

## The Role and Responsibilities of the Enrichment Coordinator

*"What do you do for a living?"*

*Anyone in my position can see that this simple question does not have a simple answer.*

*"I'm an Environmental Enrichment Coordinator."*



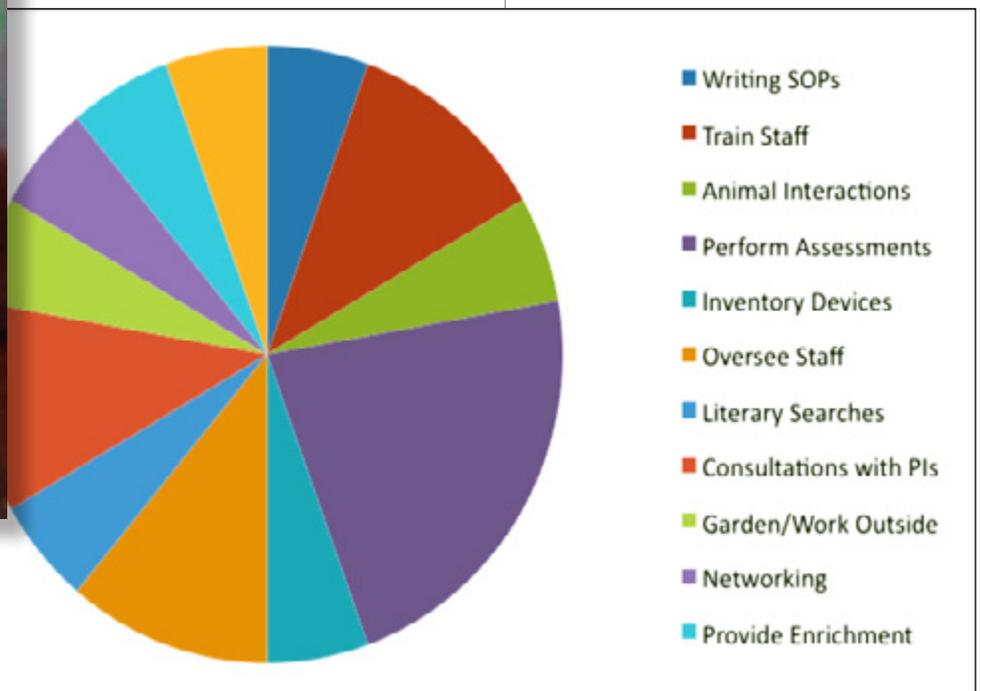
Kelsey with a red-ruffed lemur

But that's not the end of it, is it? What is an Enrichment Coordinator? How can we describe our position in a way that the general public, and even other members of the research community, can identify with? I would love to say that I am an animal trainer, but the majority of my time is not actually spent handling the animals.

On any given day, I might do a number of the following: train and oversee staff; write Standard Operating Procedures (or SOPs); coordinate housing animals in social groups; provide consultation on animal housing, husbandry, and study

procedures; purchase, inventory, construct, or maintain enrichment devices; perform literary searches to keep on top of best-practices and professional standards; field requests for interpretations of regulations and guidelines pertaining to enrichment of animals; perform behavioral assessments of animals, and then work with the research and veterinary staff to address behavioral issues; attend workshops and seminars; actively engage other members within my field to discuss common issues and potential solutions; design and implement ways to

*continued on page 18*



study the efficacy of various enrichment techniques and devices; design, develop, and maintain an organic garden for food enrichment; cut down tree limbs for browse and/or natural cage furniture; and many other tasks that might come up during the course of the day.

Depending on the institution, the role of Enrichment Coordinator could be as variable as the definition of "enrichment" itself.

An ILAR article written by Drs. Weed and Raber (2005) provides several references and proposed definitions of enrichment.

*Enrichment is an attempt to ameliorate problems caused by containment, . . . the goals of enrichment are to alter behaviour so that it is within the range of the animals' normal behaviour (Chamove 1989, p. 155).*

*Environmental enrichment is a process for improving or enhancing environments and care within the context of the inhabitants' behavioral biology and natural history. It is a dynamic process in which changes to structures and husbandry practices are made with the goal of increasing behavioral choices to animals and drawing out their species appropriate behavior and abilities, thus enhancing animal welfare. (BHAG 1999, as cited in Young 2003, p.2).*

The *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals*, 8th ed., also provides a definition of enrichment (pages 52-53).

*The primary aim of environmental enrichment is to enhance animal well-being by providing animals with sensory and motor stimulation through structures and resources that facilitate the expression of species-typical behaviors and promote psychological well-being through physical exercise, manipulative activities, and cognitive challenges according to species-specific characteristics.*

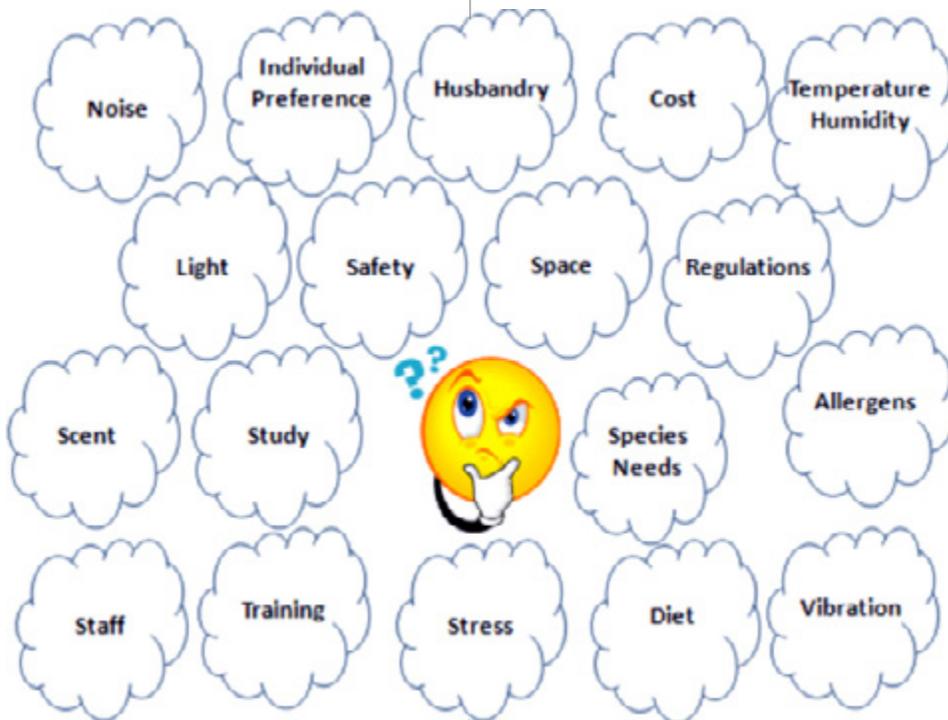
*Well-conceived enrichment provides animals with choices and a degree of control over their environment, which allows them to better cope with environmental stressors.*

As you can see, there are a variety of interpretations on the purpose and function of enrichment and a variety of ways that an Enrichment Coordinator can meet these goals. Some institutions need their Enrichment Coordinator to function as the designated individual that provides enrichment, animal-behavior management, positive-reinforcement training of animals, and social housing of animals. Whereas others need an Enrichment Coordinator to train animal

husbandry and research staff about enrichment, socializing animals, and managing the behavioral needs of the animals in their care. There are also institutions that use an alternate staff member, such as an operations manager or veterinarian, to oversee the enrichment program.

I happen to belong to the second category. My primary role is to coordinate the enrichment efforts of all components (research, animal husbandry, veterinary, engineering, administration, etc.) amongst our four campuses to create a well-functioning and consistent enrichment and behavior management program. Because of that, my days can vary greatly based on each component's needs and the needs of the institution as a whole. As one can imagine, this can lead to a wealth of challenges, especially considering the large size of Wake Forest University, how diverse research studies can be, and the physical distance between our campuses. There are many factors to keep in mind when developing and maintaining an enrichment/behavioral management program.

The most important aspect of my job is communication. I have to be able to communicate with all levels of staff in



all components in order for the program to function effectively.

The research staff and investigators must have a clear understanding of the enrichment program to determine how the enrichment could affect their studies. Enrichment is a variable. Behavior is a variable. They need to be aware how daily interactions with their animals could impact data. The research staff must understand the behavior of the animal species they study, so unexpected changes in behavior can be discussed and addressed with members of the veterinary and enrichment staff.

In my circumstance, the animal husbandry staff provides

the bulk of enrichment to the animals. They are educated on how enrichment is meant to function and why. They are trained to identify changes in animal behavior, and to contact the Enrichment Coordinator or the Attending Veterinarian. In most circumstances, they serve as the first line of defense in addressing behavioral issues or determining if something else has changed in the animals' environments.

The veterinary staff must be trained to identify various abnormal behaviors vs. normal behaviors. In some circumstances, a change in behavior can be an indicator of pain or other medical problems. These need to be investigated and

medical concerns ruled out prior to addressing the issue as purely behavioral.

If every component of the enrichment program is able to communicate well with the others, everything else will slowly fall into place and you'll be left with an integrated, well-functioning, consistent, adaptive, collectively-engaging enrichment program.

### **So how do you become an Enrichment Coordinator?**

I am asked this question frequently, usually by someone who is interested in entering the field. Sometimes, I'm asked by people who are assessing my ability to be considered an "expert" in my field. In any case, education and experience are the most important tools to obtain a position in the field, whether that entails educating yourself, pursuing more formal education processes, or taking advantage of opportunities to gain more experience in your desired career.

My childhood goal was to work with animals, so I took advantage of as many opportunities as I could to work with animals in a variety of different situations. I have a Bachelor's degree in ecology, evolutionary and population biology. In college, I worked at the Purdue

*continued on page 20*



Veterinary Teaching Hospital. I also volunteered at a local therapeutic riding center working with horses, and interned at the local zoo training lemurs, chickens, ducks, and various other species. I took advantage of an opportunity to intern at the Alaska SeaLife Center working with seals and sea lions native to that area. After college, I interned at the Shedd Aquarium, took a job as a veterinary assistant at an emergency vet clinic, and eventually found a position as a veterinary assistant at a contract research organization in Michigan. At that institution,

I was given the opportunity and support to build a behavior/enrichment program, train staff, work with animals one-on-one and develop the skills I would need to excel in my current position. From there, I was offered the opportunity to join Wake Forest University and be a part of their growing enrichment program. My experience is diverse, which helps me meet the challenges of being an Enrichment Coordinator. I have been, and continue to be, very fortunate to work with passionate individuals that support the same goals for animals in a research environment.

The challenges in being an Enrichment Coordinator can be as variable as your roles and responsibilities. But the rewards are just as great. As an Enrichment Coordinator, I am able to be part of bettering the research community. I support researchers in their goals and help them to maintain better animal models. I encourage them to understand ways they can work with the animals instead of against them. I also serve as an advocate for the animals in their environments to help ease the stress that any form of captivity can bring about. The field of research is ever-changing and growing, and as such, the need for more Enrichment Coordinators continues to grow and the role they can fill continues to evolve. The best reward, in my opinion, is that I am part of a community of dedicated, passionate individuals working with animals in biomedical research to provide improved health to human beings and animals.

#### References:

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