

Preparing for Vet School

Experience is key to acceptance.

By Cynthia McFarland

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The hours are long, the weather doesn't always cooperate, and some clients don't pay. Yet for those dedicated to the profession of veterinary medicine, the rewards of saving a life and helping an animal heal make up for any other frustrations.

Dr. Jim Thompson, associate dean of students and instruction at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, explains the main requirements of this exciting, but challenging, career to help students evaluate their aptitude:

Solid science and math education background

Keen desire to solve scientific problems

Good communication skills

Basic business skills

Ability to delegate work and manage people

Practical experience

Also remember that you must enjoy working with both people and animals since, as Dr. Thompson points out, "the animals never show up by themselves!"

So, how can you prepare for vet school?

"If you're in high school, lay the foundation with a good science knowledge base," advises Dr. Thompson. "Biology, chemistry and physics are the three key sciences. Get some experience in the veterinary profession as a veterinary assistant to be sure this is what you really want to do. If you intend to be an equine practitioner, you need direct experience in that field."

Beyond time in the classroom, Dr. Thompson urges students to engage in independent learning and read up on veterinary related topics. "As a doctor, you're required to continue to learn throughout your life. I encourage students to keep a journal of cases they're seeing and then to read more about those topics on their own, outside of school."

With hundreds of applicants competing to fill limited openings at each vet school, good grades and experience are important if you hope to be accepted. "Experience is a critical aspect of the application," says Dr. Thompson. "Without it, you will not be admitted."

You may want to be an equine veterinarian, but once you are accepted into a veterinary school, your studies will not focus solely on horses. "In the University of Florida program, all vet students take the same curriculum for the first 2 1/2 years," Dr. Thompson explains. "During the last 1 1/2 years, students focus on their career interests." For example, students wanting an equine-centered practice would take courses such as equine reproduction, equine medicine, equine surgery, large animal pathology and more.

The author is a freelance writer based in Florida.

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