

Perspectives on Conscientious Objection

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In the past decade, North American veterinary schools have been shifting the emphasis of their training programs away from traditional methods that harm healthy animals toward humane methods that meet learning objectives without harming animals. Accompanying these changes, indeed driving them, is the growing number of veterinary and preveterinary students who do not wish to inflict deliberate harm on animals.

These are encouraging trends for the rights of both animals and students. Each year, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) provides advice and assistance to hundreds of students, including veterinary students, who seek humane alternatives to curricula that they find ethically distasteful. In this brief article, I offer some thoughts and tips that can be of help to those considering conscientious objection.

Deciding to Object

Published surveys of students in middle school through college indicate that 25-65% of them are disturbed by dissection and/or live animal experimentation. Unfortunately, however, only a small fraction ever voice their concerns, perhaps fearing a loss of grades, or ridicule and/or harassment from their peers or instructors. If you are a student who believes it is wrong to kill animals so that they may be dissected or to subject healthy animals to painful and/or lethal procedures in the classroom, it is important that you not remain silent. Student opinion is a powerful force in directing curriculum reform.

Tips for Objecting Effectively

Start early: The more time you have to work with, the more likely you are to arrive at a mutually agreeable solution with your instructors.

Find Out: Determine what sort of animal use is carried out in the courses in which you are enrolling.

Formulate your position: Ask yourself what it is about the classroom exercise that you find objectionable. Anticipate any questions you may be asked by a skeptical instructor.

Approach your instructors: Arrange to meet with your instructors to discuss possible arrangements to accommodate your concerns. Always remain polite but firm. State your willingness to help locate an acceptable alternative. If your instructor agrees to an alternative assignment, congratulations!

If you meet resistance, I recommend the following:

Research alternatives: Find out what alternatives might best meet the learning objectives of the course. There are two valuable resources available to you. One is the Alternatives in Education Database published by the AVAR. This contains thousands of alternatives ranging from audiovisual material to "hands-on" simulators for psychomotor skills. This can be obtained for \$5.00 from the AVAR. Another resource is the Norwegian Inventory of Audiovisuals (NORINA), a database that contains more than 2300 alternatives to animal use in education. Several animal advocacy groups, including The HSUS, have purchased this database. Many alternatives are available as temporary free "previews" from the companies that make them or are on loan from various animal protection groups, including the HSUS, which can also provide you with an annotated list of more than a dozen studies demonstrating the efficacy of alternatives.

Find allies: Enlisting fellow students, faculty members, and local animal

protection groups who share your viewpoint will strengthen your efforts. A petition drive can be an effective way to gain support and publicize your position.

Encourage accountability: Be sure to include high campus officials in any correspondence you send to your instructor.

Meet the ombudsperson: Many campuses have an office that handles complaints of students who are not receiving satisfaction through any other channels.

Do an independent study: You might consider substituting an independent study project for objectionable parts of an exercise. Discuss your intentions with your instructor well in advance. The project you assign yourself should be as close to the in-class assignment as possible.

Publicize your plight: You can bring pressure to bear on your department by publicizing your situation through letters to your campus newspaper or local radio and television stations.

Get legal help: Because of the time and expense it usually entails, legal action should be a last resort. However, legal precedents bode well for your position. Few challenges to dissection assignments reach the courts; but when they do, the right of the student is usually upheld.

Conclusion

Being a conscientious objector is probably the most important thing you can do to improve conditions for animals in education. Given the current trends away from harming animals in education, your efforts will give a particularly timely push in the right direction.