

Diversity in the lab

An interview with William A. Hill, DVM, DACLAM, Assistant Director in the Office of Laboratory Animal Care and Director of Diversity for the College of Veterinary Medicine (CVM) at the University of Tennessee (UT)

William Hill talks to Lab Animal about following two callings: caring for animals and creating a more diverse learning environment for the students at UT CVM.

How did you get involved in lab animal medicine?

Veterinary medicine is my professional calling. I am a second-generation veterinarian and the third vet in my family, so there were obvious familial influences on my career decision. I attended North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and received an undergraduate degree in Laboratory Animal Science. As an undergraduate I was unaware of the true scope of laboratory animal medicine and only envisioned using my degree as a preparation for veterinary school. However, during my second year in veterinary school at North Carolina State University (NCSU), influenced heavily by my father's death and my mother's subsequent cancer diagnosis, I decided to pursue a career in laboratory animal medicine.

As a lab animal veterinarian at UT, I am responsible for shared veterinary care and regulatory oversight of all animals used for teaching and research. Moreover, I am responsible for coordination of our campus-wide health surveillance program. As a voting member of the UT IACUC, I am active in protocol review, development of institutional procedures and policy and quality improvement. I also train animal users and participate in research. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of my job is the opportunity to mentor and teach veterinary students.

Tell us about your work as Director of Diversity.

The Office of Diversity at UT CVM has six objectives: (i) to create and sustain a welcoming, supportive and inclusive campus climate;

(ii) to attract and retain greater numbers of individuals from under-represented populations into faculty, staff and administrative positions; (iii) to attract, retain and graduate increasing numbers of students from historically under-represented populations and international students; (iv) to develop and strengthen partnerships with diverse communities in Tennessee and globally; (v) to ensure that curricular requirements include significant intercultural perspectives; and (vi) to prepare graduate students to become teachers and researchers in a diverse world. Following the lead of the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges, our college has defined diversity in very broad terms to include gender, race and ethnicity as well as geographic, socioeconomic and educational disadvantage. We also recognize nontraditional practice interests (such as laboratory animal medicine, public health and production animal medicine) as a component of diversity.

Many of the Office of Diversity's activities center on recruitment and retention of a diverse student population. In an effort to integrate diversity education into our curriculum, we host a diversity symposium each fall for first-year DVM students. In the spring semester, the office hosts an International Food Day. We periodically host brown bag lunch seminars on various topics. All programs are open to the entire college constituency. The Office of Diversity has also organized a chapter of VOICE (Veterinary Students as One in Culture and Ethnicity). Our VOICE chapter has initiated a successful program in which members visit local primary and secondary schools to discuss responsible pet ownership and careers in veterinary medicine. Additionally, the office coordinates summer enrichment programs for high school and college-aged students.



How did you become involved in this work?

My passion for diversity-related work was birthed out of my experiences as a veterinary student at NCSU. I was the only African-American student in my class and the only African-American male enrolled in the DVM program during my tenure. Though NCSU has since made great strides in recruiting a diverse student population, the college's climate at the time was, in many respects, isolating. My experiences, both negative and positive, sensitized me to the needs and challenges facing minority veterinary students.

How can Lab Animal readers promote diversity in their own institutions?

First, it is crucial to define diversity within the context of an organization; too often, discussions of diversity derail because of a narrow focus around race and ethnicity. In addition, organizations must determine and effectively communicate the benefits of diversity by specifically defining how diversity enhances their missions. For example, here at UT, we know that diversity augments the learning environment and more adequately equips our students to serve a multicultural, multigenerational clientele. Diversity work is really about changing organizational culture. Cultural changes happen slowly and are initiated by conversation. Begin to have conversations in your workplace about diversity. Remember to be open, tempered and respectful, and you will watch your organizational culture change.