

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Veterinary Students Are Stepping Up for Women's Leadership Training

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
January 21, 2014

When I sent an invitation to veterinary students at Cornell University to participate in a one-day class on women's leadership in veterinary medicine, I underestimated the level of interest the topic would generate. Within an hour of e-mailing the notice to all of Cornell's veterinary students, four requests to take the course had already been received.

Amanda Kennedy, a first-year student, expressed her passion for advancing women in leadership positions.¹

I think veterinary medicine stands at a very interesting crossroads as far as leadership roles for women are concerned. As we have seen veterinary school classes change from 80% men to 80% women, I hope we shall soon also see more women represented in leadership positions, from AVMA officers all the way to owning practices.

Another first-year student, also one of the first to respond, sent this hard-hitting justification for why she wanted to take the course.

This is important to me because I did not come to vet school to just "help animals" but intend to influence the entire veterinary industry and make a lifelong contribution to oncology (which is my main interest so far). This course will provide me and my female classmates an opportunity to learn the challenges females face and how to overcome them. During my accepted-students' weekend,² I attended a similar course (which you may actually have been teaching), and despite the overwhelming female majority, many of the female students were not as gung-ho about owning practices and owning the veterinary industry. I was disheartened but also inspired to not be one of them.

Of the 35 students who signed up for the course over the Winter break, several indicated their interest in practice ownership while expressing concerns about business issues and work-life balance. Following are such comments from three first-year students. The first student expressed an interest in the economics of veterinary medicine.

As a woman entering the veterinary field with an economics degree, I am incredibly interested in understanding and learning about... the business side... I have dreams of owning my own practice one day.

Comments from the other two students also reflect a common concern about the juggling act that may be required to balance practice ownership with raising a family.

I am most interested in small animal private practice and hope to follow in the footsteps of my veterinary mentor, a veterinarian in Florida who, together with his wife, run a wonderful clinic. They are also respected leaders in their community. As a single female veterinarian, I believe that it will be even more difficult for me to achieve their success. I do not intend to marry another veterinarian and would like to have a family of my own, so balancing these time commitments with the time needed to own and operate a veterinary practice will be quite the juggling act. I am confident that I will be able to do it, especially if I have benefited from the advice and guidance of the speakers involved in the women's leadership course.

I have worked in 3 different practices with all of them owned by men with 6+ women working for each of them as veterinarians. It blows my mind and I believe there is so much to be done when it comes to advancing women in our field. I am particularly interested in the issues surrounding women owning practices while working full time and having families. One of my huge contingencies from my father when asking for funding for vet school was that I would not just get my degree and not use it and become a stay-at-home mother. It was crazy to me that I could work this hard for a degree and he thought I wouldn't use it, but it is apparently quite common in the human medical field and I would imagine it would be similar in the veterinary field.

Other students are looking to leadership responsibilities in organized veterinary medicine. Katherine Schuhmacher of the third-year class is a strong advocate for women's leadership. Her interest in the topic was piqued during a course on veterinary history and public policy she took two years ago. She emphasized the role that women must take in the future of our profession.³



Katherine Schuhmacher, Cornell DVM Class of 2015
(Photo provided by Katherine Schuhmacher, 2014)

I am very interested in participating in this course and believe I have demonstrated a commitment to female leadership during my time at Cornell so far. I would like to continue participating in the discussion of how women leadership can shape the future of our profession. Moreover, I would love the opportunity to gain the more practical advice in your last point: developing mentors, practice ownership, negotiation skills, and effective public speaking. I believe that extra guidance in these areas will significantly impact my ability to become an effective leader after graduation. I'm not yet sure what form that leadership will take, but I hope to be prepared for the challenge when an opportunity arises.

Another first-year student wrote that she is interested in learning more about the gender gap in veterinary medicine in terms of how and why it has persisted given that it adversely affects not only men and women, but the field as a whole.

My past experience includes working for several years in a corporate environment in which most leadership positions were held by men, despite an equal distribution of male and female employees throughout the industry. As someone with a more introverted personality, it would be of great benefit to learn ways to develop effective leadership and public speaking skills, because I have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to animal welfare legislation and policy. Finally, I look forward to forming relationships with current female leaders, so that I can

learn about their experiences, challenges they have faced, and gain advice on how to approach my career following graduation.

The course is scheduled to be an all-day program on a Saturday in March. Devoting a weekend spring day to a class for information and skills that will never be on a board examination, and which is not considered by some mainstream academicians as an important subject, takes an extra level of student interest and commitment.

Dr. Connie Curran, RN,⁴ author of *Claiming the Corner Office: Executive Leadership Lessons for Nurses*⁵ and one of the leading health care executives and educational leaders in the country, affirmed the importance of such a course in leadership training. I shared some of these student comments with her and she was impressed with what they had written. She offered these insights as encouragement to our veterinary students.⁶

Though safe medical practice is critical to being a responsible medical care professional, there is so much more to being a leader: intelligence, communication skills, problem-solving and strong interpersonal skills.

Professionals by definition assume responsibility for the optimization and leadership in their field. When it comes to the power of an organization, there can be no long-term vacuum, so if women don't lead, somebody else will. Women have a responsibility to lead in their profession, in their communities, in the corporate world, and the country.

Students of both genders are becoming increasingly knowledgeable about the gap in women's leadership. Some have read material posted recently on this website. One wrote to me, "I would like to someday hold a leadership position in veterinary medicine and am interested in learning about the gap that exists and how the profession could move forward."

First-year student, Michelle Forella,⁷ told me some months ago that she was influenced by reading Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In*,⁸ and also by the testimonial of Dr. Eva Evans, a 2012 graduate of the University of Tennessee, whose story was posted on this site last fall.⁹

It wasn't until I came to Cornell as an upcoming member of this women-dominated profession that I became interested in promoting gender equality. I have learned that the obstacles that I face are shared by other women, even in veterinary medicine. I hope that I can derive from this class the skills necessary to be a leader and to support my female colleagues as a coworker, an employer, or a policy maker.



Michelle Forella, Cornell DVM Class of 2017
(Photo provided by Michelle Forella, 2014)

Similar to students at Iowa State University described in a previous posting,¹⁰ Jenna Goldhaber¹¹ from Long Island has a strong sense of leadership beyond veterinary medicine. As someone who has been mentored by the former president of the college's Alumni Executive Board, she states, "I'm also interested in community service and leadership in the broader sense, getting involved in the community at-large as a health professional in public health, policy design, and educational settings."

It makes me especially happy that three men also signed up to take the course. One third-year male student "worked mainly under male veterinarians who were the practice owners, but would actually like to see what leadership is like from the female perspective." He is also interested in what it would be like to work for a woman veterinarian, anticipating that some day he might be in that position and wonders if it will be different from working for a man.

Drs. Stacy Pritt and Karen Bradley, both directors of the WVLDI, will also be presenting information on closing the gap women's leadership in the profession to the Student AVMA members at the SAVMA Symposium in March. One of the principal goals of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative is to help prepare veterinary students for a future in leading a profession that is now 54 % women and rapidly growing because the female student population has been over 75% for several years. The tide is turning and students—and not just women students—are hungry to learn more about how to close the gap in women's leadership so that we can have a profession whose leadership in practice, organized veterinary medicine, academia and industry can more adequately reflect the gender profile of the profession.

As far as I am aware, the course being held in March at Cornell is the first on this topic to be offered in veterinary medicine. It is a pilot that has obviously tapped a fountain of interest and Ms. Julie Kumble and I are looking forward to engaging with these enthusiastic students.

Dr. Smith thanks Ms. Julie Kumble, Director of Grants and Programs, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, Easthampton, MA 01027, for her contributions to this story. Ms. Kumble will also be co-leader of the course mentioned here.

¹ Kennedy, Amanda (Cornell DVM student). E-mail to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Jan 5, 2014.

² As an accepted student for the Class of 2018, this individual participated in one of the "accepted-student weekends" held in January and February of 2013.

³ Schuhmacher, Katherine (Cornell DVM student). E-mail to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Jan 5, 2014.

⁴ Connie Curran, EdD, RN, FAAN, is founder and CEO of Best on Board, a faculty member of the American College of Healthcare Executives, chair of DeVry, Inc., and board member of Hospira, Inc. and DePaul University. She is former board chair of Silver Cross Hospital and former dean of nursing at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

⁵ Curran, Connie and Fitzpatrick, Therese (2013). *Claiming the Corner Office: Executive Leadership Lessons for Nurses..* Sigma Theta Tau International.

⁶ Curran, Connie, e-mail to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Jan 7, 2014.

⁷ Florina, Michelle (Cornell DVM student). E-mail to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Dec 29, 2014.

⁸ Sandberg, Sheryl (2013). *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead.* Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

⁹ Smith, Donald F. A Path to Leadership for a New DVM: The Story of Dr. Eva Evans. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine.* Sept 29, 2013.

¹⁰ Smith, Donald and Julie Kumble. Veterinary Leadership in Iowa. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine.* Dec 12, 2013,

¹¹ Goldhaber, Jenna (Cornell DVM student). E-mail to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Jan 5, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine
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Veterinary Education
Connie Curran
Sheryl Sandberg
Stacy Pritt
Karen Bradley
Elizabeth Sabin
Cornell University
Iowa Veterinary Medical Association

TOPIC:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

Are students interested in including leadership development in the veterinary curriculum?

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.

Julie Kumble is Director of Grants and Programs, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts. She can be reached at juliek@womensfund.net