

Reclaiming Legitimacy

U of I offers new course in revised animal sciences curriculum.

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False statements and emotional untruths regarding livestock production are winning the hearts and minds of the “typical” American consumer. Next spring, University of Illinois (U of I) animal science freshmen will learn about these fundamental societal issues that are affecting the care and use of production animals in a new course titled “Contemporary Animal Issues.”

Janeen Salak-Johnson, U of I associate professor in animal sciences, will explore a new and increasingly important side of those sciences, including such topics as animal well-being, animal-environment interactions, domestication of animals and contributions to human welfare, biotechnology, food safety, and societal and economic impacts of animal production.

“In the United States, animal agriculture has become a small island surrounded by an urban sea,” Salak-Johnson said. “We need to teach our students how to reclaim the legitimacy of animal agriculture by leading with moral arguments based on science.”

She believes science, along with ethics and experience, should drive the changes that animal agriculture will make in the future.

“Consumers want to know where their food comes from, that it is safe and, ultimately, affordable,” Salak-Johnson said. “We need to show them that our production practices are humane and based on science. Our students need to be exposed to the issues



now so they are prepared when they enter the real world.”

Walter Hurley, U of I professor of animal sciences, said this course is the “piece that’s been missing in our curriculum.”

This class is one example of the changes that will occur in a major revision of the U of I animal science curriculum being initiated in 2010-2011. For the first time in more than 50 years, the department will implement a revised curriculum, with the goal of guiding a top-ranked program into a new era of animal science education where the focus is not only on courses, but also on how faculty create learning opportunities for students.

“The revised animal sciences curriculum is expected to provide a more integrated sequence of subject matter that will not only teach our students technical information, but help them develop a better sense of what it means to be a professional animal scientist and to understand the many career opportunities in this field,” according to Neal Merchen, head of the department.

The revised curriculum’s three components — a core curriculum,

a specialization curriculum, and a demonstration of learning — are designed to provide students with greater flexibility and options in their animal science major. The core curriculum will standardize courses offered during freshman and sophomore years, providing a solid foundation for students to enter into more specialized areas of study during their junior and senior years.

“For example, we may have a student now who hasn’t taken genetics until senior year,” Hurley said. “Even though we recommend a certain path, students aren’t required to take classes in that order. Our revised curriculum develops a core foundation so a student like this could discover an interest in genetics early. Then, she or he could take more genetics classes in junior and senior year.”

During their demonstration of learning, students will be encouraged to participate in experiential learning through internships, study abroad programs, academic teams, and any other activities that get them beyond the formal classroom. They will present these experiences to others to showcase the knowledge they have gained.

“Animal agriculture is always changing,” Salak-Johnson said. “We need to continually find ways to expand the influence our students will have in the future and arm them with the knowledge they need to be successful.”

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