HAS Opportunities Focus Feature

Jessica Austin

There are more opportunities today for students interested in studying other animals, and our relationships with them, than ever before.

As of this writing, students can choose from 10 undergraduate minors, 7 majors, and 23 graduate programs in the fields of human-animal studies, anthrozoology, or closely related fields.

Graduates from these programs can expect to enter jobs at animal shelters, sanctuaries, zoos, animal protection organizations, or veterinary offices, or may end up working in the fields of humane education, animal-assisted therapy, environmental education, humane law enforcement, or countless other areas.

One recent graduate of a human-animal studies program is Jessica Austin, of Smyrna, Georgia. She graduated from the Canisius College Anthrozoology Masters program, still the only program of its kind in the United States.

Before entering the program, like so many students, Jessica was an animal lover, and longtime member of both the ASPCA and the HSUS. But she was unaware that there were specific programs which would appeal to someone like her. So she first completed a Master of Public Administration degree, specializing in nonprofit administration, with a thesis focused on emergency planning for companion animals. It was only after completing that degree that she found out about the field of Human-Animal Studies/Anthrozoology.

Jessica told us,

“After a lifetime of fascination with what I recognized as humans’ complex interactions with other animals, I became deeply interested in the human-animal bond while studying psychology in college. However, I was..."
unaware of how to turn that interest into a career, and began my professional life in public health research. I eventually became aware of anthrozoology as a discipline, but there were no programs in the United States. When I learned of the Canisius program, it wasn’t even a question of not entering; while my public health career no doubt benefited me professionally, my real passion lies with studying the human-nonhuman relationship.”

After graduating from Canisius, Jessica founded the Canisius College Anthrozoology graduate blog, as well as the graduate student journal, Animalia: An Anthrozoology Journal, which she now edits. She has presented two papers at scholarly conferences (Moral stress, meaning-making, and mourning: How shelter employees process euthanasia at Living With Animals bi-annual conference, Richmond, KY, 2015; and Companion animal welfare in disasters: An assessment of nine state emergency plans at International Society for Anthrozoology annual conference, Chicago, IL, 2013), and has had two papers published in academic journals (“Beyond coping: Active mourning in the animal sheltering community.” In M. DeMello (Ed.), Mourning animals: Rituals and practices surrounding animal death. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2016; and “Shelter from the storm: Companion animal emergency planning in nine states.” Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 40(4), 185-210, 2013).

Jessica is currently applying to graduate schools in the hope of gaining a PhD in a field related to human-animal studies; she’d like to pursue a career in research and teaching in the field once she secures her PhD.

Jessica shared some advice for students who are in the same position that she was in a few years ago:

“First, think about how you can use your interests in animal studies in a more ‘mainstream’ field. For example, if you are interested in animal-assisted interventions, you might research how to use that knowledge in social work. While animal studies is absolutely a viable field on its own, academic programs are still very few in number. If you do some of the legwork of fitting your interests into a more established area of study, you may find it easier to land a job or spot in a doctoral program. Second, the relationships you form with your classmates are so valuable. Get to know your classmates, and don’t be afraid of sharing your thoughts and ideas. Cherish the face-time with them on campus; you will
graduate before you know it. Connect on Facebook or other social media to sustain the relationship in between on-campus visits. And finally, get to know the wonderful faculty, as well. I couldn’t ask for better mentors as I develop as an animal studies scholar.”

To find out more about what kinds of opportunities that students have today, please visit the Human-Animal Studies Degree Programs section of our website.

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i Anthrozoology is another word for human-animal studies.
ii To find out more about the Canisius program, visit http://www.canisius.edu/anthrozoology/