

The Great Divide

Is the veterinary school education you are receiving effective, efficient, and relevant to your career goals?

By Imani Williams



Dr. Frederick Douglas Patterson. Dr. Saul T. Wilson. Dr. Michael Blackwell. Dr. Diarra Blue. Dr. Aubrey Ross. Dr. Michael Lavigne. Dr. Joe Owens. Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine (TUCVM) is an establishment with a rich history of successful, groundbreaking African American veterinarians. With Dr. Ruby Perry, the first black female board-certified veterinary radiologist serving as the dean, success is effectively woven into the narrative of what TUCVM stands for and who you can become as a graduate.

When I attended open house for Tuskegee in 2013, I visited the veterinary school. During the tour, we were shown sketches and displays of renovations for the university. 2013 TUCVM was outdated but the 2018 TUCVM plans were a sight to behold. We saw plans for new buildings and facilities with updated technological equipment in every classroom, a surgery suite that could rival other schools and a world-renowned staff at the helm teaching the young leaders of tomorrow. That day, I saw a vision of what the only predominantly minority veterinary school could look like with the proper funding and facilities. In that diorama, Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine looked like every other veterinary school. And we were in awe.

Unfortunately, not much changed as I matriculated through undergrad. Facilities and technology continued to decline, and those shiny dioramas were stored in a closet for someday. From government funding disparities between HBCU's [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] and other schools such as the 1890 land grant to the endowment gaps, we are slaves to a system that was never designed for us to succeed equally. How do you compete with a 900 million dollar discrepancy in funding? And with such disproportional funding for the university as a whole, how do you scrape together the resources to keep a veterinary school on the cutting edge of medicine AND encourage the best from across the country to attend knowing on paper what you offer does not compare? You can't. TUCVM was created to increase the number of African American veterinarians who lacked opportunity elsewhere due to segregation, not to compete with other vet schools. But over time we have surpassed even our ancestors' wildest dreams and require funding and support to achieve those goals.

I have no doubt that TUCVM is helping me become the best veterinarian it can create. But how do I compare to students at other schools? Tuskegee instills an immense respect for hands-on methodology, and our surgery skills are unmatched as graduates, but vet med reaches so many fields that we don't have the money to explore fully. My professors are passionate, overworked civil servants who accept a pay cut to teach at Tuskegee because they love the school and want to invest in our success. But that is not without sacrifice on their part as many professors and faculty absorb the jobs of two to three people to account for pay cuts. And while I am grateful for them, imagine the positive changes and ideas our professors could generate if they were not spread so thin. What new talent could we bring in if our salaries rivaled those of other vet schools? Their innovative teachings and curriculum changes could set a new standard of excellence amongst faculty.

Over the last two years, I have seen positive changes in staffing, curriculum and facilities that give me hope that we are headed in the right direction but in many other ways, we as students need more outlets to voice our opinions in front of people who can make real changes. We are adjusting aspects of the curriculum but not how classes are taught and even who is teaching them. We have class evaluations, but if the teachers never see them, how can they change tactics for the students that follow us? I want to know that if I take the time to craft an idea and develop a team to see it through, that someone is watching, listening and taking note of what is realistic for us to implement. I love my school and when it comes to protecting our future, I want a seat at the table. I've developed relationships with numerous faculty members to start implementing these changes, but some of these tasks require a hefty time investment and between classes and studying, it's nearly impossible to dedicate the time necessary until summer break. We need staff members who understand our goals, with an agenda to make them a reality. I want to improve student to teacher relationships with open forums. I want administration to be more candid about where my tuition goes and how we are choosing to spend it. And I want to see improvements, such as our new student parking lot, that are relevant to me made in a timely manner.



We're here to help!

I do not wish for a broader or more focused education. I wish to enrich the education that I'm already receiving. I wish for funding to expand programs that meet the needs of students that are relevant, new and innovative. Tuskegee has never had a shortage of people that care and will go the extra mile. We support every class in all endeavors and go out of our way to be of service to others. We just need to know that you want it. And that's the most important part. That is what we do right. TUCVM has big dreams and staff dedicated to making that 2013 diorama a reality. We believe in family to our core and instill at every level the importance of working with others no matter how different and a mutual respect when doing so. All that we need cannot be fixed in an essay. What we lack is built into the institution of HBCU's in comparison to other universities, and that is a lack of funding and support. Tradition, support and alumni donations have carried us this far but without change, we cannot overcome that divide.