The first thing you notice about Amber McElhinney is her focus. She knows what she wants and has had the same academic goals since she was in high school. Amber came to UNH for the equestrian program. “UNH is really special to have a barn this close to campus. Most people don’t realize how unique that is,” she said. “A lot of schools have animal science [as a major] and you can concentrate in equine, but there’s not that many [schools] with a strict equine major.” Amber grew up riding horses – her grandfather first introduced them to her – and she also knew she wanted to go to veterinary school. UNH was the perfect match for her.

After attending an accepted students’ day in her senior year of high school, Amber was ready to come to Durham and hit the ground running. Though she had actually been admitted to UNH as a biomedical sciences major, Amber switched into the equine sciences program before she moved in to Stock Hall for her freshman year. Quickly connecting with a group she met through her June Orientation roommate, Amber joined the Pre-Vet Club and was recruited as an ambassador for the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture (COLSA) through the Admissions Office. She now works for the Audio-Visual Department in the library and is on the equestrian team, as well.

Amber’s eyes light up every time she talks about working with animals – in particular cows and horses. With her stamina for rigorous academic coursework and the credits she earned from high school, Amber was able to add a dairy studies minor in addition to her equine studies major. She also participated in the Cooperative Real Education Agricultural Management (C.R.E.A.M.) program through COLSA and the Thompson School of Applied Science. This program often required Amber to get up at three or four in the morning to care for the animals. Part of Amber’s responsibilities included assigning cows for the incoming C.R.E.A.M. students to care for during the course of a year – Amber talked about each of the cows like they were old friends.

As Amber began more advanced equine studies and animal science classes, she grew close to Dr. Drew Conroy, who became her thesis advisor. Dr. Conroy introduced her to the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) and Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) Abroad programs and connected her with UNH alumni/current veterinarians from across the country. Amber was immediately interested in the SURF Abroad program and began contacting veterinarians in the United Kingdom in hopes of doing equine research there. Amber was able to find a mentor in a veterinarian doing research on the horse heart aorta and set up a SURF Abroad all on her own. During this research experience, Amber got to hold and examine a recently harvested horse heart. “They are massive,” she said excitedly. “It is really rare to be able to do that because most of them are preserved in chemicals.” After having that hands-on research experience, Amber is now working on her thesis, focusing on the anatomy of the aorta visible on 3D echocardiography (basically a 3D ultrasound of the heart). “My SURF Abroad is where I learned what I call the most ‘sneaky’ knowledge,” Amber said. “I learned things that aren’t written in a textbook.”

The only thing Amber wishes is that she has more time at UNH, noting that she wished she had known about the IROP and SURF Abroad programs sooner. It is clear that UNH will always hold a place in Amber’s heart, alongside her love for science and animals. “Because of UNH, I am confident in my academic abilities… I was afraid I wouldn’t measure up.”

Amber has already received acceptance to four of the top veterinary schools in the world: the University of California at Davis, the University of Pennsylvania, Tufts University, and North Carolina State University. She knows people in all of these programs through Dr. Conroy already. She hasn’t decided where she is going quite yet. She dreams of completing a residency specializing in equine sports medicine in hopes of working with high-performance horses. Until then you can probably find Amber in one of her two favorite places on campus – the fourth floor of the library or at the barns, of course.

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