Karly Hodge spent five weeks during the summer of 2000 at Van Exel Dairy in Lodi working with Hank and Caroline Van Exel, herdsman Anthony Reis and food animal veterinarian Ann Scearce ('99) of Fremont Veterinary Clinic. Hodge learned to palpate cattle to check for pregnancy and to artificially inseminate. She monitored the maternity pen to make sure the newborn calves got colostrum, and bottle fed calves with frozen-thawed colostrum.

“The dairy enjoyed having a veterinary student who took a special interest in the cows in the hospital pen,” says Hodge. “I gave oral medications with the large pilling gun. It is harder than it looks—I had the bruises to prove it.”

Until this year Mark Langheinrich had never been on a dairy. Lisa Branstad had spent time with horses, but not cows. Sabino Herrera grew up in the inner city of Los Angeles. Most new veterinary students across the nation have been raised in cities and suburbs where they are less likely to have developed an interest in large animal medicine—the profession must challenge them to meet today’s increased demand for dairy veterinarians and food safety specialists.

Last summer, 12 students immersed themselves in the real world of dairy medicine and food safety through the Early Veterinary Student Dairy Experience Program. Now in its second year, the program aims to recruit a new generation of food animal veterinarians by encouraging more students to choose the food animal track in their studies. Each of the students worked on a modern dairy for five weeks, performing all the tasks—milking, feeding, medicating sick cows and calves, and keeping records—in order to gain dairy management experience. Five students spending their second summer in the program accompanied dairy veterinarians to farms in order to gain experience in the field and insight from mentors. As practitioner Julie Breher (DVM ’97, MPVM ’98) puts it, “You need the time in the truck—the more experience riding day-to-day with a veterinarian, the better.”

Associate Dean for Clinical Programs, Brad Smith says, “Although most students enter the DVM program with 1,600 or more hours of veterinary experience, few have been exposed to the unique environment of California’s large-scale dairies.” Dr. Smith coordinates the Early Veterinary Student Dairy Experience Program, funded jointly by the California Dairy Research Foundation, the Pharmacia and Upjohn Company and the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

“We have had a shortage of dairy practitioners for about ten years,” says dairy veterinarian Mark Brandt ('86) of Mid Valley Large Animal Service. Dr. Brandt, who mentored Suzanna Muncy ('02) in 2001, has seen the role of the California dairy practitioner change over more than 15 years. “Careers are more specialized now, and the type of work in dairy medicine has changed.”

Joe Machado, manager of Ahlem Farms, Hilmar, hosted Mark Langheinrich ('05) this year. “Mark was a little tired the first day. He got better by the day. We had him checking cows, milking, doing a herd check every week with the vet, [collecting embryos from donor cows for transfer], and involved in meetings.” Langheinrich also gave medications and observed surgeries. “It was an adjustment to find myself in a small town,” Langheinrich recalls. “It's a great place. When this [opportunity] came up, I jumped at it. It's hard work. It's fun.”

Lisa Branstad ('05), who wants to broaden her experience with cattle, worked on the Clauss Dairy with about 3,000 cows. She learned how to feed calves, give medications and handle heifers. Regarding the experience of working in an all-male environment, she says, “It took about a day to adjust.”

Jill Mercado ('04) found more than she expected on the Galt, Elk Grove and Lodi dairies where she spent a month with veterinary mentor Julie Breher during her second summer in the program. She says, “I thought we would go to a farm, fix a problem and leave.” But in addition to getting a feel for handling herself around a cow and learning examination techniques, Ms. Mercado learned about today's preventive medicine approach, which primarily focuses on herd health.
“We discussed management and business, nutrition and health strategies,” she says. “I’m learning about brucellosis and human health and about drugs that could end up on our tables.”

Even for students acquainted with farm life, the program offers a fresh perspective. Frank Martin (’04), whose family owns a Northern California dairy, had always intended to become a dairy vet. Two summers in the Central Valley, he says, “opened my eyes to different facets of the profession. At home, we milk 120 cows. Last year, at Rancho Teresita dairy, they had 2,800 head. It’s great to get large herd experience.”

Gaining solid work experience and a realistic view of the demands of the job enables students to focus their academic studies and tailor their clinical training. “The program makes me jazzed about being in vet school,” says Martin. “It reaffirms that what I am learning in class is important.”

Herdsmen are generous with their time for the students. Joe Machado says, “We’re pleased they’re here. That’s our future. Without veterinarians, we can’t operate.” C.A. Russell, manager of Clauss Dairy, also in Hilmar, adds, “We learn as much from our interns as they do from us. This kind of program is really going to benefit the industry down the road.”

“I don’t sugar coat any of this,” Dr. Brandt says about the challenge of dairy practice, which requires physical stamina and excellent interpersonal skills. “You develop incredibly close relationships with dairy owners,” he says. “You are an integral part of their livelihood. It’s a huge responsibility, but a very rewarding commitment.”

Veterinarian and program mentor Ron Terra (’82) says that in addition to bringing new tools and methods of veterinary practice to help dairy producers improve animal health, reduce mortality and improve pregnancy rates, “We’re trying to get out there and join with the industry to work on food safety and quality assurance issues.”

The Early Veterinary Student Dairy Experience Program alerts students to the need for partnerships between veterinarians and producers, says Brad Smith. “Students see the practical side of food safety issues—compliance with the Animal Medicinal Drug Use Clarification Act (AMDUCA), prevention of toxins in the food [production] chain, withdrawal times for various drugs, and ways to minimize antibiotic use.”

While students, dairymen and veterinarians concur that food animal medicine is not easy money, the rewards are substantial—good news for graduates paying off school debts. Starting salaries average $55,000 and up. Depending on the structure of the practice, graduates can earn up to $70,000 in their first year.

Completion of the program is a measure of success, yet the value of the program will ultimately be judged by the number of students who choose food animal practice. Considering experiences reported so far, several new dairy vets have emerged from the herd.

After two summers on dairies, Sabino Herrera (’02) has decided to follow a dairy medicine career when he earns his DVM degree. Frank Martin is seeking more dairy industry opportunities through the school. Lisa Branstad plans a mixed practice career emphasizing farm animals. Jill Mercado intends to practice food animal and small animal medicine. She concludes, “The program took someone like me—I grew up in Southern California with no farms nearby—and turned me around to thinking that I can do large animal medicine.”