

University of Nevada, Reno

**The Presence and Behaviors of Service Animals, Emotional Support Animals, and  
Pets on a College Campus**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science in Biology and Veterinary Science and the Honors Program

by

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## **Abstract**

Mental health conditions are becoming more prevalent on university campuses, which is leading to an increase in the use of emotional support animals (ESAs). Universities are struggling to accommodate this increase and understand the regulations that apply to ESAs. Service animals are also increasing on campuses, which raises the issue of distinguishing between the two classifications. Due to this challenge, some people believe that animals are being misrepresented as service animals and ESAs and are causing issues for true service animals and ESAs. This study looked at the prevalence of these different types of dogs and whether they were misbehaving and creating issues for true assistance animals. This study found that there's been an increase in the number of service animals and ESAs on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. The service animals and ESAs were well-behaved. The biggest issue was the presence of off leash pets on the campus.

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## **Introduction**

Mental health disabilities on college campuses have been increasing for years. One survey of college students found that in 2015, 7.1% of respondents had been diagnosed with a psychiatric condition, and in 2019, that number was up to 10.1% (American College Health Association, 2016, 2019). With this rise in psychiatric conditions on college campuses, there has been a rise in the use of emotional support animals (ESAs) to help students cope with their disabilities.

Many studies have shown that interacting with animals decreases stress levels, anxiety, and feelings of homesickness in college students (Trammell, 2017; Ward-Griffin et al, 2018; Wood et al., 2017). Researchers have also seen improvement in student moods, energy, and happiness levels. Students only need to interact with therapy dogs for five minutes to have improvement in their stress levels and happiness levels, although the ideal time for reducing stress is about 45 minutes (Wood et al., 2017). These studies have shown that animals can have a positive effect on mental health.

Because of the increase in mental health conditions in college students and the increasing scientific evidence of animal interactions benefitting mental health, the number of emotional support animals on college campuses is also increasing. With the number of ESAs on campus rising, there is concern that fraudulence and misbehaving dogs will impact the image of assistance animals in general. This could lead to more difficulties for people with disabilities who rely on their service animal or ESA to function.

This study will look at the number of dogs on the University of Nevada, Reno campus, including service dogs, ESAs, and, potentially, pets. Rumors of misbehaved dogs on campus have been circulating in many classes as well as at the Disability Resource Center (DRC). My study will be observational to track if there are, in fact, misbehaved dogs and whether they are marked service dogs or ESAs or unmarked dogs. Several locations around the university will be observed and all sightings of dogs will be recorded. I will mostly observe their behavior, as trained service dogs should not be misbehaving in any way. I expect to find mostly unmarked dogs or training service dogs to be misbehaving. The information gathered in this study could be helpful for the Disability Resource Center of the University. They would then know how the presence of dogs on campus is affecting other students' studying and learning. Organizations that train service dogs could also be interested in this study because they would know how their trainers and puppies are acting when not supervised by one of the leaders.

## **Literature Review**

### **Service Animals**

Service animals perform many important tasks in their handler's daily life, including but not limited to guiding, hearing, and retrieving dropped items (Von Bergen, 2015). There are many different types of service dogs. The most common and well known are the guide dogs who assist the blind. There are also service dogs that can detect diabetes, seizures, and allergens and alert their handler to the problem. These dogs are crucial for some people to live a more normal life, and without these dogs, many people

would be impaired or possibly dead. Obtaining a service animal can be a lengthy process with a long waiting list because the dog and person must be properly matched.

Service dogs are regulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This act was originally passed in 1990 and the regulations went into effect in 1991. Title II and Title III of this act were revised in 2010 due to public concerns regarding wording of the original regulations. Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act currently defines a service animal as “any dog [or miniature horse] that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability” (2011, Subpart A 36.104). The ADA permits service dogs to enter almost all public places, particularly those with no pet regulations. The service dogs must be housetrained and kept under control by the handler at all times or they could be asked to leave the facility. Most service dogs are required to be kept leashed, unless the leash interferes with their ability to perform their service. In that case, the dogs must be kept under control by voice commands of the handler. An example of this would be a PTSD service dog checking a room to make sure it is safe for their handler to enter.

All of these dogs undergo extensive training to provide a specific service to their handler, who has some kind of disability. Service animals can be trained by the handler, but many are trained by specific organizations like Guide Dogs for the Blind or Canine Companions for Independence (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). These organizations often recruit college students and their relatives to help raise and train the puppies. Because many college students help train the puppies, there are many puppies marked ‘service dog in training’ on college campuses.



## **Emotional Support Animals**

Most emotional support animals are dogs or cats; however, they can be anything from a hedgehog to a peacock. These animals are capable of providing comfort, affection, support, and a “non-judgmental positive regard” to individuals suffering from a psychiatric disability (Von Bergen, 2015). Simply the presence of the animal causes these effects. ESAs are not highly trained to perform a specific task like service dogs are. Because ESAs lack this training, they are not covered under the ADA (Salminen & Dennis, 2018). This means that ESAs do not have the same public access rights as service dogs; they are not allowed to go everywhere with their handler. Some states have laws that allow ESAs into public places; however, many states, including Nevada, do not have a law.

Although ESAs are not covered by the ADA, they are covered by the Rehabilitation Act, Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA), and the Fair Housing Act (FHA). These acts apply more generally to assistance animals, which includes ESAs. The Rehabilitation Act requires accommodations to be made for individuals with disabilities to participate in federal programs.

The ACAA allows assistance animals to be brought on flights without additional fees, like pet fees. Under this act, airlines can ask for advance notice of passengers traveling with assistance animals and documentation from a licensed medical provider stating that the assistance animal is necessary for the patient’s disability. Because planes have limited space and are often fully booked, airlines can limit the size of the assistance animal to an animal that can fit within the foot space of the handler. For example, in

2018, a woman and her emotional support peacock were denied entry onto a United airlines flight because the bird did not meet size and weight requirements (Foster, 2018). Under the ACAA, the airline decided that the bird was too large to be considered a reasonable accommodation for the woman.

The Fair Housing Act mandates that housing providers provide reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity released a statement that allowing emotional support animals to reside in no-pet dwellings is a reasonable accommodation for those individuals with psychiatric disabilities. University housing now falls under this law.

### **Legal Cases Regarding ESAs on College Campuses**

In 2012, the first case regarding ESAs on campus went to court. In *Velzen v. Grand Valley State University*, a girl struggling with depression and stress-induced cardiac arrhythmia was prohibited from living with her guinea pig emotional support animal. The court ruled, on the basis of the FHA, that the university housing officials did not reasonably accommodate the girl's disabilities, and she was allowed to live on campus with her ESA (*Velzen v. Grand Valley State University*, 2012). This court case was the first case that stated that universities needed to accommodate ESAs according to the FHA.

In 2013, a similar case occurred where a university refused to allow an ESA to live on campus (*U.S. v. University of Nebraska at Kearney*, 2013). This university argued that student housing does not fall under the FHA because student housing is more similar

to a jail than to a residence, based on the number of rooms, rules that those living there must abide to, and “transient” nature of students (Wisch, 2015). Jails are not considered dwellings under the FHA, and using this logic, dorms would not be considered dwellings either. The court disagreed that dorms are more similar to jails than to apartments and told the university that they needed to accommodate the student and allow the ESA to live on campus. This court decision challenged that university housing must comply with the FHA, but like the previous case, it was ruled that dorms do fall under the FHA.

In 2014, another case of campus student housing and ESAs was brought up in *U.S. v Kent State University*. This case found that all federally-funded residences must comply with the FHA, including apartments owned by a university (*U.S. v. Kent State University*, 2014). Although there has not been a U.S. Supreme Court case regarding ESAs in college housing, the precedent thus far based on previous cases is that the FHA does apply to college dorms and apartments.

### **University Responses to Assistance Animals**

Universities are allowed to limit assistance animals based on species or size if the university can provide a good explanation for why the animal could not be reasonably accommodated. This allows them to set size limitations or allow only domesticated species. They can require animals to be kept on leash, be kept quiet, and be groomed. Handlers who do not comply with these requirements can be asked to leave the facility. Although universities are expected to allow ESAs into their housing, they are not required to allow ESAs to enter all areas of campus. Areas like dining halls, laboratories, and the main campus could be off limits to ESAs. In a public survey conducted in 2017,

53.9% of respondents either believed that ESAs should not be allowed to live in dorms or were unsure if they should be allowed in dorms (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). Only 34.5% believed that they should be allowed in classrooms on campus (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). These general perceptions are consistent with current legislation which does not guarantee ESAs the same public access rights as service dogs.

Universities can ask for documentation that the animal is actually an ESA and not just a pet. However, there are ways that students can get around these requirements and bring their pet to school. Many websites have been created that will certify a pet as an emotional support animal for a small fee. For example, the National Service Animal Registry (NSAR) will certify an animal for only \$64.95. This includes a certificate and IDs, with an additional charge for an official vest. These can be obtained by checking a few boxes to show that one meets the necessary qualifications and then a medical provider can send a letter to the applicant (Von Bergen, 2015). The prevalence of these websites is increasing because of the difficulty to obtain an ESA through a licensed psychiatrist. Medical professionals that write ESA letters for patients with mental disabilities can be called to court and asked to testify, which can dissuade some from writing these letters. In order for these letters to be successful if the case goes to trial, they must be well-thought out and descriptive of the services provided, and the medical provider must provide sufficient evidence of their own licensing and role that they play in the individual's care (Ensminger & Lawrence, 2013). Some universities have a list of these websites to try to identify and reduce fraudulent claims. In Nevada, the penalty for fraudulence of a service animal is a misdemeanor and a fine of up to \$500. There have not been any documented cases of fake emotional support animals, nor have there been

any peer-reviewed studies regarding fraud in ESAs, as it is very difficult to prove. In public media, there are many claims that the number of fake ESAs is increasing; however, there is little scientific evidence to support this.

The public perception of fake or misrepresented service animals and ESAs was measured in a study in 2017. People who knew someone who owned a service animal or ESA were more likely to predict a high rate of fraudulence than someone who had little contact with service animals or ESAs (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). Overall, the majority of people in the study believed that most people are not cheating the system. (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). People who own a service animal express concerns that misrepresented animals will have negative impacts on their own image. Some say that they are facing more resistance from airlines, business owners, and housing officials due to the inappropriate behavior of misrepresented assistance animals. This includes barking, shedding and animals relieving themselves in inappropriate places (Teitell, 2013).

### **Challenges of Distinguishing Service Animals from ESAs**

Distinguishing service animals from ESAs has proven to be very challenging for landlords, business owners, and college officials (Burden et al., 2019; Von Bergen, 2015). Neither ESAs nor service dogs are required to be marked with a vest or tag. Even if service dogs and ESAs were required to be marked, one could buy a vest online for \$20 and put it on any animal, then claiming it to be a service animal or ESA. This makes it very difficult to determine if a given dog is, in fact, a service dog, ESA, or just a pet. Another problem with sorting out service animals from ESAs stems from the verbiage used across different legal documents in different states and municipalities throughout the

world. Some refer to these animals as ‘assistance animals,’ ‘therapy animals,’ ‘service animals,’ ‘emotional support animals,’ or ‘comfort animals’ (Von Bergen, 2015). Each of these terms has a slightly different meaning. Assistance animals is an umbrella term that includes all of the mentioned groups. Therapy animals, emotional support animals, and comfort animals are all the same in terms of the regulations that apply to them. Emotional support animals and comfort animals are two different terms to define the same type of animal. The difference between ESAs and therapy dogs is that therapy dogs provide comfort for people other than the handler, while ESAs comfort the handler. As shown, the wording of laws and regulations can have a major effect on what type of animal is covered.

The last issue associated with distinguishing between different types of assistance animals apart is that there are only two questions that one could legally ask the handlers: “is this a service animal that is required because of a disability?” and “what work or tasks has the animal been trained to perform?” (Salminen & Dennis, 2018). The handler may not legally be asked what their disability is nor asked to show documentation of their disability or certification of their ESA or service animal. However, housing officials are legally allowed to ask for documentation that there is a disability-related need for the animal.

Although service dogs have been prevalent and accepted for the last 100 years, the issues surrounding their validity are being questioned more and more (Yamamoto et al., 2015). A prominent reason for the shift from accepting service animals to questioning them is the increasing number of dogs that are performing services for disabilities that are not visible. Disabilities that fall under this category include PTSD, diabetes, anxiety, and

depression. Service dogs must be trained to perform specific duties to help with these disabilities such as checking around corners, turning lights on when entering a room, and bringing medications to a patient. Individuals can also have emotional support animals that help them cope with these disabilities; however, those animals are there for comfort and are not trained to perform any specific duties.

### **Methodology**

This section describes the details of how the study was conducted, including research questions, description of the study site, study design, and data analysis. The reasoning behind the details of the study has also been included.

### **Research Questions**

Many studies have stated that there is an increasing number of ESAs and service animals on college campuses; however, there have been few studies that quantitatively show this increase. There has also been speculation that there may be problems with ESAs, specifically regarding their conduct as compared to service animals. This study seeks to fill in some of these knowledge gaps by answering the following questions:

1. How has the number of ESAs and service dogs registered on a college campus changed over recent years?
2. How many dogs are present on campus and what is their designation (i.e. service animal, ESA, pet)?

3. What conduct is displayed by these dogs and their handlers and is this conduct consistent with the designation of the animal?

### **Study Site**

This study took place on the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) campus during the spring 2020 semester. The study included dogs seen both outside around the campus and inside buildings on campus. Four main buildings on campus were observed: The Joe Crowley Student Union (JCSU), the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center (MIKC), the Pennington Student Achievement Center (PSAC), and the Davidson Mathematics and Science Center (DMSC). These locations were chosen because they are well-traveled buildings where students often congregate to study. The outdoor locations were grassy areas on campus where students walk their dogs. The spots observed were the Quad, the grassy area outside of the MIKC, and the grassy area outside of the Fleischmann Agriculture building (FAB).

### **Study Design**

The study's design was broken down into two parts: the observational study and collection of resources gather from the UNR campus' Disability Resource Center (DRC).

#### ***Part 1***

The Disability Resource Center (DRC) on campus was contacted to gain access to information regarding the registration of ESAs and service animals on the university



campus. The DRC also provided information regarding the process of registration on the campus and other specific campus requirements.

## *Part 2*

This observational study was conducted on the UNR campus. The grassy areas were observed for a total of ten hours and each building was observed for ten hours, usually in increments of one to two hours. These hours were spread out over different days and times in each location to account for different traffic flow depending on day or time. During the observation periods, all observed dogs were documented.

Documentation of the dogs included demographics (breed), appearance (vest, leash, etc.), and behavior (laying down, being pet, barking, etc.). In addition, the appearance of the handler was documented to reduce the likelihood of documenting the same dog twice. Breed was documented for use as an indicator of the dog's potential designation. Most guide dogs are either golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers, or a mix of both. Common ESA breeds include poodles, Labradors, golden retrievers and Chihuahuas. Although these are the common breeds for different designations, any breed of dog can be a service dog or ESA. Breed was also used as a tool to reduce the likelihood of documenting the same dog twice. For example, if an uncommon breed of dog was seen more than once, it would be easy to determine if that dog had already been documented.

The appearance of the dog was documented as an indicator of the dog's classification. Dogs were grouped into 4 different categories based on their appearance. The first group was service animals, which included dogs that had a vest that said "Service Animal" or dogs with a vest that said "Guide Dogs for the Blind" or "Canine

Companions for Independence”. The second group was emotional support animals. These dogs were labeled with vests that said “Emotional Support Animal” or “ESA”. The third group was pets with a harness or vest. The last group was pets without a harness or vest. The pet group was split into two categories because service animals and ESAs are not required to be labeled, though many people label them to avoid harassment and questioning. The group pets with a harness or vest could potentially include service animals or ESAs that were unlabeled. The pet without harness or vest included dogs that were on or off leash.

The conduct of the dogs was documented to determine if they were behaving in a manner consistent with their level of training and their designation. The behavior included sitting on the ground, pulling on the lead, barking, playing fetch, etc.

### **Data Analysis**

The total number of dogs that were seen at the locations on campus offered a rough estimate of how prevalent these dogs were on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. The proportion of marked versus unmarked dogs and presence of specific organizations (Guide Dogs for the Blind and Canine Companions for Independence) on campus was also analyzed. The behavior of the dogs was compared to the designation of the dog. For example, if they were labeled as a service dog, they should have been quietly laying on the ground at their handler’s feet, not barking or pulling on their lead. A t-test was run to determine if there was a significant difference in the behavior of marked service dogs, ESAs and pets.

## Results

The University of Nevada, Reno has seen an increase in the number of both service animals and emotional support animals registered at the Disability Resource Center on campus (M. A. Christensen, personal communication, April 17, 2020). Eight service animals have been registered with the DRC since the spring of 2019. The DRC encountered some trouble finding the number of registered ESAs and service animals for previous years due to their inability to access paper files from their offices, which were closed because of coronavirus (COVID-19). However, the assistant director of the DRC said that she had email correspondence for five ESAs in 2019, but she knows there were more that she didn't have in her email.

A total of 30 different dogs were seen on the UNR campus. A little less than half of the observed dogs were pets and the other half were mostly service animals and ESAs. A full breakdown of the dogs seen is shown in Table 1. All service dogs and ESAs seen on campus were well-behaved and either sitting or walking by their handler. Some service dogs in training were observed pulling on their lead and jumping on people. There were many pet dogs on campus that were off leash. Pets displayed significantly more bad behavior than service dogs or ESAs,  $t(11) = 3.32, p < .01$ .

*Table 1. Dogs seen on the University of Nevada, Reno campus.*

Date	Location	Handler	Dog	Designation	Behavior
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<b>1/21/20</b>	Outside FAB	Male Asian, black hair	Black lab	GDB vest, training	Walking, jumping on people
<b>1/29/20</b>	Outside DMS	Male Asian, brown hair and glasses	Black lab	GDB vest, training	Walking
<b>2/10/20</b>	Joe 1st Floor	Female, Caucasian blonde	Young yellow Lab	GDB vest, training	Pulling on lead/jumping against lead
<b>1/23/20</b>	Joe 1st Floor	Male, Caucasian wheelchair	Yellow lab	K9 companions vest	Sitting on floor
<b>1/22/20</b>	Outside DMS	Female, Caucasian, brown hair	Yellow lab	Red service dog vest, training	Pulling on lead
<b>1/22/20</b>	KC 2nd Floor	Female, Caucasian, brown hair	Dachshund/Chihuahua mix	Purple service dog vest	Walking
<b>1/22/20</b>	KC 2nd Floor	Female, Caucasian, brown hair	White golden retriever	Blue service dog vest	Walking
<b>1/23/20</b>	Joe 1st Floor	Female, Caucasian, brown hair, glasses	Yellow lab	Red and black service dog vest w/handle	Walking/sitting by handler
<b>1/30/20</b>	Outside KC	Female, Caucasian	Pitbull	Red service dog vest	Walking

<b>2/19/20</b>	PSAC	Male, Caucasian, brown hair, glasses	Pitbull	Red service dog vest	Walking
<b>2/19/20</b>	PSAC	Female, Caucasian, brown hair	Chihuahua	Army green seizure dog vest	Walking
<b>1/22/20</b>	Outside FAB	Female, Asian	White labradoodle	Purple ESA vest	Walking
<b>1/23/20</b>	Joe 1st Floor	Female, Caucasian, pink hair, glasses	Brown labradoodle	Purple ESA vest	Walking
<b>2/6/20</b>	KC 2nd Floor	Male, Caucasian, glasses	German shorthaired pointer	Black ESA vest	Walking
<b>2/10/20</b>	Outside KC	Female, Caucasian, brown hair, glasses	Brown labradoodle	Purple ESA vest	Walking
<b>1/22/20</b>	KC 2nd Floor	Female, Caucasian, black hair	Black lab	Dark blue vest with patches	Sitting by handler
<b>1/29/20</b>	DMS	Female, Caucasian	Yellow lab	Red vest	Walking
<b>2/10/20</b>	Joe 1st Floor	Female, Caucasian, brown hair	Black lab	Brown harness with Handle (no vest or ID)	Walking

<b>1/22/20</b>	Outside FA	Female, Caucasian	Doberman	None	Off leash/smelling grass
<b>1/27/20</b>	Outside FAB	Male, Caucasian, bald	Mini Australian Shepard	None	Off leash/playing fetch
<b>1/27/20</b>	Outside KC	Female, Indian	Golden retriever	None	Walking
<b>1/29/20</b>	Outside KC	Female, Asian	Husky	None	Walking
<b>1/30/20</b>	Outside DMS	Female	Long haired Chihuahua	None	Walking
<b>2/3/20</b>	DMS	Female, Hispanic	Black lab	None	Pulling on lead
<b>2/3/20</b>	Outside DMS	Female, Caucasian brown hair	Mutt	None	Walking
<b>2/4/20</b>	Outside KC	Female, Caucasian	Brown labradoodle	None	Walking
<b>2/5/20</b>	Outside DMS	Male, Caucasian, mustache	Border Collie	None	Off leash/smelling grass
<b>2/12/20</b>	DMS	Female, Caucasian, brown hair	Border Collie	None	Walking
<b>2/18/20</b>	Outside FAB	Male, Caucasian	Long haired Chihuahua	None	Off leash/playing fetch
<b>2/18/20</b>	Outside FAB	Male, African American	Australian Shepard	None	Pulling on lead

## Discussion

The University of Nevada, Reno has seen an increase in both service animals and emotional support animals on its campus in the last several years. From the information that the DRC was able to gather, it does not appear that the increases at this university have been huge. However, the available information was limited due to COVID-19, which could mean that the actual increases of service animals and ESAs could be much higher.

Service dogs seen on the campus were well-behaved and followed their handlers very well. One dog, seen on several occasions, was extremely well-trained and listened to every order the handler gave her. The service dogs in training displayed behaviors consistent with their level of training. The younger the observed dogs were the more they pulled on their leashes or jumped on other people. Surprisingly, none of the observed training dogs barked at anyone, including other dogs.

Few ESAs were seen on campus, which is consistent with the information gathered from the DRC. Most ESAs that are registered with the DRC are not allowed on campus, however there are a few special circumstances where they are allowed. The ESAs that were seen on campus behaved the same as service animals would. They were on their lead at all times, walking or sitting beside their handlers. This was not expected, as ESAs do not have as much training as service animals do. However, it is good to know that the presence of ESAs on the campus is not greatly affecting other students or service animals on the campus.

The majority of the dogs seen on the campus were pets. One third of the pets were off leash, which according to the university is not allowed. According to the

administrative manual, all animals on university property must be kept on a leash, under the control of the owner or handler. Off leash dogs could pose a threat to students, other dogs, service animals, or ESAs on the campus, as they could attack if they feel threatened or scared. Without a leash on, it would be more difficult for the owner to regain control of the dog and could lead to serious consequences. This is the reason that the university requires that dogs be kept on leashes.

Overall, the University of Nevada, Reno does not have a huge problem with service animals and ESAs misbehaving. Their biggest problem is people bringing their pets to campus and letting them go off leash. By enforcing the administrative manual, the university could reduce the number of off leash pets.

Future studies could look at the reaction that students have to ESAs and service animals on campus and in classes. For example, do students think that they are a distraction? More accurate information could also be gathered from the DRC when they are allowed back on campus.



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