

Controversy continues over vet proposal



White

Mark Davis/The Sower



Henderson

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Graduate says UNL needs money, not new veterinary school

When Henderson wanted to become a veterinarian. But when he graduated from UNL in 1977, he faced a dilemma. Like all UNL graduates in vet medicine, he would have to transfer to another university to complete his veterinary degree.

That could change if Nebraska legislators approve LB 204, a bill to allow UNL to enter into a joint veterinary medicine program with a university already operating a vet school. The program would send accepted students to the second university for two years, then return the students to Nebraska for clinical education.

Program advocates say Nebraska needs the veterinary program because it would increase the number of faculty members and research capabilities, provide advanced clinical research for the state and help the continuing education efforts in veterinary medicine, according to Gene White, coordinator of the regional college veterinary program. Students like Henderson then could complete their educations at UNL.

But Henderson, now a Lincoln veterinarian, says he's not sure UNL needs a vet school. Although he is not against the school, he thinks the university shouldn't pursue a veterinary program at this time.

Henderson said the current bill, "in the hands of the politicians," stands a good chance of passing. But, he said, the current veterinary science department suffers from a lack of funding and personnel.

The school does "fine" for what it has, Henderson said, but if energy had been spent improving what Nebraska has instead of trying to establish the regional school, "we could have been far ahead of where we are now.

"It's better now, but I can remember when they had empty rooms and offices out there because there was nothing out there to put in them," Henderson said. "Our biggest need is not a vet school, but funding to build on the existing physical structures at East Campus. I'm not really against the vet school, but we just can't economically justify it anymore.

"If they're not willing to support what they've got to make it top notch, then I doubt their sincerity to make a new veterinarian school top level," Henderson said.

Henderson, a native of Brock, earned his bachelor's degree in agriculture at UNL in 1974. He planned on being a farmer, but two drought years and difficulty getting started made him turn to his second option — veterinary medicine.

Henderson returned to Nebraska and completed his requirements for veterinary school through the university's existing undergraduate school. He was accepted to the University of Missouri School of Veterinary Medicine in the fall of 1977. He graduated in 1981 and practiced at Curtis before moving to Lincoln

six months ago. He operates out of a small room in the back of the A-4 Small Animal Hospital on South Street.

Henderson said the present structure for undergraduate study of veterinary medicine is successful, and problems with the proposed program, like duplication of staff experts at the two schools, may be too much of a risk for the state.

"No matter what we do, we're going to have to have the same experts at both schools," Henderson said. "I don't think they're considering the expense of getting and keeping those faculty members. It (the new plan) gives us a lot of expense that we would have regardless if we had a (regional) school of our own."

The modified veterinary school plan was proposed after the original plan, which called for a regional veterinary college in Lincoln, died last year.

In 1974 the Old West Regional Commission, acknowledging the lack of veterinary medicine schools in the Nebraska, Wyoming and Dakota areas, proposed a \$10 million school to be built in Lincoln. The price kept going up as the plan was delayed and argued. At least two states had to adopt the plan before federal sources could be used for the project. But no other state came forward with the needed money.

about new programs since "there's no telling what it's going to do to theirs."

But, White said, the money is being given to other schools, so the new plan shouldn't take any more money than the university already is spending.

One of the facts that might have hindered the regional college proposal was the dwindling enrollment of regional veterinary schools. Henderson said that when he graduated, students who came from states that had vet schools were committed to go to that school. Now, enrollment has dropped enough that schools are accepting applications from anywhere.

Part of the reason for the dropoff, he said, might have been the realization that the field really isn't that lucrative.

Tighter admissions standards also have contributed to the dropoff. According to White, in 1984, 5,503 students across the nation met the minimum requirements to enter veterinary school. However, only 2,300 were accepted.

In 1982, 6,182 applied. White said vet school officials feel they are still getting the best applicants, but lesser qualified applicants are removing themselves from consideration earlier.

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By 1983, the price of the school had risen to \$30 million. Nebraska's Legislature authorized \$13.7 million in state matching funds for the vet school, but the money would be given only if at least two states participated. Federal legislation assured that the state of Nebraska would get close to \$13 million for the school, but said only one other school needed to be in the proposal.

In October last year, the original regional school proposal was scaled down to the split year plan. White said the current plan will keep money in the state that had been given to other states to allow Nebraska students to get veterinary training there. He said it will cost about \$16 million to build the needed clinical laboratories at East Campus and at the Roman L. Hruska U.S. Meat Animal Research Center at Clay Center.

"We're already spending that much money to send our students to other states," White said. "Essentially the same dollars would give us a lot more benefits."

When the reduced plan was introduced, among its first detractors were faculty. But White said faculty are always concerned

Vet students have to go to school the same amount of time as medical doctors, but the pay isn't as much and the work isn't glamorous, he said.

"People see that and wonder if it (vet school) is worth the long hours," he said. "Why do that when you're no better off than if you had stopped with a bachelor's?"

Henderson said the current system, which sends Nebraska undergraduates to schools such as Missouri, may be a discouraging element to potential students, but most of them are no worse off than other students when they reach graduate school.

Statistics support Henderson's theories. Nebraska has one of the nation's highest percentages of accepted applicants at out-of-state vet schools. More than 70 percent of Nebraska's applicants were accepted in 1983, according to a study by the dean of the Michigan State veterinary school.

"I was satisfied with it," Robertson said about the present UNL structure. "I thought I was as well prepared as any other student (at Missouri)." — Ward W. Triplett III