hate the people you always liked.” Thus, cooperation is a key factor to surviving your senior year.

Now that I have covered those nasty rumors about clinicians, preceptorships, and classmates, what is the first week like of your senior year? Is the clinical paperwork as confusing as it looks? What about drawing blood and other simple procedures that
you do not have the skills to do quickly and efficiently? Mark commented, “There is a lot, a lot of paperwork and there is a pretty steep learning curve right away, but after that, you kind of fumble your way through it.” Sean Harte stated that the paperwork is not that bad, but make sure that you become good friends with the technicians cause they help you out immensely. The technicians are a very important asset in the clinics and they will teach you a lot if you are willing to learn. On the other hand, Angie Anderson commented that you can never find anyone so do not try to look. It is best to just sit and wait and let the clinician come to you because it is not worth trying to find them. Angie also added that 1) writing your first SOAP will be a challenge, 2) finding the correct forms for each procedure is difficult, and 3) when they call “outpatient” over the intercom, you actually have to go physically get the animal. But, ultimately, Angie stated that the harder you work, the more you will learn. Sean said that you will drown in paperwork depending on your first rotation. Sean’s first rotation did not have a lot of paperwork so he considers himself lucky. Angie also suggested to share surgery reports. It helps to make a file for common surgeries, like orthopedic surgeries, to save everyone time. Angie also added that you will really learn to like working with cats because you do not have to walk them.

I also asked the senior students how their senior year contributed to their personal growth. Mark said, “I think a lot of people do grow and become much more mature. I think that during senior year you get a lot more self-confidence built in, you get to a point where you are graduating in two weeks going out into the real world and become very scared. But, it is amazing how much you actually learn during your four years here at ISU CVM.” Sean added that he was pretty burned out when he came into his senior year and felt pretty incompetent. In the beginning, there were things that Sean and most senior students struggle with like taking blood from jugular vein that now seems pretty easy. Tammy Weiand-Ness said, “It is scary that everything we know now will be what we have to work with for our first couple cases out in practice.” But, Tammy feels that she is well prepared to face that challenge because she knows the basics and what she does not know, she knows where to look it up. Angie had some more advice to help mentally prepare to see a patient. When you go into an examine room and are taking histories, try to make up your own plan of action before you talk to the doctor. She thinks that if you plan like “this is what I would do” then compare to the clinician’s plan, you learn more while practicing your skills that you will use for the rest of your career. Jen commented that it is surprising to look at the first time you go into an exam room to take a history and do a physical exam compared to a couple weeks before graduation. Jen said, “Wow, all of sudden you can start narrowing down things versus the first time when you have no idea what it could be. Communication skills and learning to work with other people are probably to biggest areas that you see personal growth in others and in yourself.”

To summarize all the advice given: have an open mind, positive attitude, cooperation is key, get to know your classmates, do not judge clinicians prematurely, start early on getting preceptorships, work hard, learn lots, roll with the punches, and the bottom line, have fun your senior year because it can be hell or it can be a blast.

Thanks to Angie Anderson, Roxanne Fish, Sean Harte, Dana Hall, Tammy Weiand-Ness, Twila Seefeldt-Robb, Jen Thompson, and Mark Troxel.