Food Animal Vet Training
Long journey from farm to classroom and back again

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“What? Are you telling me no one can come out to work on my cattle? Doc Smith always used to come out to our ranch!”

Have you ever found yourself saying these words and wondered why rural veterinarians are in short supply? How is this possible when young cattle producers are out there who want to become vets?

While producers reading this article have a good understanding of how to be successful at raising and marketing beef cattle, few are probably as familiar with the process of becoming a veterinarian from the time a pre-vet student drives off to college until the day you call upon him or her to help treat a sick animal or deal with a herd problem.

I hope this article will increase your awareness of issues facing students as well as their food animal instructors at the University of California, Davis, (UC Davis) School of Veterinary Medicine (SVM).

To be accepted into vet school at UC Davis, a student must successfully navigate a rigorous evaluation process that takes into account academic and non-academic achievements/attributes. The academic factors account for 50 to 60 percent of the decision to accept an applicant.

Another 40 to 50 percent of the selection decision is based on veterinary experience and an applicant’s understanding of the veterinary profession, motivation and dedication to a career in veterinary medicine, educational quality, potential to become an outstanding veterinary professional, maturity, extracurricular activities and leadership.

To evaluate these areas, an admissions committee looks at the personal statement, veterinary/animal experience, letters of evaluation and performance in an interview.

Overall, the most critically important part of a student’s application is his/her academic achievement as assessed by overall undergraduate/graduate grade point average (GPA); the last 45 semester units GPA; and the required science course GPA. In addition, a student’s performance on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is really important because it correlates with how well a student will survive academically in vet school.

In reviewing how application points are distributed, you can see that a major part of the decision to accept an applicant into the DVM program is based on academic performance. The bottom line is that prospective students must earn high grades and perform well on the GRE exam.

You are probably asking: “What about animal experience? Isn’t this important?” Absolutely!

Admitted students average around 2,500 to 3,000 hours of quality “hands-on” animal experience from growing up on ranches or farms, from jobs or volunteer service and from working directly with private practitioners. Prospective students should get as much veterinary experience as possible, especially in the area of veterinary medicine that interests them the most.

A personal statement should indicate a student’s motivation and dedication to becoming a veterinarian, an understanding of the veterinary profession and of a veterinarian’s responsibilities, and a demonstration of his/her interest in serving society through this profession.

During an interview, a food animal oriented student should be able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the profession and be able to answer the question: “What is a day in the life of a food animal or cattle vet like?”
Prospective students should seek individuals to write evaluation letters who have had good opportunities to observe them in practice settings. It is important to stress, however, that no amount of hands-on experience can outweigh poor academic performance.

For more information, interested applicants can visit the SVM Web site, www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu.

How can you help train future food animal vets? Become involved mentors for students you know who are serious about becoming veterinarians by taking an active role in their education. Don't be afraid to ask to see transcripts/GPA and ask about their GRE preparation. In doing so, you can encourage them to do better in areas where they may be falling short.

Getting into vet school is a big step; however, the hard work doesn’t stop there. During the first two years of the four-year training program, students receive broad-based training in basic science subjects common to all areas of practice including anatomy, physiology, pathology, neurology, radiology, hematology, microbiology and parasitology.

Towards the end of the second year and during the third year, students specifically focus on species types they intend to work with after graduation. Students interested in food animal practice must take a three-quarter course that covers diseases of all body systems of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs.

In addition, these students must take upper level courses in food animal surgery, reproduction and obstetrics, cattle, sheep, goat and swine herd health and dairy production medicine.

During the fourth year students rotate on various clinical services, both required and elective, depending on a student's interests. Food animal students must rotate on three clinical services that comprise the food animal training program at UC Davis. Two of the services –Livestock Hospital Service (also known as “C”-Barn) and Field Service – are based at the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital (VMTH) in Davis; the third service, Dairy Production Medicine, is based at the Veterinary Medical Teaching and Research Center in Tulare.

While rotating on the three food animal services, students work alongside food animal clinicians and residents (veterinarians receiving advanced post-graduate training). Students with a food animal focus first rotate on the Livestock Hospital Service (“C”-Barn).

Here they gain practical hands-on experience in medicine and surgery of client-owned cows, sheep, goats and pigs. Students learn how to perform routine procedures, such as castrations, dehorning, hoof trimming, obstetrics and surgeries, such as displaced abomasum surgeries and caesarian sections.

Students are taught fundamental principles of physical diagnosis and medical management that provide the solid foundation upon which success in designing and implementing herd health programs depends.

Next, students rotate on the Livestock Field Service rotation to learn more about herd/flock reproduction, bull management and reproduction, milk quality, infectious disease prevention and control, calving/lambing/kidding management, calf/lamb/kid health, nutrition and other health-related issues while working on dairy, beef, goat and sheep production units.

Finally, food animal students rotate on the Dairy Production Medicine Service that provides opportunities for herd health work on large sized dairies typical of California’s Central Valley. In addition to these rotations, food animal students must also work with private practice vets. Combined, all of these clinical experiences give our food animal students a well-rounded education that helps them to become competent veterinarians when they graduate.

The training that food animal students receive on the three clinical services is highly complementary and not at all redundant; in fact, it helps reinforce important concepts of food animal practice in various settings. Unfortunately, drastic cuts in state support to the VMTH and the vet school overall have created a need to review the merits of the three food animal clinical services and of the role each plays in educating our students to become exceptional practitioners who can offer high quality services to livestock producers in the future.

Fortunately, at a Feb. 26 meeting, our food animal stakeholders, including the California Cattlemen’s Association, spoke up in strong support for the training provided by the VMTH Livestock Hospital and Field Services.

Nevertheless, the viability of our food animal training program is still under threat as a result of the combined fiscal impacts of declining state support and the reduction in caseload we have experienced as a result of the regional and global economic downturn. Therefore, we still need your support to keep this service available.

During the February meeting, our stakeholders asked how they can help. There are, in fact, many ways to help. We need your help to inform our state legislature that it must support veterinary education and food animal veterinary training.

We also invite any producers to consider utilizing the clinical services we offer through “C”-Barn and Field Services. In doing so, you will help provide the case-based practical hands-on training opportunities our students need to become top-notch food animal practitioners who will serve the needs of the livestock industry in the future.

Contact the Large Animal Clinic at (530) 752-0290 for the Livestock Hospital Service, or (530) 752-0292 for the Livestock Field Service. Visit our Web site at http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/large_animal/default.cfm.

We also invite your opinions on what we can do to better serve you. Send your ideas in writing to VMTH Director, University of California, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616.

Training future food animal veterinarians requires the combined efforts and resources of local producers, local practitioners and state supported clinical teaching services; we all need to stay actively engaged in this effort.

Together, we can support and maintain a strong training program for food animal vets in order for them to remain available when you and your livestock need assistance.