



Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

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Cornell veterinary students form group to advance women's leadership in veterinary medicine

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Striving to boost the number of female leaders in veterinary medicine, Cornell veterinary students have launched a student chapter of the Women's Veterinarian Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI). WVLDI at Cornell will facilitate and encourage women to more fully participate in veterinary leadership roles in organized veterinary medicine as well as in corporate, government, private practice, and academic positions.

Women now make up the majority of veterinarians and around 80% of current veterinary student classes, yet across the field, from practice ownership to academia to industry organizations, few hold leadership roles. Only six deans of veterinary schools in the United States are female (20 percent), just one illustration of the "leaky pipeline" from which the percentage of women tends to decrease in more senior positions. The student chapter of WVLDI at Cornell hopes to help change this trend.



"We want to make it possible for veterinary students to succeed in any area they desire to pursue, and to help them develop the leadership skills necessary for that to happen," said Jordan Daniels '17, the president of WVLDI at Cornell.

Daniels and her fellow students formed the Cornell chapter immediately after participating in an innovative course at Cornell entitled Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine—the first ever course given anywhere on the subject. Two WVLDI founding directors led the course: Dr. Donald Smith, professor of surgery and dean emeritus at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine and Julie Kumble, MEd, acting Chief Executive Officer of the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts.

Thirty five Cornell veterinary students, including three men, attended the six-hour symposium in March 2014. Smith and Kumble presented on leadership issues in organized veterinary medicine, clinical practice, industry, and academia. They discussed obstacles women face and how they might be overcome, offering ideas for how the percentage of women leaders could be increased in the next few years, including ways to recognize and combat cultural biases and gender stereotypes, build confidence to overcome perfection complexes and run for office, and develop leadership competencies such as negotiation and public speaking.

"We aimed 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," said

Smith. “Afterwards, as they talked amongst themselves and with the guest presenters, the students began to plan a Student Chapter of the WVLDI. The excitement and enthusiasm surrounding this effort are palpable.”

WVLDI at Cornell strives to achieve leadership excellence in every sector of veterinary medicine that fully reflects the diversity of the profession and society. The organization will provide support for women seeking and enacting leadership, policy, and decision-making positions within all areas of professional veterinary activity and facilitate opportunities for students to learn leadership skills and develop mentoring relationships.

Since organizing in April 2014, the Cornell chapter has 54 members and three faculty advisors. It has cosponsored workshops on negotiations and the perfection complex, and plans to hold more events in the next academic year.

“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,” said Michelle Forella ’17, vice president of Cornell WVLDI. “I have learned that the obstacles that I face are shared by other women, even in veterinary medicine. I hope that we can build the skills necessary to be leaders and to support our female colleagues as coworkers, employers, or policy makers.”

In addition to Daniels and Forella, the leadership team includes Kat Schuhmacher, '15, secretary; Yuan Kang, '17, treasurer; and Becky Donnelly, '16, historian. Two other chapters have recently launched at Texas A&M University and the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine.