

Females in Veterinary Medical Education: Why the Choice?

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Abstract

Veterinary Medicine as a profession has undergone a change from a male-oriented one, to being predominantly female. The increase in female students is a reflection of the increasing interest in veterinary medicine by females. This study focused on reasons for the specific choice of veterinary medical education among female veterinary students. A life history approach was applied in order to explore the lives of six female veterinary students from St. George's University, School of Veterinary Medicine in Grenada. This methodology involved using interviews to collect personal accounts of students' life experiences that provided data about the reasons for the choice of female students to pursue veterinary medical education. The study revealed that life experiences as well as socio-cultural realities surrounding the lives of the students were crucial in understanding the influences and reasons for their choice of veterinary medicine. A Life Stages Theory emerged from the use of grounded theory approach to data analysis which identified personal, financial and academic needs as primary to create interest in veterinary medicine. The choice of veterinary medicine by females was found to be based on their personal interests, their ability to overcome financial and academic barriers and receive opportunities of alternative academic pathways.

Introduction

The student and professional population of veterinary medicine has transitioned from a male to a female dominated career over the past few decades. The increase in female veterinary students is a reflection of the increasing interest in veterinary medicine by females. Miller in her thesis entitled "Man's Best Friend Trending Towards Women" recognized that the 75% women and 25% men average percentages for entering veterinary students in the US is a reflection of the percentages in the applicants' pool. Miller further assessed the percentage of practicing veterinarians that are over the age of 45 years which was found to be in favour of males. This indicated that the gender transition which originated in the 1970s led to the stage today where the age profile of female veterinarians is lower than 45 years of age [1]. The experiences of female veterinarians in the US are also echoed in Europe, as the UK's Royal College of Veterinary Surgery (R.C.V.S.) reported a 77% female population among their veterinary students. The increasing number of women and decline in the number of men enrolling into veterinary schools is a trend that is recorded [2]. The numerous social and cultural changes over the past few decades can also be considered significant as they explain some developments in the education system that made education for female students more accessible. Many of the social and cultural changes were influenced by political and policy shifts, as well as social movement within societies in relation to the roles and functions of women in developed countries as reported by Stockemer [3].

A reference point on the history of women in veterinary medicine is Aleen Cust, Britain's first female veterinarian. Nolen, in an extract

from the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, described Cust's experience as follows:

"In 1894 at the age of 26, Aleen Cust enrolled in the New Veterinary College, Edinburgh, as A.I. Custance to spare her family embarrassment ... when she was to sit for the first of her professional examinations in 1897 the Council of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) declined her application. As the governing body for the RCVS, the Council defined the word "student" as "male student", therefore, the Council ruled, the RCVS lacked authority to admit a woman to the examinations" Nolen, 2011 [4].

The experience of Cust demonstrated the challenges of social norms at the time, including family expectations, legal restrictions, professional marginalization and the reflections of male dominance in the veterinary profession. In fact, in 1922, 22 years after completing her veterinary training, Cust was then awarded her diploma in veterinary medicine.

From the perspective of the United States (US), Helen Richt from Kansas State College of Veterinary Medicine began the female legacy of veterinarians many years after Cust in 1934. While the experiences of Cust and Richt were the genesis of females in veterinary medicine and the development of women in veterinary medical education, careers for female veterinarians did not take place until the 1960s. Even in the 1960s, only seven females graduated across all veterinary schools in the US noted by Chernesky [5]. By the 1970s Chernesky reported just over 30 women entered veterinary colleges.

During the period 1960s to 1970s in the US, social movements and legal reform substantially changed the presence of women in education and professional development overall. A major influence on women's increasing involvement in veterinary medicine was the women's movement, as this organized political action coincided with enactment of laws and opportunities [6]. Legal reform such as the Federal Equal Pay Act of 1963 (977 Stat. 1409 27USC 2000), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (79 Stat. 253 43USC 2000e), the 1965 repeal of the 1870 law that permitted observation by offering equal pay to female federal employees (79 Stat. 9875 USC 33 Section 165) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (86 Stat. 10342USC 2000E), were all landmark legal reforms and allowed for affirmative action plans favoring women in higher education [6]. Additionally, women benefitted from access to federal funds and grants for higher education as well as revised admission policies based on merits of each student through the Educational Amendment of 1972 and the Women's Education Act of 1974 for the first time [6].

The political, legal and social transformation that took place during the period of the 1960s and 1970s reduced barriers for women to access higher education in general and in context of my enquiry, for veterinary medicine also. This transformation was exemplified by Slater and Slater who reported on the successful competition by women in veterinary schools as well as their increasing numbers from the following comments of a female veterinarian and academician: "... the flood gates opened, and we moved in on what were then untested waters" Slater and Slater, 2000 [6].

The post 1970s era resulted in a gender transition in veterinary medicine. The US Bureau of Census, reported 98% of veterinarians were male, which was followed by the unprecedented shift resulting in more than 70% of all students entering US based veterinary schools in 2000 being female [6].

This study recognizes the significant increase of females in veterinary medicine, which I have observed in my experience in veterinary medicine. Figure 1 below represents the gender distribution among veterinary graduates from 1965 to 2012 reported by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) in 2013, collated from schools accredited by the AVMA which include US based veterinary schools.

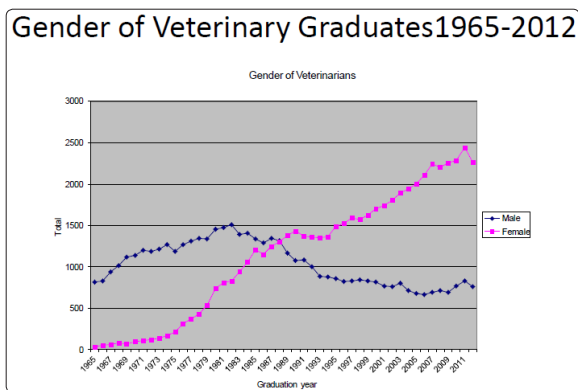


Figure 1: Gender of Veterinary Graduates, 1965-2012 (AVMA, 2013)

The data in Figure 1 reflects a predominantly male representation in the graduating class for the years 1965 to 1975. The female

presence began to emerge from 1976 to 1985 to where there was an equal gender distribution from 1988 to 1989. Since 1989, females have continued to increase significantly in numbers. The increasing number of female graduates has resulted in a gender shift from a predominantly male veterinary graduate population in 1965, to a predominantly female population of graduates today [7].

Materials and Methods

Sikes, Troyna and Goodson describe the personal characteristics of life history methodology as an "intensely idiosyncratic personal dynamics" based on the individualistic and personal experiences that are involved in the research process [8]. The result of this diverse nature and characteristics of life history research is that there is no one methodology that can be described. The life history methodology employed for this study included the following:

Choice of Life History: Life history was identified as the most appropriate technique to explore the life experiences of students and achieve the response to the research query on why the choice of veterinary medicine for female students [9,10].

Research Population: The research population present at S.G.U. represents the total number of female students' enrolled in the veterinary medical programme. The number of female veterinary students according to the Office of Admissions at S.G.U. as of December, 2013 was 600, which represent 80% of the total student population in the academic terms of Veterinary Medicine delivered in Grenada.

Consistent in the literature, after reviewing many examples of life history research, the research sample or population tends to be small in number. There are studies in which one individual constituted the entire research population, other examples where a single digit number of persons were the maximum population from which data was collected. Sikes who drew reference to both Harry F. Wolcott's 1973 classic, "The Man in the Principal's Office" and studies in the 1920s and 1930s by members of the Chicago School, where a life history was about one person, which gave insight into the individual's experiences of their life [10]. This example demonstrated that life history research can be applied in a study of one person from the perspective of sample size perspective. The point that life history work is not to prepare "nomothetic generalizations", as in the case of large samples in quantitative work, is made by [10].

Sampling: The approaches to sampling for life history include:

- **Convenience:** the situation in which the researcher has access to potential participants and persons whom the researcher can easily identify to participate in the study.
- **Purposive:** this technique includes specific characteristics, attributes and/or experiences of individuals, who need to satisfy defined criteria to be included in the study.
- **Opportunistic:** this strategy operates by chance, in which the researcher meets an individual who is willing to participate in the study.
- **Snowball:** in this strategy, the researcher is referred to potential participants by other participants.

I considered the sampling strategies noted by Sikes above as being useful and applied convenience and purposive strategies towards identifying students to participate in life history interviews for my enquiry.

Data Collection: The most commonly used strategy for data collection with the life history approach is the interview, a conversation which takes place between the researcher and the participant(s). The interview dynamics for the life history approach does not conform to any particular approach and is considered to be unstructured. This unstructured approach was used in the Chicago life histories that were collected as noted by Fontana and Frey [11].

The interview in life history examines issues in an individual's life beyond the conceptual framework of the interview process. The interview and the resulting data should portray the participant to the extent that self-reflection and emotions are evolved to the point of expressing emotions associated with the life experiences that are discussed. The other aspect of the life history interview is the potential for the interviewer to receive confidential and even challenging information which can have ethical and possibly legal issues. Finally, one of the critical requirements for the life history interview is good inter-personal relationships between the interviewer and interviewee in the interview process. Sikes suggests that a good inter-personal relationship includes a degree of reciprocity, in which the interviewer shares his/her own experiences to the interviewee [10]. The resulting exchange can serve to refine the process, and allow for increased sharing of information by minimizing the roles of the interviewer and interviewee.

Data Analysis: Life history, while being one approach, includes considerable diversity in the process of design, sampling and data collection. The diversity also relates to the considerable variation in personal lives that exist. This diversity would also apply to data analysis. The actual analysis which is done by the researcher includes an interpretation and representation of the conversations from the interview and data collection phase [12]. Miller outlines three techniques in the analysis of life histories:

- **Narrative:** this is the reconstruction of life history interviews, and the analysis involves themes that emerge from the narrative.
- **Inductive:** this approach takes the form of arranging data collected into concepts which serve as themes from which theory is constructed.
- **Neo-positivist:** this approach aims to use information obtained from data collection to build on previous work or existing literature, in an effort to provide a greater understanding of an existing phenomenon.

For my data analysis, I applied both narrative and inductive techniques to report and analyze the interviews conducted with students.

Data Presentation: Ojermark identified several styles for presenting life history work which include narrative writing, using themes, patterns and schemes developed from the analysis. The narrative style includes detailed accounts of interviews which focus on the re-creation of the life experiences of the persons interviewed [9]. Thematic classifications that emerged from the analyses were used to arrange the detailed accounts of participants' lives coupled with the use of anecdotal life sketches provides a greater understanding and evoke emotion to the theme(s) identified by the researcher [9]. In presenting the interview notes of students, alternate identifications were used in the reporting.

Results and Discussion

Student characteristics that were personal and intrinsic to each student and how they informed the emergent themes from the students' life histories. Themes that emerged from interviews with the students are summarized in Table 1 which follows:

Table 1: Themes Emerged from Students Interviews

	Mary	Jane	Lucy	Sanju	Marie	Anne
Decision to be a veterinarian	I note the period in middle school around 11 to 12 years old when I was asked about my career option and I reported veterinary medicine at school	If I were to give you a year, I would say that as young as four to five years old was when I wanted to be a veterinarian	The choice of veterinary medicine for me was only after identifying and learning about the international opportunities that was available at S.G.U.	I first became interested in veterinary medicine when I visited the summer academy at S.G.U	I was around 16 years old and was thinking about being a vet technician. It was only after talking with Dr. Z, I started to think about being a veterinarian	I always wanted to be a veterinarian. [recalled around five years old]
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students decided to become veterinarians before the age of 12 years • Knowledge of veterinary medicine was learnt at an early age <p>There was an early interest and decision to become veterinarians among students.</p>						

Life experiences surrounding the decision to be a veterinarian	I shared with my teacher and my class that I wanted to be a veterinarian when I grow up to save animals from suffering and dying. At least every Saturday, I would go to the clinic to assist the veterinarians. All of these opportunities I fully enjoyed as it showed me how veterinarians did their work and confirmed for me that I wanted to become a veterinarian as well.	I protested that the clinic was our life and livelihood and what I wanted to return to after I became a veterinarian. My father agreed to hold on to the clinic and my mother would assist on weekends. I will be in the clinic and I did all of the administrative and technician support services.	working on the farm and getting married to someone was not what I wanted. I even went on-line and sent applications to several countries around the world in various job positions that were advertised. I chose veterinary medicine as the first three years of the programme was held in Grenada followed by a fourth year which could have been completed in countries outside of the US.	I was not sure what I wanted to pursue but I know that I did not want to become a doctor. I also enjoyed seeing the veterinarians in a small animal hospital and thought to myself that I could see myself doing that. The veterinarians were so nice and we got a chance to talk with them and they all seemed to be happy with their work and spoke about their family and children which inspired me the most	Dr. Z shared with me his own experiences and how he worked from coming through a poor family and described the stages he took to become a vet. This was the first time I learned about the steps it took to get to college and then what was required to become a veterinarian. I began to think that I can do this and if I could go to college and even become a vet, I would be able to take care of my mother and she would not have to work any longer.	it still pained me and I knew that I would not euthanize animals when I become a vet. My parents were embarrassed by my inability to get admitted into a veterinary school as all of my relatives knew that I wanted to be a vet and my parents had to make up excuses for me as to why I was delayed in finishing my undergraduate degree and was at home and not moving on to a vet school. my parents who supported paying for the programme.
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- Students noted financial needs towards supporting themselves and their family
 - Students identified personal needs to support care of animals themselves as veterinarians
 - Students identified social and cultural needs that were related to the choice of veterinary medicine including for and against family and society expectations for higher education and professional career, social class factors for and against pursuing particular career paths
- All of the students expressed personal, financial and socio-cultural needs that were related to their choice of veterinary medical education

Needs from a personal and financial perspective within the context of each student socio-cultural life experiences were central themes that emerged from the initial interests of students towards veterinary medicine

Early Childhood Experiences with animals	my first recall from my history was the time of my pet dog Bruno	I grew up with my parents who are both veterinarians and owned a veterinary clinic	My entire family and the entire community is associated one way or another with the dairy farming practices	I also had a pet dog who we kept in the yard	I grew up in an apartment building together with my mother and two brothers	I would be occupied wherever we went with pets and I groomed and attended to dogs
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- Students had recall of pets at the start of their life history was noted
- Pet ownership and early exposure to animals was common among students

Noted Experience with animals	I would take Bruno to the pet shop to get his coat groomed. Bruno was hit by a car ... I thought to myself that I wanted to be a veterinarian as I would have saved Bruno	I told my parents that I wanted to keep the clinic going as I was going to become a veterinarian and wanted to work in our family owned clinic	My mother worked at the farm, my father and all my latives all worked on the farm. For me, working on the farm was a good way to earn some extra cash.	My grandfather would take the dog to eat some grass when he did not want to eat and when the dog had like bruises and wounds, my grandfather would wash the affected area with kerosene fuel	I would pass by just to see what types of animals, mainly the dogs that were in the clinic. I was overjoyed as I was thinking about getting a job and this was perfect as I liked being in the vet clinic anyway	I remembered telling the vets in anger that I would be vet and I would be able to treat the cancer instead to removing the leg of a dog.
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- Students had personal traumatic experiences with their pets which led to their declarations to become veterinarians
 - Students had financial interests towards working with animals
- Students related experiences with animals to personal tragic experiences and financial/employment interests towards becoming veterinarians

Pet Ownership and Knowledge of and Exposure to Veterinary Medicine and Animals/Pets were early and common Experiences for the Students

Experience with veterinarians	It actually became fun for me to visit the veterinarian with Bruno. My view of veterinarians today, well, I am engaged to one and I intend to marry him after I graduate.	Veterinarians [parents] were my heroes growing up and still are today. The veterinarians that came through the clinic were always young and friendly people who I enjoyed having around.	I think they [veterinarians] were professionals that had an important job to do. I am always interested to learn about their [veterinary faculty] international experiences.	I find veterinarians to be friendly, pleasant and courteous people even more so than any other profession that I know. It is most like if my personality is fit to be a veterinarian.	Dr. Z always took an interest in my schooling and would be sure to give me opportunities to work and earn more money in the clinic as I grew older. Dr. Z would give me extra money and I felt looking back that he was like a father figure to me.	I particularly liked it when the vets would visit our home as I got to see what they did and spoke with them. To be a doctor and work with animals and get paid for the work is like getting paid for having fun.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students had prior experience with veterinarians • Students had early life experiences with veterinarians • Students associated positive experiences and impression with veterinarians • Students related their experience with veterinarians to their personal lives and interests as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal relationships • Family business • International experience • Matching personality • Financial gain • Animal care 						
Academic experience	I was never really a good student before coming to S.G.U.	I excelled in all my classes and was always in the top list of the class even during my college years.	At school I always performed well and was a top student wherever I went	I performed well as all I did was attend classes and studied at home.	I was not however a high performing student growing up. I was maybe about an average performer.	I was not a particularly good student in school. I usually got by with a pass in most of my classes but also failed some as well.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students reported not being academically successful students <p>Academic experiences for the students was challenging throughout their schooling lives.</p>						
Admissions process into veterinary school	After several attempts and applications, I was unsuccessful in gaining admission. I would say that the opportunity to work at the veterinary clinic during my middle and high school years was related to my ability to care and comfort animals in the clinic. I would have to admit that my fiancé [graduate of S.G.U] was and is the main reason that I am here today.	After initial difficulty in gaining a place at a vet school. I could think of the financial strain my veterinary education would place on my family. Every time I applied to veterinary schools, I also enquired about scholarship opportunities	I applied to the veterinary programme [S.G.U.] and in a short space of time received an acceptance letter. I concede to your [myself] point that the circumstances surrounding my relationship with my family and my interest not to return home can be considered as the opportunity that led me to choose S.G.U. and vet medicine	Only because of the period surrounding my grandfather's death I was able to receive permission to pursue veterinary medicine from my father as I doubt that I would gotten it otherwise. I received a response from S.G.U. indicating that I would need to complete a one year pre-veterinary training after which I would enter into the veterinary school.	I did receive acceptance from one of the vet schools I applied to but I had to decline as I did not get a scholarship and could not afford the fees. S.G.U. was the only school in the list that was also giving me accommodation with the scholarship which covered tuition	I applied everywhere and always received the same rejection letter. The folks from S.G.U. were really nice and gave me materials about their vet school and encouraged me to apply
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students had continued difficulty gaining admission into veterinary schools for academic performance reasons • Students had financial difficulty that factored into their admission into veterinary school • Students had personal opportunities related to S.G.U. that supported their admission into veterinary school • Students had financial opportunities related to S.G.U. that supported their admission into veterinary school • Students had academic opportunities related to S.G.U. that supported their admission into veterinary school. 						

Students had personal, financial and academic barriers towards gaining admission into veterinary school. Students also had personal, financial and academic opportunities that supported their admission into veterinary school at S.G.U.

Personal, Financial and Academic reasons not only influenced the students' interest as characteristics of their respective lives, but also were barriers and opportunities that challenged their choice to pursue veterinary medicine and also were the opportunities throughout their life experiences that led to their choice of veterinary medicine. These features manifested as students transitioned their early interests based on exposure to and knowledge of veterinary medicine towards their decision and enrolment into veterinary medicine. S.G.U. was a consistent factor that offered academic and financial opportunities directly and personal opportunities indirectly for the choice of veterinary medicine.

Central to this study are female veterinary students, and in particular, students of S.G.U. The role of S.G.U. was based on the institution where the students are enrolled for their veterinary medical education. However, there are characteristics of the students that led each of them to S.G.U.

The relationship of society and culture to education and career is explored at length in the literature. Bourdieu highlights the relationship with society and culture by describing the concept of 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital as noted by Bourdieu includes family characteristics (particular practices) and social positions (class). Cultural capital suggests that children will have a tendency to adopt the practices of their parents [13]. Also, such practices will conform to characteristics of the respective social classes and will be favored by the children. Aschaffenburg and Maas note the application of cultural capital among students of arts [14]. From data collected using surveys, Aschaffenburg and Maas concluded that for students at particular developmental ages, the educational transitions towards the study of arts were related to the influences of family practices and to social backgrounds. Society and culture therefore seem to interact and produce a particular set of standards and guidelines supporting the educational and career choices of individuals.

In general, there is an increased presence of women in higher education. The National Center for Educational Statistics reported in fall 2012 for the U.S. that there were 10.0 million female undergraduate students (56 percent of total enrolment) and 7.7 million male undergraduate students (44 percent of total enrolment) [15]. The report further stated that since 1990, female enrolment increased by 52 percent (from 6.6 million to 10.0 million students), while male enrolment increased by 43 percent (from 5.4 million to 7.7 million students). The male to female ratio has shifted in favor of the females. In the US, public universities note a male and female ratio of 43.6–56.4 while private not-for-profit institutions 42.5–57.5 or all private schools 40.7–59.3 [16]. The nearly 40–60 ratio of male to female students demonstrate the increased presence of females in higher education. This increase represents a relatively new phenomenon particularly in developed countries according to Social Trends from the Office of National Statistics in the United Kingdom (UK). As women increase their educational attainment through higher education, a greater diversity of career opportunities would be available to them [17].

Foreign education institutions are a relatively recent but growing phenomenon in the Caribbean. To date, there are more than thirty offshore medical schools in fifteen Caribbean countries [18]. The first of the offshore institutions was S.G.U. in Grenada founded in 1976 [19]. The structure of the offshore educational institutions is based on a combination of basic medical sciences training on Caribbean campuses with the administration based in the US. These institutions do not fall under the jurisdiction of US accreditation agencies, although of the three offshore institutions that offer veterinary

programmes in the Caribbean, S.G.U. and Ross University in St. Kitts are accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) like other US based veterinary schools. St. Matthews University in the Cayman Islands is an offshore institution that also offers veterinary medical education. The quality of education provided by offshore institutions is an area of intense debate. This is based on the premise that the quality of applicants to offshore education institutions is below the matriculation requirements of US based institutions. The evolution of offshore education institutions in the Caribbean has adopted a business model that specializes in services [20]. The services include those provided by the institution themselves and support services to the student and international community that engage the institutions.

The interdependence between the students and S.G.U. is noted, based on S.G.U.'s ability to meet the students' needs for veterinary medical education through mechanisms of offshore education, and associated lower admissions requirements. The students who do not meet requirements for US based veterinary schools seek alternative educational opportunities such as S.G.U. Among these students include those who can afford and obtain funding to meet the cost requirements for private higher education. These students serve as a market for offshore educational institutions such as S.G.U. The students whose life histories formed this thesis reflected the offshore educational institution academic and financial characteristics through their own personal, financial and academic needs. The context of the students in offshore educational institution dynamics contributes to the overall data, analysis, discussion, theory and conclusion. The point of S.G.U. being an offshore medical institution must therefore be considered as a critical component of the overall study and thesis. The students as students of S.G.U. and S.G.U. as an offshore educational institution are an important fundamental characteristic that needs to be taken into account on the reading and understanding of this thesis.

Conclusion

This study which identified reasons for female students' choice of veterinary medicine was a diverse one. The diversity of life experiences provided unique life histories for each student which resulted in individual idiosyncrasies of reasons for their respective choice. The individual differences while noted were also placed in context of similarities within diverse life histories for each student. Consistent experiences such as pet ownership, positive perceptions of veterinarians and veterinary medicine, expressed interest in pursuing veterinary medicine together with personal, academic and financial barriers accompanied by opportunities emerged as comparable themes across the respective students' life experiences.

The research question central to this study included what were the reasons for female students to choose veterinary medicine for their higher education and career? The use of life history methodology to understand the life experiences of the six female veterinary students revealed the following reasons:

- Personal reasons towards the care of pets and other animals, meet family expectations of becoming a veterinarian, positive experiences with veterinarians, aspiration towards the informed personal life of a veterinarian or escape family oriented socio-cultural expectations through international opportunities in veterinary medicine.
- Exposure to veterinary medicine and veterinarians whether for the care of personal pet animals growing up, the practice and work experience of veterinary medicine in a clinic setting or learning about the lives of veterinarians.
- Financial reasons to seek personal and family socio-economic advancement associated with higher education or a career in veterinary medicine.
- Academic reasons through the educational opportunity through pre-veterinary programs provided for veterinary medicine.

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