
Chapter 14

Student Career Focus Switching Survey

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the primary decision factors that cause veterinary students to switch from one career focus area to another. Additionally, this survey will provide insight into when students switch career focus areas, the rate of switching that is present among veterinary students, and an analysis of which areas students are switching out of and into.

Methodology

Sample

The Deans at all 32 colleges of veterinary medicine in the United States and Canada were contacted and asked to participate in the survey by supplying email contact information for their second and fourth year veterinary students. Tremendous support was received with 19 colleges providing email listings directly to us and another 13 colleges agreeing to send out the survey directly to their students. The survey was administered in April of 2005. Three waves were sent out in one week increments. The survey was sent to 1,590 valid email addresses of second and fourth year veterinary students with 759 students responding, resulting in a 47.7% response rate. Responses were received from students at all 32 colleges of veterinary medicine in the United States and Canada. The questionnaires were approved by the FSVMC and AAVMC.

Methodology (continued)

Cover letter / Survey / Constructs

Second and fourth year veterinary students were sent an email message from the research team that explained the purpose of the research, identified the sponsoring organizations, and invited them to participate in the study. A web URL was included in the email message that linked to the online survey. The survey was pretested and sent out in three waves separated by one week increments in order to increase response rates. A variety of questions were asked in this research instrument including occupational focus area including original career focus area upon entering veterinary medical school, new career focus area – if changed, factors that influenced the respondents decision to switch to a new career focus, when focus area switched – if changed, and open ended responses for why their career area had changed.

Non-response Bias

Statistical analyses were carried out for non-response bias. A wave analysis with the Student's t-test was used to look for differences between early and late returns. This provides some information about whether the data from completed questionnaires are biased by the likelihood of non-response. The wave analysis method assumes that subjects who respond less readily are more like non-respondents. Using the t-test for two sample proportions and a 95 per cent level of confidence, it was found that there were no significant differences between early and late returns for items in the questionnaire at the 0.05 level. Since the study did not involve sensitive issues, it was concluded that there was no compelling reason to believe that the response group systematically possessed different response tendencies from non-responders.

Overall Findings from Student Career Focus Switching Survey

- **Sixty eight percent of second and fourth year students planning to spend 2/3rd or more of their time working with food animals grew up in a community with a population under 10,000. Among students planning to spend 1/3rd to 2/3rd of their time working with food animals 58% grew up in a community with a population under 10,000. Comparably, 24% of students *not* planning to work with food animals grew up in a community with a population under 10,000; while 52% of these students grew up in either a suburb of a large city or a community larger than 50,000 (12% grew up in a city larger than 500,000).**
- **Forty five percent of respondents expected an annual income in the \$60,000 to \$79,000 range five years after graduation. Another 25% expected annual income in the \$80,000 to \$90,000 range. On average, male annual income expectations are higher than those of females.**
- **Those students planning to enter food animal careers are more satisfied with their career choice and more committed to spending a lifetime in their career choice area than those students planning to enter other veterinary occupational areas.**

Overall Findings from Student Career Focus Switching Survey (continued)

- **Approximately 21% of fourth year students report changing their career focus area to something that is different from the original career focus area they had in mind when they entered veterinary medical school.**
- **Career focus switching takes place in nearly equal amounts across all four years of veterinary school. That is, students that switch do so at nearly equal rates across their four years.**
- **Those switching out of food animal veterinary medicine were most likely to switch to a mixed practice**
- **The overwhelming reason that students change their career focus area while they are in veterinary medical school is because they developed new interests as a result of their veterinary course work. Other reasons given include better compensation in the new area, greater enjoyment of new area, and spousal employment concerns.**

Overall Findings from Student Career Focus Switching Survey (continued)

Compared to those switching out of companion animal medicine, those switching from food animal medicine to a new career focus were more concerned with:

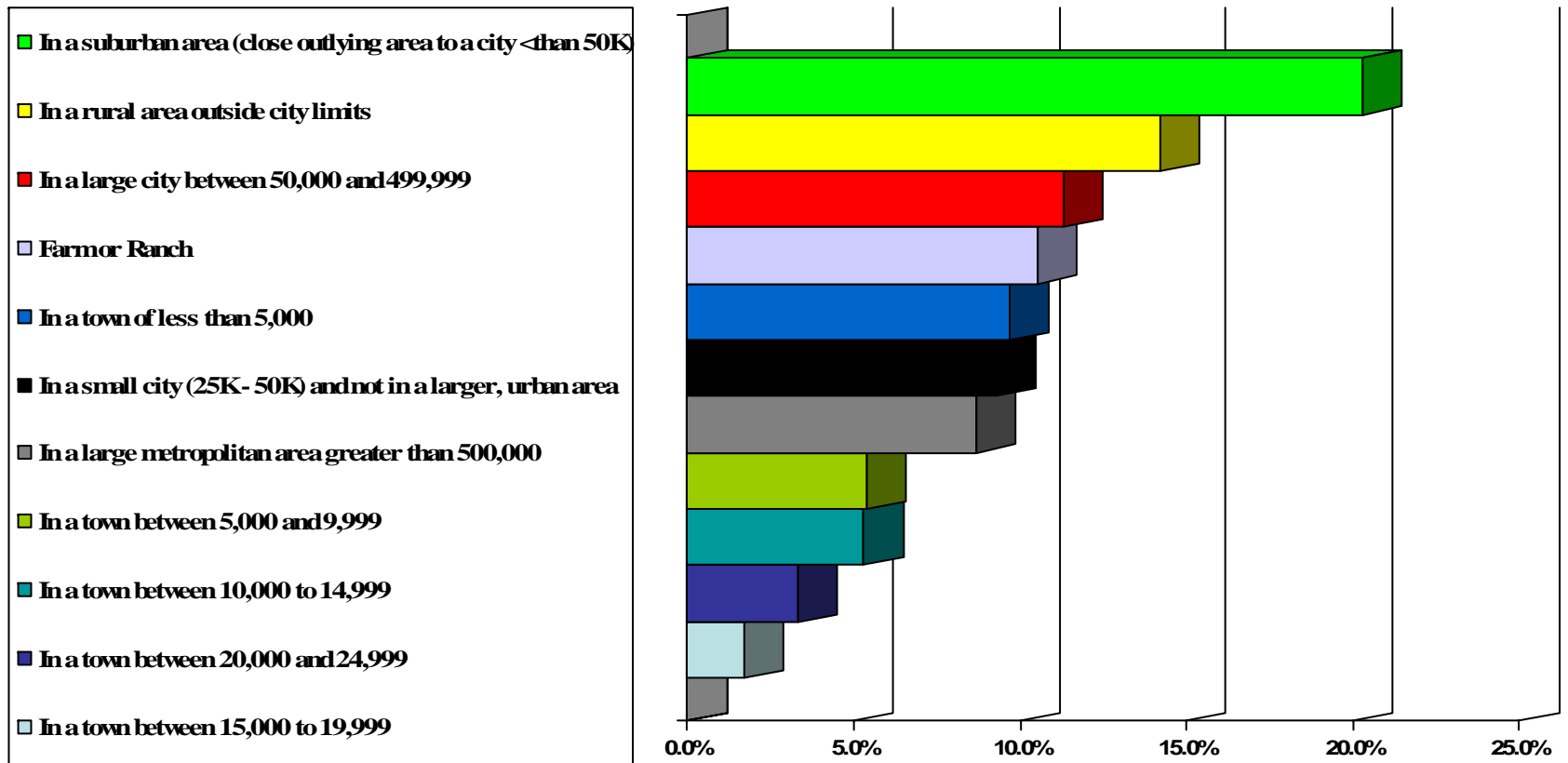
- (1) The heavy time demands associated with being on-call in a food animal career.
- (2) Not being able to make full use of their medical/surgical skills in a food animal career.
- (3) Not being able to earn enough in salary to efficiently pay off their student debt load in a food animal career.
- (4) Inadequate career opportunities available for their spouse in the areas they would live as a food animal veterinarian.
- (5) The demands placed on them associated with excessive travel needed to serve food animal clients.
- (6) The heavy physical demands of food animal veterinary work.
- (7) High levels of gender discrimination from clients in a food animal career.
- (8) The perceived lack of available recreational and cultural activities in the areas they would live as a food animal veterinarian.
- (9) The limited number and variety of retail stores and restaurants in the areas they would live as a food animal veterinarian.
- (10) Objections about their career area from their significant other or spouse.

Respondent Demographic Profile

- **31% of respondents came from suburban areas and large communities, with a sizeable group (14%) from ranches or farms. The distribution of an ideal place to live mirrors the community-size-grown-up-in data.**
- **Respondent undergraduate degrees are primarily from biological sciences (54%) and agriculture (26%).**
- **Over 42% of the respondents are 20 to 24 years in age with another 41% between the ages of 25 and 29.**
- **Female respondents accounted for 81% of the sample with 93% being Caucasian.**
- **38% of respondents are married or cohabiting, while 60% having never been married.**
- **45% of respondents expected an annual income in the 60K to 79K range five years after graduation. Another 25% expected annual income in the 80K to 99K range. On average, male income expectations are higher than those of females**

Childhood Community size

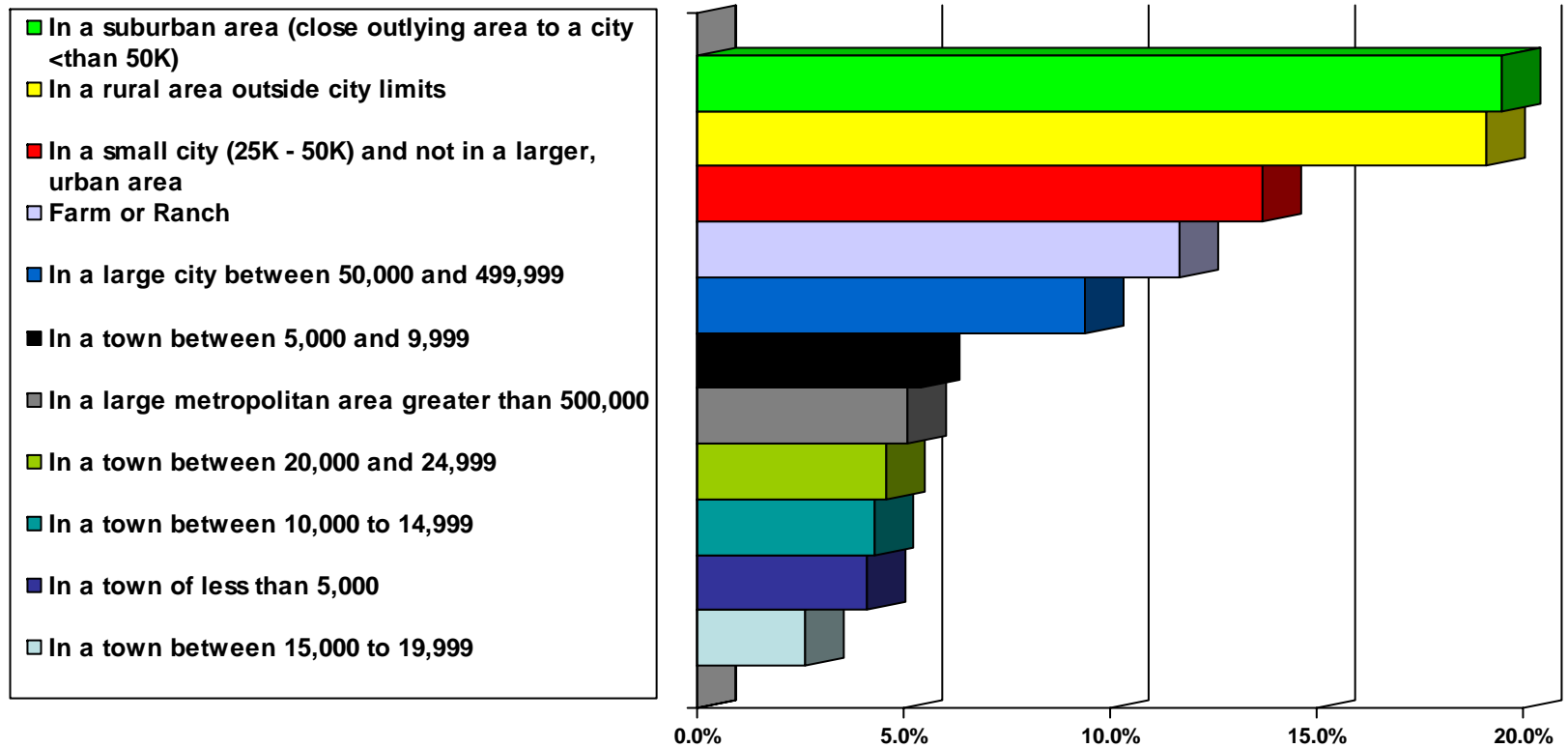
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q90: What is the size of the community in which you spent the majority of your childhood?

Ideal Community Size to Live After Graduation

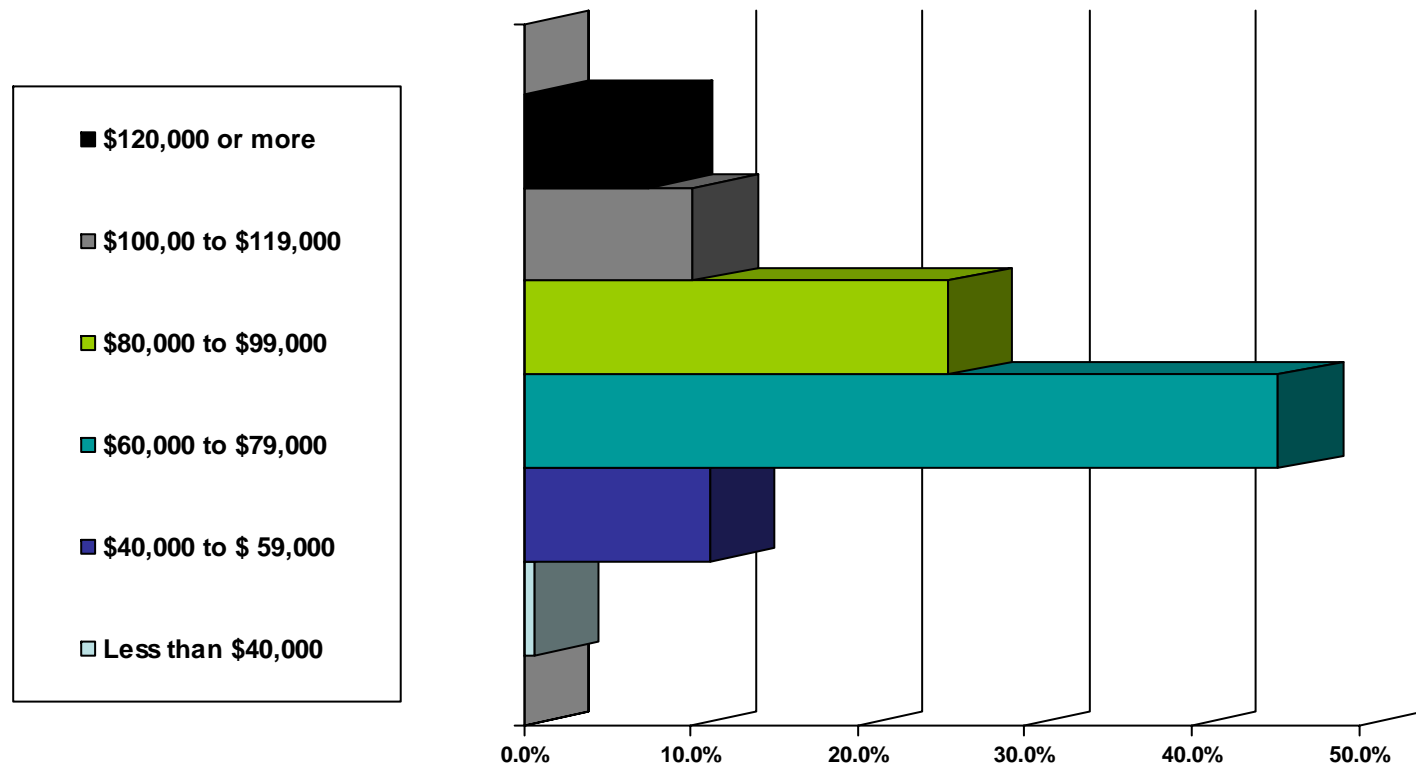
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q91: What is the size of the community where you would ideally like to live?

Estimated Salary 5 Years After Graduation

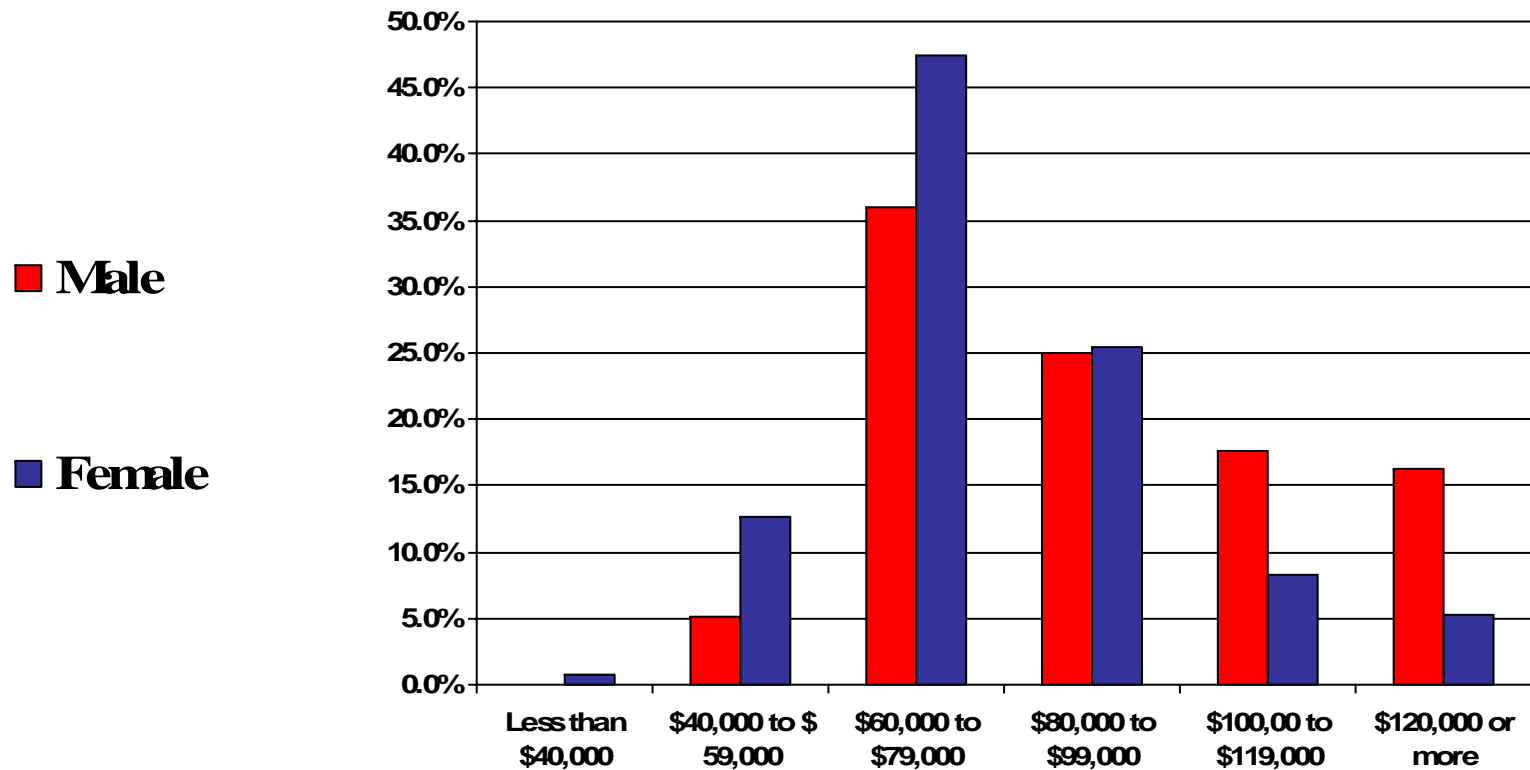
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q93. Which category below best describes the annual income you think you will make from your veterinary medicine work after 5 years on the job?

Estimated Salary 5 Years After Graduation by Gender

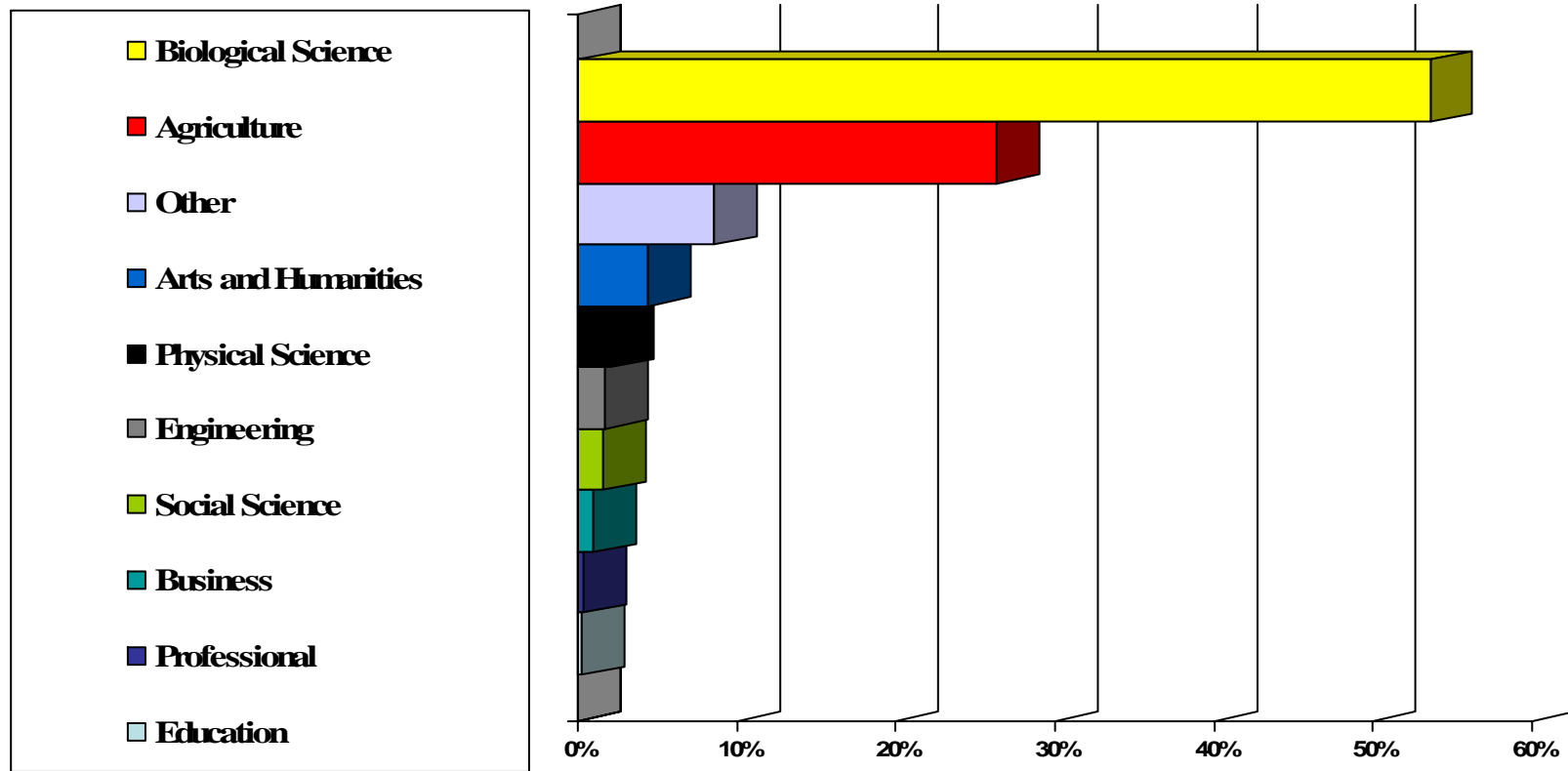
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q93. Which category below best describes the annual income you think you will make from your veterinary medicine work after 5 years on the job?

Undergraduate Major

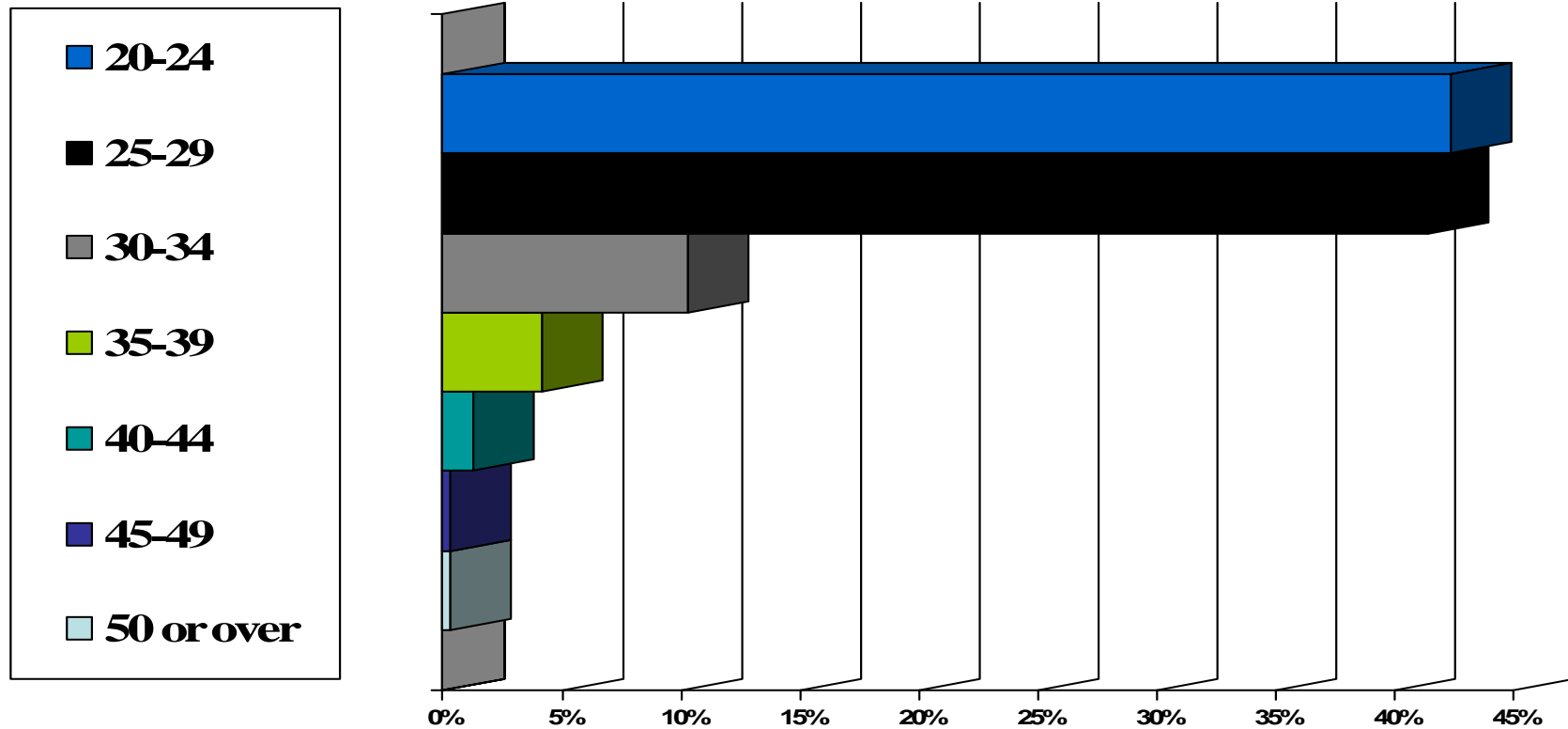
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q96: In which area was your undergraduate major?

Respondent Age

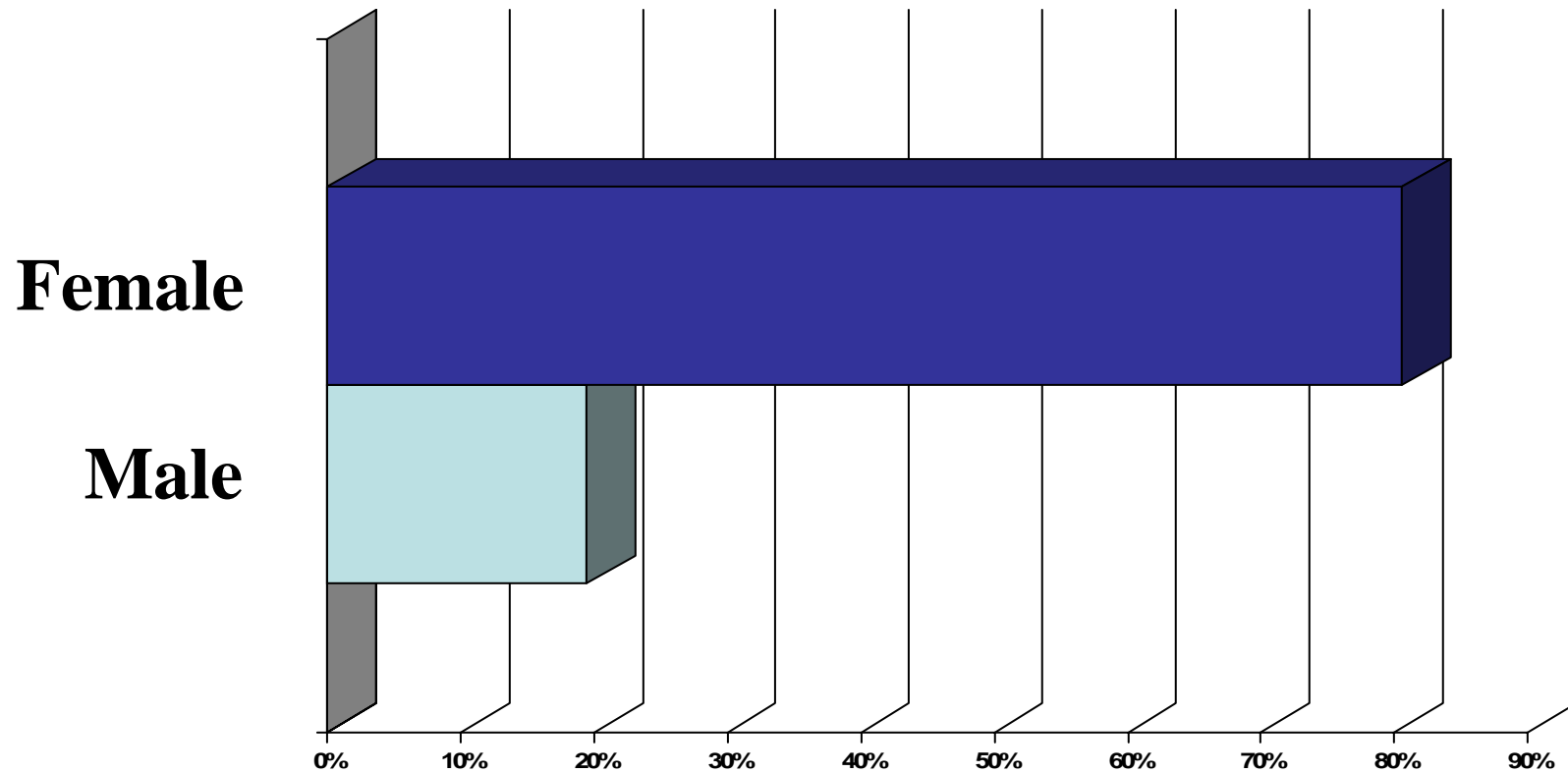
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q97: What is your current age?

Respondent Gender

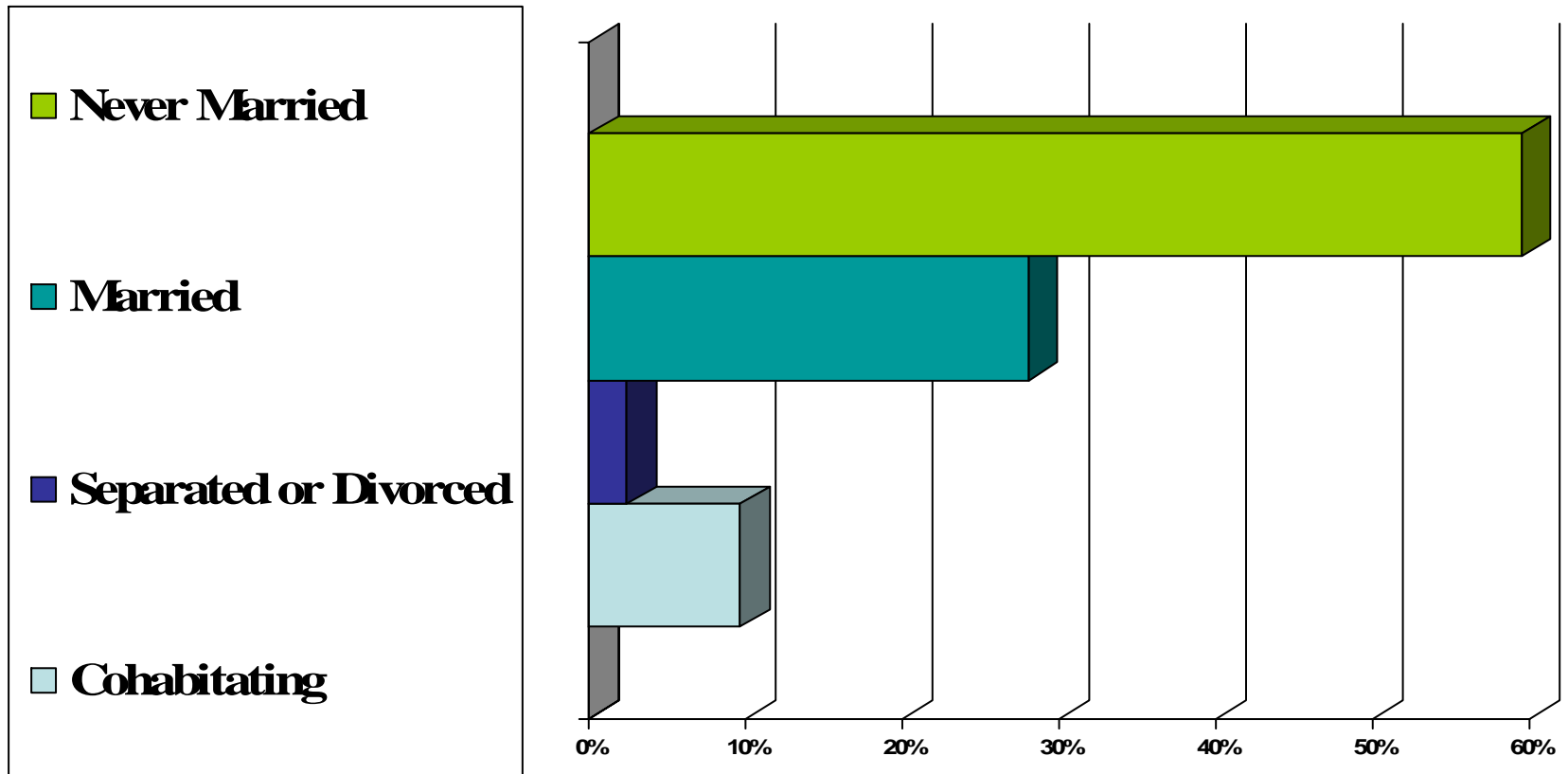
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q98: What is your gender?

Respondent Marital Status

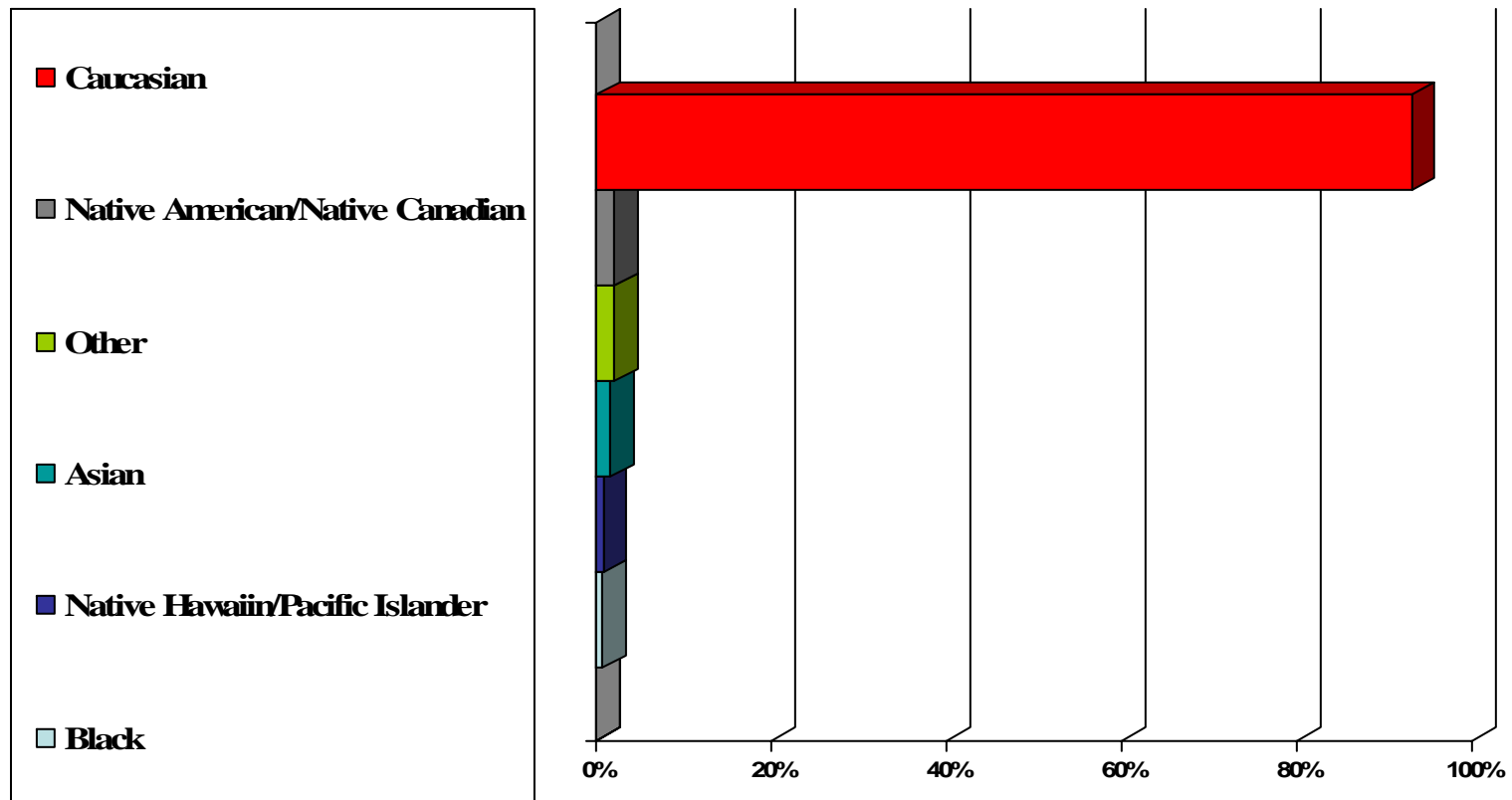
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q99: What is your marital status?

Respondent Racial / Ethnic Background

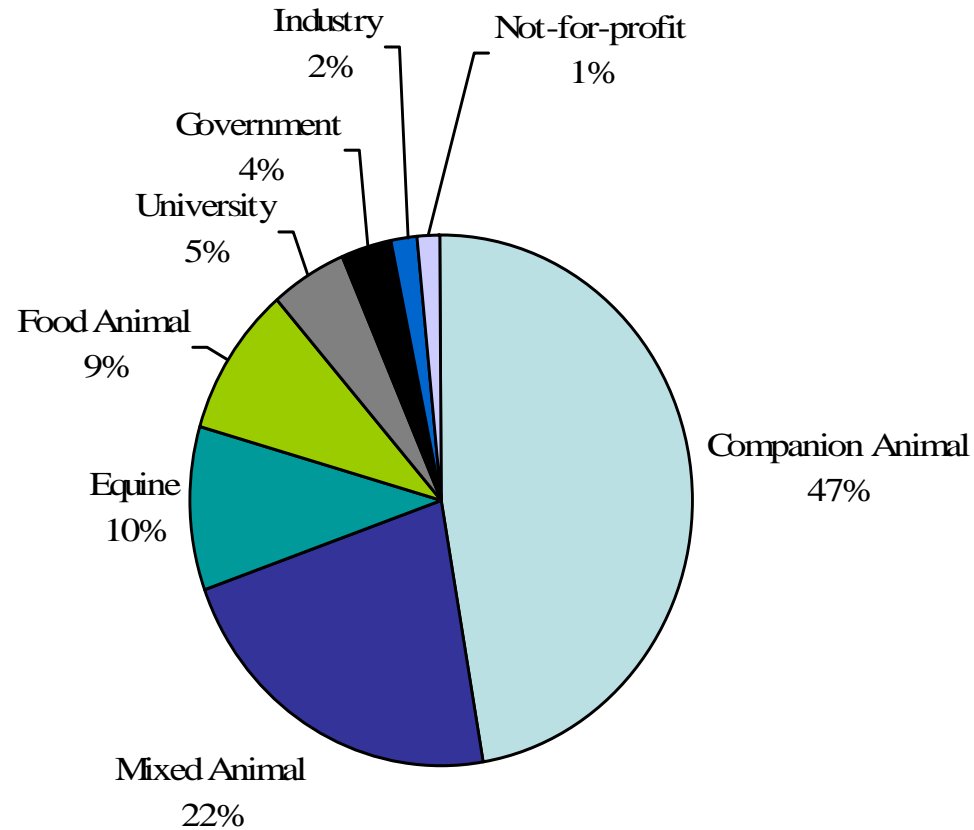
Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Q100: Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background?

Planned Occupational Area

Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents



Summary of Career Focus Switching Behaviors

- **Approximately 18% of all respondents changed their career focus area from what it was when they first entered veterinary college.**
- **Students interested in a University career had the highest rate of switching (25%) to a different career focus area, followed by Mixed Animal (23%), Equine (21%), Food Animal (18%), and Companion Animal (16%).**
- **Fourth year student respondents reported changing career areas in nearly equal amounts across their four years in school with a slight leaning towards the latter years of the program.**
- **If they changed their career focus, those students entering veterinary college with a food animal predominant or food animal exclusive career focus were most likely to switch to a mixed animal focus (only 10% of the switchers originally interested in food animal medicine switched to companion animal). Both mixed animal students and equine students most popular area to switch to is companion animal, while companion animal students were most likely to switch to mixed practice.**
- **Those that have maintained the same career focus area throughout veterinary college report a higher level of commitment to their area than those students who have changed career areas.**

Switching Of Career Focus Area While In School

- ◆ Respondents were asked to identify their original career focus area when entering veterinary medical school (e.g., food animal, mixed practice, companion animal, equine, industry, etc.) and, if they had changed, their current career focus.
- ◆ Current career focus area is different from career focus originally planned when entering school at the following rates:
 - ◆ 17% of second year students switched areas
 - ◆ 21% of fourth year students switched areas

Percentage Switching Out of Occupational Area

Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents

Original Occupational Area	% in original area switching to new area
Food Animal	18.5 %
Mixed animal	23.3 %
Companion animal	16.1 %
Equine	21.6 %
University	25.0%

When Do Students Switch Career Focus Areas?

Based on fourth year students who have switched

Year in School Career Focus Changed	Percentage
First Year	18.5%
Second Year	22.2%
Third Year	31.5%
Fourth Year	25.9%

Q58: What year were you in veterinary medical school in when you decided to change your career focus?

From – To Switching Analysis

Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents who reported switching areas

Original Area	Most common new area	Second most common area
Food Animal	Mixed (45%)	Equine (18%)
Mixed animal	Companion (69%)	Government (11%)
Companion animal	Mixed (52%)	University (21%)
Equine	Companion (50%)	Mixed (25%)

Analysis of responses to Q2 (Which one occupational area are you most likely to make a lifetime career commitment to when you graduate?) and Q16 (Which one occupational area did you *originally* plan on committing to when you *first entered* veterinary school?)

No Differences in Switching

There is no difference between switchers and non-switchers on the following variables:

- **Gender**
- **Size of town grew up in**
- **Size of town want to live in**
- **Marital status**

Occupational Commitment Between Switchers and Non-Switchers

Among all second and fourth year veterinary student respondents

Item	Switcher Mean	Non-Switcher Mean	F-value	Significance level
I am very likely to make a lifetime commitment to this occupational area in veterinary medicine (Q3)	5.73	6.14	24.384	.000
I am very unlikely to change from this occupational area in veterinary medicine over the course of my lifetime (Q4)	4.43	5.00	17.275	.000
I get a strong sense of identity from making a lifetime commitment to this occupational area in veterinary medicine (Q5)	5.01	5.51	16.615	.000
I am satisfied with making a lifetime commitment to my occupational area in light of my veterinary career expectations (Q8)	5.64	5.94	11.902	.001
I am satisfied making a lifetime commitment to my occupational area when I compare it to other areas of veterinary medicine (Q9)	5.60	5.96	15.061	.000
My interest in the occupational area of veterinary medicine that I am focusing on now came about by chance (Q10)	3.45	2.54	49.554	.000

Analysis of Variance using Q14 (The occupational area I currently plan to enter is different from the occupational area I had in mind when I first entered veterinary medical school) to group respondents (Very Strongly Disagree to Neutral = Non-Switcher, Somewhat Agree to Very Strongly Agree = Switcher).

Why Students Change Career Focus Areas While in Veterinary School

- **Forty different factors that could influence one to change their career focus were rated by those who switched career focus areas. New interests developed in the student's veterinary courses were overwhelmingly rated as having the most influence. Indeed, the other 39 factors had means below the scale midpoint and less than 50% agreed with each statement.**
- **In response to an open ended question the top five factors leading those who changed career focus to do so were: (1) exposure to new area in veterinary school, (2) new area is better compensated, (3) new area is more personally enjoyable, (4) difficult for spouse to find employment in rural geographic area, and (5) a desire to practice high quality, hands-on medicine.**

Major Factors Examined for Understanding Student Motivation to Switch Career Focus Area

Examined 40 different factors

1. **Veterinary courses developed new interests**
2. **Interactions with other students about original career area**
3. **Lack of flexible work hours in original career area**
4. **Poor balance between work and family in original career area**
5. **Heavy time demands from on-call in original career area**
6. **Too much time working evenings or weekends in original career area**
7. **Faculty mentor encouraged new area**
8. **Difficult to get time off fro vacations in original career area**
9. **Not enough use of medical/surgical skills in original career area**
10. **Difficult to arrange time off for parental/family responsibilities in original career area**
11. **Uncertain work hours in original career area**
12. **Must live in undesirable geographical area in original area**
13. **Lack of clear path for advancement in original career area**
14. **Too much veterinary competition in original career area**
15. **There are too few good jobs in original career area**
16. **Could not efficiently pay off student debt from salary earned in original career area**
17. **Hassles of running a business in original career area**
18. **Clients expect very low fees in original career area**
19. **Low compensation in original career area**
20. **Inadequate career opportunities for my spouse in areas that I would be employed**

Major Factors Examined for Understanding Student Motivation to Switch Career Focus Area

Examined 40 different factors

21. Not enough hands on work with animals in original career area
22. Limited flexibility in pricing veterinary services in original career area
23. The client base is too small in original career area
24. Reduced demand for veterinary services in original career area
25. Not enough interaction with other people in original career area
26. Excessive travel to serve clients in original career area
27. Lack of respect from clients in original career area
28. Work was too physically demanding in original career area
29. Too much gender discrimination in original career area
30. Difficult to forge lasting client relationships in original career area
31. Poor quality medicine being practiced in original career area
32. Inadequate retirement benefits in original career area
33. Inadequate health care benefits in original career area
34. Limited recreational and cultural activities in areas that I would be employed
35. Inability to form professional relationships with other DVMs in original career area
36. Lack of retail stores and restaurants in areas that I would be employed
37. There is a lack of good quality, affordable housing in areas that I would be employed
38. Work is too dirty in original career area
39. Significant other or spousal objection to original career area
40. Parental objection to original career area

Top 5 Factors Leading Students to Switch Career Areas While In School

- 1. Veterinary courses developed new interests**
- 2. Interactions with other students about original career area**
- 3. Lack of flexible work hours in original career area**
- 4. Poor balance between work and family in original career area**
- 5. Heavy time demands from on-call in original career area**

Percentage Distribution of Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas

	Percent Agree	Percent Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Veterinary courses developed new interests	75	25	5.08	1.72
Interactions with other students about original career area	43	57	3.85	1.78
Lack of flexible work hours in original career area	36	64	3.42	1.82
Poor balance between work and family in original career area	33	67	3.40	1.86
Heavy time demands from on-call in original career area	36	64	3.39	1.99
Too much time working evenings or weekends in original career area	35	65	3.35	1.91
Faculty mentor encouraged new area	33	67	3.29	1.84
Difficult to get time off from vacations in original career area	30	70	3.28	1.85

Percentage Distribution of Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas (continued)

	Percent Agree	Percent Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Not enough use of medical/surgical skills in original career area	30	70	3.18	1.99
Difficult to arrange time off for parental/family responsibilities in original career area	27	73	3.11	1.80
Uncertain work hours in original career area	26	74	3.07	1.84
Must live in undesirable geographical area in original area	25	75	2.98	1.95
Lack of clear path for advancement in original career area	25	75	2.95	1.82
Too much veterinary competition in original career area	20	80	2.91	1.71
There are too few good jobs in original career area	24	76	2.85	1.82
Could not efficiently pay off student debt from salary earned in original career area	21	79	2.84	1.76

Percentage Distribution of Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas (continued)

	Percent Agree	Percent Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Hassles of running a business in original career area	18	82	2.81	1.67
Clients expect very low fees in original career area	20	80	2.80	1.64
Low compensation in original career area	19	81	2.78	1.66
Inadequate career opportunities for my spouse in areas that I would be employed	16	84	2.71	1.71
Not enough hands on work with animals in original career area	20	80	2.71	1.81
Limited flexibility in pricing veterinary services in original career area	13	87	2.65	1.43
The client base is too small in original career area	16	84	2.65	1.56
Reduced demand for veterinary services in original career area	15	85	2.64	1.53

Percentage Distribution of Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas (continued)

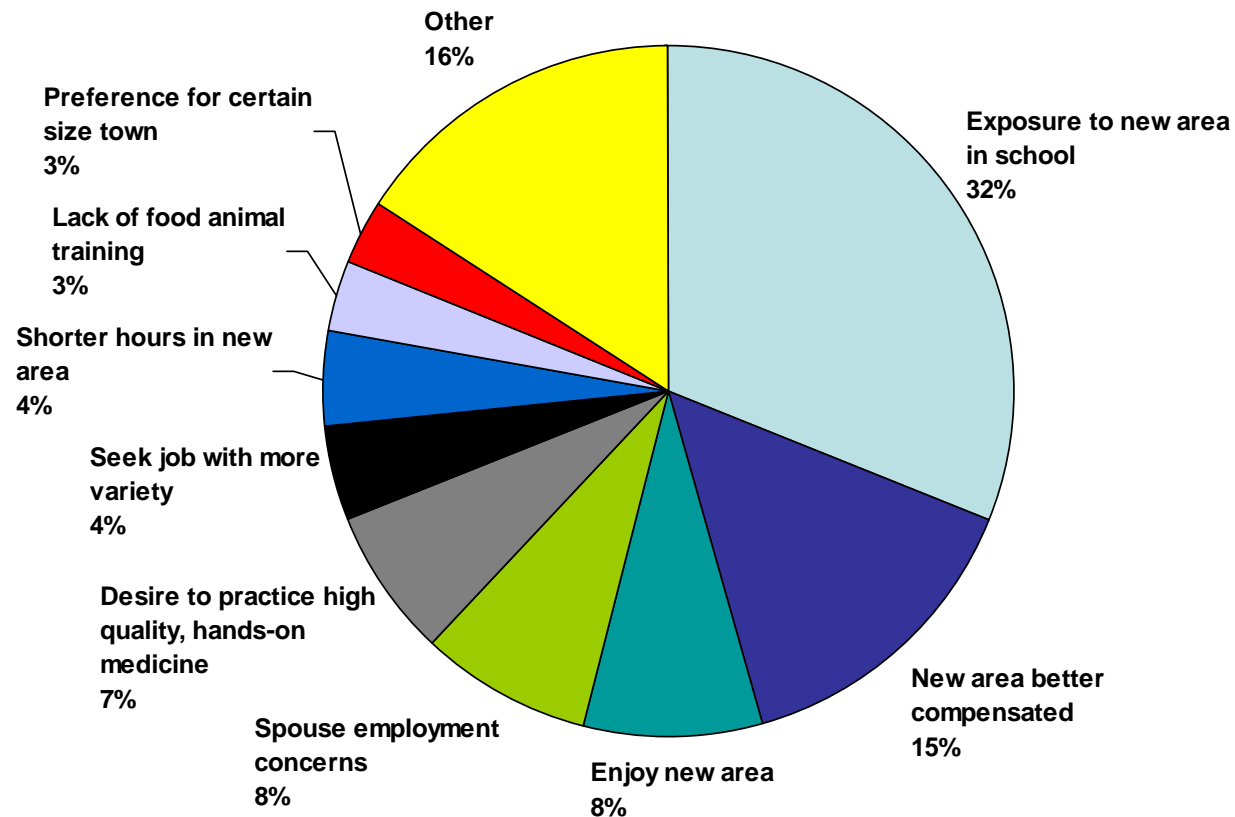
	Percent Agree	Percent Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Not enough interaction with other people in original career area	15	85	2.61	1.59
Excessive travel to serve clients in original career area	16	84	2.57	1.62
Lack of respect from clients in original career area	15	85	2.55	1.53
Work was too physically demanding in original career area	17	83	2.53	1.66
Too much gender discrimination in original career area	16	84	2.53	1.65
Difficult to forge lasting client relationships in original career area	11	89	2.51	1.51
Poor quality medicine being practiced in original career area	13	87	2.46	1.58
Inadequate retirement benefits in original career area	9	91	2.44	1.40

Percentage Distribution of Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas (continued)

	Percent Agree	Percent Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inadequate health care benefits in original career area	9	91	2.43	1.41
Limited recreational and cultural activities in areas that I would be employed	12	88	2.41	1.49
Inability to form professional relationships with other DVMs in original career area	9	91	2.36	1.34
Lack of retail stores and restaurants in areas that I would be employed	7	93	2.17	1.34
There is a lack of good quality, affordable housing in areas that I would be employed	4	96	2.17	1.18
Work is too dirty in original career area	5	95	2.10	1.23
Significant other or spousal objection to original career area	6	94	2.06	1.33
Parental objection to original career area	3	97	1.87	1.12

One Critical Reason That Changed Your Career Focus

Based on all second and fourth year students who changed career focus during school



Q57: What was the one critically important reason that you changed your career focus? (open ended responses)

Switching Factor Differences Between Original Career Focus Areas

- **Compared to those switching out of companion animal medicine, those switching from food animal medicine to a new career focus were more concerned with: (1) heavy time demands associated with being on-call, (2) not enough use of their medical/surgical skills , (3) not able to efficiently pay off student debt from salary, (4) inadequate career opportunities for their spouse, (5) excessive travel to serve clients, (6) physically demanding work, (7) high levels of gender discrimination, (8) limited recreational and cultural activities, (9) a lack of retail stores and restaurants, and (10) significant other or spousal objection to career area.**

Differences in Perception Among Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas by Original Focus Area

	Occupational area switched from			
	Food Animal	Mixed Animal	Companion Animal	Equine
Veterinary courses developed new interests	4.77 ^{ab}	4.98 ^{ab}	5.48 ^b	3.94 ^a
Heavy time demands from on-call in original career area	4.77 ^a	4.11 ^a	2.77	4.35 ^a
Faculty mentor encouraged new area	3.15 ^{ab}	3.38 ^{ab}	3.81 ^a	2.12 ^b
Not enough use of medical/surgical skills in original career area	4.46 ^a	3.22 ^{ab}	2.55 ^b	3.29 ^{ab}
Uncertain work hours in original career area	3.23 ^{ab}	3.76 ^b	2.79 ^a	2.35 ^a
Too much veterinary competition in original career area	2.31 ^{ab}	2.16 ^a	3.32 ^b	3.18 ^{ab}
Could not efficiently pay off student debt from salary earned in original career area	4.08 ^a	3.67 ^a	2.31 ^b	2.35 ^b
Clients expect very low fees in original career area	3.46 ^{ab}	3.44 ^a	2.50 ^b	2.29 ^{ab}
Low compensation in original career area	3.23 ^{ab}	3.31 ^a	2.45 ^b	1.94 ^b

Within a row, means with the *same* superscript are not significantly ($p < .05$) different from each other.

Differences in Perception Among Factors Causing Veterinary Students to Switch Career Focus Areas by Original Focus Area

	Occupational area switched from			
	Food Animal	Mixed Animal	Companion Animal	Equine
Inadequate career opportunities for my spouse in areas that I would be employed	3.77 ^a	2.69 ^{ab}	2.34 ^b	2.94 ^{ab}
Excessive travel to serve clients in original career area	3.54 ^a	3.00 ^a	2.06 ^b	3.00 ^{ab}
Work was too physically demanding in original career area	3.77 ^a	2.87 ^a	1.97 ^b	2.82 ^{ab}
Too much gender discrimination in original career area	3.77 ^a	2.87 ^{ab}	2.15 ^b	2.24 ^b
Poor quality medicine being practiced in original career area	3.15 ^{ab}	3.13 ^a	2.15 ^b	2.18 ^{ab}
Inadequate health care benefits in original career area	3.38 ^a	2.69 ^{ab}	2.34 ^{ab}	2.00 ^b
Limited recreational and cultural activities in areas that I would be employed	3.38 ^a	2.80 ^{ab}	2.16 ^b	2.12 ^{ab}
Lack of retail stores and restaurants in areas that I would be employed	3.23 ^a	2.58 ^{ab}	1.97 ^b	1.88 ^b
Significant other or spousal objection to original career area	2.92 ^a	2.18 ^{ab}	1.76 ^b	1.71 ^b

Within a row, means with the *same* superscript are not significantly ($p < .05$) different from each other.

Occupational Commitment Differences by Current Career Focus Area

- **In general, compared to other occupational areas, those students planning to enter food animal careers are more satisfied with their commitment to their career choice and more committed to spending a lifetime in that career.**

Differences in Occupational Area Commitment and Food Animal Career Knowledge by Current Occupational Area

	Current Occupational Area			
	Food Animal	Mixed Animal	Companion Animal	Equine
I am very likely to make a lifetime commitment to this occupational area in veterinary medicine.	6.42 ^a	5.80 ^b	6.10 ^a	6.18 ^{ab}
I am very unlikely to change from this occupational area in veterinary medicine over the course of my lifetime.	5.36 ^a	4.47 ^b	4.99 ^a	4.92 ^{ab}
I get a strong sense of identity from making a lifetime commitment to this occupational area in veterinary medicine.	5.96 ^a	5.15 ^b	5.27 ^b	5.75 ^{ab}
I am satisfied with making a lifetime commitment to my occupational area in light of my veterinary career expectations.	6.14 ^a	5.57 ^b	5.99 ^a	5.83 ^{ab}
I am satisfied making a lifetime commitment to my occupational area when I compare it to other areas of veterinary medicine.	6.36 ^a	5.52 ^b	5.94 ^a	5.99 ^{ab}
I have a great deal of knowledge about veterinary career opportunities in the food animal industry.	5.96 ^a	4.90 ^b	4.01 ^c	4.47 ^{bc}
My knowledge about careers in food animal veterinary medicine is greater than most students.	6.14 ^a	4.81 ^b	2.96	4.36 ^b

Within a row, means with the *same* superscript are not significantly ($p < .05$) different from each other.