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Recruitment of Veterinarians for Rural Communities through Education: The Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas

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Veterinarians are important members of rural communities and provide valuable services to both community members and the food production systems in these areas. The population of new veterinary graduates entering rural, mixed animal practice is decreasing and several studies have concluded that a shortage of veterinarians in this area is apparent. The Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas (VTPRK) was created to address the educational and financial needs of students entering practice in rural Kansas. The program provides a forgivable loan for a select group of students during veterinary school and specific courses to help prepare these students for success in rural practice.

Much has been written during the last ten years about the shortage of veterinarians practicing in rural communities throughout the United States.^{1, 2, 3} Likewise the number of new graduates from the twenty-eight veterinary colleges located in the United States dedicated to practicing in rural communities seems to be diminishing. This shift has been attributed to a decreased number of current veterinary students who have rural backgrounds, lack of social and cultural opportunities in many rural communities, the lack of suitable career opportunities for spouses of veterinarians in farm communities, increasing veterinary student educational debts at the time of graduation, and starting salaries for veterinarians in many rural communities.^{4, 5, 6} Also, as the veterinary colleges have expanded curriculum and faculty in response to the increasing demand for clinical specialties in small animals, the proportion of curriculum dedicated to food animal education has dwindled. Veterinarians play an important role in the social structure of rural communities and the loss of veterinary practices may be detrimental to a community as a whole.

Many veterinary students still express an interest in pursuing career choice in rural settings. However, financial constraints is one of the deciding factors when selecting a job.⁷ Long-term sustainability in practice is dependent on the ability of the veterinarian to generate an income adequate to provide living expenses, service a student debt load, and provide quality of life assurances. Student debt load upon graduation has increased dramatically in recent years; conversely, starting salaries have failed to keep pace.^{8, 9, 10} Financial incentives aimed at minimizing

educational debt may be a valuable method to keep students engaged as future veterinarians in rural practice.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has estimated that there are approximately 500 counties with significant populations of food animals throughout the United States that do not have resident veterinarians. There are more than 10 counties in Kansas that currently that do not have veterinarians residing in them. The current AVMA directory lists less than 20 veterinarians in Kansas who devote their entire practices to food animals. Many veterinarians in Kansas, who devoted their early careers to treating farm animals, have decreased the amount time and services for food animal practice. Factors contributing to this trend include the rigors of activities associated with large animal practice and the shifting animal populations and demands for veterinary services within veterinary practices.

Recognizing the impending shortage of veterinarians in private practice in rural Kansas, the Kansas legislature passed and funded HB 3005 in 2006. This bill was developed and implemented to provide encouragement, opportunities, and incentives for students pursuing veterinary medicine degrees at Kansas State University to locate their veterinary practices in rural Kansas immediately following graduation. The program also facilitates specialized training targeted to meet the needs of livestock producers and rural Kansas communities. Collectively the financial incentives and training program are known as the Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas (VTPRK).

The VTPRK program consists of financial incentives for students to practice in rural Kansas coupled with the training to provide the skills necessary to sustain success in rural practice. The Kansas HB3005 allows for up to five students in each class enrolled in the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree (DVM) program at Kansas State University to obtain \$20,000 annually as a loan to be used for educational expenses while enrolled in-good-standing in the veterinary professional curriculum. Each veterinary student in the program can borrow up to \$80,000 during the four years while completing his/her veterinary degree. Preference is given to those students who are Kansas residents and who are determined to practice in any county in Kansas with population bases of less than 35,000 people. Of the 105 counties in Kansas, 91 (87 %) meet the VTPRK population criteria.

Following graduation with the DVM degree, the educational loans obtained through this program are forgiven at the rate of \$20,000 per year if the veterinarian practices in a qualified rural Kansas community. Therefore, the \$80,000 borrowed by each of five students in each veterinary class can be totally forgiven within four years following graduation. Educational debt and a perception of modest incomes in rural practice are often cited by students as significant deterrents for new veterinary graduates desiring to practice in rural Kansas communities. The VTPRK program provides an incentive to find employment in a rural area of Kansas following graduation by removing or minimizing one of these economic obstacles from the student's deliberation.

While enrolled in the DVM degree program, students in the VTPRK program are expected to participate in additional activities designed to prepare them for not only living but also to become leaders in their rural communities following graduation. These activities vary from year to year and include training in public health, livestock biosecurity, foreign animal disease diagnosis, regulatory veterinary medicine, and the detection and prevention of zoonotic diseases. VTPRK students are

given specific information about rural demographics, rural sociology, and rural economics. Each VTPRK student is also required to complete several four-week externships with experienced veterinarians in rural Kansas during their four years in the veterinary curriculum.

A variety of resources are used to provide the VTPRK students with a well-rounded educational experience and prepare them for a sustainable rural career. Veterinary students in the program have received training at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center off Long Island, NY; the National Animal Disease Center in Ames, IA; the National Animal Disease Center in Riverdale, MD; and, through the Frontiers Program jointly sponsored by Kansas State University and New Mexico State University, the Office of the Livestock Commissioner of Kansas, the Kansas Health Department, the Kansas State University Center for Rural Engagement, and other programs. Each student in this program must satisfactorily complete online FEMA training in preparation to participate in the Kansas State Animal Response Team (KS-SART) program.

Each student in the VTPRK program is also required to enroll in a fourth year course entitled “Advanced Rural Food Animal Business Management” during his or her spring semester before graduation. Business management has been identified as one of the most important areas of need in education of future veterinarians.^{11, 12} The goal of this course is to provide an overview of basic business management skills pertaining to rural veterinary practice. Course material focuses on how basic business concepts impact the long term sustainability of the rural practice. Following one week of classroom discussion, each participant is required to spend three weeks in a rural practice in Kansas. During their time in the practice, the externs participate in normal veterinary activities and spend time observing the business aspects of the practice. At the conclusion of the externship, the student presents a seminar detailing their findings and incorporating the principles from the business class.

Since the inception of the VTPRK program, five veterinary students have graduated. Four are employed in rural practices in Kansas and the fifth has not yet accepted a job. The VTPRK program will be assessed on an on-going basis through monitoring of the careers of all participants. Assessments will determine if the program has been successful in increasing veterinary services in rural Kansas.

The VTPRK program demonstrates a serious dedication by the people of Kansas to help recruit new veterinary graduates to assist in rural and underserved communities. By eliminating the real or perceived barriers created by large educational debts, this program provides an attractive incentive for students to locate in rural Kansas.

A shortage in rural veterinarians has been identified in recent years and the Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas represents a method to help remedy the problem. The VTPRK combines a financial program with adequate training to provide new veterinary graduates with the tools needed for a long-term successful career in rural Kansas. This system can serve as a model for rural veterinary training programs in other parts of the country.

End Notes: Elmore, R.G. and B.J. White. "Recruitment of Veterinarians for Rural Communities through Education: The Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas." [*Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy*](#) (5.7, 2010).

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Author Information

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Dr. Ronnie Elmore has been a veterinarian for nearly 40 years. After earning his veterinary degree at the University of Illinois, he was in private practice in Ohio, on the faculty of the University of Missouri - Columbia, on the faculty of Texas A&M University and is currently on the faculty of Kansas State University.



Elmore is a board-certified Theriogenologist. He is active in local and national veterinary organizations and Rotary International. Elmore has always been interested in the relationship between animals and humans and has lectured widely on the subject of U.S. presidents and their pets. Elmore is a prolific writer, having published more than 250 journal and magazine articles, abstracts and book chapters. He has written a weekly column for Copley News Service for more than 30 years and is a popular speaker for both veterinary and non-veterinary groups. He lives in Manhattan, Kansas, with his wife, and neutered Welsh corgi.

Dr. Elmore has served as the Associate Dean for Academic Programs, Admissions, and Diversity at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University for more than twenty years.

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.

