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The Applicants: Past, Present and Future

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Fall 1960. His crew-cut head droops over the biochem text that rests on his chinos. 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, which he now coasts through. He has time to watch Watergate criminals wave from prison. Margaret Thatcher takes over the British Conservative Party and the color red covers the screen in *Jaws*.

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 gluconeogenesis, but since she majored in journalism, she wonders if she could have written the textbook better. She is one of 111 students, representing 20 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 applicants may exhibit wider 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 into vet school, 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 school as it was 10 to 15 years ago, and the lack of communication between veterinary schools and counselors has not helped matters."

Then what makes them apply, finally? "They go into another field—say, finance—but they hear the opportunities for women are opening up, or they can't shake the wish to try veterinary school. They still have a nagging desire to work with animals."

Take Ann MacCormack-Byrd, 28, a first-year student, for instance. A political science major at Smith College, she thought human medicine looked promising. But after working summers in hospitals, she switched to international banking, which also didn't fit.

"I kept trying to figure out why I wasn't happy, why I wasn't doing what I really wanted to do, even though I didn't know what that was," says MacCormack-Byrd. "I kept coming back to medicine, thinking maybe there was another way to put it together. I got a lot of advice about careers. There was a split between the people who supported a change and the people who said you shouldn't change out of what you have done, you should use your first master's and not switch to something entirely different."

Long a pet owner and the neighborhood caretaker for animals, MacCormack-Byrd wanted to test the hypothesis that veterinary medicine might be her calling. She worked evenings and weekends in an animal hospital. "If I was going to try a second career, I wanted to be sure," she says. Eventually she left banking and spent a year taking additional courses and working at an animal hospital and the Northeast Aquarium in Boston.

The competition for a spot at Penn's Veterinary School is tough, fiercer in some categories than others. Of 550 applicants in 1990, 111, or roughly one out of five, matriculated. At least 62 to 64

members of each class are Pennsylvania residents. Since Commonwealth residents comprise only a fourth of the applicants, their competition is relatively less stringent. Over half of all Pennsylvania applicants are offered admission. As the Pennsylvania number has decreased, the number of those outside the state has increased, and a more diverse class has evolved.

The scope of the competition has changed dramatically since the class that entered in 1960, the earliest year for which records are readily available. On the admissions graph, the line indicating matriculants creeps up from 55 in 1960 to 110 in 1978, then essentially flatlines. From 1960 through 1966, the line showing applications rises gradually. As the Sixties end, the line becomes steep: From an average of 200 to 350 hopefuls, the number shoots up to 850 in 1972 and off-the-chart at 1,250 in '75. Applications plummeted to around 500 by the end of the decade. Matriculants remain essentially constant, at 109.

Mac Keiter attributes the rapid mid-70s rise to the Baby Boom and to the crunch of men applying to veterinary, medical, dental and optometry programs to avoid Viet Nam. Often, he says, students had to apply several times before getting accepted, some collecting multiple degrees while waiting for space.

Since 1979 the applicant pool has declined because of a decreasing eligible population and competition from 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 (six), and three each 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—in fact they came from 25 majors. 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. Fourteen freshmen have earned graduate degrees: MA's, MS's, PhD's and one MBA. A single 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 also see a larger number of applicants who want to take up veterinary medicine as a second career, not just women but also men. And as earnings of veterinarians catch up with other fields, the profession will become increasingly more attractive to those who have always wanted to work with animals."

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Starting Salaries

The School conducted a survey of recent graduates (V'88, V'89, V'90). Among the questions was one about starting salaries. Here are the figures:

	Small Animal Practitioners	Equine Practitioners	Food Animal Practitioners
1988	\$24,500	\$22,000	\$20,000
1989	\$27,000	\$24,000	\$25,000
1990	\$30,000	\$24,000	\$28,000

The AVMA nationwide average figures for 1990 are:
 Small animal practitioners \$26,800
 Equine Practitioners \$26,000
 Food Animal Practitioners \$27,000

It should be kept in mind 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 to students here at Penn'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.

A full-time curriculum 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 very 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 this three-day effort. And to let the students "meet" the city, sightseeing trips via trolley, subway and bus were arranged.