

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

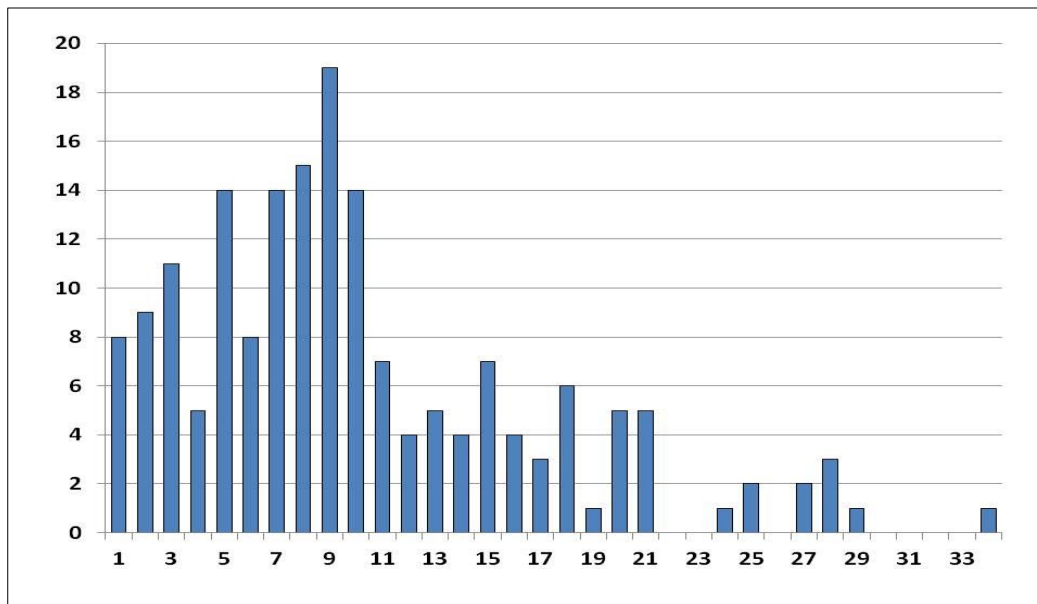
The Duration of Deans' Terms

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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When I was appointed as dean in 1997, a self-identified sage cornered me at a national veterinary meeting. With his strong residual British accent, hinting of instant credibility, he quietly informed me that the average dean now served fewer than four years. He didn't elaborate, but the implication seemed to be that I had better watch my back and refrain from disenfranchising faculty or alienating alumni or my term could also be truncated.

I kindly thanked the gentleman and went on my way. Later that evening, I did my own back-of-the-envelope calculation of deans' longevity at the time and arrived at about 3.8 years. I tucked that little fact into my mind and went on being dean, a story I shall share another time on this site.



Length of dean terms for AAVMC-member colleges (1880 – 2013). The number of deans for each term length is on the y-axis. Deans who served at more than one college are listed more than once, representing each term.

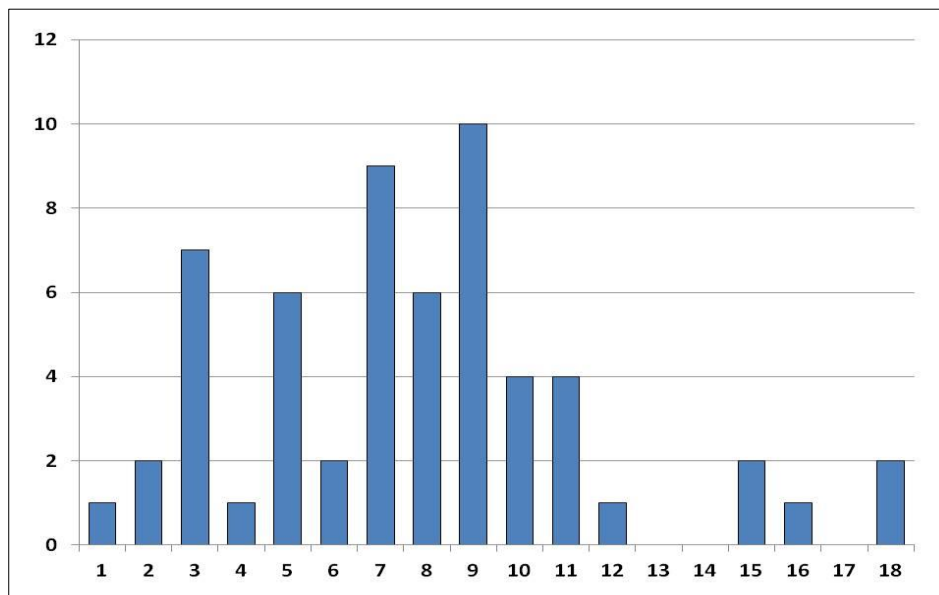
Data from annual AVMA Membership Directories and Resource Manuals (to 2007)¹

While the tenure of deans who were in place when I was appointed in mid-1997 may not have been overly long, in reality, almost half of the deanships in the country had turned over in the previous three years. So it was no wonder the rolling term average was modest.

However, the historical average tenure for dean appointments from 1880 to the present has been 10.1 years. These data do not include deans whose terms are still ongoing, but only those whose terms have been completed. The distribution of those terms is shown in the graph above.²

Terms for inaugural deans who are appointed to lead the establishment of new colleges tend to be the longest with a mean of 12.2 years.³ If one disregards the brief terms of the five inaugural deans who served fewer than four years, the mean is an impressive 14.5. Part of this longevity may relate to the startup period, which in some cases is a couple years or more, before the first class of students is admitted.

In more recent times, specifically the last three decades, the mean length of service is still substantial as shown in the following chart, with two recent deans (Peter Eyre, Virginia-Maryland and Daryl Buss, Wisconsin) each serving 18 years. Despite the increasing size and complexity of the job, most deans are still serving seven-to-ten years before turning over the reins to their successors. In many colleges, deans have terms of either four or five years, with the potential (even the expectation) that upon successful review, a second term would be offered.⁴ While some deans continue in office past 10 years, the majority feel they have fulfilled their mandate by that time and are ready to move on to other professional or personal opportunities.

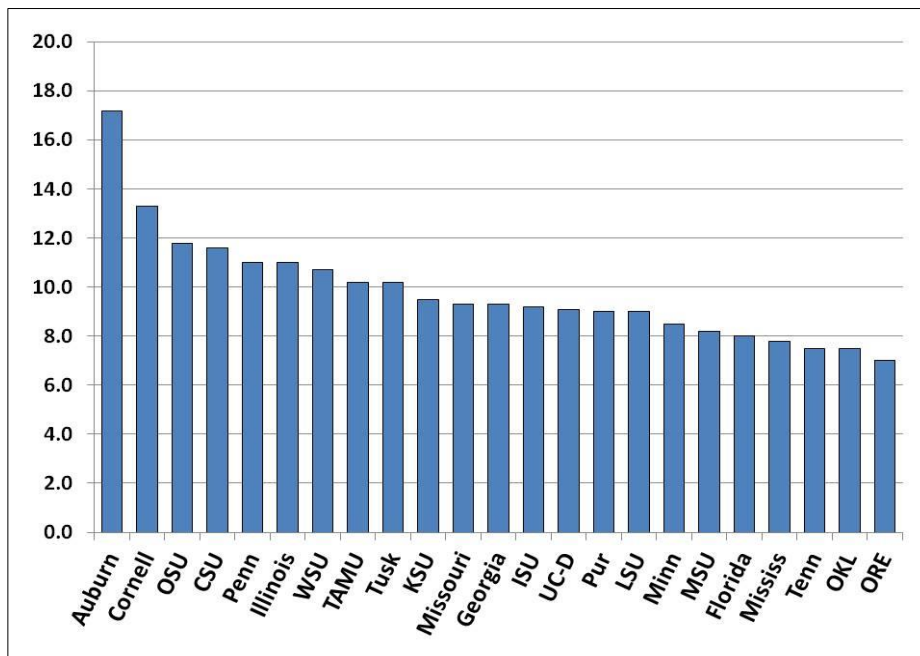


*Length of AAVMC-member dean terms for past three decades (1984 – 2013).
The number of deans for each term length is on the y-axis.
Deans who served at more than one college are listed more than once, representing each term.
Data from annual AVMA Membership Directories and Resource Manuals (to 2007)⁵*

Over the course of the history of our 29 colleges, eleven deans have served at more than one institution. The first to accomplish this was W. W. Armistead, who spent four years as dean at Texas A&M before moving to Michigan State where he was dean for another 17 years, through 1974. He then became the inaugural dean at the University of Tennessee, where he served from 1974-1977. This represents a total of 24 sequential years at three different colleges.

Ten others have served as dean at two colleges, and all but one (Glen Hoffsis)⁶ served sequential terms. Three of the six deans at the University of Florida had previously served as dean at other colleges.

With a couple of exceptions, duration of deans' terms is surprisingly consistent across institutions. For the 23 colleges that had at least four deans complete terms, the mean length of terms for each college is shown in the graph below.



Mean length of dean terms (y-axis) in years for colleges that have had at least four deans (x-axis). Deans who served at more than one college are listed more than once, representing each term.

Data from annual AVMA Membership Directories and Resource Manuals (to 2007)⁷

The longevity of Auburn's deans (average 17.2 years) is remarkable. Even the last incumbent, Tim Boosinger, completed 15 years in 2011 before ascending to the position of provost of the same university. Despite two of their nine deans serving fewer than two years (Pierre Fish died in 1931 during his second year of office and Franklin Loew resigned in

2007 after 16 months in the position), Cornell's deans have also averaged an impressive 13.3 years of service.

Life after deanship varies greatly. Some deans retire, but others move on to another administrative post (dean or occasionally university provost or president). Some take an executive position in the pharmaceutical or pet food industry, and many – I am among that number – return to a faculty appointment at their institution.

Regardless of what happens after serving as the senior executive at a veterinary college, new challenges and opportunities are available. Sometimes those years can be the most rewarding.

¹ AVMA Membership Directories and Resource Manuals were discontinued in 2007. For more recent data, the AVMA website ([Member Community and Networking](#)) was used.

² With the exception of the deans at Virginia-Maryland and Illinois who expected to finish their terms in 2013 and who have been included in these data, no other sitting dean is included in these data.

³ For the initial ten colleges that were established by 1916, the mean length of term was longer (18.4 years), with Kansas State's Dykstra serving 29 years. The inaugural deans at Auburn and Colorado State each served 28 years.

⁴ Some deans do not have term appointments, but are reappointed year-to-year.

⁵ See ref 2, above.

⁶ Dr. Glenn Hoffsis held a senior position with a major pet food company for two years after he left the OSU and before he was appointed dean at the University of Florida.

⁷ See ref 2, above.

KEYWORDS:

Veterinary Dean
History of Veterinary Medicine
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges

TOPIC:

Veterinary Colleges in the US (or whatever topic is closest)

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.