



The Montana-WICHE Veterinary Medicine Workforce Partnership

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has provided Montana's students with affordable access to veterinary medicine programs for more than 55 years through its Professional Student Exchange Program (PSEP). Some 525 doctors of veterinary medicine (DVMs) from Montana have been educated through WICHE. Educating veterinarians through this regional program is a sound investment for several reasons. It is economical, it builds a veterinary workforce with diverse skills, and it gives Montana residents preferential admission and access to some of the highest quality colleges of veterinary medicine in the nation.

- **Montana's Return on Investment.** In 2012-13, Montana appropriated a total of \$1,050,000 to cover the resident/nonresident tuition differential for 35 veterinary medicine students who enrolled through WICHE's PSEP, at a cost to the state of \$30,000 per student. The participating veterinary medicine students pay an average of \$22,963 in resident tuition and fees per year towards their education (2012-13). Nine of the 35 veterinary medicine students will graduate in Spring 2013.
- **The Cost Difference.** Over a four-year period, the state spends roughly \$120,000 (using 2012-13 rates) to educate one DVM through WICHE, and the student pays an average of \$91,851 over four years in resident tuition and fees at one of the three colleges of veterinary medicine participating in the WICHE program.
- **WICHE Access to High-Quality and Diverse Education.** Montana is served by three diverse and well-established colleges of veterinary medicine (CVMs) which produce graduates who possess the knowledge needed to practice in the various branches of veterinary medicine. WICHE's partner programs are fully accredited and operate full service veterinary teaching hospitals. WICHE's Cooperating Colleges of Veterinary Medicine are: Colorado State University (CSU – 18 Montana students enrolled) in Fort Collins; Oregon State University (OSU – 2 Montana students enrolled) in Corvallis; and, Washington State University (WSU – 15 Montana students enrolled) in Pullman.
- **Capacity to Enroll More WICHE-Sponsored Students.** An additional 70 students from within the WICHE region could have enrolled in the 2012-13 academic year at CSU, OSU or WSU had additional state support been provided. In 2012, the state supported only nine new students out of 32 certified applicants (28 percent). It's also important to note that additional capacity in the WICHE region is on the horizon. Two fully accredited programs have expressed interest in becoming WICHE partners: the University of California Davis School of Veterinary Medicine and the Western University of Health Sciences College of Veterinary Medicine. In addition, Midwestern University's Glendale campus is opening a college of veterinary medicine and will enroll its first class of 100 students in Fall 2014.
- **Attracting DVM graduates to practice in rural areas in Montana.** The shortage of veterinarians in the rural West is a challenging problem. The average student debt load for DVM graduates nationally is \$140,000. When many students first enroll in veterinary school they plan to specialize in food animal practice with the intention of returning to rural areas when they graduate, but once they've amassed high levels of debt, they often turn to companion animal practice in the urban areas because it is more lucrative. To encourage more DVM graduates to practice in underserved rural areas, Montana could develop a rural DVM loan repayment program as it has done for human medicine.
- **Workforce shortage or distribution problem?** According to the National Academy of Sciences Study on veterinary medicine published in May 2012, there is a geographical distribution problem of DVMs in rural locations, and too few DVMs who are well trained in high-need areas. Many DVMs carry high debt loads that they cannot service with low rural salaries. The study suggests the use of veterinary technicians supervised by fewer DVMs as a more cost effective approach in these rural locations. It also encourages CVMs to educate more students in the areas of herd health, because food production trends favor much larger farms. Finally, it recommends that CVMs focus on developing DVM expertise in the areas of infectious diseases, public health and environmental toxicology—branches of veterinary medicine where there are significant workforce shortages.
- **Montana's policymakers and higher education leaders oversee WICHE's program.** Montana WICHE Commissioners are: Clayton Christian, commissioner of higher education, Montana University System; Kim Gillan, state senator; and, Sheila Stearns, commissioner of higher education emerita, Montana University System. Montana members of WICHE's Legislative Advisory Committee are: Sen. Bob Lake; Rep. Kris Hansen; and, Sen. Kim Gillan. In addition, members of WICHE's Veterinary Medicine Advisory Council meet annually to review WICHE's veterinary medicine program. Members include deans of participating schools of veterinary medicine, state veterinary medicine association leaders, state legislators, pre-veterinary medicine advisors, and key veterinary practitioners.

Building a Diverse Workforce

The three colleges of veterinary medicine provide WICHE students with a broad education that enables students to enter a wide variety of professional careers. At each of the colleges, the courses and clinical experiences address large and companion animal health issues and the relevance of animal diseases to public health. Each of the colleges prepares practice-ready veterinarians, provide state-of-the-art diagnostic clinical facilities and services, and provide students with research opportunities alongside world-class researchers. During their four years in veterinary school, WICHE PSEP students gain hands-on clinical experiences at their university's veterinary teaching hospitals and can pursue a wide variety of specializations, depending on their interests:

- Colorado State University (CSU) specializes in cancer research, infectious disease, environmental health, orthopedics, animal reproduction and more.
- Oregon State University (OSU) focuses on disease prevention, comparative medicine, public health, and food safety, as well as gain experience with large-scale farming operations.
- Washington State University (WSU) specializes in companion animal, food systems/agriculture and equine practices, and offers students research experiences in neuroscience, infectious disease, reproduction, cancer biology, and global animal health.

Montana's Service Return Policy for WICHE PSEP Graduates

A 2006-2007 WICHE study showed that 56 percent of Montana DVM's who graduated between 2001 and 2005 through the WICHE program returned to the state to practice. Montana is an "honor system state" that does not contractually obligate PSEP graduates to return to Montana to serve, although an expectation is established when WICHE support is awarded. By comparison, states that require their PSEP graduates to return to their state and serve averaged a 74 percent return rate. Each state determines its policy on service or financial payback requirements for its graduates.

For More Information, Contact:

Jere Mock, Vice President of Programs & Services, WICHE
TEL: 303.541.0222, jmock@wiche.edu

Margo Colalancia, Director of Student Exchange, WICHE
TEL: 303.541.0214, mcolalancia@wiche.edu

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How WICHE's Professional Student Exchange Program Works

State legislatures appropriate funds to buy access to seats for their residents at other institutions within the 15-state WICHE region. The funds are administered through WICHE's PSEP and are sent to the enrolling institutions. The "price" for each seat (called a "support fee") is negotiated between WICHE and the cooperating programs. It is designed to cover the difference between resident and nonresident tuition levels, with a small incentive for the enrolling institution to save seats for residents from WICHE states. Each state decides how many students it can support in each field.

The "support fee" is sent directly to the enrolling institution for each student. WICHE does not charge any PSEP administrative fees to the state, nor to the student, nor to the enrolling institution. WICHE administers PSEP as one of the many benefits for its state members that pay annual dues. Fiscal year 2013 dues are set at \$125,000 per state and support an extensive array of WICHE programs.



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