

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Choosing the Veterinary College That Is Best for You

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

January 25, 2014

Though many veterinary applicants are waiting to hear if they have been accepted into college this fall, others have heard good news from more than one institution and will have to make a decision between now and the middle of April.

For those with a choice: should you select the in-state school where tuition is lower, or the out-of-state college that has a program that better meets your academic goals? How highly do you value an established college with the enhanced career opportunities that come from a large and geographically-dispersed alumni base? How important is weather, proximity to family, size of city, and employment opportunities for your spouse or partner while you are in college?

Here are the things that I suggest you consider.

The Academic Program and Curriculum

Evaluate the quality, number, and subject expertise of the faculty. Is there a good cross section of faculty at all levels of experience, from relatively new graduates who are instructors and assistant professors, to those who have been teaching for years and are senior professors? Are the faculty respected leaders in their field of expertise, commensurate with their years of experience? Are they truly dedicated to teaching as well as scholarly advancement, and are they accessible to students? And a fundamental question: Do faculty and the administration consider students as students, or as future colleagues?

Are the faculty good role models, and does the faculty profile reflect current sensibility and demographic of the profession? For example, are there senior women in every department and also in the administration, or are the women mostly clustered in the junior ranks in the clinical departments? Do faculty members go home at a reasonable hour, or do they work way into the late evening *and expect the students to do the same*?

Don't be fooled by the machismo that was so prevalent in my generation! Colleges where clinical students are expected to be available in the clinics from six am to nine pm or later, day after day, are neither conducive to nurturing a balanced lifestyle nor to being an exemplar for young veterinarians interested in considering academic leadership.

Similarly, check out the first- and second-year schedules. Are students expected to spend all of their time in class and preparing for examinations, or do they have available time for personal

development, club activities, understanding the profession, and maintaining sufficient knowledge about national and world events so they can make a truly informed decision on Election Day.

Colleges that just teach *how* aren't fostering the leaders of tomorrow. Find a college that teaches *how* and also challenges you to discover *why*.

Finally, is the academic program flexible and does it have strengths in your area of clinical or research interest? While most mainland US colleges have a sufficient small animal caseload to accommodate the needs of students, there is a great difference among colleges in the number and variety of equine, farm animal, wildlife, and exotic cases. If you plan to pursue the academic, corporate, or service aspect of veterinary medicine, does the college carry robust research programs, or offer opportunities in areas of special emphasis such as public health and corporate practice? Are summer experiences available for research, clinical enhancement, and international veterinary medicine?

The Quality and Character of the Campus

Students attending veterinary colleges that are geographically part of a large university and where faculty have strong connections with programs in biology, agriculture, law, or business, sometimes offer more opportunity for insight into fields that complement veterinary medicine. Colleges that have meaningful ties to medicine or the allied health colleges on the same campus should be able to engage students across the health disciplines. This will become more important as the concept of *zooeyia*—defined as the potential improvement of the physical, social, emotional and mental health of people who share their homes and environments with pets—takes hold in the more progressive veterinary colleges.¹

Consider the students who will be joining you as you enter veterinary school, who will become your colleagues and among your closest friends for the next four years and throughout your career? Do they come from a variety of backgrounds? Do some have real-world experience in other fields before coming to veterinary college or are they moving directly from undergraduate to professional school? Will they complement your knowledge base and expose you to new interests? Do you think you will work effectively with them?

The Projected Cost of Your Education

Don't underestimate the importance of educational debt in your long term personal and professional goals. How much will your DVM cost and how will you pay for it? While some educational expenses are comparable from college to college, tuition varies greatly. Living expenses (rent, commuting time, cost of living) are sometimes higher in an urban setting than a smaller community.

On the other side of the equation is the availability of job opportunities and financial support. Has fund-raising for scholarships been a long-term college priority? Are scholarships awarded on the basis of financial need only, or is academic merit a factor? Don't be hesitant to ask the administration how much money is distributed annually—not just for first-year students, but

for all four years—from both long term endowments and anticipated annual gifts. This is public information at most veterinary colleges.

A logical extension of educational cost is anticipated return on investment, and that starts with finding a job after graduation that will compensate you appropriately in your chosen field. This is where networking comes in. Based on numbers alone, colleges with 4,000 alumni should have greater networking potential than colleges with fewer than 1,500 alumni.

But not always! If you aspire to attend a college where 80% of the graduates stay in state, but you want to move across the country, perhaps you should consider other available options if the cost is at not at variance with your budget. Colleges with faculty and staff who help match students with people they know personally in their field are invaluable to students finding summer employment and eventually a post-graduation job.

No college is perfect, and I'm not entirely sure there is much correlation for the majority of students between college ranking and what's best for a particular individual.

After you have considered all of these factors, after you have discussed things with your family and close friends, what feels right? Sometimes you just have to put the sheets with the plus and minus columns aside and trust your instincts—and maybe your mother's.

¹ Smith, Donald F. One Health Comes of Age. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. June 23, 2013.

KEYWORDS:

Veterinary Colleges in the United States
Choosing a college
Veterinary college rankings
Women in Veterinary Medicine
History of Veterinary Medicine

TOPIC:

Colleges of Veterinary Medicine in the US

LEADING QUESTION:

How do you choose the right veterinary college for you?

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.