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Becoming a Veterinarian: What Students Really Need to Know

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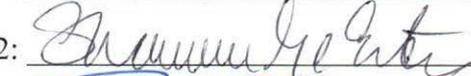
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Becoming a Veterinarian: What Students Really Need to Know

Abstract

Teachers and professors face the challenge of preparing high school and college students for their future career plans; they have the potential to be very influential figures in a student's decisions. While some students know what profession they want to pursue, other students may be undecided during high school, or even after entering college. Students who are unsure about their future career path can benefit from activities like the one included in this paper. This paper is focused on the veterinary field; teachers and professors can use the information provided to teach students about various aspects of veterinary medicine, such as getting into vet school, what a career in veterinary medicine entails, and the different opportunities in veterinary medicine. Many students interested in veterinary medicine don't know any specific details about the field before deciding that they want to become a vet, so this information can be very beneficial to potential veterinary students. At the end of the paper, I have included an interactive activity sheet where students may use smartphones and computers to answer some common questions about different aspects of the veterinary field. After having a class discussion about the information provided in the paper and completing the interactive activity, students will have a more realistic idea about the process of becoming a veterinarian.

Introduction

There are countless opportunities for a career in biology, yet many students think that the only options for a biology career are becoming a doctor, a veterinarian, or a teacher.

There are so many alternatives to these three stereotypical careers, and it is important that students are aware of all of the possibilities before deciding what they are going to pursue. Career choices can be influenced by intrinsic factors, like intellectual interest, as well as extrinsic factors, such as salary expectation and the availability of jobs (Dick & Rallis, 1991). An important part of choosing a career is knowing what that career entails before pursuing it. For example, becoming a veterinarian is a dream job for many children growing up. There is a lot of interest in the younger years, but this interest declines as students grow up and learn what becoming a vet really involves (Robinson et al., 2007).

Although many students think that they know what becoming a vet involves, there remains an overall lack of knowledge about the veterinary field (Robinson et al., 2007). Many students' perceptions about the veterinary field consists of them knowing that it requires a lot of schooling which will be costly, but will pay off in the long run because of high salaries in the profession. This perception is not sufficient knowledge of the profession; a student wanting to pursue a career in veterinary medicine needs to know its ins and outs before making informed career choices. Teachers and professors can aid students in acquiring this knowledge by having a class discussion about the information in this paper, as well as having them complete the interactive activity attached.

Influences on Pursuing a Career in Veterinary Medicine

If you ask a student why he or she is interested in becoming a vet, he or she will most likely respond with an answer along the lines of "because I love animals," "because I am

interested in learning about animals,” or “because I am concerned about animals’ health.” These are all very generic answers, but are commonly given because students generally have the same influences that have made them decide they are interested in being a vet (Ilgen et al.,2003). People’s professional aspirations and employment preferences are greatly impacted by previous animal ownership and relationships (Serpell, 2005) (Fig. 1.).

Another important influence is the Human-Animal Bond (HAB), which is perceived as a relationship between a human and his/her companion animal where there is a mutual responsibility for each other and involves an emotional, enduring, and ethical commitment (Martin, Ruby & Farnum, 2003). Many students wanting to become vets feel emotionally connected to their animals and feel that it is their job to protect and care for the animal; they want to become a vet so they can assume responsibility of many animals.

Others are interested in veterinary medicine because of the high status of the profession; veterinarians are looked upon highly because it is their duty to take care of clients’ animals and to try to treat them if the animals are unhealthy (Robinson et al., 2007). Vets should be able to speak authoritatively about animals and have the answers to questions asked by pet owners. Some people are interested in becoming veterinarians for this reason; they want to be depended upon, and they want to be the person that clients turn to when desperate for an answer regarding a pet.

An influence that is thought to be very important in veterinary career decisions is money; it is commonly thought that vets make a lot of money, but income is not the main reason of why vets value what they do (Chadderdon et al., 2001). Veterinarians can potentially generate very high earnings, but it is not a guarantee. The type of veterinary medicine and the location of the practice affect salaries.

Ambition and inspiration are also two important influences on choosing a veterinary career. A student's educational and vocational goals for the future can be described as their ambition, while their involvement in an activity for the enjoyment and intrinsic value is described as inspiration (Wang & Staver, 2010). Both ambition and inspiration are vital if a student wants to become a vet. Ambition is important because becoming a vet is a long and difficult process; students also need to be inspired in order to enjoy the job. If a student is very ambitious in pursuing this career, but is not inspired by it, he or she is going to be unhappy in the long run because it will not be something enjoyable. If a student is only inspired by the idea of becoming a vet and not ambitious, he or she is going to struggle through the process of becoming a vet and will most likely not be very successful. All of these are important influences on pursuing a career in veterinary medicine, and the student will most likely be influenced by more than one of these.

Preparation for Admittance into Vet School

It is important for students to know how to prepare to gain admittance into vet school, and this starts with their high school education. Students should take as many science classes in high school as their schedule allows; doing so will provide them with a basis of

scientific knowledge which will be beneficial when they start taking science courses in college. When it is time to start college, potential veterinary students need to know that they are not required to get a Bachelor's in Science; they also don't have to major in a science in order to get into vet school. Students interested in applying to vet school can major in anything that they would like, but must know that there are a lot of science courses that are pre-requisites for vet school. Many students feel it is just easier to major in a science because of all of the pre-requisites that have to be met, so that is why a large portion of students applying to vet school are biology majors. Since business is also a very important aspect of veterinary careers, it is a good idea to take some business courses to obtain background knowledge about what the business aspect of the profession will be like (Bachynsky et al., 2013).

Another one of the most important ways to prepare for getting into vet school is to have experience working with a veterinarian (Robinson et al., 2007). There are various ways to gain experience, such as shadowing or interning with a veterinarian, or getting a job at a veterinary practice. Although a lot of veterinary schools don't require a specific number of hours of experience needed, it is recommended that the student gets as much experience as possible. Gaining experience in a veterinary office is vital for performing well in the field because it enables students to see what kind of work they will be doing and allows them to experience different situations that they may encounter in the future.

Vet schools also look for certain qualities which they feel are needed in vet students.

Some key indicators of a good applicant aside from a strong academic profile are good

communication skills, knowledge and understanding of the profession, motivation, and commitment (Robinson et al., 2007). Although these qualities aren't "required," students showing these qualities will be more desirable to accept than students not having them.

Concerns about Getting into Vet School

There are many concerns that students have about getting into vet school. Applying to vet school is a lengthy and difficult process; there is stiff competition for a limited number of spots in each school (Robinson et al., 2007). Each vet school has different academic requirements and many schools require a series of interviews before accepting students. It is crucial to have a strong academic profile when applying to any vet school. Vet school is very demanding, so when choosing students to admit, vet schools look for students who are likely to excel. These are usually students who have exceptional grades and who are involved in their school and community; an ideal student will be well rounded.

Vet schools require some kind of veterinary experience and some students find it difficult to find places to get this experience. Students living in rural areas may find it easier to get experience working with a large animal vet, and students living in more urban areas may find it easier to get experience working with a small animal vet. Students living in areas where there are very few vets may find it difficult to even get the opportunity for any experience at all (Robinson et al., 2007). If there are only one or two veterinary practices in the area that a student lives and the practices are at full capacity of employees/interns, the student may be turned down and not able to get experience, which may cause problems when trying to get accepted into vet school.

Aside from the difficulty of getting accepted into vet school, cost is another major concern. Vet school is very expensive and although student loans are available for initial payment, these loans must still be paid back which places a large financial burden on the student. Although cost is a negative influence, it is not sufficient enough to keep many students from applying to vet school (Ilgen et al., 2003).

Qualities Recommended for Success in a Veterinary Career

When people think of a career in veterinary medicine, they usually think it only entails science. Most people do not realize that business is also a very important aspect, so it is crucial to have business and financial expertise as well as scientific expertise (Lloyd & Walsh, 2002). It is also a common perception that having a career as a vet is strictly dealing with animals. However, vets have to deal with the people who own the pets as well as the people that work alongside them. This makes it important for vets to have good communication and leadership skills, the ability to work well in a team, and be capable of understanding cultural differences and values (Chadderdon et al., 2001).

Veterinarians must be highly motivated and willing to persevere through tough times. It is also crucial to have orderly thinking and systematic work habits in order to get the job done. Vets need to be willing to 'get their hands dirty' and work hard because it is a very demanding profession.

Concerns about the Veterinary Profession

The veterinary profession is very stressful and there are many concerns with the profession that may deter students from pursuing this as a career. The veterinary

profession is looked upon as a prestigious profession. Pets are family, so clients have very strong expectations for their vets (Robinson et al., 2007). This can be a concern for potential veterinary students, as they might not know how to deal with an angry or upset pet owner. Clients also look to their vets during times of need in order to make decisions that will best benefit the animal. For example, a vet may have to decide whether or not to euthanize a beloved family pet. A veterinarian has to use the knowledge that they have to be able to make this decision without second guessing him or herself, which is a challenging part of the job.

An even greater concern for many students is how emotionally difficult the veterinary profession is. There are very uplifting and rewarding situations, but there are also very challenging situations; some people are not able to handle all of the different emotions felt at a certain time. Situations such as dealing with sick animals and having to put animals down can be very hard emotionally; many owners are heartbroken when their pet has to be put to sleep, and constantly seeing people so upset can take a toll on the veterinarian as well. Since there are many tough times, the good times boost spirits. Seeing an animal who was battling a sickness or a disease get better, or saving an animal during an emergency surgery are times of joy. The good times tend to outweigh the bad, and make it all worthwhile.

Another difficulty of the profession is that it is very time consuming and there are very few, if any, 'off days' (Bachynsky et al., 2013). While some veterinarians only work during office hours, some are on call 24/7 in case of an emergency. For vets that work

long hours or are on call 24/7, it is hard to maintain a scheduled personal life. It can be difficult to have a family because an animal emergency could come up at any point in time. This is a concern for some potential veterinarians, but others fully accept this possibility because they have decided that their career as a vet comes first in their lives.

Demographics in Veterinary Medicine

Males have dominated the veterinary profession for most of its history; women did not start entering vet schools in large numbers until the 1950's and 1960's. However, women now dominate the field (Serpell, 2005) (Table 1). There is also a lack of racial diversity in the veterinary field; there are very few applicants from minority ethnic backgrounds (Buss, 2007). The demographics of veterinary applicants and students, as well as practicing veterinarians do not reflect the demographics of society (Fig. 2). Changing demographics in society are likely to impact the market of veterinary medicine, which will influence future veterinarians. It is important to have more diversity in the veterinary field so multiple perspectives exist, but there is not a simple solution as to how to get this to happen.

Opportunities in the Veterinary Field / Job Market

Society's needs are constantly changing in regards to veterinary medicine, but regardless of the changing demands, the veterinary profession is predicted to flourish in the future (Nielsen, 2003). There are many different types of veterinary medicine that one can practice, some of which are less commonly known about. Many students think that the only option is to be a small animal vet or an equine vet (Table 2). Although these are the

most common types of veterinary medicine, there are so many more specialty opportunities where a vet can apply their knowledge to a specific topic (Fig. 3). These 'applied' veterinary jobs provide unique opportunities for veterinarians to work in a setting that isn't quite what a typical office veterinarian would experience.

Summary and Classroom Activity

This activity is designed to familiarize students with general knowledge about the veterinary field. The activity is important because it will provide students with information about the cost of veterinary school, the salary of a veterinarian, the difference between a vet and a vet tech, as well as other aspects of a veterinary career path. This is an interactive worksheet; students may use their cell phones and/or computers to search the Internet for the answers to these questions. An answer key has been provided for teacher use.

Name:

Becoming a Veterinarian: The Real Deal

Directions: Use a cell phone and/or computer to search the Internet for the answers to these questions. Find the answers from a reliable source.

1. How many vet schools are there in the United States? In the state you live in?
2. What is the average amount of debt that a student has after graduating from vet school?
3. What is the average cost of veterinary school per year for: a) in-state students and b) out-of-state students?
4. What is the average GPA of an admitted veterinary school student for the top 3 vet schools listed? (go to <http://veterinary-schools.startclass.com>).
5. What is the average yearly salary for a veterinarian?
6. What are some of the main differences between a vet, a vet tech, and a vet assistant?

Name: **Answer Key**

Becoming a Veterinarian: The Real Deal

Directions: Use a cell phone and/or computer to search the Internet for the answers to these questions. Find the answers from a reliable source.

(Answers may vary depending on the source that the student gets them from)

1. How many vet schools are there in the United States? In the state you live in?

United States- 30

By state:

Alabama- 2	Indiana- 1	Mississippi- 1	Pennsylvania- 1
Arizona- 1	Iowa- 1	Missouri- 1	Tennessee- 2
California- 2	Kansas- 1	New York- 1	Texas- 1
Colorado- 1	Louisiana- 1	North Carolina- 1	Virginia- 1
Florida- 1	Massachusetts- 1	Ohio- 1	Washington- 1
Georgia- 1	Michigan- 1	Oklahoma- 1	Wisconsin- 1
Illinois- 1	Minnesota- 1	Oregon- 1	

*Source: American Veterinary Medical Association

2. What is the average amount of debt that a student has after graduating from vet school?

≈ \$135,000 - \$153,000

*Source: American Veterinary Medical Association

3. What is the average cost of veterinary school per year for: a) in-state students and b) out-of-state students?

a) ≈ \$22,500

b) ≈ \$46,000

*Source: Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges

4. What is the average GPA of an admitted veterinary school student for the top 3 vet schools listed? (go to <http://veterinary-schools.startclass.com>).

UC Davis- 3.70

Colorado State University- 3.60

Texas A&M- 3.65

5. What is the average yearly salary for a veterinarian?

≈ \$91,250 (commonly ranges anywhere from ≈ \$50,000 - \$140,000)

*Source: work.chron.com

6. What are some of the main differences between a vet, a vet tech, and a vet assistant?

Vet	Vet Tech	Vet Assistant
--Diagnosing, prescribing medications, performing surgery --Approximately 8 years of schooling: usually have a Bachelor's Degree and a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) --Must pass a licensing exam	--Work under a licensed vet: obtain and record patient case histories, collect specimens, perform lab procedures, prep animals and equipment for surgery, develop x-rays --Less schooling: can get an Associate's degree (approx. 2 years) or a Bachelor's degree (approx. 4 years) -Must pass a credentialing exam to ensure entry-level knowledge	--Support vet and vet tech in daily tasks --Perform kennel work, assist in restraint and handling of animals, feed and exercise the animals, clerical duties --Less schooling: A high school diploma or equivalent (like GED) is sufficient; no further education required

*Source 1: American Veterinary Medical Association

*Source 2: National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America

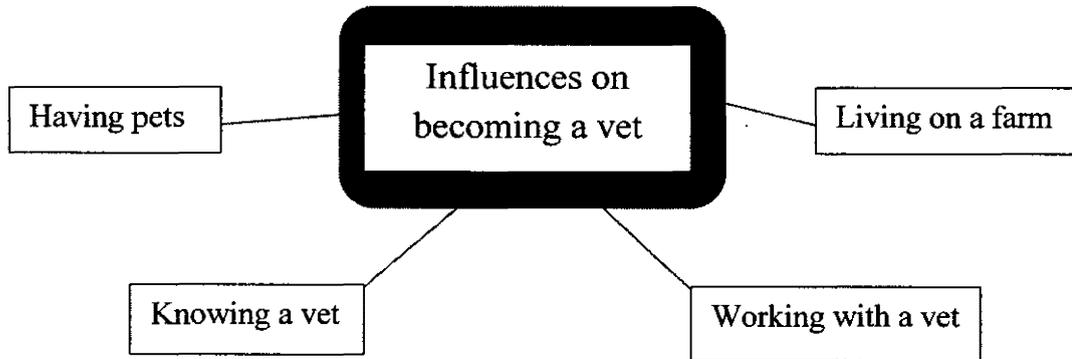


Figure 1. The most common influences causing students to become interested in becoming a vet.

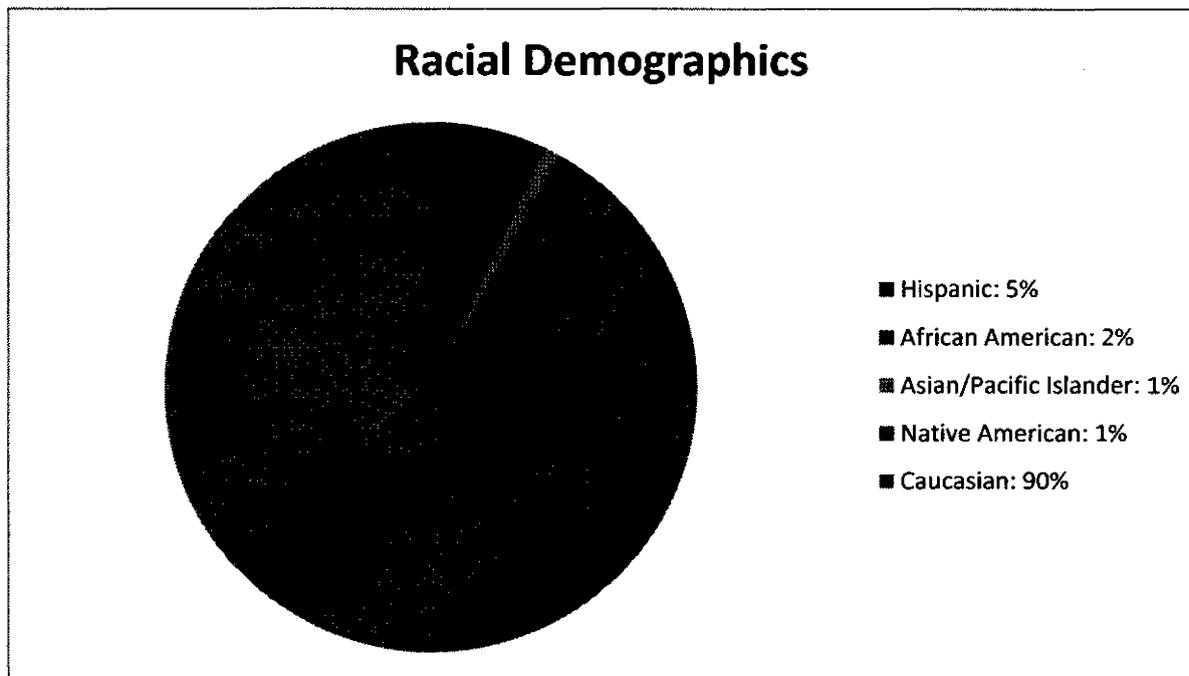


Figure 2. Recent data regarding racial demographics of students in veterinary medicine. (Data Source: Buss, 2000)

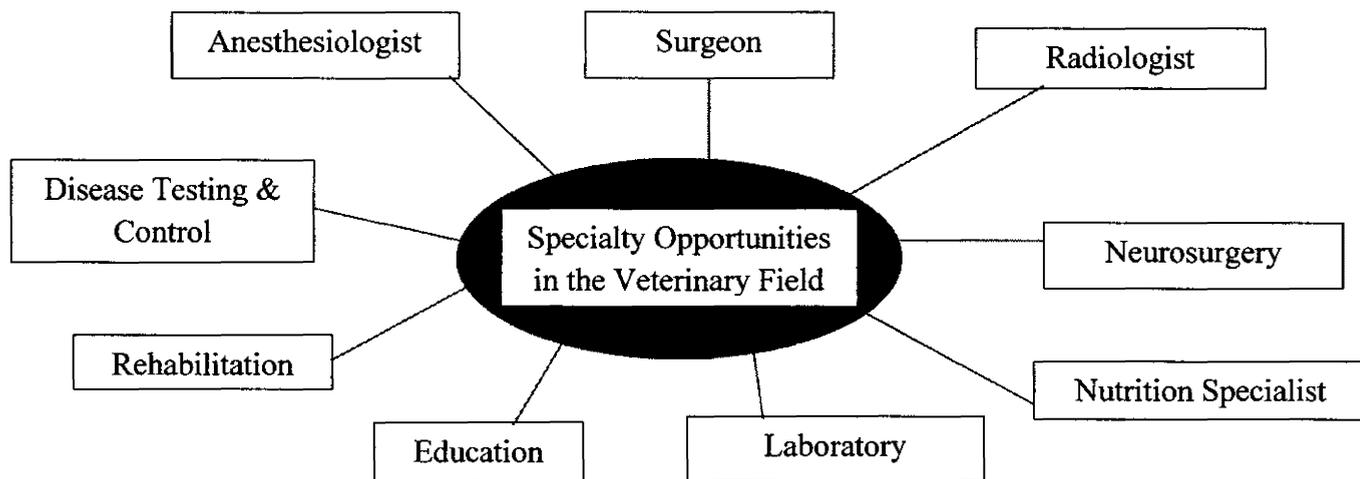


Figure 3. Opportunities in the veterinary profession that aren't as common, and require specialty knowledge.

Gender	Number of Applicants
Male	6,090
Female	24,293
Unknown	1,085
Total	31,468

Type of Veterinary Medical Practice	Description
Small Animal	Practice focuses primarily on 'house pets' such as dogs, cats, rabbits, and other 'small' animals
Large Animal (Equine)	Practice focuses primarily on 'farm pets.' Most commonly horses, but can also include other farm animals.
Food Animal	Practice focuses on animals/livestock important in the food business, such as cows and pigs.
Wildlife	Practice focuses on wildlife species including birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals.

Table 1. Veterinary Medical College Application Service (VMCAS) public data gender statistics from 2009-2013. Gender distribution of vet school applicants during this time period.

Table 2. Common opportunities in veterinary medicine and a brief description of what each opportunity entails.

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