1-1-1991

The Applicants: Past, Present and Future

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The Applicants — Past, Present and Future

Fall 1960. His crew-cut head droops over the biochem text that rests on his chin. He's studying enzyme kinetics, but his attention wanders to the television screen, where John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon are debating in black and white.

This veterinary student is one of a class of 56 men and two women, the elite 30 percent chosen from the applicants.

Fall 1975. The freshman, one of 54 men and 44 women, faced roughly twelve-to-one competition for his spot, and this is the third time he applied. While waiting for admission, he earned a master's in biochemistry, with plans to enter veterinary school and watch Watergate criminals wave from prison. Margaret Thatcher takes over the British Conservative Party and the color red covers the screen in Jews.

Fall 1990. The typical student is a she, not a he. Murphy Brown is a role model and the TV debate is about colorizing Lassie. She is studying biochem, trying to decipher glycoconjugates, but since she majored in journalism, she wonders if she could have written the textbook better. She is one of 111 students representing 48 percent of the applicants.

Malcolm "Mac" Keiter, director of admissions at Penn's Veterinary School, says, "We seek candidates with a broad range of interests — yet still a deep interest in animals." Increasingly Keiter finds that some female exhibitors have interests and experiences than males. "For the most part the men are in their early 20s and are coming straight from undergraduate or graduate programs, while many of the women had another career before applying to veterinary school."

This year's class is 72 percent female, compared to 67 percent last year. "Women have been given the wrong information," Keiter says. "They have been told they can't get in, or they can't do the work if they do get in, so they don't even try."

An additional problem is the persisting belief of counselors that it is as difficult today to get into veterinary medicine, dental and optometry programs to women as it was 30 years ago. Medicine and veterinary medicine will play an important part in the future. Students are encouraged to seek specialties in other fields, notably business, law, computer sciences and engineering. "Fewer students are applying now," says Keiter, "but they still tend to have more education than before the boom, and they are more idealistic."

In the Class of 1994, more students (nine) graduated from Cornell University than anywhere else, followed by Pennsylvania State University, 109. In the Class of 1995, 15 of 107 students were equally likely from Albright and Ursinus Colleges and the Universities of Michigan and Pennsylvania. In all, these students represent 75 colleges and universities.

Not surprisingly, biology accounts for half the students' undergraduate majors, and animal science 13 percent. Except for the handful who majored in chemistry and zoology, students were equally likely to have focused on history as animal behavior. Students had no trouble catching on. Christine K. Smith, who majored in Russian language and literature, admits there's "no tie" between Slavic speech and Siberian huskies, but she wouldn't trade her liberal arts background. "I find it strange that students have earned graduate degrees: MA's, MS's, PhD's and one MBA. A singular factor links veterinary students across the decades. As Smith says, "I always loved animals — we all did. Veterinary medicine is a good career choice."

Keiter adds that modern veterinary medicine is a diversified profession with many options. A graduate can pursue companion animal or food animal medicine, work with aquatic animals, horses, zoo animals, wildlife, laboratory animals or have a career in biomedical research or regulatory medicine.

"And this diversity will make the profession even more attractive to the young people now in high schools and universities. Many of them have a great interest in how we can improve life on the planet, how we can save vanishing species and how we can help people and animals and ensure a better life. Veterinary medicine will play an important part in this and I am optimistic that our application rate will remain steady or even increase, even though the number of high school or university graduates will decrease in the coming years. We will see a larger number of applicants who want to take up veterinary medicine as a second career, not just women but also men. As more veterinarians retire and as competition from other fields, the profession will become increasingly more attractive to those who have always wanted to work with animals."

Susan Perloff

Starting Salaries

The School conducted a survey of recent graduates. Among the questions was one about starting salaries. Here are the figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small Animal Practitioners</th>
<th>Equine Practitioners</th>
<th>Food Animal Practitioners</th>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>$24,500</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>$27,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$28,000</td>
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The AVMA nationwide average figures for 1990 are:

Small Animal Practitioners: $36,000
Equine Practitioners: $40,000
Food Animal Practitioners: $30,000

It is advised that in most practices raises will be granted after six and 12 months of employment. In many cases these raises are substantial.

Student Life

The life of a veterinary student is stressful, new courses every eight weeks, exams, laboratories, city environment, and the hustle of coping with daily life.

To ease the burden a bit, a number of people are available. There is the student's Veterinary School. The Office of Student Affairs, staffed by three, counsels, acts as a liaison between faculty and administrators and students, listens to suggestions by students and implements new student-supportive programs. It assists with the management of the student-run bookstore, meetings between students and the administration, and the Student Government Dinner Dance. This office also organizes the annual career seminar and commencement, and keeps a job book where graduating class members can locate job openings.

A financial counselor/attorney is retained to advise graduating seniors during employment contract negotiations.

The admissions coordinator is available to assist with scheduling of courses, arranging of elective courses at other institutions, and scheduling clinic rotations. To reduce student stress, exam schedules are now staggered. In its second year, this has proven to be a successful approach as the number of re-exams has declined drastically.

The debt load is a worrisome problem to many students. A financial aid administrator is available to help students cope with the avalanche of forms, to assist in developing a financial aid package strategy and to monitor the debt load and work out a repayment schedule. Loans and scholarships are administered by this office. The School is actively soliciting endowment for scholarship funds, so far 14 dean's scholars are funded for partial tuition.

Communications between students, faculty and administration are important. A faculty student mentor program is in place and the dean has regularly scheduled "drop-in" hours for students.

Students learn about these services first during orientation. On the recommendation of the strategic planning committee on student life, orientation this year was changed from a two-day impersonal marathon of lectures on school policies to a small seminar format which allowed the new students to meet faculty, staff and upperclass student on a more informal basis. Alumni too became involved in a three-day effort. And to let the students "meet" the city, sightseeing trips via trolley, subway and bus were arranged.

Winter/Spring 1991