

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Proprietary Model: Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
May 9, 2013

When Professor Mary Anna Thrall of Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine was awarded the highest teaching honor in the veterinary profession at the 2013 meeting of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges,¹ many educators from around the country paused to consider the quality of faculty at the proprietary college that is projected to graduate approximately 285 new veterinarians in 2013.²



*Mary Anna Thrall, DVM, MS, Dip ACVP Professor of Clinical Pathology
and Head, Department of Biomedical Sciences
(Photo provided by Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine)*

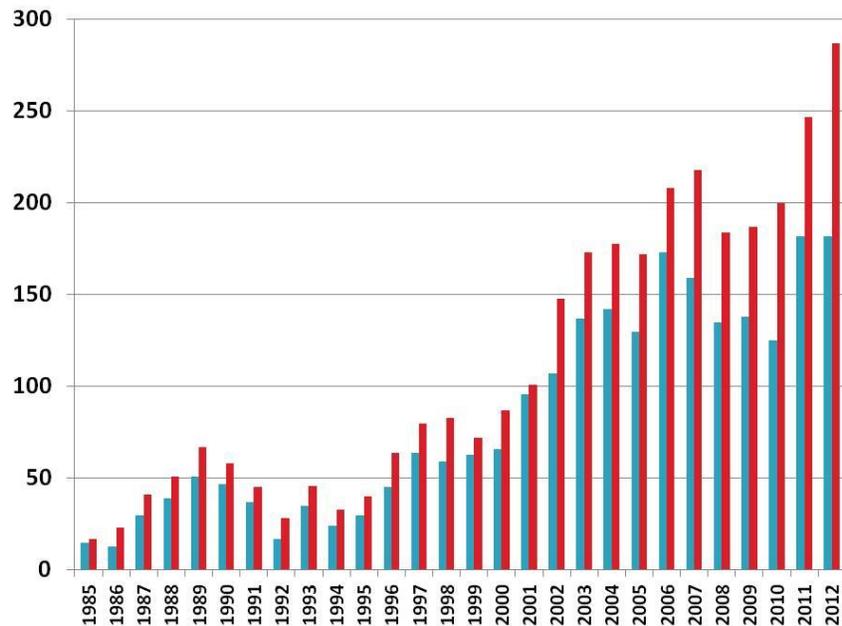
Over a century ago, large numbers of young Americans traveled north to Toronto to attain their veterinary education from a private for-profit college because there were not enough places at universities like Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania.³ In the middle decades of the last century, other students went to Italy and the Philippines to fill the growing need for veterinary education that was not being met by the colleges in the United States.⁴

In 1978, Robert Ross, whom the New York Times referred to as “a gung-ho entrepreneur who juggled global deals in things like fertilizer, pantyhose, steel and antismoking medicine,” established a for-profit medical school on the island of Dominica in the Lesser Antilles.⁵ He followed four years later with a veterinary college which he relocated to nearby St. Kitts in 1983. One of Mr. Ross’s most important recruits was a well-known pathologist from Kansas State University named Stanley Dennis who arrived on the island in 1992 and stayed for eight years as dean. He got the college on sound academic and administrative footings and hired key faculty, some of whom are still at Ross.

Ross sold his medical and veterinary schools to Leeds Equity in 2000 and, three years later, the current owner, DeVry, Inc. purchased it for 310 million dollars. At the time, it was the largest transaction in postsecondary education.⁶

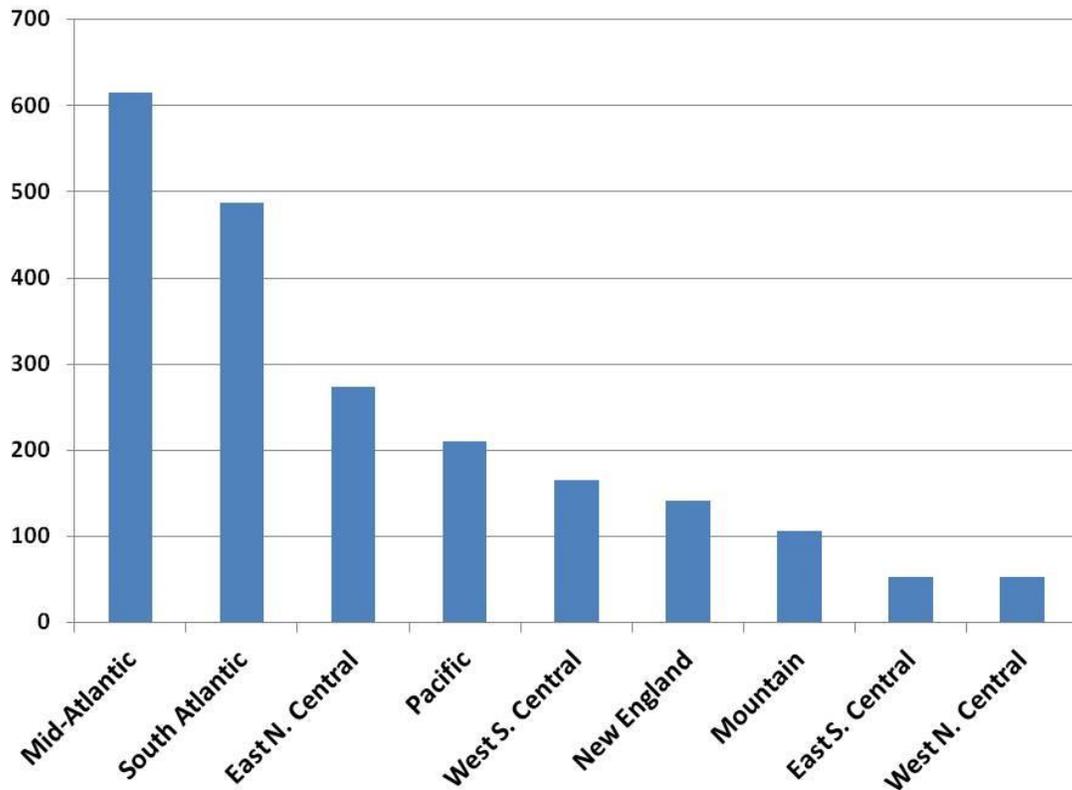
Ross University has approximately 85 full time faculty members who teach preclinical education during seven contiguous semesters. Hospital rotations are contracted through accredited colleges in the United States.⁷

The university has graduated 2,341 AVMA-member veterinarians since its first class in 1985. This represents four percent of the almost 65,000 AVMA-member veterinarians who graduated during that period.⁸ The total number of Ross graduates from 1985-2012, including non-AVMA graduates, is 3220.⁹



Number of Ross University veterinary graduates who are AVMA members (blue) by year of graduation shown on Y-axis. Total number of Ross University veterinary graduates (red).

Most Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine graduates live in the Mid Atlantic States.¹⁰ New York has the largest population (427 graduates). This represents over 21 percent of NYS veterinarians who graduated since 1985 and almost 12 percent of all the veterinarians in New York State, regardless of year of graduation. New Jersey is second to New York with approximately six per cent of the total number of veterinarians in the state.



Region of the country where Ross graduates who are AVMA members reside (number of veterinarians is on Y-axis).

The Mid Atlantic states include New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

United States Department of Education Title IV eligibility has been in place for many years, allowing American students studying at Ross to apply for federal loans. In addition, the accreditation of Ross by the AVMA in 2011 effectively validated the quality and breadth of the program.

Ross has had many naysayers in the educational community, and for several years I was one of them. Establishing a proprietary institution outside of a major university setting without either a comprehensive academic teaching hospital or a robust research program seemed an anathema to my core educational values.

However, in 1998 and with my approval and support as dean, Cornell started accepting final-year students from Ross, allowing them to complete their clinical education in an established

university setting. Our first Ross student was Long Island native, Deborah Trainor, who had entered Ross as a mature second-career student. Dr. Trainor so impressed the small animal faculty at Cornell that they invited her to do a three-year residency at Cornell starting just six months after graduation and without the usual internship.¹¹ Dr. Trainor became board-certified in internal medicine¹² and currently works in a specialty referral hospital in Florida.

“I applied to Ross as an older student and they gave me an opportunity to earn a veterinary degree when other schools may have not. As older students or ones who were not accepted in the U.S. on the first try and attending school in a foreign country, I think our dedication was greater than some of the students who got into U.S. schools on their first try. The education at Ross focused on making us good clinicians and we all felt it was a privilege to have the opportunity to become a veterinarian.

“I have many fond memories of St Kitts and of our closeness as students, and how we and the faculty all took care of each other.”¹³



Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine on St Kitts.
(Photo provided by Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine)

As the issues of non-traditional educational programs continue to be debated, one lesson of history must not be forgotten. *The private sector will always fill in the gaps that the public sector is unable or unwilling to accommodate.*¹⁴ The Ontario Veterinary College did it over a century ago, and produced some outstanding veterinarians who became leaders in the profession. Middlesex University¹⁵ and the Italian and Philippine universities did the same fifty years later. Now, it seems, it is Ross's turn.

¹ <http://www.aavmc.org/PressRelease/?id=125>

² Peeler Jodi (Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine, Assistant Dean for Communications and External Relations). Email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2013 Apr 16.

³ The Ontario Veterinary College, located in Toronto, Canada was a private college from 1862 to 1908. Smith DF. 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America. J Vet Med Educ 2010 37(4) 317-327.

⁴ Smith DF. 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America. Part 3: 1970-2000. J Vet Med Educ 2011 38(3) 211-227.

⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/business/global/22ross.html?_r=0

⁶ http://www.leadsequity.com/portfolio.cfm?section_sub_id=7&portfolio_id=22

⁷ Twenty-three colleges of veterinary medicine currently place Ross students for this purpose (Ref. Jodi Peeler, Ross University).

⁸ Unless otherwise specified, all references are to AVMA-member veterinarians. This includes AVMA-members who may have graduated from colleges outside the United States and who may be living and/or working outside the United States.

⁹ The proportion of Ross graduates who are AVMA members is 73%. For comparison, 83% of Cornell graduates during the period 1985-2012 are AVMA members.

¹⁰ Mid Atlantic states are New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

¹¹ The three-year length of the residency was at the time one year longer than typical because Dr. Trainor had not completed a one-year internship.

¹² American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM).

¹³ Trainor Deborah T, DVM, Dip ACVIM (veterinary specialist at Florida Veterinary Referral Center, Estero, FL). Email to Donald F. Smith. 2013 April 18.

¹⁴ Smith DF. Lessons of History in Veterinary Medicine. J Vet Med Educ 2013 40(1) 2-11.

¹⁵ Middlesex University (now Brandeis University) had a veterinary college *circa* 1935-1946. Smith DF. 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America. J Vet Med Educ 2011 38(1) 84-99.

KEYWORDS:

Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Elaine Watson

Dr. Stanley Dennis

St. Kitts

Ontario Veterinary College

History of Veterinary Medicine

Proprietary Veterinary Colleges

Council on Education

American Veterinary Medical Association

Dr. Deborah Trainor

Dr. Mary Anna Thrall
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges
Robert Ross
DeVry, Inc
Leeds Equity
Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine
Middlesex University

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.