

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Critical Role of Mentors for Veterinary Students

By Dr. Donald F. Smith and Julie Kumble
May 16, 2014

Mentoring is widely considered to be an essential ingredient in the success and future leadership of students. Nearly all of the women deans of veterinary colleges with whom we've spoken point to the absolute influence that mentors had on their trajectories.¹ The belief, confidence and support of their mentors fostered for these women a sense of belief and confidence in them.

We took their lessons to heart and asked each of the 35 students in our course, "Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine,"² to identify a potential mentor and to interview her (or him) as a means to establish a first-time connection, or to further cultivate an already existing relationship.

Nurturing is a close cousin of mentoring, and some of us are fortunate enough to find people in our academic years who offer a good dose of each. New York Times Op Ed columnist, Charles Blow, defines the concept of nurturing as it relates to his professors and how pivotal they were in his college years.³ He also cites a new study that points to the fact that students report feeling like they've had mentoring or nurturing far too infrequently.⁴

While we believe that mentors within veterinary college are important to career development, we also stressed to our students the critical importance of reaching beyond the academy. However, there was a time in veterinary educational circles that mentoring was considered the exclusive provenance of veterinary college faculty. In the early days of the profession, one prominent academic, Dean Leonard Pearson⁵ who chaired the AVMA's Committee on Intelligence and Education, insisted that just as "water runs downstream from its source ... *No profession can rise higher than the schools in which its members are trained, as these are the sources of the special knowledge...*" Reporting on behalf of his committee in 1907, Pearson inferred that knowledge emanates from the veterinary colleges and that practitioners in the field would always be less informed than their teachers and only by having well-educated faculty could veterinarians ever be expected to be able to practice effectively.⁶

By the 1930s (if not before), that concept had been turned on its head and veterinarians outside of the universities were developing some of the major advances in clinical medicine and feeding them back into the universities.⁷ More recently, and especially since the development of the clinical specialty boards in the last half century, some of the most progressive

practitioners and scholars can be found in private practice, research institutes, governmental agencies and nonprofits, as well as in academia.

We instructed the students in our course to reach outside the university to find potential mentors for their class assignment—because they have regular access to faculty here at Cornell, we insisted that they broaden their network. Some took a comfortable, but still valuable, route of interviewing veterinarians who had been instrumental earlier in their career, as they developed their credentials for applying to college. Others were venturesome, contacting people whom they had only heard about, or whom they identified through the AVMA member data base (a marvelous resource, by the way).

Aziza Glass, who is interested in a career in biomedical science, tracked down and interviewed four-time space traveler, Dr. Richard Linnehan, who told her that veterinary schools need to find ways to move beyond their classical mindset to include One Health as a crucial part of veterinary theory, education and practice sets.⁸

Because of her interview with Dr. Karen Bradley, founder of Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative, Jordan Daniels was energized at the increasingly active role that dynamic and courageous practitioners can play in transforming organized veterinary medicine and making it more responsive in the 21st century. She took that verve and, together with several other students in the course, launched the first student chapter of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative.

Yet another student interviewed Dr. Valerie Ragan, director of the Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine. Another interviewed a woman who is one of the most creative and skilled deans in the country.

These are not just insightful and helpful interviews, but they represent introductions to some of the truly great leaders of our time with the potential for these people (both women and men) to affect the careers of students in a meaningful and sustaining manner.

We agree with Mr. Blow that mentors are important and they are often available in the students' college environment. But as educators of future professionals we must insist that more of our educational offerings tie directly to experts and leaders outside the academy. To be competitive in today's veterinary environment, our students should develop strategic networks and mentoring relationships that include the breadth of the profession.

¹ Smith, Donald F and Julie Kumble. Mentoring as a Career Factor: Six US Women Deans Reflect. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Sept 12, 2013.

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

³ Blow, Charles M. [In College, Nurturing Matters](#). New York Times, May 7, 2014.

⁴ Ray, Julie and Stephanie Kafka. [Life in College Matters for Life After College](#). Gallup Economy, May 6, 2014.

⁵ Leonard Pearson VMD was the third dean of veterinary medicine at the University of Pennsylvania (1897-1909).

⁶ Pearson, Leonard, Report of the Committee on Intelligence and Education. Proceedings of the American Veterinary Medical Association 1907. (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott Company), 1908.101-102.

⁷ Smith, Donald F. 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in the United States. J Vet Med Educ 37(4) 2010, 322-323.

⁸ Glass, Aziza. A Student Interviews a Veterinary Astronaut. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 28, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Charles Blow
Mentors
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Women Veterinarians
Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine
Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative
Karen Bradley
Valerie Ragan
Leonard Pearson
Aziza Glass
Jordan Daniels

TOPIC:

Mentors

LEADING QUESTION:

Why is it important to have veterinary students develop mentors in the real world?

META-SUMMARY:

During a student course in Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine, Cornell students were asked to interview a potential mentor from outside the university.

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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