

From Today's Students, Tomorrow's Research Leaders

By Herb Whiteley

Dean

It takes no more than a walk through the Zuschlag/ISVMA Veterinary Heritage Collection to see how veterinary research has benefited society and elevated our profession. From the discovery and eradication of hog cholera to present-day work on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies and a host of other biomedical concerns, veterinarians who engage in research have improved lives worldwide.

They have also formed the basis for current veterinary practice and provided continual advances to benefit our patients.

Veterinary researchers are in demand in academia, in government, and in industry.

Yet the need for veterinary researchers greatly outstrips the supply. A 2005 report from the National Research Council said this shortage is "due partially to declining interests in research among veterinary students." Their lack of interest, in turn, is attributable to the huge investment in time and money required to pursue a DVM and PhD, the little financial support for such students, and the minimal exposure to research provided to veterinary students. (1)

The College of Veterinary Medicine has been working hard to address this problem. To expose more veterinary students to research activities, we have conducted summer research programs for the past five years through our Center for Zoonoses Research. This program now has funding through Merck-Merial and the National Institutes of Health.

Nevertheless financial support for students will be the real key for encouraging budding researchers within our profession. We are presently revitalizing our Vet Med Scholars Program, which provides tuition waivers and stipends for veterinary students who simultaneously pursue a PhD.

When 254 prospective members of the Class of 2012 interviewed at the College on February 18, thirty applicants sought out Dr. Ned Hahn, associate dean for research and graduate studies, to discuss the Vet Med Scholars Program.

"They were a very diverse crowd," he reports, with interests ranging from engineering to snake immunology.

More than 40 of the applicants accepted into the DVM program in February were sent graduate program application materials. In mid April we will review the applications and invite two or three incoming students with demonstrated research interest into the Vet Med Scholars Program.

For our College in this era of budgetary austerity, investing in student-scholars is a significant financial commitment. Yet we recognize the potential risks if the need for veterinary researchers goes unmet. Who will address mounting concerns about national biosecurity and public health? Who will make discoveries to improve animal and human health? Who will teach future generations of veterinary students?

If you share our commitment to investing in the future of our profession by encouraging the next generation of veterinary researchers, I urge you to consider establishing a scholarship or fellowship in this area. Brenda Betts, assistant dean for

advancement, can advise you on a variety of giving options to put this within your reach. Contact her at 217/333-5545.

If we succeed in fostering veterinary researchers, someday soon we will be adding to the Zuschlag/ISVMA Heritage Collection. We will extend the story of Illinois contributions to the veterinary profession with a new cabinet highlighting the work of our veterinary scholar alumni.

1. National Research Council. *Critical Needs for Research in Veterinary Science*, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005; p. 7..