

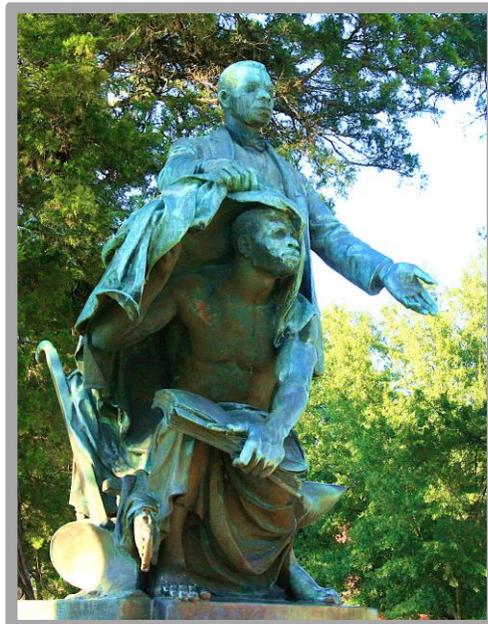
## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Five Tuskegee University Veterinary Graduates from the 1970s Became Deans

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
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Patterns of leadership in veterinary medicine fascinate me. Why, for example, are there so many foreign-educated veterinary deans and department chairs in our country's veterinary colleges?<sup>1,2</sup> Why are there so few women deans?<sup>3</sup>

Now, a question that I've also pondered for some time: why have so many Tuskegee graduates from the 1970s attained dean positions? There have been fewer than 100 permanent dean appointments in the AAVMC-member United States veterinary colleges in the last three decades, yet five who graduated during the 1970s are Tuskegee graduates. All are African-Americans.



*Booker T. Washington Statue at Tuskegee University*  
(Photo by the author, 2012)

During African American History Month in February, I shall share with readers some of the responses I received from these deans about what inspired them to such distinction.

But first, who are these five leaders?

**Alfonza Atkinson** served as the fifth veterinary dean at Tuskegee University from 1999 until his untimely passing in 2004. Also an undergraduate at Tuskegee, Atkinson received his DVM in 1973. He was subsequently awarded a MPH (1988) and a PhD from the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Environmental Health Science-Environmental Toxicology Program (1995). Atkinson was a commissioned veterinarian at the Birmingham (Alabama) Racing Commission, and also a supervisory veterinary medical officer in the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service in Tallahassee, Florida. He returned to Tuskegee as a member of the faculty in the departments of Microbiology and Biomedical Sciences. He was associate dean for administration and interim dean before being appointed dean of the college.

**Michael Blackwell**, the son of a graduate of Tuskegee's second DVM class, was appointed dean at the University of Tennessee in 2000. Dr. Blackwell operated a private veterinary practice following graduation in 1975. He then entered public service, working for the FDA for 20 years in both human and veterinary branches, and rising to the position of deputy director of the Center for Veterinary Medicine. In 1994 he transitioned to the US Public Health Service where he was chief veterinarian for the United States. Moving to the Department of Health and Human Services, he was chief of staff to the Office of the Surgeon General, and in 1997, he was promoted to the rank of Assistant Surgeon General (Rear Admiral) of the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service. From there, he moved to Knoxville and served as dean for eight years. Dr. Blackwell, who also holds the MPH degree, is now Senior Director of Veterinary Policy for the Humane Society of the United States.

**Phillip Nelson** received his undergraduate degree from Jackson State University where his father, a Tuskegee graduate with a degree in Food Service Administration, was Assistant Vice President for Business Affairs. After earning his DVM from Tuskegee in 1979, he developed his clinical skills in internal medicine at Mississippi State University, and later pursued a PhD in immunology and biotechnology at North Carolina State University. His research activities primarily focused on feline infections as biological models for human HIV, and the development of lymphocytic immunity in the dog and cat. Dr. Nelson returned to Tuskegee as head of the Department of Small Animal Medicine and Surgery, then in 1994 moved back to Mississippi State as associate dean, a position he held for over a decade. He then moved to Western University of the Health Sciences in Pomona, California and became Executive Associate Dean of the Pre-clinical Curriculum. Two years later, in 2007, he succeeded Dr. Shirley Johnston as the second dean of the college. Dean Nelson serves on various committees of the AVMA and AAVMC, with a special interest in diversity issues as they relate to the veterinary profession.

A board-certified radiologist, **Ruby Perry** is interim dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health Sciences at Tuskegee University. She is the first female African American veterinary dean in the United States. Dr. Perry had previously served as associate dean for academic affairs since 2007. After undergraduate studies at Belhaven College and Jackson State University, Dr. Perry received her BS and DVM from Tuskegee in 1976 and 1977, respectively. She initially pursued a clinical career, completing the veterinary radiology residency at Michigan State University and an MS degree (Microbiology). Dr. Perry's administrative experience includes section chief of veterinary radiology in the College of

Veterinary Medicine at Michigan State University, acting chair of the department of small animal medicine, surgery and radiology at Tuskegee University, interim chief of staff in the office of the president at Tuskegee University. A decorated teacher and mentor, she has been recognized for her leadership in professional and community service. She is a former president of the Tuskegee Veterinary Medical Association.

**Willie Reed** graduated from Tuskegee in 1978, then attended Purdue where he earned a PhD in veterinary pathology. A diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Pathologists and charter diplomate of the American College of Poultry Veterinarians, Dr. Reed served for several years on the Purdue faculty in the avian diagnostic services assuming increasing administrative responsibilities, and was eventually recruited to Director of the Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory<sup>4</sup> at Michigan State University (1990). He was subsequently named Chair of the Department of Pathobiology and Diagnostic Investigation. Dr. Reed returned to Purdue in 2008 as dean, a position he currently holds. Reed has held several other major leadership positions in veterinary medicine, including President of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC), president of the American Association of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians (AAVLD), and chair of the AVMA's Council on Research. He was appointed as a member of the Board of Directors of Zoetis Inc. in 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. Foreign-Born Deans of Veterinary Medicine. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. December 5, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Donald F. Education of a Dean. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. July 7, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Donald F. and Julie Kumble. Mentoring as a Career Factor: Six US Women Veterinary Deans Reflect. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. September 12, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Now called the Diagnostic Center for Population and Animal Health.

#### KEYWORDS:

Alfonza Atkinson  
Willie Reed  
Phillip Nelson  
Ruby Perry  
Michael Blackwell  
African-American veterinarians  
Tuskegee University Dean

#### TOPICS:

African-American Veterinarians  
Diversity

#### LEADING QUESTION:

Which college has graduated the most veterinarians to serve as deans of US veterinary colleges in the last 30 years?

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**META-SUMMARY:**

Tuskegee graduated five veterinarians in a single decade (1970s) who have subsequently become deans of veterinary colleges.

**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.