Current veterinary students will become our future colleagues in practice, industry, government, and academia. The makeup of the profession will be determined by current and future student populations. The American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) publishes an annual data report that summarizes findings on student applicants, enrollment, and other aspects of academic veterinary medicine. The data on the current student population show trends that include increases in total enrollment and racial/ethnic diversity along with decreases in male student population.

To understand the data, the greater context of education, the economy, and the profession at-large must be considered. "It’s about the story behind the data,” says Lisa Greenhill, MPA, EdD, senior director for institutional research and diversity at the AAVMC. This is the story that will continue to impact the population of veterinarians in the future.

INCREASING ENROLLMENT
Enrollment in U.S. veterinary colleges increased 4.7% in the 2021 to 2022 academic year, with 3860 students enrolled in the class of 2025. In a profession where questions of veterinarian shortages are common, this increase could be beneficial if these students enter clinical practice, especially in underserved areas.

There is some debate about whether the current staffing challenges in veterinary practices are due to true workforce shortages or maldistribution of veterinarians and decreased efficiency due to workflow during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Greenhill says the AAVMC does not take a position on whether there is a need for more students, and the organization leaves it to institutions to determine appropriate class sizes.

A large factor in current increases in enrollment is due to the opening of new schools. It is unknown whether...
more veterinary schools will continue to open. Dr. Greenhill stated that for many established schools, available space in the facilities limits the current class sizes and will prevent continued growth. However, veterinary student enrollment could continue to increase through less traditional programs, such as new “2+2” programs where students spend their first 2 years at an institution and then move to an established veterinary school for the remaining 2 years of their schooling. Six schools currently offer similar programs. Alternatively, some schools in the United States, such as the University of Arizona, are modeling their programs after the veterinary schools in the Caribbean, which stagger the start of multiple classes throughout the calendar year.

Some may question whether continued increases in enrollment could lead to a change in the quality of students entering veterinary school and the profession. But Dr. Greenhill says she’s “never had a particular concern about the quality of applicants. The quality of our pool is very deep.” She stated that while the ratio of applicants to seats can vary from year to year, this ratio does not affect the quality.

INCREASED RACIAL/ETHNIC DIVERSITY

The lack of racial/ethnic diversity in veterinary medicine has been a persistent problem and a growing conversation in recent years. Thanks to the hard work of many organizations and individuals, racial/ethnic diversity in the profession is slowly improving. When it comes to the veterinary student population, the proportion of enrolled students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups continues to rise. In the most recent report, the population of U.S. veterinary students included 23.2% of students from underrepresented backgrounds.¹

We are “benefitting from decades of work devoted to increasing awareness and recruiting,” says Dr. Greenhill. A big part of improving diversity is focused on helping communities of color understand that becoming a veterinarian is an attainable goal that provides a broad range of professional opportunities. Continuing this education is necessary for continued growth in the diversity of the veterinary profession.

Dr. Greenhill notes that the applicant pool has shown a huge increase in diversity over the past 2 years. The population of Hispanic and LatinX students saw especially large growth, which is consistent with census data in the U.S. that shows this population to be one of the fastest growing. She suspects some of the increase in diversity may be a ripple effect from the pandemic and economic changes in the United States. Historically, when there is a dip in the economy, many view it as a good time to go to graduate school. Thus, students who may have been planning on veterinary school at some point could have accelerated their timeline for applying.

Whether diversity will continue to increase at the current rates remains to be seen. As of spring 2022, undergraduate enrollment had declined 9.4% from pre-pandemic numbers.² Populations that are most affected by enrollment decreases include those underrepresented in veterinary medicine, rural students, first generation college students, and low-income students. It is “hard to determine how many of our potential [veterinary school] applicants were impacted by enrollment declines,” says Dr. Greenhill. “I don’t think we will lose ground, but I’m not sure we will continue to see increases in the pool that we are currently seeing.”
Men represented about 12% of the applicant pool but made up 17.3% of the graduating class of 2025.

DECLINING MALE POPULATION
The third major trend seen in the veterinary student population is a continued decrease in students identifying as male. The percentage of men enrolled in U.S. veterinary schools decreased in the 2021 to 2022 report.\(^1\) While some may think there is active discrimination against men in the veterinary profession, the data do not support this theory. Men represented about 12% of the applicant pool but made up 17.3% of the graduating class of 2025.\(^1\) This shows a bias in favor of men in the veterinary school applicant pool.

Dr. Greenhill notes that a common question she hears in her work is why veterinary schools aren’t doing more to recruit men. But she says the more pertinent question is: “What is happening to men in education?”

“Men have not represented the majority of undergraduate students in decades,” shares Dr. Greenhill. In fact, only around 40% of men in the United States have education beyond high school.\(^4\) There are several factors that have influenced this decline of men in higher education. “Men and young boys are far more likely to get negative messaging about school,” she says. This messaging can start as early as elementary school, leading young men to question the investment in a college degree.\(^4\)

For men who do enter college and pursue a degree in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines, there is a tendency to pursue majors in technology and math. A big factor that is seen in larger data pools of men in education is the effect of starting salaries in a given career.\(^4\)

While debt can play a factor in career choice, it appears that the starting salary is the larger determinant of which disciplines men will pursue.\(^4\) “The majors [veterinary schools] tend to pull from are those with the lowest starting salaries [of the science majors],” says Dr. Greenhill. Unsurprisingly, men are underrepresented in these majors. “Even though salaries in vet med have increased, they are not on par with other STEM disciplines,” continues Dr. Greenhill. Veterinary medicine is faced with trying to recruit men from a population where they are already underrepresented and must compete with other STEM disciplines with higher starting salaries. When messaging about the feminization of the profession is combined with these factors, other STEM disciplines are often seen as more appealing to male students. Similar patterns have been seen in other female-dominated professions.

Dr. Greenhill says that to combat the continued decline of men in the veterinary field, efforts should be focused on improving messaging about education in general to male students as early as preschool and elementary school. Encouraging boys and young men to pursue advanced education is the first step to increasing the number of male applicants in the pool of prospective veterinary students. Additionally, improving the salaries of veterinary professionals will help to attract men and ultimately benefit all genders in veterinary medicine.

PROJECTING THE NEXT APPLICANT POOL
The AAVMC monitors trends, the current economic climate, and undergraduate enrollment numbers, which all affect the future applicant pool of veterinary students. Ultimately, some things can’t be predicted because “we haven’t lived through this type of scenario before,” says Dr. Greenhill. With a recent pandemic and the current economic downturn, only time will tell what trends in the veterinary applicant pool will continue. “We haven’t had a downturn in the [applicant] pool in a while,” says Dr. Greenhill, though these downturns have been seen historically. Despite a potential for decreased numbers of applications in the future, she is confident the quality of the applicant pool will remain strong.

One economic factor that may affect prospective veterinary students is the mere cost to apply. Dr. Greenhill noted that applicants who apply to more than 1 institution are more likely to get an offer, and the average applicant has historically applied to 4 or 5 schools. But with the current rates of inflation, the funds for applications don’t go as far. A fee waiver program is available for students from low-income backgrounds and is expanding thanks to a grant from the Merck Animal Health Foundation. Students who
apply for the program and receive a waiver can get a second application for free (bit.ly/3drR2eR).

THE FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION
While it might seem intuitive to assume that the 3860 students who enrolled in the class of 2025 will graduate in that year, this likely will not be the case. However, delays in graduation are very rarely due to attrition of students. Dr. Greenhill says that it is more common for students to delay graduation because of an enrollment in a dual-degree program or life circumstances beyond their control that require dropping back a class year. Ultimately, most students will graduate within 5 to 6 years of matriculation. Thus, the proportion of male veterinarians and those of underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds may not be quite the same in 2025 as the data show now, but these students should be expected to enter the veterinary workforce by 2027. **TVP**

References
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