



May 15, 2015

To: AASHE STARS Committee

Dear STARS Committee Members,

I am writing this letter to support NAIT's STARS Innovation submission for Flynn the Certified Therapy Dog.

The concept of a therapy dog at NAIT originated as a little light bulb in my head one evening while watching a program about therapy dogs. From this, I started to think about the link between the information in the program and how a therapy dog could be utilized at NAIT for students and staff. As a Registered Nurse employed at NAIT it was important for me to explore this idea further. This began a year of research, talking with NAIT'S Animal Care Committee, connecting with local animal therapy organizations and enrolling in an Animal Assisted Therapy Certification Program through the School of Nursing, Oakland University.

The historical use of animals for therapy can be traced as far back as the 18th century where they were used in York Retreat, England as a socialization tool. Since then, animals have been incorporated as a therapeutic medium with psychologists, in institutions, prisons, nursing homes and an expanding variety of settings. A literature review can find many animal therapy studies with evidence supporting the healing and stress-reducing potential of therapy dogs and other animals. This stress reduction includes evidence that a short period of petting an animal result in a reduced state of anxiety and that petting a dog decreases blood pressure and decreases cortisol levels (a hormone in the body that increases with increased stress levels).

NAIT was open to the idea of having a resident certified therapy dog within the Health Services department, so then started my search for the perfect dog – well, almost perfect. Along comes Flynn and with the wonderful support of the NAIT community, an animal behaviorist and my family, he was certified as a therapy dog in April 2014.

The positive effects of Flynn's presence on staff and students was astounding to me, even though I knew the research showed the benefits of a therapy animal for reducing stress and providing opportunity for a 'paws-itive' wellbeing break. He has helped nurses open the door to communication with students and staff experiencing difficulties; he is a safe and non-judgmental listener for students experiencing anxiety or with a diagnosis that can result in feelings of being overwhelmed; he can be a great

excuse for a walk and a few minutes of distraction from work or school; and he is always ready to provide the NAIT community with the simple pleasure of petting and playing with him.

The benefits of having a therapy dog available throughout the year at NAIT provide opportunity for students and staff when they need it most. In contrast, many schools provide visiting pet therapy dogs on specific days and times during exams only. This is the difference between the therapy program at NAIT and other institutes. Flynn has been called into action to support a staff member having a difficult day, to a class of students struggling with speaking at the front of the class and to welcome new students. But the most memorable and touching moments are the private ones between human and animal that happen spontaneously and have the greatest impact. These moments occur on a daily basis and are difficult to describe with words, you have to see it to understand. I once tried to explain to someone what Flynn does, in that moment some students came along and after a few minutes watching the students and Flynn the person looked at me and said, "I get it now".

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Linda Shaw', written in a cursive style.

Linda Shaw RN

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