

Vet School Surge

Veterinary schools expand, with focus on large animals

February 8, 2012 – *Inside Higher Ed*

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/02/08/veterinary-schools-expand-focus-large-animals#ixzz1lnNg5ff9>

by Mitch Smith

Schuyler County -- in New York's Finger Lakes region -- is home to 18,000 people; 14,000 farm animals; one NASCAR track and [exactly zero livestock veterinarians](#).

That dearth of vets is a common problem in rural America, and one reason behind a push by the country's veterinary colleges to admit more students.

Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine is seeking approval of a [\\$22 million plan](#) that would allow it to enroll 120 of its annual 1,000 applicants by 2017, improve its facilities and train more students to treat livestock. That expansion would be part of the state budget approved in 2013. In the meantime, the college is seeking funds that would allow it to keep its entering class size at 102 instead of 90, its number a few years ago.

If the plans are approved, Dean Michael Kotlikoff said, Cornell hopes to increase enrollment in its food animal program from 20 in each entering class to 30.

Those extra vets – as many as 100 graduating every decade – could help ease a [well-documented trend](#) of veterinarians in New York and elsewhere leaving food animal practices for more lucrative careers treating domestic pets.

Adding a couple dozen students to an entering class might be a rounding error at a large university. But Cornell is part of a trend among veterinary colleges -- generally very small and incredibly selective -- making what are seen in the field as historic increases in their size. And much of the motivation for this growth is money and agriculture, not St. Bernards from the suburbs.

Schuyler County, not far from Cornell's campus, is among dozens of counties across America with thousands of farm animals but no veterinarian specializing in their treatment. Farmers have to call in vets from elsewhere to tend to their cattle, goats and sheep. Brett Chedzoy, who runs a beef operation in the county and is a senior resource educator for Cornell's extension office there, said that inconvenience has become a fact of life. "You've got to kind of get on their good side and their Christmas card list to get them to come to your farm," he said, "but they seem to be making it work."

Chedzoy said large animal vets are known for their dedication and work ethic. But he suggested it might take more than expanded college programs to attract new veterinarians.

“I think most students today in vet schools like Cornell see that there’s more money and an easier lifestyle in treating dogs and cats than to be out on farms in less than ideal conditions,” he said. “I kind of liken it to logging or funeral directing, you almost have to be born into it today to want to do it.”

The need for more rural vets, combined with a growing pet population and higher expectations for their medical care, has created a shortage of animal doctors in some disciplines and regions. In response, more than half of America’s 28 accredited vet colleges have [increased their class size in recent years](#), some by up to 50 percent. Also, a new veterinary program is set to open this year at [Lincoln Memorial University](#), while colleges like [Genesee Community College](#), the [University of Tennessee at Martin](#) and [Texas A&M University at Kingsville](#) are increasing access to [veterinary technician training](#).

The University of Georgia is nearing the end of a 10-year fund-raising effort for a new veterinary complex. Construction is slated to start in the next year, and the facility will give the college the capacity to gradually increase its enrollment from 102 students in each class to 150. Dean Sheila Allen said the growth has been a long-term goal as her college seeks to replace aging facilities and meet the needs of a growing state.

Similar growth has been seen at the University of Missouri at Columbia, where 80 students enrolled in its veterinary program four years ago. The latest first-year class had 120 students.

Dean Neil Olson said that growth could play a small role in filling unmet demand for farm animal care, a need that is [especially acute in the Midwest](#). But Olson said the main reasons behind the 50 percent enrollment growth were the chance to increase tuition revenue and fill veterinary positions across all specialties.

Still, he said, the lack of rural vets is a challenge his college is trying to address. Missouri has [five counties](#) with more than 25,000 food animals but no food animal vets, according to American Veterinary Medical Association data. Daviess County, in the state’s northwest corner, has 160,199 heads of livestock but no veterinarians specializing in their care. That places vet schools in a difficult position. In Missouri, Olson said more students are pursuing "mixed" practices where they might have an office in St. Louis or Kansas City while also serving small farms near the city.

“You can’t expect someone with seven, eight years of college education to go out into a rural area and not make a decent living,” Olson said. “It’s a real problem for us.”

But Bennie Osburn, interim executive director of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, said the country’s vet programs are working to fill those needs by providing loan repayment incentives to rural vets and emphasizing large animal programs.

The number of seats in vet schools has grown by about 2 percent annually for the last decade, Osburn said. The growth has multiple causes, with institutions interested in filling unmet rural needs while also generating new revenue and responding to an explosion of foreign veterinary schools that, according to U.S. vet school administrators, have been recruiting Americans.

Kotlikoff, Cornell's dean, said all those issues are at the heart of his college's expansion plan. But he also sees the growth as a chance to bring financial stability and improved infrastructure to a top-notch vet program with some outmoded facilities. When the college's home was built in 1957, its student body was largely male. Now it's 70 percent female, making locker rooms and other facilities a challenge.

Skeptics question whether the university should be graduating more vets, but Kotlikoff said those concerns are misdirected and that the expansion is a chance to help the college while meeting growing needs in both rural and urban New York. He said the state funding, available to Cornell because of its unique status as both a private college and a land-grant institution, would accomplish that. "Practicing veterinarians are saying, 'Do we really need Cornell to produce more veterinarians?'" Kotlikoff said. "The combination of the operating costs and the additional tuition will do something that's very important – stabilize the quality of the top-ranked veterinary college in the world."