

# Canine Studies: Go to college, play with dogs!

by Pam Hogle - August 9, 2010 at 12:41 pm

I recently received an unusual academic degree: a Master of Science in Human-Canine Life Sciences. There is only one accredited university that offers such a degree: Bergin University of Canine Studies in Santa Rosa, California. The university also offers bachelor and associate of science degrees.

What does one learn in a dog-focused university?

Well, in the associate degree program on service dog education, students learn to train puppies starting when the puppies are only four weeks old. Students assist with the birth of litters of puppies, teach the dogs to enjoy being petted and handled, and teach them all the skills that a mobility assistance service dog needs to know. Students learn about creating a healthy and enriching environment for puppies. They learn that early experiences have a lasting impact on puppies and that socializing puppies to all kinds of people, places, sounds, and smells is important for any puppy but critical for a dog who will work as an assistance dog, accompanying his human partner to public places like malls, restaurants, and airports. Students train several dogs of various ages and take a dog everywhere they go. Students also learn about the clients who will ultimately partner with the service dogs they are training, studying the various disabilities that service dogs help mitigate.

When I was in the associate degree program, we taught our dogs to perform their tasks by responding to words printed on flashcards. We also raised and trained puppies from birth. Watching a 12-week-old puppy perfectly perform a dozen tasks that I had taught her was incredibly rewarding, and inspired me to work as a puppy and service dog trainer.

Students in the bachelor and master's degree programs delve into academic research about dogs and how dogs learn. Courses apply learning theory and cognitive development research to dogs and study the evolutionary and biological roots of canine behavior. Bergin University offers the first accredited programs that bring the study of the dog into mainstream scholarly study.

The master's class is a series of one- and two-week seminars taught by top researchers and experts including Dr.

Marc Bekoff, Dr. Pam Reid, and Dr. Stanley Coren. A survey class presents a range of training and teaching approaches and students then devise their own ideal method for educating dogs. A genetics class explores heredity and its effects on both health and behavior. An ethics class analyzes the way humans and dogs interact and work together and explores the responsibilities of both dogs and humans in these partnerships. The seminar format of the master's

degree program means that students can live anywhere and commute to the university for courses once or twice a year. Students complete a culminating research project or thesis that contributes to and advances the body of knowledge about dogs.

Jana attended nearly all of the master's degree classes with me and was the inspiration for my culminating project, a book I am writing that is called, "No Bad Dogma: Connecting Thinking Dogs and Their Families." Jana also got to participate in classes on freestyle dancing with dogs, agility, scent tracking and disc (or Frisbee) dog training.

Bergin University offers a short summer seminar, in addition to the college degree programs. Find out more on the university's website: [www.berginu.org](http://www.berginu.org).



*Learning to turn on a light switch*

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