



University of Missouri

College of Veterinary Medicine

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NEWS & EVENTS

Educating the Next Generation of Veterinarians at MU

At the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine (CVM) commencement this past May, alumnus Dr. James Gilkerson, CVM '74, addressed the graduating class. He spoke eloquently of his journey from owning a mixed animal practice in a small community in rural Missouri to a career in research and development designing cardiac devices that extend and improve people's lives. Among his most telling remarks, "The things you learned in veterinary school didn't exist when I was in veterinary school."

Since its beginnings, the veterinary profession has been in continuous transition as our understanding of and relationships with animals have evolved. This remains no less true today. As Dr. Gilkerson pointed out in his address, the rapid change and evolution of our profession brings with it a challenge: Will we determine our future place in society or will we respond reactively, and thus allow our role to be determined for us? If we choose the latter, our profession will surely contract and become less relevant to societal needs.

There has been much discussion surrounding the recently released National Research Council (NRC) for the National Academy of Sciences study, "Workforce Needs in Veterinary Medicine," (<http://dels.nas.edu/Report/Workforce-Needs-Veterinary-Medicine/13413>). The NRC report points to a number of uncertainties, including those for practices involving companion animal care, due to the continuing economic recession accompanied by a lack of documented evidence that there is a widespread shortage of veterinarians. Importantly, the report affirms the College leadership's position that rather than an excess of DVMs, there exists a maldistribution within the profession. The report notes that the original objective in establishing veterinary schools at land grant colleges, such as the University of Missouri, was to support agriculture and food animal medicine. The MU CVM Mission Statement (below) encompasses this historic purpose and addresses the complexities of meeting current and future requirements of developing a workforce trained to meet society's needs:

"We are Missouri's only College of Veterinary Medicine. Our mission is to educate and train outstanding clinicians and scientists, generate new knowledge, and foster economic growth, all of which promote and protect the health and welfare of animals and people. We are guided by a One Health/One Medicine philosophy, strengthened by campus wide collaborations with human medicine, animal and life sciences, agriculture, engineering, and the other health professions."

The NRC report emphasizes the critical distinction between workplace shortages and unmet societal needs. Indeed, societal needs for veterinary expertise are substantial and growing and the potential contributions of veterinary medicine have not yet been realized. "The veterinary workforce of today may bear little resemblance to the one 10 to 15 years from now," according to Dr. Andrew Maccabe, executive director of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. "As the population increases and veterinary medicine evolves, we expect that veterinarians will fill more roles in a broad range of careers not typically linked in the public's mind with veterinary medicine ..." It is clear that long-term planning for the future of the profession requires decades of effort, and that we look beyond immediate economic scenarios and short-term needs. At MU, we are very well positioned to educate the next generation of

veterinarians who will serve all the needs of our diverse profession including the One Health/ One Medicine initiative. In fact, even in the face of a sluggish economy, unemployment and the struggle to start careers seen by graduates in numerous other fields, the CVM prides itself on a 100 percent job placement rate for all of our graduates.

Nearly four years ago the CVM increased the number of students admitted. The decision to increase the class size was made after a great deal of reflection based upon available data of anticipated societal needs, our graduates' employment rates, our ability to adapt our curriculum to ensure that our students' education would remain top-quality, and finally the projected impact on the college if we failed to take this step. We currently admit 60 Missouri residents and 60 non-resident students into each class. We are, of course, accountable to the state we serve, our graduating students and certainly our alumni. In order to assuage concerns that the companion animal market in Missouri was becoming oversupplied and that increasing the class size would aggravate that potential issue, we drew the additional students we admitted from the pool of out-of-state applicants. As there are only 28 schools and colleges in the United States conferring the DVM degree, there are many students who lack the opportunity to seek their professional veterinary education within the borders of their home states. However, through their intellect, motivation and willingness to sacrifice, they have proven time and again to be exemplary students and future leaders in our profession. Upon graduation, we expect that nearly all of the out-of-state students will leave Missouri to begin their careers.

Despite our success in placing our graduates, we have long recognized that increased emphasis must be placed on sectors of the profession outside of companion animal medicine. Accordingly, we adjusted our admissions standards to award credit to aspiring veterinary students for experience in public health and research. We also modified our curriculum to accommodate the opportunities in veterinary sectors outside of companion animal medicine. Assessment and evolution of our curriculum will continue as part of our strategic planning process and to allow us to improve quality of education and flexibility of training. Among our most dynamic and recent initiatives was the development of a program that allows students to pursue concurrently a DVM and a Master of Public Health degree. We currently have 12 students enrolled in the dual DVM/MPH program. In addition, our students have the capability to pursue graduate training in other areas.

The NRC report also addressed the importance of the veterinary profession investing in its future through biomedical research. We are proud of the CVM Veterinary Research Scholars Program (VRSP), which was established to encourage students to explore research projects while learning to appreciate the challenges, stimulation and career growth potential of the field. The program was established in 2005 and in its inaugural year had 10 students participating, each assigned to a faculty mentor. In 2012, the VRSP had its most successful year to date with 33 students engaged in scientific research under the mentorship of faculty. Our students also have the option to pursue research training by enrolling in other graduate programs while completing the DVM degree. For example, we currently have two students who are obtaining a master's degree in animal science concurrent with their DVM training. It is also of note that up to 30 percent of our graduates pursue post-doctoral training and up to 40 percent report entering sectors of veterinary medicine other than private practice immediately following graduation.

Decreasing state investment in education and increasing student debt are also threats to the veterinary profession. Indeed, during the past several decades declining state support has placed enormous financial constraints on the College. Since 2001, state appropriations to the University of Missouri have decreased 12 percent while total university enrollment increased 47 percent. Missouri is now 44th nationwide in spending on higher education. Sensitive to the increasingly disproportionate student debt burden in relation to average starting salaries for veterinarians, we have attempted to minimize tuition and fee increases. With in-state tuition and fees set at \$20,092 per year, and out-of-state tuition at \$49,398, MU remains an extraordinary value when compared to other DVM programs. We also offer one of the most accommodating policies to students attempting to qualify for in-state student status. The average debt load for all members of the MU CVM Class of 2012 was \$117,804. Compare that to a national average in 2011 of \$142,613, and our commitment to addressing the College's financial pressures without exacerbating the looming crisis of affordable education is clear. The College also employs a financial counselor who speaks with all of our veterinary students and offers advice on managing their financial affairs and debt reduction strategies, and makes sure they are provided with information on grant and loan opportunities.

Without an influx of additional tuition revenue, the CVM would have been placed in the

untenable position of being forced to cut faculty positions, halt research programs, discontinue utilizing the latest technologies, and scale back clinical, diagnostic and pathological services. Our ability to educate veterinarians, care for companion animals, secure the health of food animals, and fight diseases affecting both animals and humans would have been curtailed. Indeed, this very issue faced by veterinary schools and colleges is addressed in the NRC report:

“A major trend affecting veterinary academe is the precipitous decline in state support for faculty positions and tuition support, resulting in reduced hiring, layoffs, and the elimination of whole programs from veterinary schools. ... Colleges and schools of veterinary medicine face a precarious situation. They are in desperate need of trained graduates for faculty positions in structural biology, physiology, pharmacology, pathology, clinical pathology, infectious diseases of animals and zoonotic diseases, virology, microbiology, food safety, epidemiology, and nutrition. ... In the near future, the profession will experience major setbacks if veterinary schools lack a sufficient number of experts to serve as faculty. Unfortunately, the trends suggest that the academic veterinary community will not meet its own needs, let alone those of state diagnostic laboratories, federal research and regulatory agencies, or the pharmaceutical and biologics industry.”

To forestall this dire scenario, we became entrepreneurs. We opened a cancer treatment center proximate to our St. Louis clients to facilitate cancer treatment for their pets, and we improved our financial position through the sale of RADIL. Thus, increasing class size was one of several proactive steps we have taken to protect the future of Missouri's only College of Veterinary Medicine.

Moving forward, we recognize that we need to increase our efforts to attract students who are motivated to work in those sectors of the profession that the NRC has identified as being underserved — academia, food animal production and security, water safety and security, wildlife and ecosystem health, and zoonotic and bioterrorism threats — and we must further tailor our curriculum to meet the academic needs of these future scientists who will embark upon careers in an ever-expanding field of veterinary disciplines. To have responded to the complex needs of the global community with inaction was not a course we could in good conscience follow.

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