

Applying to Veterinary Medical Colleges as a University of Massachusetts Amherst Pre-Veterinary or Animal Science Major

Veterinary medical school admission is extremely competitive, with approximately 3,000 seats available in the US compared to over 20,000 human medical school seats. There are 2-2.5 times the number of applicants as there are available seats. The UMass Amherst Pre-Veterinary program is nationally ranked in the top five of college programs for future veterinarians. Of the 20-25% of our majors who apply to vet school, virtually all gain admission to at least one vet school and most students choose between multiple acceptances.

Most students intending to major in Pre-Veterinary enter as Animal Science majors. If they earn a 2.700 or better GPA in ten selected science classes, they have the option to enter the Pre-Veterinary major. The courses required to graduate with a Pre-veterinary major are specifically tailored to fulfill the course requirements of most veterinary medical, graduate, and medical schools and to prepare our majors for success in these programs. (see <http://www.vasci.umass.edu/undergraduate/pre-veterinary-major>). Students who change their mind about applying to veterinary medical school will benefit from an Animal Science careers seminar, career training classes and independent study opportunities and can graduate with a bachelor's degree in Pre-Veterinary, Animal Science Biotechnology concentration or Animal Science Animal Management concentration. The UMass Amherst Animal Science program is also highly ranked nationally.

Components of a successful veterinary college application

1) *Excellent grades.* Aim for a GPA of 3.5 or better. The higher the GPA, the higher number of veterinary medical college acceptances and the more options open to the student. A minimum of a 3.4 UMass Amherst GPA is predictive for admission to at least one US veterinary medical school; the average GPA of admitted veterinary medical school students in 2013 was 3.59. An "A" in a higher level science course (i.e. 400 and above) counts for more than an "A" in a lower level course. Veterinary college admissions look very carefully at your overall GPA and your grades in biology, inorganic and organic chemistry, biochemistry and advanced science courses as an indicator of whether you can pass the demanding veterinary school curriculum. Your grades will largely determine whether you can get into the vet school of your choice or get into any vet school straight out of college, since grades and GRE scores make up 60-70% of the decision. You can take a few classes during the summer session or at a community college, but not so many that it appears that you won't be capable of doing well in the many demanding courses taken at once in vet school (thirteen in the first semester at Tufts). If you have a very low GPA, you can rehabilitate your application portfolio by performing well on higher-level science courses that you take after graduation. Earning a master's or Ph.D. degree also helps.

2) *Excellent Graduate Record Exam (GRE) test scores.* This test is similar to the SAT, with verbal, quantitative, and written components. Plan on preparing to take the GRE no later than the fall of your junior year by going to the Educational Test Service website (<http://www.ets.org/gre/>), downloading the free Powerprep II software for Windows, working through a test preparation book or taking a course. You should start taking them by the spring of your junior year, so that you can take them more than once before the vet school application deadlines in September of your senior year. Taking the GRE twice is sufficient; taking the test three or more times looks suspicious. Do not take the test before you have prepared—a low

score will hurt your chances, even if you have a higher score later. A very high GRE could compensate for a lower than average GPA. It takes a high GPA to make up for a low GRE.

3) *Veterinary medical related experiences.* You need three experiences of at least 200 hours each, chosen from the following four areas: a) Large animal b) Small animal c)

Wildlife/conservation d) Laboratory research. Veterinary medical colleges prefer applicants with an open mind about animal species since their mission is to teach you the material that you will be tested on the National Veterinary Licensing exam in your fourth year of veterinary medical school. They are judged on the basis of the percent of their students who pass the licensing exam, so they have a vested interest in your interest in all of the species covered. Thus, it's a mistake to have two or three veterinary medical-related experiences centered on small animals or horses, even if you think that's what you will specialize in as a veterinarian.

Conversely, if you are interested in a veterinary specialty (e.g. zoo medicine), make sure that you gain experience in that area. These experiences can be pursued during the school year or during the summer, but keep in mind that it might be easier to find an opening in a vet clinic near home than near Amherst, where you'll be competing with all the other pre-vet students. Summer experiences may also be more exotic (i.e. internship at an aquarium). These experiences are required so that the veterinary colleges are assured that you have a comprehensive grasp of the veterinary medical profession and so that you can cultivate contacts who will write superlative recommendation letters for you. Document your experiences daily (hours worked, what species) so that you can fill in details on your applications years later. Remember that veterinary medicine is just as formal as human medicine. Just as you would defer patient questions to the M.D. if you were working in a human clinic, you should defer all client questions on the diagnosis or treatment of their animals to the D.V.M. It is a good idea to periodically ask your supervisor for feedback on your performance and to implement their suggestions.

4) *Superlative recommendation letters* (minimum 3). One to two will be from contacts from your veterinary medical related experiences, and one to two will be from an academic advisor or a professor from a science class. At least one of the recommendation letters should be from a veterinarian. Once you've identified candidate references, ask them if they feel that they could write you a strong letter of recommendation for vet school. You don't want a lukewarm letter of recommendation and it's no fun to write one, so both of you will benefit from this. Recommendations consist of two parts. In the first part, the recommender is asked to rate you on your emotional stability, initiative/originality, motivation, personal and social maturity, dependability, communication skills, integrity, intellectual capacity, leadership and ability to work with others. Your goal in your veterinary medical related experiences and in your interactions with your professors is to convince the recommender that you deserve the highest rating in all of these categories. There is a question about whether you can handle large and/or small animals adequately, but the choices are "yes", "no" or "not able to judge". The veterinary schools are interested in your psychological profile and how you interact with other people, who will be your classmates, professors, and clients. The assumption is that you can interact satisfactorily with animals, or you wouldn't be applying to veterinary medical college. The second part of the recommendation is a letter. When you ask someone to write a letter of recommendation, send them your resume/CV to make writing a strong letter as easy as possible. List all your work, veterinary medical related, and extracurricular activities, with phrases underneath each activity pointing out how this activity proved you have the character traits listed above (e.g. "Cashier at a supermarket for five years—demonstrated dependability and integrity in handling large sums of money"). Your letter writers will use this information in their ratings

and their letter. If there's a weakness in your application (i.e. low grade in Chemistry 111 because of a death in the family), discuss it with them so that they can help you make your best case.

5) *Personal statement/ essay questions.* Start working on your personal statement early (June after junior year) and have other people read it and make suggestions. Think about it from the perspective of the admissions counselor, who has to read thousands of these personal statements. Don't put the admissions counselor to sleep. Don't make the mistake of using platitudes ("Helping animals is very rewarding"), dwelling on how long you've wanted to be a veterinarian ("...since I was *in utero*."), how much you love animals ("I love my cat/dog/horse/iguana."), or how you were motivated to become a vet because of an emotional response to the death or rescue of an animal. Avoid a reiteration of your veterinary medical related experiences. Instead, demonstrate that you've thought deeply about the profession of veterinary medicine. For example, identify emerging trends and challenges in veterinary medicine, issues in animal welfare, and influential cases you've seen and conversations you've had. Relate these to your goals and the contribution you plan to make to the field of veterinary medicine.

6) *Choice of veterinary medical colleges.* You will have to decide whether you only want to go to one veterinary school (maybe the one in your state of residence), or whether it's more important to you to start veterinary college the fall after you graduate with a B.S. The highest ranked veterinary schools are very selective. Most students apply to a range of schools, from their dream school to their safety schools. Consult with members of the Pre-Veterinary advisory committee on your choices. Your odds of getting into a veterinary school are affected by whether a veterinary school has reserved spots for residents of your state. You may want to establish residency in another state by working there after you graduate (attending school there doesn't count). If you want to go to a specific school, go ahead and apply even if your odds are low.

7) *Excellent interview.* Prepare for the interview by reading American Veterinary Medical Association discussions on current veterinary medical controversies. Find out about the job opportunities and starting pay for DVMs. The average debt for a graduating DVM is \$165,000, so you should have a plan for paying it back. Research the veterinary school so that you're prepared with questions about their program, financial aid, etc. Make sure you know your own application inside and out—it looks very bad if you can't tell your interviewer about your own record and experiences. Read what other interviewees have written at:

<http://schools.studentdoctor.net/schools/?view=medical>

Timeline:

High school and Freshman year

— Veterinary medical related experiences in small or large animal, wildlife, or laboratory research.

— Investigate Veterinary college and career choices on the AAVMC website and the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Sophomore year

— Veterinary medical related experiences in small or large animal, wildlife, or laboratory research.

— Investigate Veterinary college programs. Make sure you will have all necessary prerequisite classes for the veterinary colleges you are considering applying to.

— January: Decide whether you will apply to the early admissions program at Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. Work on application during the January break. Ask evaluators if they would be willing to write a supportive evaluation and letter for you, as described below for a senior.

— March: Early admissions deadline for Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. If you don't get in, schedule an appointment with an admissions counselor from May-August to go over your application with you.

Junior year

— Veterinary medical related experiences in small or large animal, wildlife, or laboratory research.

— Decide which Veterinary colleges to apply to.

— Fall: start preparation for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE)

— Winter: look at the VMCAS site and start to familiarize yourself with it. This will be useful to start gathering all the details the application requires.

— Spring to summer: take the GRE one to two times. Check allowable frequency of test taking on GRE website— minimum spacing could be no more frequent than once every 30 days. Check the individual vet schools' GRE deadline requirements on the VMCAS website to make sure that you will start taking the GRE early enough. When you take the GRE, arrange for your scores to be sent directly to the vet schools to which you are applying.

— Mid May between Junior and Senior year: VMCAS site opens. Start working on your application now! Filling out the information will take a considerable amount of time, so do it now, when you are not busy with classes. Write the first draft of your personal statement and other essays. Plan to show these to multiple people and go through at least six drafts. Request official transcripts from all universities that you've attended to send transcripts to VMCAS. Prepare and send supplemental applications to veterinary colleges that require them. Two US schools (Texas A&M and Missouri for residents) use their own application process, so if you apply to one of these schools, you will have to ask your evaluators to submit their evaluations and letters through their websites in addition to the VMCAS.

— May-July: Contact your evaluators to ask them to write a strong letter of recommendation for you. Supply them with an unofficial transcript and a resume that makes all the points you want to appear in the evaluation and the letter. You can register up to six evaluators on VMCAS; a

minimum of three evaluators is required. Follow up with your evaluators as to whether they have received an email from VMCAS or schools with their own applications giving them access to the evaluation website. Let them know the deadline— VMCAS won't send your application without three evaluations.

Senior year

— August-September: VMCAS applications are due **September 15**. Try to finish and submit your VMCAS application by August to avoid last-minute issues. Remind your evaluators of the deadline by sending them an email thanking them for completing the evaluation and letter by that date. Submit any required supplemental applications and follow up with the veterinary colleges to make sure your applications are complete.

— December-Spring: Prepare for interviews. If you are not successful this round, make an appointment to talk to a veterinary medical school admissions counselor in a school to which you have applied about the weaknesses in your application and consider what you should do to remedy them, whether you should change which veterinary medical colleges you apply to in the following fall, or whether you should implement “Plan B” and pursue a different career path. Many people who do not gain admittance immediately after college will eventually do so.

Resources

- aavmc.org/v16updates.aspx

- Veterinary Medical School Admissions Requirements, published yearly by Purdue University Press

- Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association

<http://avmajournals.avma.org/loi/javma>

- Careers in veterinary medicine, vet school requirements, VMCAS link, scholarships and financial aid for veterinary students

<http://www.aavmc.org/Students-Applicants-and-Advisors.aspx>

- VMCAS updates

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Veterinary-Medical-College-Application-Service-VMCAS/119971444705528>

- AAVMC updates

<http://www.aavmc.org/Pre-Vet-Student-Resources/Newsletter.aspx>

- Graduate Record Examination (GRE)<http://www.ets.org/gre/>

UMass Pre-Veterinary Advisory Committee

Dr. Janice Telfer, Ph.D.

Ph.D.: Harvard University

Post-doctoral training: California Institute of Technology

Current Specialty & Area of Scholarship: Research scientist in immunology & developmental biology using rodent and large animal models;

Associate Professor at UMass Amherst, Undergraduate Program Direct

Dr. Katherine Beltaire, D.V.M. Board Certified by the American College of Theriogenology
Veterinary College: Tufts University
Veterinary Residency: University of Illinois
Current Specialty & Area of Scholarship: Farm Animal Medicine, Surgery, and Reproduction
UMass Farms Clinical Veterinarian, Lecturer at UMass Amherst

Dr. Rafael Fissore, D.V.M., Ph.D., Board Certified by the American College of Theriogenology
Veterinary College: Argentina
Veterinary Residency: University of California Davis College of Veterinary Medicine;
Ph.D.: University of Massachusetts Amherst;
Post-doctoral experience: Brigham & Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School
Current Specialty & Area of Scholarship: Research scientist in Animal Health (Reproduction & Developmental Biology)
Professor at UMass Amherst, Chair of the Department of Veterinary and Animal Sciences

Dr. Carlos Gradil, D.V.M., M.S., Ph.D., Board Certified by the American College of
Theriogenology;
Veterinary College: University of Lisbon, Portugal;
Veterinary Residency: Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine;
M.S. & Ph.D.: University of Minnesota;
Post-doctoral training: University of Ottawa, Canada
Current Specialty & Area of Scholarship: Academic veterinarian, reproduction specialist with
clinics at UMass Amherst and Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University;
lectures in equine health and reproduction and diseases of livestock and horses
Extension Professor at UMass Amherst