

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Sheila W. Allen, University of Georgia: Veterinary Dean with a Passion for Education

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Dr. Sheila Allen never intended to become an academic veterinarian, let alone a dean. But somewhere in her early career at the University of Georgia, she “got the teaching bug” and eventually became the country’s second woman dean.



*Dr. Sheila Allen, Dean University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine
(@ University of Georgia, 2013)*

Liking science and wanting to become a veterinarian from her youth, Allen completed an undergraduate degree at Cornell, majoring in chemistry. Though she was admitted into Cornell’s veterinary program immediately following her Bachelor’s degree, she deferred for one

year and worked as an industrial engineer on Long Island in the manufacturing division of Clinique Labs, a division of Estee Lauder Cosmetics Company.

Dr. Allen was a member of Cornell's DVM Class of 1981, the first cohort to have 50% women.¹ Her interest in small animal medicine was honed by her selection as one of the small group of students who were invited to work in the clinics during the summers after her second and third years. "Working on the small animal treatment crew was a great opportunity to see a lot of cases and gain hands-on skills early in my veterinary education."²

Though most Cornell students interested in internships during that era aspired to a position at the Animal Medical Center in New York City or Angell Memorial Medical Center in Boston, Dr. Allen was influenced by two interns at Cornell, Drs. Nita Irby and Susan Fubini, both graduates of the University of Georgia.³ Through their encouragement and mentoring, she applied and was accepted for an internship at Georgia and has been in Athens ever since.

In a surprise departure from her original plans, Dr. Allen then migrated from internal medicine to surgery.⁴

I had originally thought that if I was going to continue on for a residency, it would be in internal medicine. However, I was very heavily influenced by two surgery residents who became mentors to me, Liz Hardie and Dale Bjorling,⁵ and by an outstanding senior surgeon, Clarence Rawlings.⁶ I just really enjoyed my interaction with students on the clinic floor.

Being bitten by the surgery bug and the teaching bug, and having developed an interest in oncology, I moved on to a surgery residency⁷ and simultaneously a master's degree in Clinical Pathology under Keith Prasse,⁸ then was fortunate enough to be offered a faculty position.

During her 11 years as a faculty member in the Department of Small Animal Medicine and Surgery, she served in various mid-level administrative positions such as intern coordinator. In addition to her department chair, Dr. Rawlings, she was greatly influenced by Dr. Jeanne Barsanti,⁹ who had entered the profession at a time when women were so strongly discriminated against that she applied to the small animal teaching crew at Cornell as J. Barsanti to disguise her gender. Her excellence in teaching and clinical research as a senior colleague to Allen at the University, and her leadership as department head at the University of Georgia was a great inspiration to Dr. Allen and one that she attributes to helping pave the way for her own ability to work in a more woman-friendly environment.¹⁰

Dr. Allen's first major move into senior administration came shortly after her former mentor, Keith Prasse, was appointed dean in 2007 and invited her to become Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. A significant component of her portfolio became curriculum reform and that

suiting Dr. Allen because of her love of instruction and her concern over the future of teaching and learning.¹¹ Towards the end of her eight-year appointment as associate dean, Dr. Prasse started to encourage her to apply for deanships when they became open across the country. Allen initially balked at the idea.¹²

At the time, my children were young and I was pretty engaged in my role as associate dean and aspiring to become a dean was not something I was thinking about at the time. But the more Keith talked about it and the more I observed the role of a dean, I could feel myself drawn to the possibility. Furthermore, I had always wanted to be more involved in veterinary education on a broader scale, not just at Georgia.

I remember one day making some comment to Keith about how few women leaders there were in our profession and he looked at me and said, "Well, when are you going to step up?" I took that as a step up or shut up mandate.

Dr. Allen did apply and interviewed for a couple of deanships about the time that Prasse retired, but rather than pursue an opportunity at another university, in March 2005 she accepted the appointment as interim dean during the interregnum period. "It turned out to be the longest job interview of my life," she said of the nine-month selection process that culminated in her appointment as dean in November.¹³

Now in her ninth year as dean, Dr. Allen is widely recognized as an accomplished veterinary college CEO, enhancing Georgia's national reputation as one of the outstanding colleges of veterinary medicine in the country, developing new research programs, especially in infectious diseases, and establishing dual degree programs for DVM/PhD and DVM/MPH students.

At the national level, Allen has vigorously supported the educational arm of the profession, the Association of American Veterinary Colleges (AAVMC), including serving on the Board of Directors in 2010-2012.

One of her most important national contributions was serving on the AVMA's Council on Education for the past six years, culminating in her chair appointment this past year. Andrew Maccabe, executive director of the AAVMC, lauds Dean Allen's adroit leadership during a time when the Council was buffeted by critics from within the veterinary community for the more insular accreditation policies that had been adopted in recent years. "I have enormous respect for Sheila," Maccabe said, "she kept the Council focused during a tumultuous year."¹⁴

Sheila Allen is the only Cornell veterinary graduate currently serving as dean of a veterinary college. Though only 32 years have passed since she received her DVM, she is already among the longest-serving deans in the country. I have known Sheila since her veterinary student days and, having followed her career with interest and admiration, will be interested to see how she

gilds the lily if and when she decides to move to another position following her very successful tenure as dean at Georgia.

¹ The Cornell Class of 1982 had just under 50% women, but all classes since then have had a majority women.

² Allen, Shelia (Dean, University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine), email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), 2013, July 29.

³ Drs. Nita L. Irby and Susan L. Fubini, both graduates of the University of Georgia, Class of 1980, are still at Cornell University. Dr. Irby is Senior Lecturer in Ophthalmology and Dr. Fubini is Professor of Surgery and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

⁴ Allen, Sheila, interview with Julie Kumble (Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts) and Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), 2013, Jul 18.

⁵ Drs. Lizette Hardie (DVM, Cornell 1979), currently Professor and Department Head, North Carolina State College of Veterinary Medicine; and Dale Bjorling, (DVM, Illinois 1976) currently professor of Surgery and Associate Dean for Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

⁶ Dr. Clarence A. Rawling (DVM, Illinois 1967), professor emeritus, University of Georgia.

⁷ Dr. Allen is a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Surgery (ACVS). She has served on the Board of Regents of the ACVS.

⁸ Dr. Keith Prasse (DVM, Iowa St, 1965), dean emeritus, University of Georgia.

⁹ Dr. Jeanne Barsanti (Cornell DVM 1974), professor emeritus, University of Georgia.

¹⁰ Allen, Sheila, (see ref 3 above), *Ibid.*

¹¹ Under Dr. Allen's leadership as associate dean, the curriculum was revised to allow more flexibility in content and instructional format allowing students to pursue areas of personal interest.

¹² Allen, Sheila, (see ref 3 above), *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Maccabe, Andrew (Executive Director of the Association for American Veterinary Medical Colleges), telephone conversation with Donald Smith (Cornell University), 2013, July 29.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
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Dr. Sheila W. Allen
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Dr. Keith W. Prasse
Dr. Clarence Rawlings
Dr. Andrew MacCabe
University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine

TOPICS:

Women in Veterinary Medicine

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.