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David E. Anderson
Kansas State University

Brad White
Kansas State University

Robert Larson
Kansas State University

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The Changing Face of Veterinary Practice: A Special Focus on Rural America

[DAVID E. ANDERSON](#), DVM, MS, DACVS
Special Issue Editor
College of Veterinary Medicine
Kansas State University

[BRAD WHITE](#), DVM, MS
Special Issue Editor
College of Veterinary Medicine
Kansas State University

[ROBERT LARSON](#), DVM, PhD, DACT, DACVPM, DACAN
Special Issue Editor
College of Veterinary Medicine
Kansas State University

Rural and food animal veterinary practice is evolving in response to changes in society, veterinary student demographics, and business opportunities available in the 21st century. The gravitation of veterinarians toward metropolitan areas has created a perception of under-served animal health needs in rural communities. Many rural communities are heavily reliant on agriculture; therefore, this perceived need for veterinarians influences the food animal industry as a whole. Veterinary colleges have changed in response to the increased number of students who are interested in companion animal medicine. These changes have resulted in diminished large animal content in the professional curricula, attrition of the number of faculty teaching food animal medicine, increases in the number of faculty dedicated to small animal curriculum, and an overwhelming sense that the veterinary program is centered around training in preparation for a career in companion animal practice. A multitude of factors likely contribute to the continued gravitation of veterinary students toward small animal practice. Veterinary colleges must strive to maintain a balanced, open-minded view of the profession so that students have an equal opportunity to choose a path that best suits their desires and interests.

One common misconception is that rural veterinary practice is less financially rewarding compared with small animal practice. Many rural practices are not large animal focused and practices provide health services for multiple species. Starting salaries among the practice species disciplines consistently have been shown to be similar ([Figure 1](#)).¹ Thus, the impression of lower salaries in rural practices is not supported by salary data. We must recognize that starting salary is not the only consideration for a new veterinarian when selecting a career path. Quality of life issues and practitioner perceptions of the ability to maintain connections to cutting edge medical information may influence this decision. We have discussed with students the factors that influence their career decisions. Some report that they have been warned not to enter large animal practice and that some individuals suggest that the future of veterinary medicine and financial rewards are best found in urban small animal practices. Articles in this special issue of the OJRRP discuss in detail issues surrounding career choices by students.

Of growing concern among veterinary educators and students is student indebtedness and its relationship to starting salaries. Educational debt-to-starting salary ratios have increased markedly over the last 20 years. Although starting salaries have increased modestly, tuition and costs of educational materials and living adjustments have increased markedly ([Figure 2](#)).¹ To be sustainable, the rural practice has to be able to offer services that can generate the necessary income for the practitioner to maintain financial stability.

Of interest in veterinary education during the previous 20 years has been the gender shift toward professional classes composed primarily of women. The cause of this extreme shift has not been clearly elucidated, but data suggest that this has had an effect on the number of veterinary students entering rural practice ([Figure 3](#)).¹ The total number of veterinary students entering small animal practice has increased dramatically especially among female students. However, the total number of students entering large animal or mixed practice has remained similar from year to year. Many potential causes of these trends can be hypothesized, but the gender distribution creates an additional need for positive role models to ensure that female veterinary students see rural practice as an equally viable opportunity.

Technology advances in many fields of human activity including communication, computation, and medical diagnostics and therapeutics have directly impacted and will continue to change the role of practicing veterinarians in rural areas. In many ways these advances have increased both the standard of care and knowledge expected from veterinary practitioners by animal-owning clients. Also, these technologies have caused competition for the attention and resources of those clients between veterinarians and other service providers who have little geographic constraint or need to live in the same rural community as the consumer.

This special issue of OJRRP was created to invite authors to submit manuscripts pertaining to the current and future economic, societal, technological, and professional factors influencing rural veterinary practice. In this issue of OJRRP, you will find a wealth of information regarding rural practice, training of veterinary students for rural practice, and various aspects of operating a small to medium sized business in a rural community. We are proud of the efforts of the many authors who contributed work to make this special issue valuable.

1. Chieffo C, Kelly AM. Trends in gender, employment, salary and debt of graduates of US veterinary medical schools and colleges. J AM Vet Med Assoc 2008; 233:910-917.

Figure 1. [\[back\]](#)

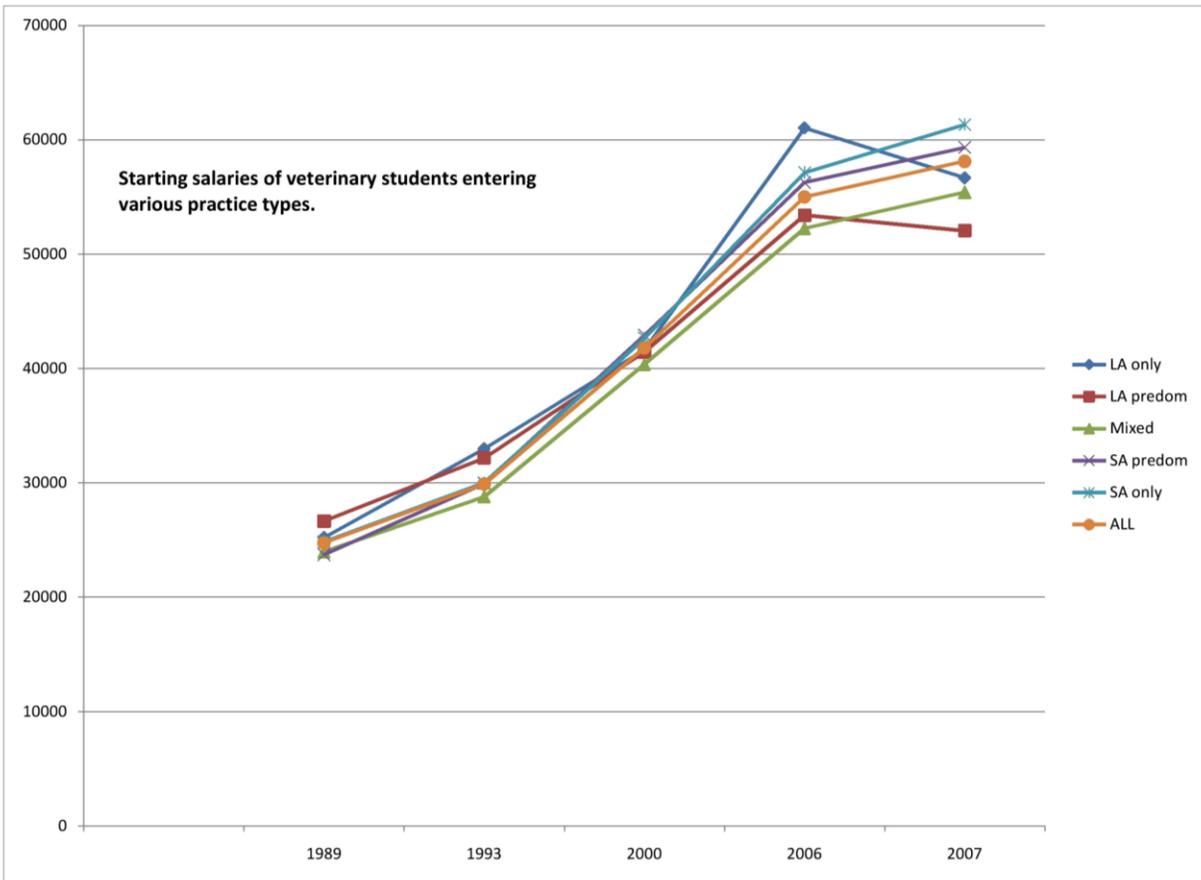


Figure 2. [\[back\]](#)

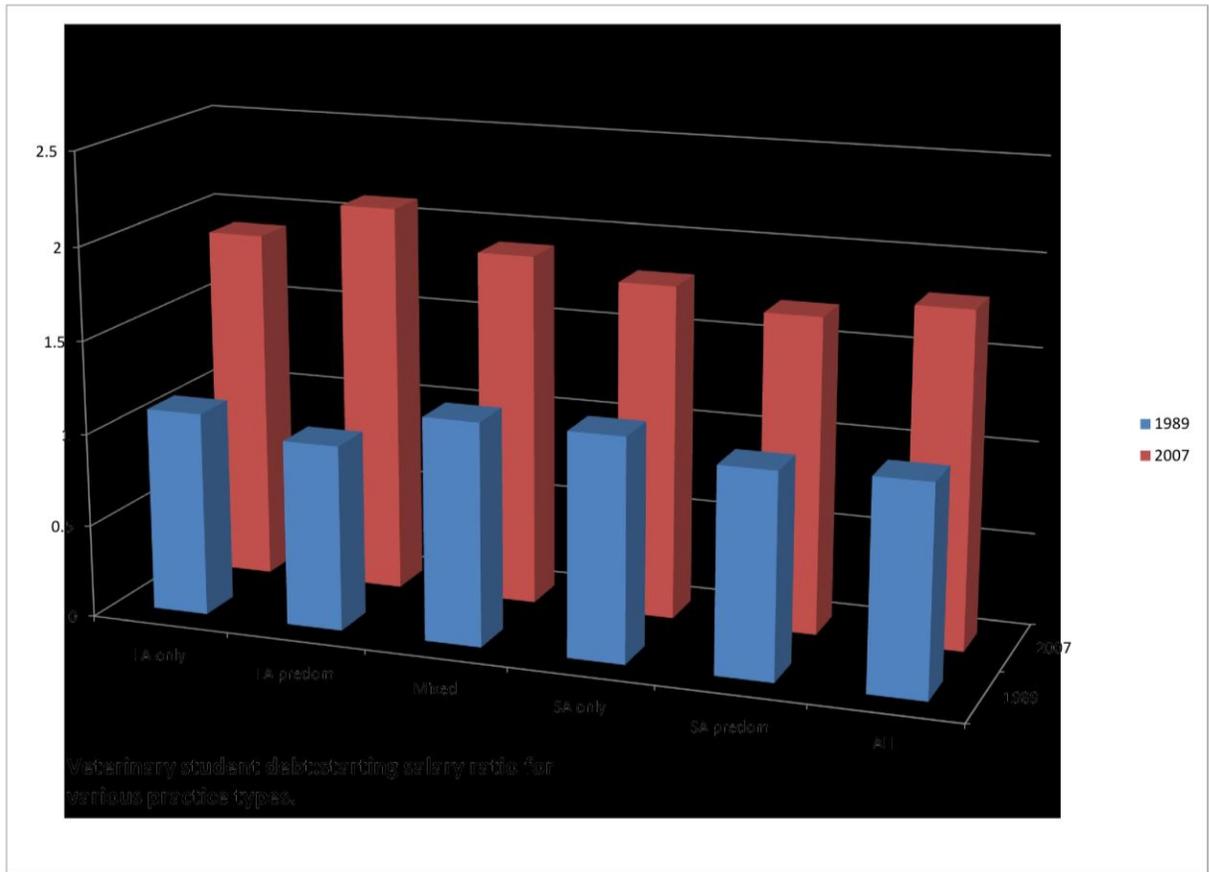
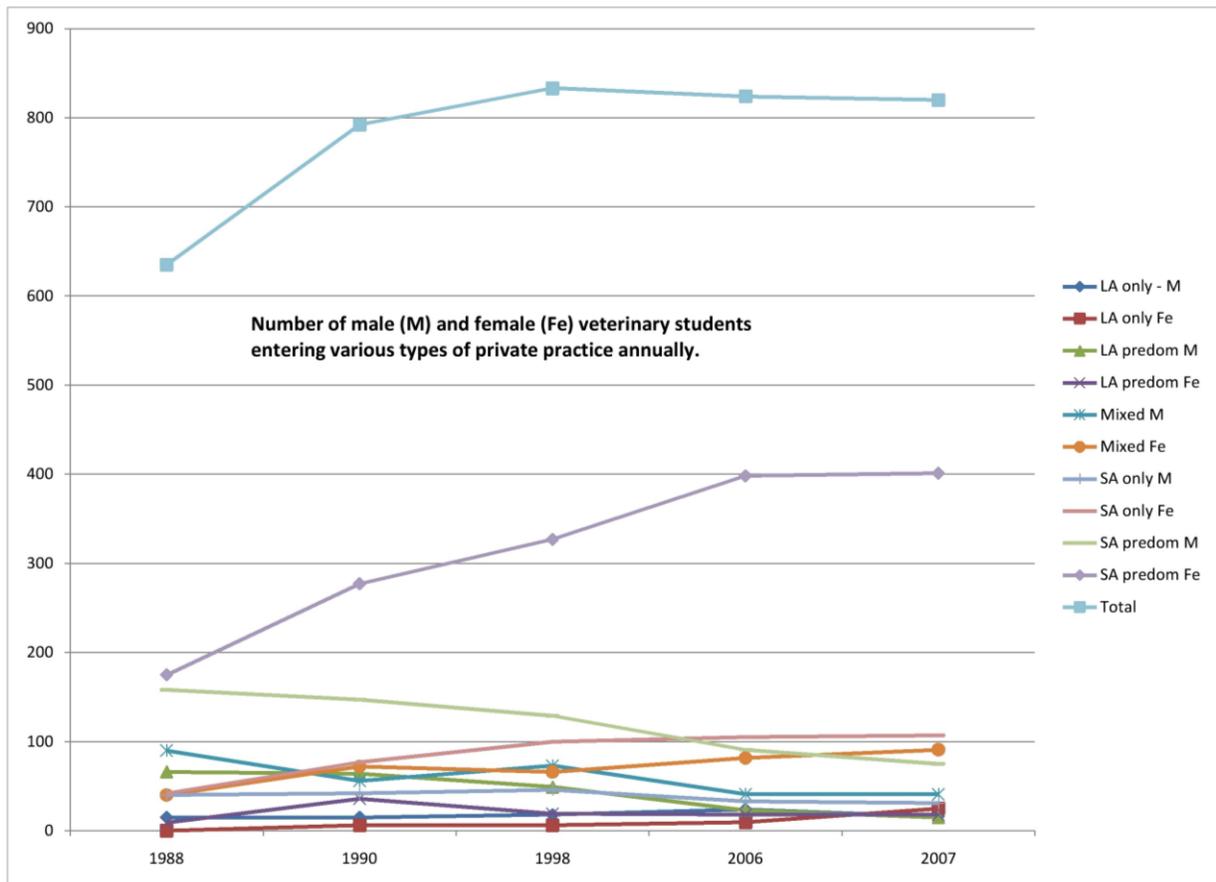


Figure 3. [\[back\]](#)



Editor Information

David E. Anderson ([back to top](#))

Dr. Anderson was raised in North Carolina in the small farming town of Oak Ridge. He earned both a BS degree in Animal Science and a DVM from North Carolina State University. He then completed an intensive rotating internship in large animal medicine and surgery at the University of Georgia and a Residency in Food Animal Medicine, Surgery, and Reproduction at Kansas State University. Dr. Anderson became a board certified specialist in surgery (Diplomate ACVS) in 1995. While at Kansas State University, he earned a MS degree in Clinical Sciences focusing on bovine surgery bone physiology and fracture repair. Dr. Anderson became Head of Food Animal Medicine and Surgery at Ohio State University where he developed techniques in minimally invasive surgery of ruminants



and founded the International Camelid Institute. The ICI is an information repository and continuing education center with participants from 17 countries around the globe. Currently, Dr. Anderson is Head of Agricultural Practices at Kansas State University in the Department of Clinical Sciences in the College of Veterinary Medicine. He continues development of novel surgical treatments of injuries that limit welfare and productive use of livestock. His research focus is in surgery of food animals with special emphasis on pain and welfare. In 2009, Dr. Anderson founded the International Academy of Farm Animal Surgery to provide a method for international exchange of information among veterinarians. The IAFAS has over 300 participants in 19 different countries.

B.J. White ([back to top](#))

Dr. Brad White received a D.V.M. from the University of Missouri-Columbia and worked for six years in a mixed animal practice in southeast Missouri. His emphasis in practice was beef cow-calf and stocker medicine and management. After practice he worked for two years in beef production medicine at Mississippi State concurrent with completion of his Masters degree. He is currently on faculty at the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine. His focus is beef production medicine and management, and currently works on research related to both cow-calf and stocker health and management.



Dr. White is a member of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Kansas Veterinary

Medical Association, American Association of Bovine Practitioners, Society for Theriogenology, and Academy of Veterinary Consultants.

Bob L. Larson ([back to top](#))

Dr. Larson was raised in northeast Kansas and attended Kansas State University where he received a bachelor degree in Animal Science. He stayed at Kansas State for his veterinary education and he received his DVM in 1987. After one year in mixed practice in Southeast Kansas, he returned to Kansas State to pursue a PhD in the Department of Animal Sciences and Industry. His graduate work focused on beef female reproduction and nutrition-reproduction interactions. He received his PhD in 1992 and returned to private practice for one year in Carthage, Illinois and three years in Abilene, Kansas. While in private practice, Dr. Larson worked primarily with cow-calf producers, backgrounding/stocker operations, and farmer-feeders.



In 1996, Dr. Larson joined the faculty at the University of Missouri as a veterinary beef production specialist where he worked on the Commercial Agriculture Program's Beef Focus Team, a multi-disciplinary team made up of veterinarians, agricultural economists, and animal scientists. In 2006 he returned to Kansas State University as the Coleman Chair of Food Animal Production Medicine.

Dr. Larson is board certified by the American College of Theriogenologists, the American College of Animal Nutrition, and the American College of Veterinary Preventive Medicine. He has served as the president of the Academy of Veterinary Consultants and the Evidence Based Veterinary Medicine Association, and he has served on committees for the American Association of Bovine Practitioners and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. His primary areas of interest are improving reproductive efficiency in cow herds and the integration of marketing, nutrition, health, production efficiency, and quality assurance in stocker and feedlot operations.

Bob and his wife Laura (DVM '92) have three daughters, Mariah (12 years), Karrin (9 years), and Annie (5 year).