

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine: A Course for Veterinary Students

By Dr. Donald F. Smith and Julie Kumble
April 2, 2014

On the one hand, it was just another elective course proposal. On the other hand, it could also be described as an experiment in teaching and learning within the context of one of the most vexing issues in veterinary medicine, the continuing gap in women's leadership.

So, we asked the question:

**Would veterinary students at Cornell University
be interested in a course in women's leadership?**

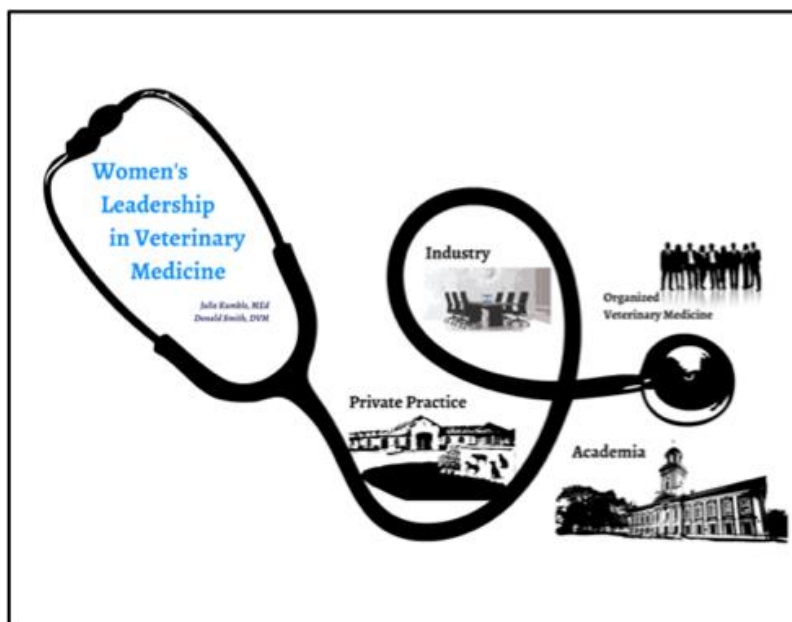
If so, it would be the first of its kind, anywhere.

Since the formation of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI)¹ last fall, we have felt that we needed to test the waters to see if there would be interest in a student symposium directed specifically at women's leadership. As explained in a posting here on January 21st,² an email was sent to all Cornell students on December 23rd asking them if they would be interested in devoting a weekend day in March to the topic.

Within a few hours, half a dozen students had sent emails requesting to be enrolled and justifying why they wanted to take the course. Responses continued to come in over the break and well before the January 5th deadline we had reached the course limit of 25 students. We subsequently increased the limit, allowing 35 students³ attend the six-hour symposium on March 1st. Three were men.⁴

Being a Saturday morning, we opened with a continental breakfast. To facilitate introductions, the morning session began with a dozen students sharing their rationale for taking the course.⁵

We then gave a 90-minute presentation about women's leadership, drawing heavily upon our research in the four areas of organized veterinary medicine, clinical practice, industry, and academia. Our goals were to raise the awareness about the gap in women's leadership, promote understanding of the need to have women in leadership positions, and share best practices from both within and outside veterinary medicine.



*Student Course in Women's Leadership, Cornell University
Screenshot of the Title Slide for the Opening Presentation
(Prezi presentation designed and prepared by David Seader '16, who also participated in the symposium.)*

Within the domain of organized veterinary medicine, we presented data on women in leadership positions at the national level (American Veterinary Medical Association, AVMA) and the local and state levels, with emphasis on states like Iowa which have instituted numerous policy changes to promote leadership of women in particular and younger veterinarians in general.⁶

Considering clinical practice, we shared information from the 2013 National Research Council study that documented significantly lower return on educational investment for associates compared to owners.⁷ This topic would be the focus of the noon panel which featured three practice owners. We also presented data from various sources showing lower levels of compensation for women, beginning with starting salaries and continuing throughout their careers.

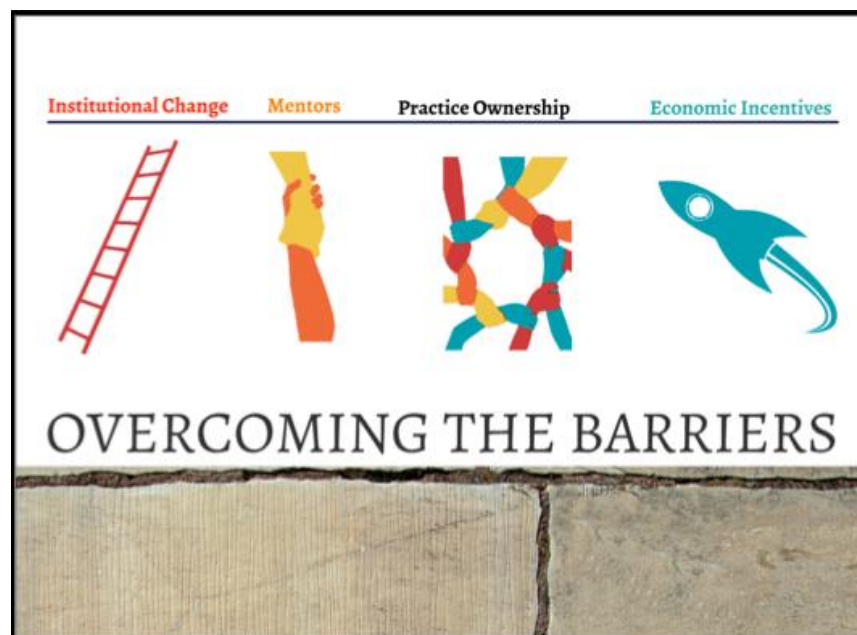
For the discussion of industry, data were drawn from Fortune 500 companies, to major veterinary companies. Emphasis was on the need for a critical mass of women (generally viewed as 30%) to be present at the top leadership of companies in order for the culture of that company to reflect good business practices for men and women alike, as well as to enhance profits and achieve better standing in their respective industries. We also posited that it was important for transparency of leadership at the top and noted that this deficit in some private companies where there is no legal requirement for board members to be identified publicly.

Finally, we discussed academia where, despite over three decades of affirmative action policies, we still have only six women deans in the US, a mere 20% in a domain that one would expect to be leading the way. Furthermore, the last five dean appointments have all been males. We

used academia as a prime example of the “leaky pipeline” where the percentage of women tends to decrease as appointments are made into more senior positions.

Having considered the current state in these domains, we turned our attention to identifying and explaining some of the barriers to women’s leadership drawn from substantive research in the field. We talked about:

- systemic barriers, such as the lack of term limits in many positions in organized veterinary medicine;
- cultural barriers, such as differences in women’s personal and professional priorities, and gender stereotypes;
- psychological barriers, the lack of self-promotion and the so-called “perfection complex” and self-assessment traits of women compared to men;
- economic barriers, showing disparity in salaries as well as differences in negotiation styles between men and women, and promoting the concept of paid family leave policies.



Student Course in Women’s Leadership, Cornell University
Screen shot of the Introduction to the Subtitle, “Overcoming the Barriers”
(Prezi Presentation by designed and prepared by David Seader ‘16, student participant)

After presenting data on the current state of the profession and then identifying barriers for women’s leadership, we tapped the bank of our research and presented specific examples of how women have overcome obstacles. For organized veterinary medicine, we drew heavily upon the experience in Iowa mentioned above. We then focused at some length on mentors and their impact on one’s career, using examples from organized veterinary medicine (Dr. Eva Evans)⁸ and academia (Deans Sheila Allen and Deborah Kochevar).⁹

Relative to practice ownership, we talked about women, including the guest presenters who each owned their practices, to others who overcame some of the logistical barriers of single ownership by joining with others (often women) to co-own or multi-own practices.

We highlighted industry-based strategies, such as programs at Zoetis and Hill's Pet Nutrition, which have been successful in developing women leaders. Again, we used specific examples from our interviews with women leaders in industry, such as Dr. Christine Jenkins (Zoetis).

The last segment of our presentation, entitled, "Bridging the Leadership Gap," was intended to provide a greater degree of clarity for how the percentage of women leaders can be increased in the next few years. We gave specific examples, such as how some gender stereotypes and cultural biases do, in fact, create a climate where fewer women either run for elected office, or are appointed into leadership positions. Men, we argued, need to be aware of these issues as much as women if we are going to be able to see a truly balanced profession that will benefit all veterinarians.

We counseled female students to challenge their "perfection complex," giving examples of how women can confidently perform admirably in leadership positions (just like men) even if they don't have the entire skill set in place at the onset. We encouraged self-nomination for office and ignoring the fear of not getting a position.

To complete the presentation, we focused on developing leadership competencies. This included taking formal training programs to enhance leadership competencies such as financial and management acumen, negotiation and public speaking skills, and building a strong mentoring support system.

During the working lunch, the three invited veterinarians formed a panel, describing their experiences in private practice and business, and in organized veterinary medicine at the state level. They gave substantive presentations and were amazingly upbeat. "You have a veterinary degree and you can do anything," was the recurring theme, and they provided example after example based upon their real-world experiences to prove their point. The panelists were Dr. Linda Tintle,¹⁰ owner of Wurtsboro Veterinary Clinic¹¹ and past president of the New York State Veterinary Medical Society (NYSVMS), Dr. Susan Wylegala, owner of Cheektowaga Veterinary Hospital¹² and Executive Board member of the NYSVMS, and Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne,¹³ owner of the Bloomfield Animal Hospital¹⁴ and President-Elect of the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association.

This one-hour segment generated questions on a wide range of topics from how to do clinical research while running a practice, to asking if the panelists would be willing to open their books to students interested in knowing more about running a business. The session energized and, at times, electrified the students. Two-thirds of them later reported it as the most informative and helpful segment of the day.



Student Course in Women's Leadership, Cornell University
Guest presenters at front are Drs. Linda Tintle (speaking), Susan Wylegala and Andrea Dennis-LaVigne
(Photo by the author, 2014)



Student Course in Women's Leadership, Cornell University
Student group working on developing a plan for mentoring
(Photo by the author, 2014)

The third segment of the course returned to the issue of “essential skills” in becoming an effective leader, and the steps to reach that goal. We focused primarily on networking,

mentoring, and role models. This took the form of a working session where the small groups of students, assisted by the guest presenters, worked to articulate goals and expectations for developing an individualized mentoring program.

The capstone of the afternoon was completion of an exercise in which each student wrote down her or his specific goals, and the time frame for achieving them. They were written on specially-made bookmarks identifying the course name and date, and then the bookmarks were inserted inside a copy of Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, which was given to each of the students and guest presenters at the close of the day.

Afterwards, as they talked amongst themselves and with the guest presenters, the students began to plan a Student Chapter of the WVLDI. As we write this story just a month later, not only will the Cornell Student Chapter soon become a reality but chapters are also being planned at two or three other colleges. The excitement and enthusiasm surrounding this effort are palpable.

¹ Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative. Both Dr. Donald F. Smith and Julie Kumble serve as directors of WVLDI.

² Smith, Donald F. Veterinary Students Are Stepping Up for Women's Leadership Training. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. January 21, 2014.

³ Approximately half the students were first-year; the remainder were second- and third-year students.

⁴ Three men attended (9%), slightly less than the 15% men in the student body.

⁵ Smith, Donald F. Veterinary Students Are Stepping Up for Women's Leadership Training. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. January 21, 2014.

⁶ Smith, Donald F. and Julie Kumble. Veterinary Leadership in Iowa. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. December 12, 2013.

⁷ National Research Council. Workforce Needs in Veterinary Medicine. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2013.

⁸ Evans, Eva. A Path to Leadership for a New DVM: The Story of Dr. Eva Evans. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. September 29, 2013.

⁹ Mentoring as a Career Factor: Six US Women Veterinary Deans Reflect. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. September 12, 2013.

¹⁰ Tintle, Linda. New York President Challenges the Empire State's Veterinarians. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. August 25, 2013.

¹¹ Wurtsboro Veterinary Clinic, Wurtsboro, New York.

¹² Cheektowaga Veterinary Hospital, Cheektowaga, New York.

¹³ Smith, Donald F. A Tuskegee Graduate to Lead the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. February 10, 2014.

¹⁴ Bloomfield Animal Hospital, Bloomfield, Connecticut.

KEYWORDS:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

Cornell University

Teaching and Learning

Mentors

Mentoring

American Veterinary Medical Association
New York State Veterinary Medical Society
Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association
Iowa Veterinary Medical Association
Linda Tintle
Susan Wylegala
Andrea Dennis-LaVigne

TOPIC:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What veterinary college recently held the first ever student course in women's leadership?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.

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