



The Effect of Facility Dog Interactions on Undergraduate Students

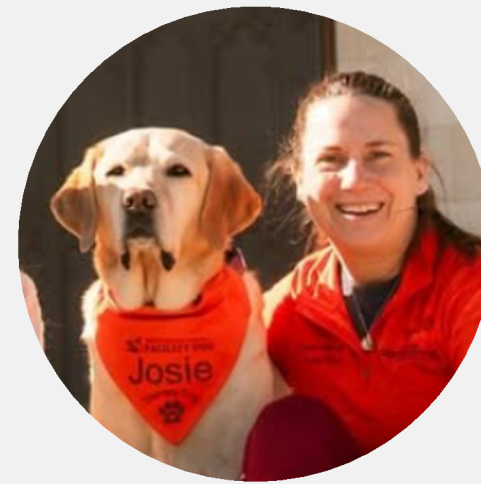
Libraries Collaboration Grant - 2025

Team



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The background is a solid blue color with various white hand-drawn scribbles scattered around the edges. These include loops, swirls, zig-zags, and other abstract shapes. The word "BACKGROUND" is centered in the middle of the image in a bold, white, sans-serif font with a slight drop shadow.

BACKGROUND

Mental Health on Campus

Research shows that mental health challenges for college students are on the rise, particularly post-COVID [1]. Colleges are attempting to meet these needs through and beyond counseling services, including support from academic libraries [2].

College student mental health factors [3]:

- **Individual** - coping abilities, navigation skills, extracurricular engagement
- **Interpersonal** - social network development, intergroup awareness, sense of belonging, and communication skills
- **Institutional** - campus climate



Dogs on Campus

Numerous studies have shown that there are physical and mental health benefits for adults who are interacting with animals, particularly dogs [4]. Recently, college campuses have started introducing dog outreach events as a way to reduce stress, particularly around finals seasons [5]. Some institutions also host facility dogs who are dogs working full-time under employee supervision [6].

Virginia Tech Therapy Dogs (VTTD) fall into this category and work out of the Cook Counseling Center in Assisted Animal Therapy (AAT).

Their work includes:

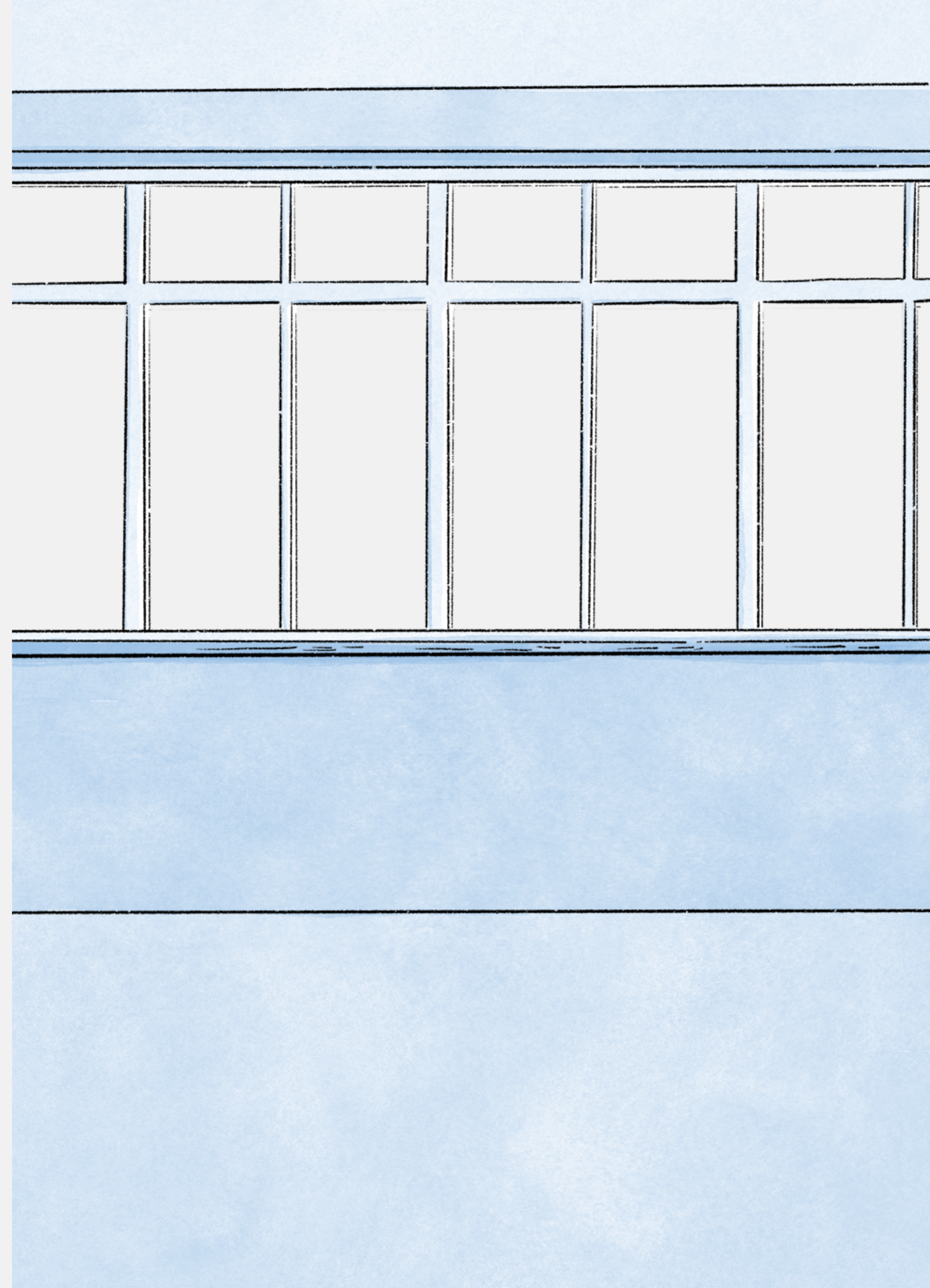
- **Meeting with clients**
- **Supporting group therapy**
- **Acting as mental health ambassadors**



The Library Connection

VTTD can not do their work alone. Collegiate mental health services are challenged by extremely high demand and mental health is tied to personal, academic, and social growth [7].

VTTD and the University Libraries are reaching their 5th year of partnership putting on events with embedded learning and connection activities. These events aim to help students connect with each other, interact with on-campus resource teams (including the Libraries), and reflect on personal identity and well-being.





Research Question

What is the effect of facility dog interactions for undergraduate students?

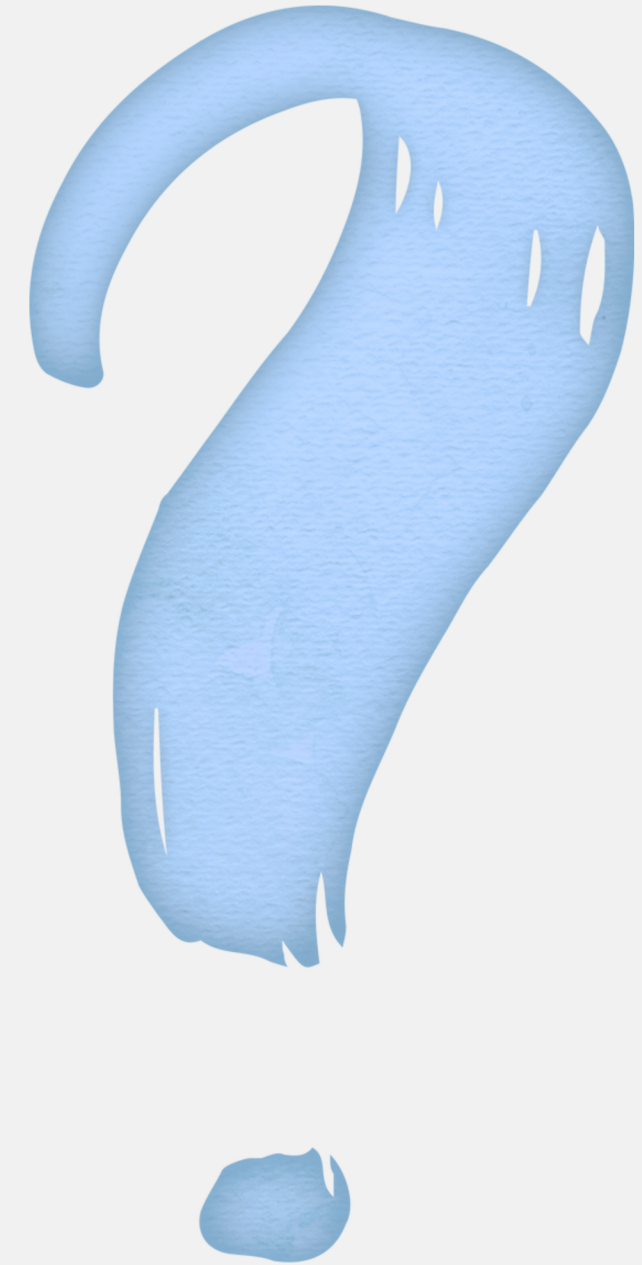
- *Overall programming and Library-specific*
- *Holistic and open approach (social, academic, etc.)*
- *Program improvement and transferring beyond our institution*



RESEACH STUDY

Question Types

- Transition to college
- Challenges and triumphs in college
- Prior experience and knowledge of VTTD
- “Meaningful interactions”
 - Within and outside the Library
 - Social Media
- Motivations to seek out VTTD
- Perceived impact and value of program
- 3 words to describe program



Research Process



01

Screening Survey

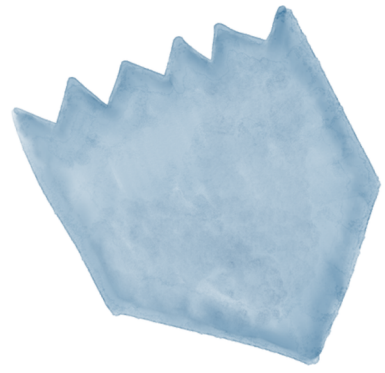
02

Demographic Survey

03

Oral Interview

Participant Pool



Overall

Virginia Tech Undergrads - 12



Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual- 8

Bisexual- 3

Asexual- 1



School Year

First year- 5

Junior-2

Sophomore-2

Senior-3

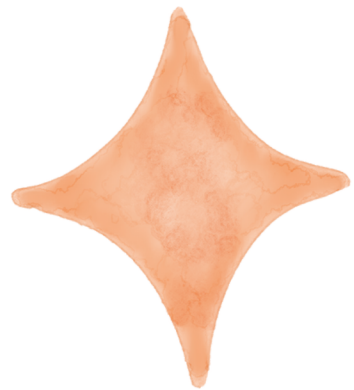


Gender

Male- 5

Female- 6

Non-binary- 1



Race

White/Caucasian- 7

Asian- 2

Hispanic/Latino- 1

Multiracial- 1

Black/African American- 1



Additional

Transfer Students- 2

Mentioned Living Learning
Community (LLC) - 4



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Three Words

Cute (2)

Relaxing (2)

Exciting (3)

Fun (2)

Happy (2)

Comforting (3)

Helpful

Wholesome

Grounding

Interactive

Down to Earth

Encouraging

Connecting

Dopamine boost

Available

Exciting

Amicable

New

Uplifting

Inclusive

Positive

Unique

Beneficial

Awesome

Enthusiastic

Ut Prosim

Therapeutic

Familiarity

Special

Themes

Wellness

Uniqueness

Solidity

Warmth

Access



Areas of Interest



ACCESS

Students reported being positively impacted by the frequency and accessibility of therapy dog interactions.

Being able to easily, repeatedly, and reliably access interactions with the same dogs over time helps improve connection and belonging as students feel they on-going relationships with the dogs.

Although bringing outside therapy dogs to campus can help with stress, the on-going presence of a facility dogs may be more impactful for longer term issues like loneliness.

“I was already missing my dogs because I knew I wasn’t going to see them for a really long time, so knowing that there were dogs on campus for me to interact with was a nice comfort...”

Areas of Interest

UNIQUENESS

Students report the VT Therapy Dog program is unique and this effects them positively.

The knowledge that other universities do not have full-time dogs (particularly 3 highly trained facility/therapy dogs) can give students a sense of pride, something to share with friends/family, and a feeling of “in-group” pride that they may not have otherwise (akin to their university having a good sports team or celebrity student). They also perceive the VT Therapy Dogs as an integrated part of the Virginia Tech experience and school identity.

“It’s another thing to love on top of the other good things about Virginia Tech.
It’s another thing to talk about...”

Areas of Interest

CONNECTION

Students report connecting not only to other attendees, handlers, and campus workers through program, but also leveraging the program to build existing relationships (e.g. dormmates) and communicate with family and friends not at VT. They also view the program as a community unifier for Tech and the town.

This shows that the program's digital presence is a part of assisting student's connections to support networks. Future events should continue to incorporate engagement activities for connection, but also evolve to help foster existing relationships and tap into community identity.

“My family at home loves them, so sometimes I’ll even text my mom or my mom will text me and be like, ‘Did you see the VT therapy dog Instagram posted?’”

Areas of Interest

LIBRARY

Students report perceptions and use of Newman Library is increased by the program. Students who previously never utilized the Library are exploring the space, learning about resources, and better understanding what a collegiate Library can be. Most impact seems to be centered on spending more time in the building and surface level knowledge of spaces/resources.

Future programming should continue to reduce “library anxiety” [8], but also aim for more specificity on resources and identity. Could being more “library-forward” in activities help students increase library engagement?

“The dogs are probably what inspired me to go to the library... because I don't really spend a lot of time in Newman. But when they were there, it's like, “Huh, this is kind of a good space. Maybe I could come here some time...”

Additional Notes



Back Home:

Many program attendees reference their dog “back home.” We learned that this not only includes the daily presence of a dog but also emotions around missing moments like a dog passing way or being added to family. Participants also missed interaction with dogs in their home communities, not just family units.



Mental Health:

Students reported mental health benefits of the program and some mention that it helps with their personal therapy journeys



WRAP UP

Final reflections and future steps

We are finalizing coding and data analysis at this time. This summer we will begin writing our findings and sharing our research results more widely.

We also hope to continue researching the effect of facility dog interactions on undergraduate students. We hope to focus on specific change factors and their impact, as well as observing impact over longer periods of time. Stay tuned in 2025-2026!



The background features various hand-drawn blue scribbles and shapes, including loops, swirls, and zig-zags, scattered across the white background.

**Thank you
very much!**

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References

- [1] Catling, 2023; Gopalan et al, 2022
- [2] Bladek, 2021
- [3] Abelson et. al, 2022; Byrd & McKinney, 2012; Gopalan et. al, 2022
- [4] Bowman, 2021; Crossman & Kazdin, 2015; Polheber, 2014
- [5] Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015
- [6] Guth, 2021
- [7] Glass, 2019
- [8] Parks, 2019

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