

**Jolynne Judge, MA, BA, LVT**

**Q: Where do you currently work as a credentialed Veterinary Technician? Job title/position?**

I am an Academic Instructor in the Veterinary Nursing Program at Michigan State University  
Veterinary Nursing Program

**Q: How did you learn about this job opportunity?**

As a clinical technician in the College of Veterinary Medicine Veterinary Medical Center (Oncology/Internal Medicine/Soft Tissue Surgery), I was responsible for training veterinary technician students during their clinical year and serving the patients, clinicians, and DVM students in the hospital. Having served as a clinical technician for 12 years, I was ready for a new challenge. My continuing relationship with the (then) Veterinary Technology Program faculty led the director to ask me to interview for a new position they were establishing. The focus of this position was to develop a pre-clinical training program for veterinary technician students in partnership with the local humane society. Our students would learn hands-on nursing skills as they helped prepare animals for adoption by performing physical exams, administering vaccines, parasite identification/control, and behavior screening under the guidance of the shelter veterinarian and program instructors. I coordinated this program for approximately 15 years until a shift to a new curriculum shifted my responsibilities to other areas.

In addition to teaching nursing skills in the shelter setting, my responsibilities include providing instruction in surgical nursing, large animal nursing skills at the university farms, laboratory animal skills, and providing classroom instruction (traditional and remote) in large animal diseases, careers/professional development, and communication.

**Q: What makes your position unique or different from working in a typical clinic/hospital?**

Working in an educational setting is worlds apart from working in a clinical setting. While some of the same nursing duties are performed (such as surgical laboratory courses), your time is spent developing teaching materials, providing instruction, and assessing students. Additionally, being part of a veterinary college at a large university, much interdepartmental communication is needed to coordinate teaching spaces and resources.

Additionally, clinical practice allows you to develop relationships with your patients and clients. That is less available in the educational setting. Essentially, the students become your clients. Their needs are the driving force behind your purpose and guide your actions. These relationships, while different, are just as rewarding when you see your students succeed.

**Q: Other than your C/L/RVT does your job require additional education/skills?**

This will be different for every educational entity. Currently, a bachelor's degree is required. However, additional certification in education and/or Veterinary Technician Specialty certification is viewed favorably in the hiring process. Once hired, completing a master's degree or certificate in best educational practices and learning theory is also encouraged.

Possessing good technical skills and knowledge is only part of what is needed to be an educator. You must also be able to identify the student's needs, assess where they are at in the process, and effectively communicate those skills and knowledge at a level they understand. It often requires breaking a topic down to its most basic elements and building the concept from there, and then assessing the learning that has occurred.

Working in an educational setting also requires an understanding of the organizational structure and social differences to create an environment in which all students are free to learn.

**Q: What do you feel is the most rewarding part of your job? Are there any downsides?**

It is very rewarding to see our students successfully complete our program and enter the profession, especially when they have had challenges to overcome.

Being part of a program that is part of the College of Veterinary Medicine, I am very fortunate to work with an administration that understands the importance of veterinary nurses to the veterinary profession and the importance of quality veterinary-related education. This has allowed me to complete my master's degree in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, hone my organizational development skills, learn new technology to manage a remote classroom, and build relationships with other veterinary faculty that are highly regarded in their respective fields.

I also really enjoy being able to routinely work with nearly all major species through our teaching laboratories. It has helped me redevelop skills that, prior to teaching, I hadn't had the opportunity to use since tech school. It has also broadened my view of the role of veterinary medicine in society regarding issues of animal welfare, food safety, and biosecurity.

**Downsides:**

After the first couple of years of teaching, I felt bad that I taught 'only' entry-level skills. After all, I had come from working in specialty services where I performed advanced procedures requiring specialized skills. Then I realized how incredibly important those entry-level skills are to the veterinary nursing graduate. After all, it is those foundational skills that are utilized ninety-nine percent of the time in clinical practice. Of course, one can always learn more advanced skills as needed, but even those advanced skills will rely on a solid foundation of basic skills from which to build.

I also don't get to "play with puppies and kittens" every single day in an educational setting. Depending upon the courses being taught, I may not have any contact with a furry patient all semester. Thankfully, the Veterinary Nursing Program is housed in the same building as the Small Animal and Large Animal Hospitals. There are always hospitalized patients in need of comfort.

There are also times when I am not the most popular person in the room when holding students to standards that are part of the profession. The best I can do is try to set students up for success and then work with them toward that goal. Sometimes it is more beneficial for the student to step away, address any impediments to success and reconnect with that goal at a future time. It can be a difficult choice but often results in a successful outcome.

**Q: What advice would you give a new Vet Tech grad if they wanted to pursue the same career path?**

- Get at least 2-3 years of clinical experience under your belt if you are a new graduate. Very often, in school, you will have learned one way of doing things. Going out into clinical practice and learning various ways to perform the same procedure will provide you a deeper toolbox from which to teach. It will also help develop your transferrable skills. Finely honed communication skills, writing ability, and critical thinking are skills that will build your confidence and help shape your professional identity.
- Be willing to pursue an advanced degree in best teaching practices. Explore the degree programs that are available even before you apply for a teaching position. Your willingness to improve yourself may be a point of negotiation in being offered a position even if you haven't started on the degree path yet. In addition, some employers offer professional development benefits that can be used toward a degree program.
- There is so much technology used in the classroom these days. Anything you can do to help develop IT skills will be a benefit. The bare minimum would be to be comfortable with MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Zoom.
- Be open to possibilities. Explore being a guest speaker for a veterinary nursing program or your regional or state veterinary technician association to build your speaking skills and professional identity. Pick a topic you are interested in and develop a lesson plan around it. Or better yet, have someone give you a topic that maybe you aren't all that interested in and develop a lesson plan for it. This would be the true test of whether teaching is something you would enjoy.
- Become a good public speaker before you need to. Joining an organization such as Toastmasters is helpful. When attending conferences, pay attention to how good speakers present themselves. The interview process for educational positions will require you to develop and give a presentation. Being polished and professional in your presentation skills will help you stand out.
- Talk to your former veterinary nursing instructors as well. Find out what they like/don't like about teaching. Do your market research so that you know what to

expect regarding compensation. Often there is a disparity between the perception of faculty wage structure and reality. Many teaching positions are salaried, and hours are often longer than expected.

- If you interview for a position and it is not offered to you, seek feedback on how you can improve. Do you lack experience or skills? Did you adequately reflect your transferrable skills and show how you would be an asset to the program? Reapply at the next opportunity after correcting any of the issues that may exist.
- If you are truly interested in a new career, your best opportunities maybe elsewhere. Many new programs are being established as well as a wave of faculty retirements occurring. Be willing to relocate if a great opportunity comes your way.
- Think outside the box. Teaching opportunities don't only exist with veterinary nursing programs. Many veterinary medical colleges have established clinical skills training laboratory spaces where DVM students learn their basic skills. Veterinary Nurses make excellent instructors in these types of learning spaces. They may not require much in the way of classroom teaching. Still, you will be challenged with out-of-the-box thinking in developing models, working with teaching animals, and creating simulations to replicate real situations.