

Recruitment and retention of veterinary students for food animal practices

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Although there are growing concerns regarding a perceived deficiency of veterinary graduates going into food animal practices, recent surveys indicate that there probably is an adequate number of students interested in becoming food animal practitioners admitted to veterinary schools and colleges to fill current private large animal practice needs. Unfortunately, a large proportion of these students do not ultimately go into food animal practice. The number of new food animal practitioners needed each year has not been determined, yet perceived shortages are based on anecdotal stories by practitioners in rural areas who have been unsuccessful in hiring new graduates, declining numbers of veterinarians belonging to food animal practice associations, and changing percentages of AVMA members in various practice categories. To attract new graduates, food animal practitioners must work closely with veterinary faculty to mentor veterinary students, aggressively advertise their employment opportunities, and provide attractive compensation packages.

Because there are more qualified applicants than available positions, each veterinary school and college must have an equitable selection process. Limited enrollment requires selection of the most qualified applicants on a uniform and fair basis at each institution. Identification of applicants possessing the desired qualifications is usually accomplished through evaluation of applications including essays, letters of reference, college transcripts, standardized tests, and interviews.

Beyond stating their desire to become veterinarians, most successful applicants must demonstrate their desire by documenting substantial experiences with animals and veterinary work experiences. Twenty-three of the 27 accredited veterinary colleges in the United States list animal experience as a requirement for consideration for admission.¹ In addition, 26 of the 27 veterinary schools and colleges list veterinary experience as a requirement or consideration for admission.¹

In a recent survey of 1,425 first-year veterinary students (class of 2006) enrolled at 17^a of the 27 accredited veterinary colleges in the United States, 1,354 (95%) have owned dogs, 1,226 (86%) have owned cats, 1,226 (86%) have owned pet fish, 666 (47%) have owned pet birds, 599 (42%) have owned horses, 584 (41%) have owned reptiles, 371 (26%) have owned cattle, 271 (19%) have owned pigs, 228

(16%) have owned goats, 157 (11%) have owned sheep, and 627 (44%) have owned other animals. Of the 1,425 surveyed first-year veterinary students, 1,403 (98%) have owned either a dog, cat, or both, and 507 (36%) have owned food animals (cows, sheep, goats, pigs, llamas, or ostriches). Therefore, it can be estimated that about 851 of the 2,364 (36%) first-year veterinary students have owned food animals. Information regarding the ownership of other food animals, such as poultry, fish, buffalo, and deer, was not collected.

Of the surveyed 1,425 veterinary students, 228 (16%) were raised on farms or in towns with < 1,000 people, 456 (32%) in towns of 1,000 to 25,000 people, 271 (19%) in towns of 25,000 to 50,000 people, and 470 (33%) in cities of populations > 50,000 people. Therefore, it can be estimated that about 378 (16%) of the 2,364 first-year veterinary students were raised on farms or in towns of < 1,000 people, and 756 (32%) first-year veterinary students grew up in towns of < 25,000 people. A total of 298 (21%) of the survey participants graduated in high school classes of < 100 students.

The US census data from 1990 (the last year for which data are available) stated that 1.6% of the people living in the United States lived on farms. Additionally, < 2% of the US labor force in 1990 worked on farms. Therefore, the veterinary student body does not reflect the US population. A larger percentage of people with rural backgrounds are enrolled in our veterinary degree programs than would be expected if considering only US census data.

Forty-three percent (294/684) of surveyed students raised on farms or in small towns of < 25,000 residents indicated that they intend to go into practices with a food animal component. Only 127 of 741 (17%) of the surveyed students raised in large towns and cities stated that they intend to go into practices with a food animal component. Therefore, it can be estimated that about 488 (43%) of the estimated 1,134 first-year veterinary students from farms and small towns and 209 (17%) of the 1,230 first-year veterinary students from large towns and cities currently enrolled in colleges of veterinary medicine in the United States have intentions of going into practices with food animal components. Therefore, an estimated 697 first-year veterinary students of the class of 2006 are interested in practices involving food animals.

Of the 1,425 students surveyed, 337 (24%) are male, and 1,088 (76%) are female. Overall, 148 (44%) male students and 294 (27%) of the surveyed female students are planning to go into practices with a food animal component. A total of 82% of the surveyed

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male students raised on farms and 51% of the surveyed female students raised on farms plan to go into practices with food animal components. Therefore, more than half of the veterinary students of either gender raised on farms enter veterinary college with plans to return to rural practices.

Some veterinarians have alleged that admissions policies that include the use of standardized examinations and evaluation of college transcripts are discriminatory against applicants from rural areas. Some have even suggested that academic standards for applicants from rural areas should be lower than those for other applicants because of the perception that rural educations are not as broad or rigorous as those in larger schools.

Because it is impossible to easily and fairly compare the rigors of the academic programs of all of the colleges offering courses to fulfill veterinary prerequisites, all of the admissions committees in the United States use scores from standardized national examinations to rank applicants.¹ Twenty of the schools and colleges of veterinary medicine require submission of scores for the **Graduate Record Examination (GRE)**; 2 accept scores from either the GRE or **Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)**; 1 accepts either GRE scores or scores from the **Veterinary College Admission Test (VCAT)**; 2 accept only VCAT scores; and 2 accept GRE scores, MCAT scores, or VCAT scores. Nationally administered standardized tests allow fair comparison of the academic abilities and achievements of applicants regardless of where each completed his or her preveterinary requirements. Standardized tests also help admissions committees to fairly compare applicants with academic records differing in such variables as average course loads.

Although some veterinary school and college applicants have complained that standardized tests do not represent their true academic abilities because they are not good test takers, all of the licensing boards throughout the United States use standardized tests to determine fitness for practice, and most veterinary college faculty members use tests similar to the standardized admittance tests to evaluate students. Most veterinary school and college admissions committees allow and encourage applicants with low standardized test scores to retake the examinations following adequate preparation.

The composite GRE scores (verbal, quantitative, and analytical) and mean science **grade point averages (GPA)** for 346 veterinary students currently enrolled in the DVM degree program at Kansas State University were calculated (**Table 1**). The numerical differences in GRE scores and science GPAs equate to less than 1 point in the overall 100 points used to rank applicants. Therefore, the concern that applicants from farms, rural, and small communities are at a disadvantage because of the emphasis placed on academic standards in admissions policies is unfounded.

The **United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)** has predicted that veterinary medicine will be one of the fastest growing industries of this decade. According to the BLS's **Occupational Outlook Handbook**, this growth will be the result of consumer

Table 1—Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and prerequisite science grade point averages (GPA) for 346 current College of Veterinary Medicine students enrolled at Kansas State University

Farm or town size (No. of residents)	No. of students	Mean GRE scores	Mean science GPA (4.0 scale)
Farm	104	1,768	3.5
< 5,000	53	1,796	3.5
5,000 to 20,000	45	1,825	3.5
20,000 to 50,000	42	1,860	3.4
50,000 to 100,000	25	1,875	3.3
> 100,000	77	1,877	3.4

demands as baby boomers grow older and have higher-than-average discretionary disposable incomes.² Although this predicted growth is good for veterinary medicine in general, it might also be a reason for decreased interests in food animal practices by new graduates. Veterinarians hoping to hire new graduates for food animal practices will have to compete with small animal clinic owners in large metropolitan areas as this growth occurs.

Recruitment and retention of veterinary students with interest in food animals will continue to be a challenge. However, several actions can be immediately implemented to ensure an adequate supply of food animal practitioners well into the future.

Half of the current DVM degree students at Kansas State University made their decisions to become veterinarians at a mean age of 12.5 years or while they were in the seventh grade or earlier. When asked who most influenced them to become veterinarians, 142 (41%) of the current veterinary students at Kansas State University stated that it was a veterinarian, 145 (42%) stated that it was their parents, 35 (10%) stated that they made their decisions without any influence by anyone else, and only 24 (7%) stated that a teacher was most influential. Veterinarians who are visible in their communities are excellent recruiters of veterinary students. Veterinary participation in civic activities, such as science fairs, Boy Scouts, 4-H, and county fairs, pays big dividends in recruitment of students into veterinary medicine. Veterinarians who allow young people to ride with them on calls and observe them in their practices also help junior high and high school students solidify their decisions to become veterinarians. Veterinarians who do not have time to share with the youth of their communities should not complain that new graduates are not returning home.

From January 1, 2002 until October 1, 2002, there were only 107 different positions with a food animal component listed in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. Although many food animal veterinarians have stated that placing advertisements in journals is not fruitful, it is not surprising that a veterinary student looking through the classifieds may assume that there are not many positions available for them in food animal practices. To attract new graduates, potential employers must aggressively advertise their positions.

Of the 2,096 veterinary college graduates during 2002, 88% had educational debts of an average of \$67,775.³ Unfortunately, many new veterinary college graduates cannot accept the positions of their choices

because of their obligations to repay educational debts. To enable and encourage new graduates to accept positions with them, some organizations have recently started providing scholarships or signing bonuses for future employees. Food animal practitioners seeking new employees should consider compensation packages that include help with educational debt repayment or scholarships for veterinary students while enrolled in college.

To ensure that there will be an adequate number of new graduates seeking food animal practice positions in the future, an accurate estimate of the needed number of new graduates to go into food animal practices must be established by the AVMA or other interested organizations, and the faculty of veterinary colleges and practitioners must diligently work together to mentor those students expressing interest in food animal practices.

^aA total of 1,425 first-year (class of 2006) students (337 males and 1,088 females) from the following schools and colleges of veterinary medicine participated in the survey cited in this article: Auburn University, Cornell University, University of Illinois, Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, University of Missouri, North Carolina State University, The Ohio State University, Oklahoma State University, University of Pennsylvania, Purdue University, University of Tennessee, Texas A&M University, Tuskegee University, Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, and Washington State University.

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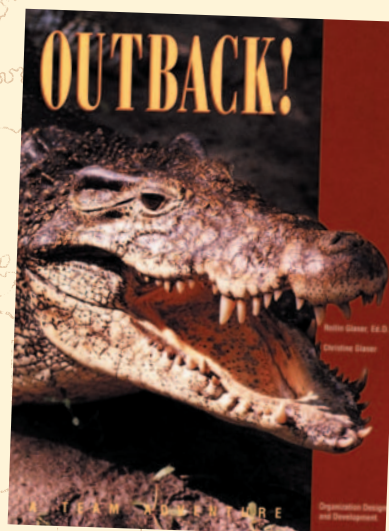
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