

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Are there more Creative Options for Diversifying Academic Leadership?

By Dr. Donald F. Smith and Julie Kumble
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During a presentation on Women's Leadership at the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) meeting on March 15th, we confronted the issue of the slow increase in appointments of women to professorial and senior academic leadership positions over the past three decades despite vigorous affirmative action policies in the academy. "Can we learn some lessons from the successful increase in women's leadership in places like the Iowa Veterinary Medical Association (IVMA)," we asked, "or are we going to continue the glacial pace of improvement that characterizes many of our universities?"

As we reported in a posting here last year, the IVMA, led by Dr. Tom Johnson, didn't just increase the depth of the candidate pool and help people understand and support a broader understanding of gender diversity, they also fostered institutional change. By modifying the very basic parameters of office-holding, they increased the pace of change.¹ "Our leadership profile didn't just happen," Johnson told us during our 2013 interview.

Instead, they used a multi-pronged approach. One was familiar to all of us, and involved developing leadership training opportunities for the target audience of women and new graduates. The other initiative was bolder: they made substantive institutional changes in the association.

Of the several structural changes they instituted, we mention just two. One was to institute term limits, thereby opening up opportunities for more people to have a chance at leadership. Second, they confronted the prevailing dogma that leadership required progressively more challenging appointments, moving sequentially up the ladder one rung at a time to attain the necessary qualifications through experience, rather than a combination of experience AND creative mentoring PLUS targeted educational opportunities.

How has veterinary academia fared in the thirty-plus years since we have seen over 50% women enter our US colleges? In the last five years (2010-2015), the increase in tenure track professorial positions at all levels has only changed from 32% to 34%. The increase in faculty administrators, from 25% to just 34%.² The percentage of women in all faculty positions in our 30 colleges ranges from 15% to 49%. Clearly, not what any of us wants.

Is it time to consider a bolder approach?

How about the following:

- Term limits for deans, associate and assistant deans, department chairs and directors: four- or five-year terms, renewable no more than once. In addition to ensuring more frequent turnover of people in the most senior administrative offices, it would also allow colleges to prepare two or three years in advance of the appointment, rather than just months in advance. Though most dean searches are conducted over 12-14 months, the actual period of inviting people to become candidates is often a mere four months.³ By extending opportunities for inquiry, recruitment and extended visits to one year or longer, the potential for active consideration of inspiring candidates could increase exponentially.
- What about changing these job descriptions to accommodate greater flexibility for high quality candidates with diverse portfolios? Do all deans need to be internationally-recognized research scholars? Perhaps we need a less constrained concept of scholarship, one that reflects the future needs of society rather than the traditional needs of the academy. Do all deans need to be expert fundraisers, constantly on the move from meetings a mile away with vice presidents for development, to meetings a continent away with potential donors? Do we ever really assess the investment of international travel on time away from our offices and our families? Do deans really need to spend four hours a week in face-to-face meetings with provosts and vice presidents? Is it time to say “no” to the unending reports that keep deans from the important work of meeting with students and faculty, and from their children? Accountability is important, but so is trust and a lighter hand on university centralization. Is it time for deans to return to becoming academic leaders more, and managers of centralized university units less?

“Can’t be done,” some would argue, “because of federal and state regulations, the tightening university grip, and a myriad of other challenges.” Perhaps. But with an added measure of creativity, open minds, and our collective ability to problem solve, we might be able to make the type of progress that our colleagues in organized veterinary medicine have already been able to accomplish.

And by doing so, we could really increase the richness and diversity of the potential applicant pool. Now, THAT would be affirmative action, and perhaps the graphs would more accurately reflect the face of veterinary medicine in 2020.

¹ Smith, Donald F. and Julie Kumble. Veterinary Leadership in Iowa. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, December 12, 2013.

² Annual Data Report 2014-15 [Internet]. Washington DC, Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges: 2015 – 1-15 from <http://www.aavmc.org/About-AAVMC/Public-Data.aspx>

³ The additional time is spent for provost to meet with stakeholders, for the search committee to be established, and for the position description to be written and advertised. Following the assembly of a cohort of applicants, the final several months are devoted to interviews, selection, and negotiation.

KEYWORDS:

Leadership
Affirmative action
Women's leadership
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges

TOPIC:

Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

How can the veterinary profession move beyond traditional affirmative action to diversity the academic leadership community?

META-SUMMARY:

The authors, one of whom is a former dean, suggest ways to increase diversity in academic leadership positions.

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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