

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Class Assignment with Impact: An Interview with Dr. Valerie Ragan

By Rebecca Donnelly (Guest Author)
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Every student dreads the moment when the professor explains the homework assignment. Read the first 200 chapters, complete problems one through 500, and top it off with a 20-page paper on a dull subject of your choosing. But what if your class assignment was to interview someone amazing? Even better, what if you had to interview someone whom you admire, who could offer advice relevant to your intended career path, and serve as a mentor moving forward?



Rebecca Donnelly, Cornell DVM candidate 2016
(Photo provided by Rebecca Donnelly, 2014)

That very assignment was given to all 35 attendees of Cornell's course on Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine.¹

After collecting several suggestions from faculty and peers, I decided to interview Dr. Valerie Ragan, a 1983 graduate from the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Ragan is someone whose career and leadership experience I greatly respect, and I was delighted that our class assignment provided an "excuse" to interview her. Whenever I told

someone I was interviewing her, students and faculty alike responded with absolutely glowing reviews. I now understand why.



Dr. Valerie Ragan
(Photo provided by Dr. Ragan, 2014)

Dr. Ragan's career began in small animal private practice, but soon after she moved into the field of epidemiology, where she focused on brucellosis with the USDA APHIS Veterinary Services.² She is now the director of the Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine,³ a position that would have made her great grandfather (also a veterinarian) proud.⁴

I began our phone call by asking Dr. Ragan to expand on her varied career. She responded that her career path was "all over the place, but in a good way." After she graduated from veterinary college and was practicing as a small animal veterinarian, her mother said to her, "You've reached your life goal, what will you do next?" That question gave her pause; she had expected to stay in small animal practice forever. But one day after spaying her "sixth cat of the morning," she knew that she was no longer challenged. Soon after, she happened upon a brochure for the USDA Veterinary Services Public Practice career-training program. That one brochure would lead her to a remarkable career aimed at the eradication of brucellosis, both domestically and internationally.

Dr. Ragan explained that one of the keys to success in her career was her mentor, who also worked on brucellosis as a regional epidemiologist. He not only provided guidance by making her reason through decisions, but also helped her understand that the decisions she made were

valid. She emphasized that because of his support she made herself available to help him whenever he asked, which particularly resonated with me.



Dr. Ragan (L) at work as an international veterinary epidemiologist
(Photo provided by Dr. Valerie Ragan, 2014)

One topic that comes up repeatedly in conversations about mentorship is, “But what can I give back to my mentor?” Dr. Ragan’s simple answer was that if her mentor asked her to give a presentation on any given topic, whether she was well versed in that topic or not, she would *always* agree and follow through. Each time it offered her a great learning opportunity in addition to a chance to give back to her mentor in a meaningful way. And when that mentor retired, she moved into his senior position, crediting him for pushing her so she was prepared for that transition.

When I asked Dr. Ragan about any obstacles she faced throughout her career, she told me of a school counselor who told her that she could not go to veterinary school “because she was a girl.” Fortunately, her parents deemed that “ridiculous” and encouraged her to pursue whatever dreams she had. She was accepted to veterinary school, but that wasn’t where the obstacle of “being a girl” ceased. While working as a field veterinarian for the USDA, clients would often make it obvious that they expected a male veterinarian. Rather than be fazed by this, she would simply reply, “Well, here I am.”

I then asked if Dr. Ragan had ever felt “ready” or “qualified” for her leadership positions throughout her career. She responded that she did not feel completely ready for her current position, which she has successfully held for five years. She explained that there is a difference between having self-confidence and feeling ready or qualified.

She explained that if you wait until you feel that you know “everything,” you will be too old to apply. Chiding herself for not applying for positions in the past for fear of not being selected, she advised, “If you don’t apply, you definitely won’t get it.” Getting a position and being effective in it boils down to confidence and “making people believe that you believe in yourself.”

Finally, I asked Dr. Ragan, “If you knew then what you know now, what advice would you have given yourself at the beginning of your career?” She wished she had known that her first job was not going to be her last and had embraced that fact.

Relax. Your first job won't be your last one. Explore veterinary medicine. From there you can knock things out... Relax and enjoy it! Part of the veterinary oath is a commitment to lifelong learning, and we should take that seriously.

She suggested self-assessment and a heightened level of reflection—what’s important to you, what drives you, what do you want out of a career, what do you really enjoy doing? She also acknowledged that she wished that she had negotiated more in the process of accepting her first job.

What makes the difference between you and another graduate? What are they [the hiring institution] looking for? A practitioner needs someone who is a people person, confident, makes clients feel comfortable, dedicated, and hard working. That's a whole skill set you can make them aware of or not. They're in a “people business.” They need veterinarians who are going to attract and keep clients. Everyone has a basic skill set in medicine; they're looking for the right person. [Show them that you] have that extra edge that will make their business grow.

She turned the end of our conversation back on me by asking what my intended career path might be in veterinary medicine. I responded that I wasn’t sure and, honestly, I wasn’t sure how to figure it out. To help me explore that question, she sent me some documents on self-reflection. After I took the time to reflect on my skills, goals, priorities, and how they fit with the endless career options in veterinary medicine, I had a much clearer picture of which path I wanted to pursue.

From one phone call I can say with total confidence that Dr. Ragan is amazing. She was extremely warm, kind, easy to talk to, and spoke humbly about her impressive career.

Dr. Ragan’s advice has stuck with me:

- have confidence in your abilities and skills;

- sell those skills and apply them to meet the needs of any hiring organization;
- take the time to reflect on what is important to you and what your goals are to guide you in making career decisions; and
- apply for leadership positions even if you don't feel ready. In her words, "If you don't apply, you definitely won't get it."

¹ Smith, Donald F. and Julie Kumble. Women's Leadership In Veterinary Medicine: A Course for Veterinary Students. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 2, 2014.

² [United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services](#) (USDA APHIS)

³ [Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine](#), Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine.

³ Dr. Ragan's great grandfather was the late Dr. John Parker Divine, a 1910 graduate of George Washington University. Though she never met him, she always admired his legacy. When Dr. Ragan graduated from veterinary college, her grandmother (Dr. Divine's daughter) gave her his instruments and diploma, which she considers to be some of her most treasured possessions.

KEYWORDS:

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Mentoring
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TOPIC:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

How can you get advice from an established leader in veterinary medicine?

META-SUMMARY:

Veterinarian Dr. Valerie Ragan provides advice about mentoring, taking career risks, negotiation and developing leadership skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Rebecca Donnelly is a member of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2016. She is an officer in the Cornell Student Chapter of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative, and is Cornell Senior Delegate for SAVMA (Student American Veterinary Medical Association).