

## **From Student Perspectives to State Policy: Understanding and Addressing the Rural Veterinary Workforce Challenge in Iowa**

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### **Project Identification and Original Purpose**

My FSLI project originated from ongoing conversations in veterinary medicine about the persistent shortage of veterinarians in rural and food animal practice. The issue is often framed as a “pipeline problem,” suggesting that too few veterinary students are interested in rural practice. However, relatively little empirical data exist examining veterinary students’ perspectives on rural careers. The evidence that does exist suggests that the challenge may lie less in recruiting students with rural interests and more in the relative lack of attractiveness of rural veterinary jobs to new graduates, including concerns related to compensation, lifestyle, and work hours.

The original goal of this project was to retrospectively analyze existing survey data from veterinary students at the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine (ISU CVM) to better understand the factors influencing career decision-making. The project aimed to synthesize multiple sources of student feedback—including career placement surveys, exit surveys, and other institutional data—to identify themes influencing decisions to pursue or avoid rural veterinary practice. The ultimate goal was to generate evidence-based insights that could inform veterinary colleges, rural employers, and policymakers working to address veterinary workforce shortages.

Early in the project, I joined the Iowa Rural Veterinary Medicine Task Force to better understand stakeholder perspectives and ongoing initiatives. I also began collaborating with colleagues at Kansas State University on a complementary survey of rural veterinary practitioners to identify factors associated with long-term success in rural practice. This collaboration has already produced two abstracts, with further analysis ongoing.

### **Project Pivot**

A major development midway through the FSLI program fundamentally reshaped the project’s direction before I could begin formal analysis of student data. During the 2025 legislative session, it became clear that the Iowa legislature was considering a bill that would require the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine to enroll approximately 80% Iowa residents in its veterinary class. The college currently enrolls roughly a 50/50 mix of resident and nonresident students.

The stated goal of this legislation was to address Iowa’s rural veterinary shortage. However, available evidence suggested that such a policy would be unlikely to solve the underlying workforce problem and could create significant unintended consequences for the college – affecting the college’s financial model, reducing applicant selectivity, and diminishing the national competitiveness of the program.

Recognizing the urgency of this issue, I strategically pivoted my FSLI project toward collecting and synthesizing data that could inform policymakers about veterinary workforce dynamics and the potential implications of the proposed legislation.

### **Project Implementation and Actions Taken**

As the likelihood of legislation increased, I began compiling and analyzing information on veterinary school admissions practices and national comparisons among colleges of veterinary medicine to complement my student survey data on rural career interests. When House File 2209 was formally introduced during the 2026 legislative session, I worked closely with the Dean of ISU CVM, our institutional legislative liaison, and key stakeholder organizations to ensure that policymakers had access to accurate information. Specifically, I:

- Compiled comparative data on admissions policies and residency distribution across U.S. veterinary colleges
- Performed preliminary analyses of my survey data regarding student career interests and job selection
- Developed evidence-based talking points explaining why residency quotas alone would not address the rural veterinary shortage
- Participated in meetings with representatives from the Iowa Veterinary Medical Association and agricultural stakeholders including the Iowa Cattlemen's Association and Iowa Pork Producers
- Briefed the university's legislative liaison to support discussions with legislators

The foundational research I had begun through my FSLI project positioned me to contribute quickly and effectively when the legislative issue emerged. Ultimately, this work resulted in **a set of data-driven talking points** designed to inform legislators about the complexities of the rural veterinary workforce issue.

### **Impact and Outcomes**

House File 2209 ultimately did not advance past the legislative funnel during this session. While multiple factors contributed to that outcome, the ability of ISU CVM and its partners to provide clear, data-driven information helped shape the policy discussion. Though there remains work to be done – this bill could return at a future legislative session – we are now better positioned to shift the discussion with legislators toward broader workforce factors such as compensation, mentorship, and long-term career sustainability.

### **Future Plans**

The original research goals of the project remain important, and I plan to continue analyzing and publishing the student survey data. The practitioner survey collaboration with Kansas State University is also ongoing and will provide additional insights into factors that support successful rural veterinary careers. Relationships developed with legislators and stakeholder groups during this process will support continued efforts to educate policymakers about the drivers of rural veterinary workforce challenges and potential solutions. ISU CVM, in collaboration with the IVMA, is planning a "Rural Veterinary Listening Tour" for summer 2026 to showcase our proactive interest in this topic and commitment to contributing to productive solutions.

### **What I Gained from the FSLI Program**

The FSLI fellowship provided both the framework and the time to examine this complex workforce issue from a broader systems perspective. The program's focus on leadership, policy, and strategic thinking proved particularly valuable when the project intersected with active legislative discussions. Because of the preparation and perspective gained through FSLI, I was able to help position ISU CVM to respond proactively to a significant policy challenge affecting the future of veterinary education and rural veterinary care in Iowa.