

Approved Veterinary Assistant

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 302 Boone Trail Rd.
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Introduction

During my capstone experience between March 2022 and March 2023, I received a Veterinary Assistant diploma from Penn Foster and became an Approved Veterinary Assistant through the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA).

Through Penn Foster, I took 8 online courses, learning about all aspects of how veterinary clinics operate and the daily expectations of a veterinary assistant. After finishing these courses, I participated in a required 100-hour externship at a veterinary clinic near my hometown.

By obtaining my diploma, I was able to take the Approved Veterinary Assistant (AVA) exam through NAVTA. Once I successfully passed this, I officially became an AVA.

Objectives

During this journey, my goals were to:

- Improve my resume by adding certificates, experience, and veterinary hours
- Advance my skills as a veterinary assistant so I could improve performance at work
- Have a unique capstone experience that would give me real-world experience
- Network with veterinarians and other veterinary assistants

Penn Foster Diploma

I learned about the Penn Foster veterinary assistant program through ads on Facebook and decided to research more about what they were offering. The entire program cost me \$800, which includes access to all 8 courses and the textbook. Penn Foster uses *Textbook for the Veterinary Assistant* by Kara Burns. The program is self-paced and completely online, except for the externship. The courses included:

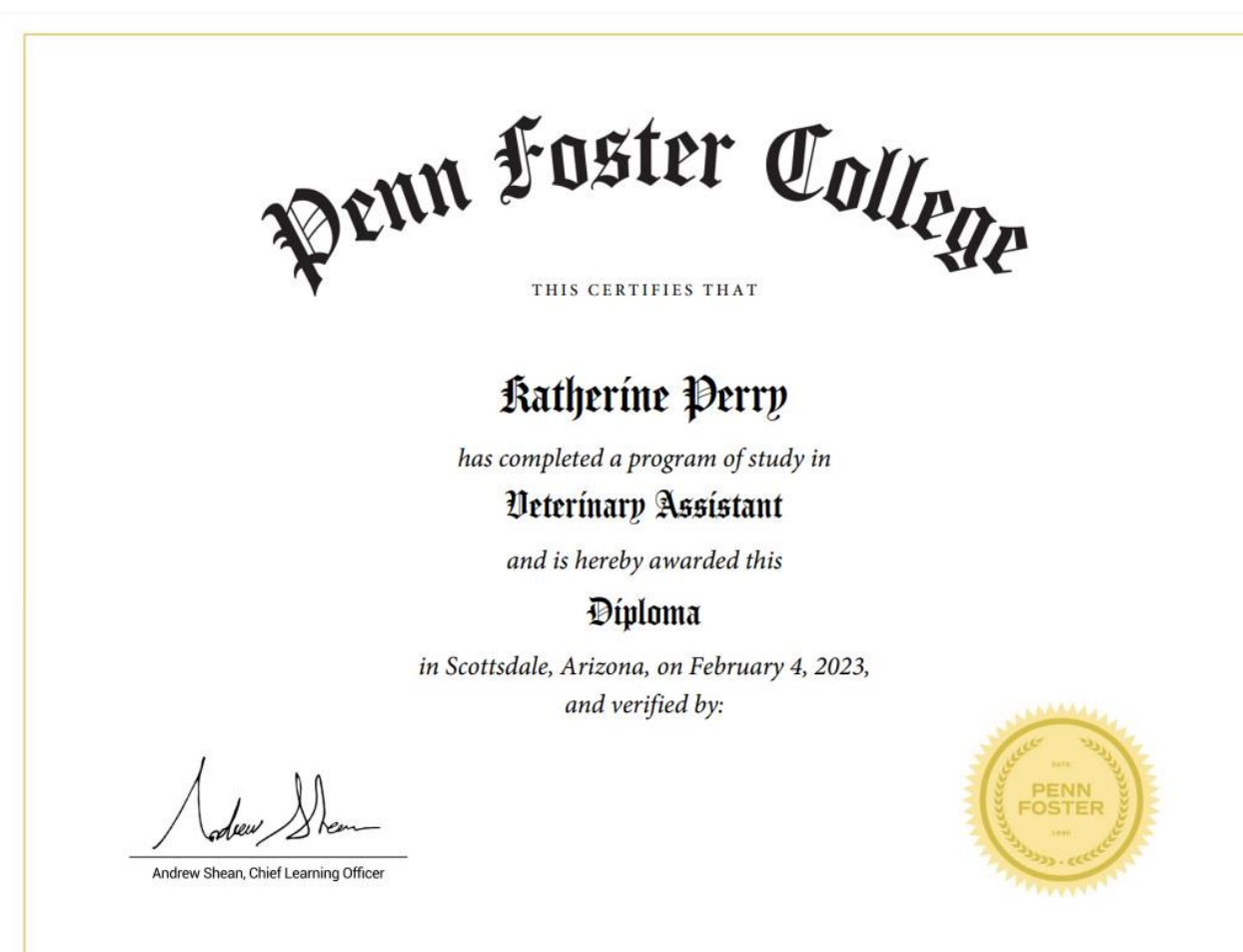
- Behavior, Handling, and Restraint
- Body Systems and Terminology, Part 1
- Body Systems and Terminology, Part 2
- Nutrition, History, and Physical Examination
- Emergency and Wound Care
- Small and Large Animal Nursing
- Radiology and Surgical Preparation
- Veterinary Practice Administration and Procedures

To graduate, Penn Foster requires completion of:

- 26 online exams (20-30 questions each) at the end of each section; there are typically 3-5 sections per course
- Final written exam with 5 questions answered in 2-3 paragraphs each
- 100-hour externship at a small-animal clinic
- Weekly reports during the externship
- 15 skills checklists signed by the supervising veterinarian

My main challenge with the Penn Foster program was staying motivated and prioritizing time for the online courses, especially during classes here at Virginia Tech. However, I knew that this experience would provide many benefits for myself and my career. Thus, I pushed myself during summer break to complete at least 4 online courses and to work on them for at least one hour per day during each semester.

Overall, I believe Penn Foster helped me learn essential skills needed to be a successful veterinary assistant. The online courses were best for learning terminology and anatomy, while the externship was best for hands-on skills, such as restraining animals and wrapping surgical packs.



Official
 Penn
 Foster
 diploma

Choosing an Externship Site

Although I was working at a veterinary clinic in Radford, I knew I wanted to do my externship at a different practice. This would allow me to network with other veterinarians and see how various clinics operate. I decided to email 4 Paws Veterinary Hospital in Duffield, VA because it was close to my hometown and some of my family members had been going there for years.

When I reached out, the practice manager/receptionist, Nikki, was extremely helpful and very responsive. I sent in the paperwork that was required by Penn Foster and it was accepted around one month later, with my externship starting date being December 27, 2022.

The Externship

During my externship, every team member at the clinic was extremely welcoming and helpful; I felt like a part of the family in just a few days. The owner and veterinarian, Dr. Cortney Jessee, was my site supervisor. We quickly realized how much we have in common, especially our love of cats. There were over 15 cats living at the clinic!

I worked Monday-Friday, 9:00am-5:00pm, occasionally staying a little later if we were still seeing clients. This experience took place between December 27, 2022, and January 16, 2023, for a total of about 120 hours. My daily tasks included:

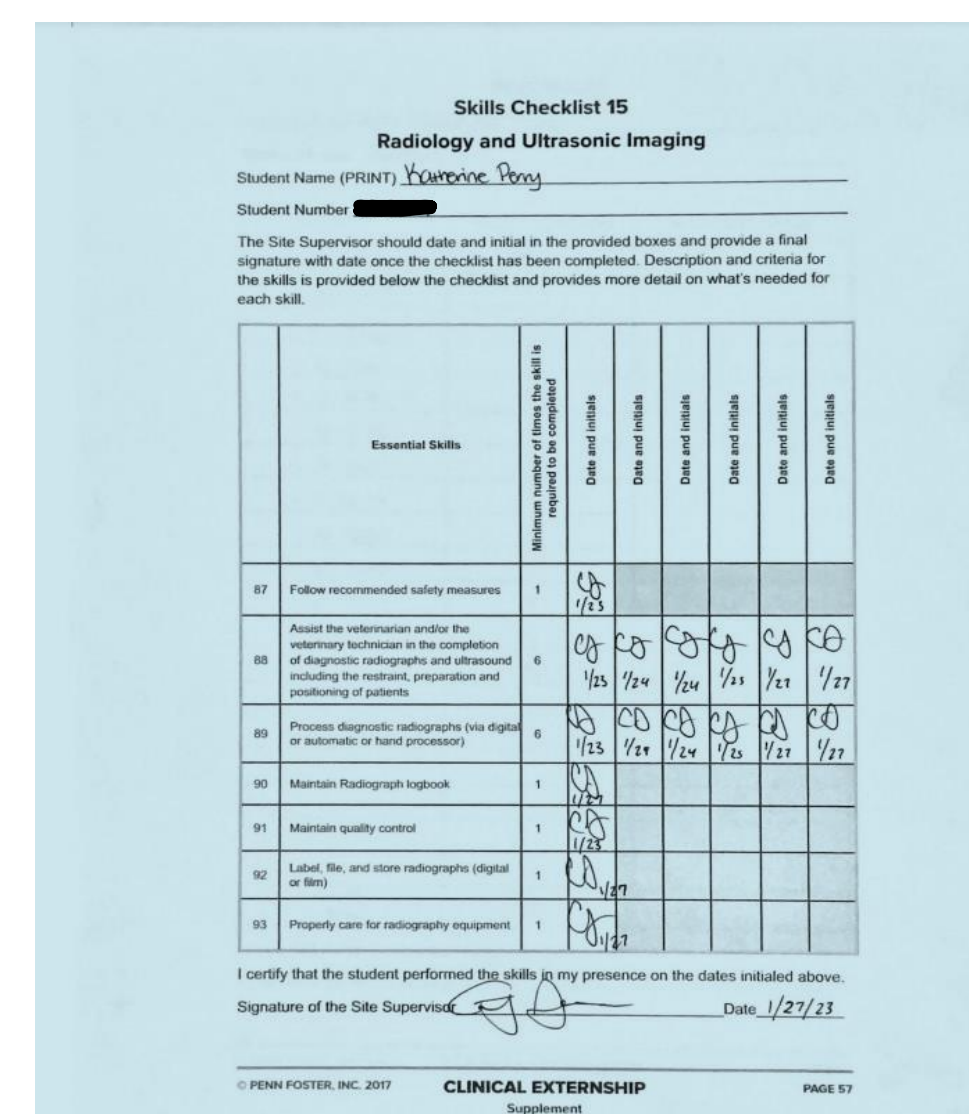
- caring for hospitalized/boarded animals
- cleaning the treatment area
- restraining animals for exams
- drawing up vaccinations
- preparing animals for IV catheters
- assisting with radiographs



Some of the clinic cats waiting to be given breakfast

Over the course of my externship, I had 15 skills checklists that had to be completed in order to graduate from Penn Foster. A few examples of these required skills are:

- answering and directing phone calls
- filing and retrieving medical records
- taking an accurate history and reporting chief complaint
- performing inventory control procedures
- demonstrating various types of restraint
- identifying external parasites
- administering medications
- handling disposal of deceased animals
- applying bandages (practiced on a healthy animal)
- preparing surgical packs
- assist the veterinarian with monitoring patients recovering from surgery
- preparing fecal flotations and smears



One of my completed skills checklists

By completing these checklists, I was able to learn skills needed in every department of the veterinary clinic, from the front desk to the surgery suite. Finally, at the end of my externship, Dr. Jessee was required to initial every checklist, sign my timesheet, and give a performance evaluation. After these were all graded, I received my diploma, and was ready to begin preparing for the AVA exam!



Me with Margarita, a clinic cat



Motley, a Pitbull, ready for her exam

AVA Exam

After graduating from Penn Foster, students are given the option to take the AVA exam to officially become an AVA. This is not required; however, the AVA designation cannot be used.

It cost \$100 to take the exam, and a proctor must be present. This can be a licensed veterinarian, veterinary technician, or a proctor at a testing center. I chose to take my exam at 4 Paws Veterinary Hospital so that I could visit the team.

To study, I read the textbook provided by Penn Foster, took notes, and used flashcards to remember important definitions. This helped me pass with 95/100 questions correct. I am now officially Katherine Perry, AVA.

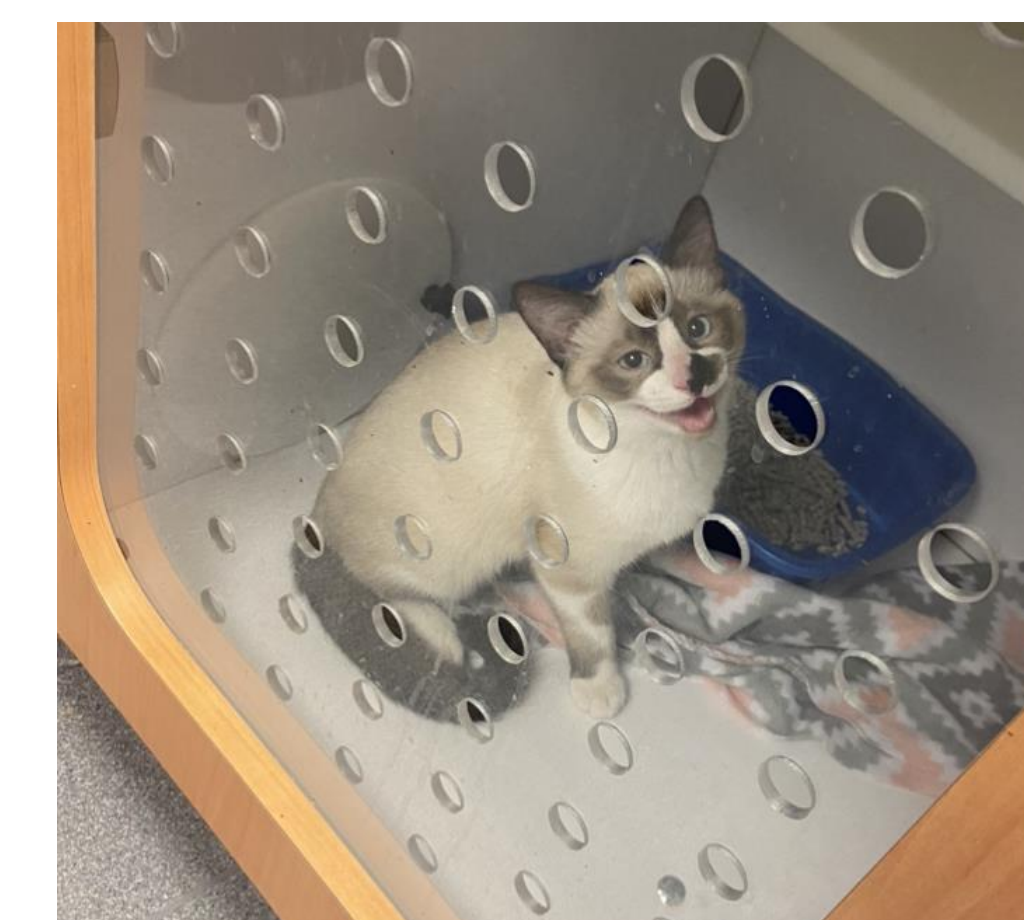


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Highlights

One of my favorite days during the externship was surgery day. Dr. Jessee brings in a relief vet once a month to perform surgeries. This allowed me to meet Dr. Catherine Rasnake, who owns a clinic in Grundy, VA. She completed 13 surgeries on this day, and I was able to assist with these by preparing the patient and helping monitor during and after surgery. Dr. Rasnake was very helpful and encouraged me to ask questions during the surgeries. She allowed me to draw blood on my own for the first time; I held off the vein on my own and successfully collected blood from the lateral saphenous vein. At the end of the day, she spoke very highly of me to Dr. Jessee and offered for me to complete veterinary school rotations at her clinic in the future.

One of the interesting cases seen during my 3 weeks there was Loki, a shih tzu, who came in after a groomer accidentally cut his eye with an electric razor. The cut was deep and did not pick up the fluorescein eye stain. We were barely able to see his pupil, as there was so much blood in the eye. He was referred to the ophthalmologist at the VT Veterinary Teaching Hospital for surgery.



Shadow waiting for his neuter.



Puggles the Pug waiting for blood work and vaccinations.

Conclusions

Overall, this experience allowed me to gain a lot of hands-on experience working in multiple aspects of a veterinary clinic. I was also able to obtain a new diploma and certificate. My externship gave me networking opportunities with other veterinary assistants, as well as two veterinarians. It has further inspired me to pursue my dream career as a small animal veterinarian. Many thanks to Nikki Quillen, Dr. Cortney Jessee, and Dr. Catherine Rasnake for their help during this experience!

Contact information

If you have any questions about my experience with Penn Foster or taking the AVA exam, please email me at katieperry@vt.edu