

So you want to be a Veterinarian

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The strong pull of the human-animal bond makes many people consider a career in veterinary medicine. I am often asked about the steps involved in becoming a veterinarian and what additional tasks are involved in becoming a veterinary specialist. I would like to provide a little information to those considering veterinary medicine as a career.

In this country, a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree (DVM or VMD) requires at least four years of study at a veterinary school accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Anyone considering a career as a veterinarian should have an aptitude for science and math, a love and compassion for animals, excellent social skills, and the stamina to survive the demanding educational requirements and the rigors of practice. Once you obtain your doctorate, you can choose to practice clinical medicine (after successfully passing the national board exam and your individual state board exams) or to pursue any number of other career paths that will be available to you, including the option of engaging in further education to obtain a specialty certification.

Education

Due to a large number of factors, veterinary school admissions are quite complex and highly competitive. It can actually be more difficult to be accepted into veterinary school than to be accepted into medical school.

Each school has specific scientific course requirements that must be completed prior to applying for admission. Few schools actually require a Bachelors degree, but it is highly unusual to be granted admission without it. Most candidates have at least a Bachelors degree and some have Masters or PhDs as well. The majority of candidates are science majors however, this is not a requirement. To be a competitive candidate you will need to present a GPA for your course work of at least 3.5. In addition, most schools require that your Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores also be submitted with the application. Scores of 600+ on the verbal portion and 700+ on the quantitative portion will make you an attractive candidate. Each fully qualified applicant in this country has only a 1:10 chance of acceptance and it is not unusual to have to apply several times before you are granted admission.

State Residency

Your state of residence is an important factor in determining which schools you should seek admission to and what your actual chances of admission are. Most veterinary schools will reserve a large number of their available seats to be filled by residents of the state the school is located in. Then they will set aside a specific number of seats to be filled by applicants from states that have a formal agreement with the vet school to partially subsidize tuition. Finally, the small number of seats that remain may be filled from the pool of other candidates.

The State of New Jersey does not have its own School of Veterinary Medicine. All NJ residents must attend an out of state school. Due to budget cuts in 2007, four of the seven participating contract schools have dropped out of the NJ Veterinary Medical Education Contract Program (NJVMC), which resulted in a decrease of available contract seats for NJ residents from 24-25 per year in

previous years down to 8 seats per year in 2008. The three contract schools that remain in the program at this time are Tuskegee University, Oklahoma State University and Tufts University. Any NJ resident that would like to apply for admission to any other veterinary school will enter the nationwide pool of “non-resident & non-contract” applicants which will make admission much more challenging. It has been calculated that a fully qualified NJ resident only has a 1-in-30 chance of being admitted to veterinary school.

Gaining Experience

It is important that applicants to a veterinary school understand the scope of practice and the rigors of a career in veterinary medicine. Volunteering or working in a veterinary clinic will help you realize there is more to veterinary medicine than just cute and cuddly animals. In addition, veterinary schools are interested in candidates who are experienced with, comfortable with and effective in handling animals of various types. The type of practice you spend time in depends on your area of interest. If you are small-animal oriented, then you should work in a small-animal setting. If it is large animals you're interested in, then your choice should be a large-animal practice. If you are curious, then try both or volunteer at a zoo or a wildlife rescue organization. If research is of interest to you, then get involved in a research project at your college or university. Do understand however, that gaining experience in all of these areas will make you a more attractive candidate to an admissions board. The bottom line is that they want to know how you have translated your love of animals into action in your academic, employment/volunteer, and personal life. A minimum of 500-600 hours of involvement is recommended.

Application Process

Application for acceptance to most veterinary schools is accomplished using the Veterinary Medical College Application Service (VMCAS) application available through the Association of American Veterinary Colleges (AAVMC) in Washington, DC. Find them by phone at 202-842-0773 or through the AAVMC web site at aavmc.org. This web site provides links for each of the individual veterinary schools web sites, provides applicant and student admission data for the past 5 years, outlines applicant responsibilities and provides access to individual PDF files for the requirements for each of the veterinary schools. This address will also give you access to the electronic application. There is no paper VMCAS application. Be aware that some schools do require a second school-specific application in addition to the VMCAS. There are also three US veterinary schools and a number of foreign schools that do not use the VMCAS application process.

In addition to the basic application the following items are required:

- College transcripts
- Information about professional and volunteer experience
- Information about extracurricular activities
- A personal statement
- Letters of reference
- Standardized test scores (Usually GRE)

Once the admission committee reviews the completed applications they will usually invite the strongest applicants to a personal interview. The final class members are selected from this pool and this is normally the final step in the selection process.

Veterinary School Class Size and Tuition Considerations

The class size for each year will range from 86 to 145 students depending on the school. Tuition (not including fees, supplies, equipment, or room and board) can range from \$ 12,250 – \$ 33,712 per year for in-state or contract-state students to \$ 36,890 - \$ 53,585 per year for out-of-state or non-contract state students.

The average veterinary student graduating with a DVM or VMD degree will be facing a debt load of \$ 120,000 but, for some individuals, it may well exceed \$ 200,000 and that does not include any debt incurred from obtaining their undergraduate degree. In addition, if you choose to pursue an internship or a residency, the minimal stipend salary you receive (which is unlikely to cover your living expenses) will also contribute to the final total debt load.

Although these debt loads are equivalent to those graduating from medical school programs, the starting salary of a veterinarian can be expected to be much lower than that of a family physician, dentist or even an optometrist.

Licensing Requirements

In order to practice after graduating and receiving your DVM or VMD degree, each veterinarian must pass the national board exams and then a state board exam for the state they want to practice in. Each state has its own individual requirements, but some states do have reciprocal agreements. Foreign veterinary school graduates have a more extensive testing program that they must complete prior to being eligible to sit for the national and state boards.

Internships

More new graduates are opting to spend their first year practicing in an internship training program than ever before. In the past, internships were simply a pre-requisite for advanced training leading to a residency and specialty certification. Today, however, many new graduates are using the internship experience to hone their skills prior to entering private practice so that they can provide better service to their patients and clients.

Board Certified Specialists

Over the last 25 years, veterinary medicine has changed dramatically. There is so much new information and so many new treatments available that it makes it very difficult for a general veterinary practice to provide this wide a range of services. To address this need, veterinary specialty organizations have been formed. There are currently 20 different specialty boards with a total, at the end of 2008, of 9,305 active board-certified diplomats. When you consider that there are approximately 85,000 veterinarians in this country it becomes obvious that this is quite a distinguished pool of individuals.

Some specialty boards are quite small – there are only 45 diplomates in the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists – and some are comparatively quite large - 1,894 diplomats in the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine. Internal Medicine includes the sub-specialties of Cardiology, Small Animal Internal Medicine, Large Animal Internal Medicine, Neurology and Oncology.

In order for a veterinarian to become a board-certified specialist he or she, after obtaining their DVM or VMD degree, will be required to go through one or two year-long internship programs. Then they go through a very competitive application and interview process. If they are fortunate enough to gain admission to a program, they must then complete an exhaustive 2 to 4 year residency training program (depending on the specialty). After successfully completing their training, they must then sit for a rigorous and comprehensive exam prior to being given board-certified status. No veterinarian can ever properly call themselves a “specialist” if they have not completed all of these steps. A true board-certified specialist will use the term Diplomat (or the abbreviation Dip.) followed by the indication of their specialty organization after their name.

The presence of these specialists allows general family veterinary practices to concentrate on preventive medicine and routine care. When a serious problem occurs that goes beyond the scope of knowledge or training of the family veterinarian, they now have the option to refer the client and patient to a specialist to allow them access to the best advice, treatment and related equipment available today.

Career Options

About three out of every four veterinarians work in a solo or group private practice setting either as generalists or specialists. Their patient pool may include small animals only (cats and dogs with or without exotics), cats only, birds only, exotics only, mixed small and large animal practice, mixed large animal practice, race horses only (with a focus on a particular type of race horse possible), horses in general, cows only (either beef or dairy or both), pigs only, sheep and goats only, or chickens only. In addition to private practice there is a wide range of other choices available including: Teaching, Biomedical research, Pathobiology/Pathology, Aquatic Medicine, US Health and Human Services Dept. positions, Wildlife Conservation, Environmental Protection, USDA Food Safety Inspection Service, Federal Drug Administration positions, State Departments of Agriculture, Military Service, and even positions in NASA. Some people even combine their DVM/VMD degree with other degrees to open up specific and unique positions for themselves. Some commonly combined degrees include PhD, MD, MBA and law degrees.

**** Bonus Fact – What is the difference between a DVM and VMD?**

This is the same degree but most schools present the degree in English, “Doctor of Veterinary Medicine” whereas one school, the University of Pennsylvania presents their degree in Latin, “Veterinariae Medicinae Doctoris”. Established in the 1800s, the veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania is one of the oldest in the country. It was a direct outgrowth of the University’s School of Medicine and they choose to maintain the degree in Latin to honor those roots.

Like medical doctors, veterinarians have an oath administered at their graduation and it is as follows:

Veterinarian's oath:

Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.

I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.

I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.