

What should veterinary students expect?

By Ask Dr. Watts - Michael Watts/Community Columnist, ClevengersCorner.com

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Q: I am starting college this month and want to get into veterinary school. What advice do you have?

A: First, choose a major that you will enjoy. Many pre-veterinary students make the mistake of thinking they need to major in biology or chemistry. All veterinary schools have prescribed prerequisites that you will need to take before applying. These courses will include at least biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, biochemistry, math, statistics, and English. However, the remainder of your coursework can generally be whatever you please.

If you love history, it is likely you will get better grades taking history courses than in a required course on the molecular biology of plants for bio majors. Do not worry that you will not have enough science in your undergraduate years.

Believe me; you will get all the anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, and pharmacology you will need once you reach veterinary school.

You do not need to learn it all in undergrad. In addition, courses in business, history, philosophy, religion, the arts, and other “non-veterinary” subjects will help make you a well-rounded, balanced person. Your better grades will help you get admitted to veterinary school and your broad background will make you a more successful, interesting individual.

Second, contact the admissions department of any veterinary college you are considering. Do it now. Be sure to check with them every semester to be sure you are registering for the appropriate pre-requisites. This regular advice saved me an extra semester in my undergraduate career. I had registered for a biochemistry course that did not meet the requirements for one of the colleges to which I planned to apply. [The advisor](#) caught my mistake in time for me to make the appropriate change.

Third, use internships, self-directed electives, and summer jobs to broaden your exposure to the veterinary profession.

“I love animals” should not be the only answer you have when an admissions board asks why you want to be [a veterinarian](#). Most admissions boards want to see that you understand the wide range of knowledge [a veterinarian](#) is expected to have. Hands-on exposure to agricultural practice, equine medicine, small animal practice, research, and government or corporate positions will set you apart from many applicants. Given the shortage of public service veterinarians, an applicant planning on working in [food safety](#) or research may have an edge against the thousands who plan to enter small animal general practice.

Forth, find several mentors. Start with [a good faculty advisor](#) in your major. You should also have at least two veterinarians with whom you establish close working relationships. These people will be important in guiding you along the way. They will also be the ones who supply you with letters of recommendation when the time comes.

Finally, have fun ... but not too much. Your college years can be a source of valuable memories. Many people meet their spouses, best friends, or lifelong tailgating buddies in college. Many learn to appreciate sports, the arts, or religion. All-nighter studying, fights with a roommate, or partying a little too hard can teach you valuable life lessons.

If you focus only on your pre-veterinary studies, you will be developing narrow habits. You may get into veterinary school.

When you get there you will likely continue your hard work in your coursework and save time for little else. When you graduate, you will probably put in long, hard hours and may be a very “book-smart” doctor. However, you are less likely to enjoy what you have accomplished and less likely to be a successful practitioner.

In my opinion, veterinary practice is about people. It is about helping them make their lives better. It is about happiness and balance.

The most successful practitioners can talk to people. They can read emotions and respond to them. They can empathize. Much of that comes from life experience. So now that you are starting college, don't forget to experience life. And study hard, too.

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