

Melinda Fox, University of Florida
An Activist on the IACUC

In the spring of 2001, I transferred to the University of Florida (UF) as a junior to study Animal Science at the College of Agriculture, with the hopes of later pursuing a veterinary career. In a class lecture, a professor mentioned that UF was at the forefront of medical research and that animal testing was conducted here. The professor boasted about the university's research accomplishments with pride, and recommended that we all take the initiative to get involved as research assistants as a way to enhance our vet school applications.

I was becoming familiar with farmed animals through my studies at UF. I took classes in swine reproduction and equine physiology and regularly attended lectures at the dairy and beef teaching units. It was there that I learned that animal science relating to agriculture was not just about how to breed these animals to grow faster, leaner, with minimal food and water intake but, also, that they were used in animal experiments. Genetics, nutritional studies, xenotransplantation, and student labs for medical classes in dentistry and ophthalmology are the norm.

While attending school, I also worked at a specialty referral veterinary clinic. At work, I coyly began discussing animal research with a resident who told me that animal research was prevalent in many universities and most vet schools. When I voiced my concerns for the animals, he said that they all had a special committee that looked out for animal welfare. I looked into such a committee on the UF website and found the University of Florida Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

According to U.S. federal law, institutions that use laboratory animals for research or instructional purposes must establish an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) to oversee and evaluate all aspects of the institution's animal care and use program. This committee was mandated by the Laboratory Animal Welfare Act of 1966, which was later amended in 1970 and renamed the Animal Welfare Act, as we know it today. The committee focuses on animal welfare aspects of research, including housing, experiment procedures, transportation, feeding, and veterinary care. The IACUC must approve all animal experiments before they can begin. It also has significant influence over studies that are planned to be published.

As a student, I was fast becoming vocal in my classes, had started an animal rights group on campus, and was working diligently on the Florida Gestation Crate Initiative. My days were spent in classes that were ethically challenging and psychologically disturbing, while my nights were filled with animal rights meetings, vegan potlucks, and lengthy philosophical discussions. As time went on, animal testing became an issue many of my fellow budding activists wanted to know more about. I noticed that even the most seasoned activists I had contact with still made weak arguments against animal experimentation. As I committed myself more to the movement, I found myself being more challenged by the opposition in the area of animal testing. Simply stating that 'the means don't justify the ends' wasn't enough. As a leader in my student group, and as

someone who seeks more understanding of complexities in general, I felt that it was my responsibility to learn more from the inside.

Every IACUC is required to have a certain number of people to hold a majority quorum and to have full representation. The committee is made up of university officials such as professors and researchers, and requires one local community member with no affiliation to the university. Students are not required, but I was told that graduate students were readily welcome. At UF, there are subcommittees to the UF IACUC divided into three areas: agriculture, psychology, and biomedical, all of which fell under the same umbrella but met at different times and days. I had decided to apply to a committee as a student member. The IACUC coordinator was excited about my interest and suggested that I apply to the agriculture committee, since I was an animal science major with a minor concentration in agricultural law.

I filled out an official application along with my resume (academics submit a CV instead, highlighting their academic accomplishments) and a letter of intent. My cover letter highlighted the fact that I was a UF science student and, for experience, was seeking a seat on a committee. My resume highlighted all of my animal rights activism, including the group I had started, conferences attended, etc. I had nothing to hide, and wanted to be up front to avoid any possible concerns later on. I applied on my own accord, with no plans of representing my small yet growing animal rights campus group.

Given that UF has a student population of about 47,000 students and about 5,000 employees, I had experienced nothing short of a bureaucratic nightmare navigating my way through my curriculum and student resources, and I assumed that the IACUC committee would be just as riddled with paperwork. In short, I assumed they wouldn't pay much attention to my ambitions.

I was invited to sit in on an upcoming meeting and introduce myself to the agriculture committee members. Meetings were held monthly, beginning with a luncheon at noon with the committee business to follow. I dressed professionally and arrived early. I had prepared a short introduction and was ready to take feverish notes. I sat behind the round meeting table and read quietly while the members ate their BBQ luncheon and chatted. The committee was composed of mainly older men, Ph.D. agriculture researchers, one female researcher DVM, and two female support staff and secretaries.

At one point, their casual luncheon discussion turned to the topic of animal rights activists, citing an alert sent out by a national pro-research group. Quickly, the conversation became more intense, with two gentlemen, including the head of the committee shaking his head in disbelief and saying, "those people will just never stop with their antics; they're idiots," to which another researcher replied, "I don't necessarily think they're all idiots; you just can't get one to sit down long enough to talk any sense into them."

I was horrified! Here I was at a professional meeting, and this was the discussion. I had assumed the members were all pro-research but did not expect that they would be so blatantly against anyone and everyone who challenged them and spoke up for the

animals. My naiveté had put me into an awkward position. My knees were shaky, and I was nervous.

The meeting began, and I was on the agenda to speak last. I listened to the experiment protocols up for review before the committee and what concerns they had. It struck me how they used words that distanced them from the painful procedures being discussed, and the arbitrary speciest lines they drew. It was strictly business and science. I was fascinated by how progressive the studies were, while at the same time in disbelief that experiments of these types were happening throughout the university.

At the end of the meeting, I was introduced as a student who was applying for a seat on the IACUC. It was clear from the introduction the committee chairman gave that he had not read my application or resume. I introduced myself to the committee members. I stated my major and said that while I was a student of science, I was also an animal rights activist interested in working on legislation and policy in the future. I thought it would be beneficial to me as an activist and to them as committee members and researchers to grant me a seat on the committee because I saw myself later influencing the policies that directly affect them and the university in the future. I continued: "I felt I would be better equipped to make sound decisions if I was able to see what the committee was about and how it actually worked." I finished, stating that I heard some talk about animal rights activists during their lunch and assured them I was one who would be willing to sit down long enough at the same table not to influence but to learn. The committee sat speechless, and seemed a bit embarrassed after reflecting on the comments made earlier. They voted there and then, and I was granted a seat on the committee.

I spent two years on the committee, rarely missed a meeting, and studied the science and protocols diligently. For half on my stint, I was granted full voting rights. I took part in all training sessions, conducted facility inspections, and attended all mandatory meetings. I was complimented on my professional conduct many times by committee members.

The experience opened my eyes to the inside of animal testing and the extensive legal protection it has. I continued to be amazed at the unbelievable amount of monies and funding involved, and astonished by the sheer numbers—almost 70,000 animals being tested behind closed doors, both off campus and underground at my university. While it was a responsibility I took very seriously, it was also excruciatingly difficult for me as time went on.

Recently, I spoke at the national animal rights conference AR2003 East and gave several presentations about IACUCs. The presentations serve as a cursory introduction to what an IACUC is and how it works. I was attempting to demystify IACUCs a bit, and I chronicled some of my experiences. Shortly after, I was featured negatively in a pro-research newsletter sent to animal testing facility directors nationwide. It was sent to the Director of the UF IACUC, who distributed it personally via e-mail to all IACUC and animal service personnel at UF. I was unofficially dismissed from the UF IACUC.

Interestingly, while I was willing to sit at the table with IACUC members and university researchers, they no longer appear to be willing to sit with me.

Melinda Fox recently graduated with a B.S. in Natural Resource Conservation and is planning to attend graduate school to study non-profit management. She is the Co-founder of Animal Activists of Alachua, the only registered animal rights group annually funded by the Student Government at the University of Florida at Gainesville. Please visit their website at www.animalactivists.org