Foreword
What It Means to Be Inclusive and Why It Is Imperative for the Veterinary Profession

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In the year 2011, the veterinary profession launched a global celebration of the 250-year anniversary of veterinary medical education. Throughout the yearlong celebration many accounts of important contributions by the veterinary profession since the founding of the first veterinary school in Lyon, France, in 1761, were chronicled in international publications and at scientific conferences around the world. The celebration largely highlighted scientific contributions of Caucasian/White and predominantly male members of the profession, with little or no mention of the contributions of women or individuals of color. While it is undeniable that the veterinary profession has made many important contributions to both human and animal health, one wonders what other contributions could have been made by a more diverse and inclusive profession. Would the many fractious and divisive debates over animal welfare, the disagreements over the status and value of animals to society, or the rise of animal rights organizations have occurred if more voices with different cultural perspectives had been heard? Would disease control and eradication programs have been more successful, and perhaps less
costly, if the veterinary profession had sought and better embraced a wider array of cultural perspectives? And how much animal and human suffering would have been alleviated if disease problems had been tackled by more diverse teams of problem solvers? Unfortunately, the world will never know.

Veterinary medicine in the US has the dubious distinction of being the least diverse of all health professions. However, veterinary medical education and a few other segments of the veterinary medical profession have made nominal gains in recent years in attracting individuals who have been historically underrepresented in the profession. While veterinary medicine has over a 150-year history in the US, only in the past thirty years has it experienced success in attracting women, predominately Caucasian/White women, who now dominate many segments of the profession. Women are now taking their rightful place in many significant leadership positions and will help shape the profession for generations. The long-term impact of this dramatic gender shift, along with the current gender imbalance in the nation’s veterinary colleges, on the profession is still unknown. Veterinarians of color only account for approximately 10 percent of the 92,000 in the US veterinary workforce. The outlook in the near term for increasing racial and ethnic diversity in veterinary medicine is not good given the fact that the applicant pool to veterinary school has not experienced meaningful growth in the past ten years and is annually composed of only 15 percent racially or ethnically underrepresented students. An added concern is that the entire applicant pool is only expected to increase by a modest 2 percent in the coming years. Currently, only around 13 percent of enrolled students in US colleges of veterinary medicine are underrepresented.

Given the current status of the profession with respect to diversity and inclusion, along with future challenges such as the impact of soaring population growth, global warming, emergence of new infectious diseases that threaten animal and human health, and unprecedented economic challenges, just how important is diversity and inclusion for the veterinary profession? In the recently released North American Veterinary Medical Education Consortium (NAVMEC) report, “Roadmap for Veterinary Medical Education in the 21st Century: Responsive, Collaborative, Flexible,” diversity and multicultural awareness are recommended core competencies that all veterinarians should possess. The report states that veterinarians should have “an understanding of the manner in which culture and belief systems impact delivery of veterinary medical care while recognizing and appropriately addressing biases in themselves, in others, and in the process of veterinary care delivery.” NAVMEC brought together the largest and broadest spectrum of veterinary profession stakeholders ever assembled and provided the
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strongest endorsement ever for diversity and inclusion in veterinary medicine. So if there is national consensus that diversity and inclusion are necessary competencies of graduating veterinarians, belief that a diverse and inclusive environment enhances excellence in the educational experience, and acceptance of the business case for diversity currently espoused by corporate America, will colleges of veterinary medicine fund diversity efforts and sustain them during downturns in the economy, or when there is a swing in the political pendulum? If we truly believe that the veterinary profession is strengthened by many perspectives and approaches to solving societal issues such as health care disparities, are we prepared to take hold of the well-meaning goals and objectives pertaining to diversity and inclusion that litter the strategic plans of our professional organizations and veterinary colleges, and make them a reality for the profession rather than just politically correct rhetoric? Are we finally ready to tackle, in a comprehensive and consistent manner, the complexities of navigating a new journey to diversity and inclusion in the profession? Given the rapid demographic shifts in the US and current economic challenges, do we really have a choice if the profession is to sustain its workforce and retain its relevancy to society?

In this first authoritative narrative on diversity and inclusion in veterinary medicine, the authors have framed the current status of veterinary medicine, with respect to diversity and inclusion, as being at a pivotal transition, where failure to act could have grave consequences on the future standing of the profession. Beginning with a historical account of veterinary medicine, in context to historical changes and actions within US society, a call for action is made for the profession to get its act together if it is to maintain societal relevance and continue to enjoy its status as one of the most admired professions. The authors do not provide a precise pathway to reach the desired level of inclusiveness and cultural competency in the veterinary profession, but rather, they describe a journey where many roads have been traveled and must be traveled to reach a new future for veterinary medicine. As with any map, there are many roads that can be chosen to reach a desired destination, and different individuals will choose different routes, some with unexpected detours and stops along the way. This journey will be made without the assistance of a global positioning system.

The authors have not attempted to tell us all the possible directions that could be taken to reach the destination we seek, nor should they. However, the information presented will help with reading the map, plotting the path, and effectively navigating the challenges and complexities that are encountered by those who work to achieve diversity and inclusion in veterinary medicine. We are taught skills that are applicable in multiple areas and how a systems approach to diversity
and inclusiveness is necessary for long-term progress and success. And we are reminded of the need for the profession to live up to the veterinarian’s oath, where all who enter the veterinary profession pledge to use their scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society. If we accept that increased diversity and inclusion in veterinary medicine benefits society through improvements in public health, decreased disparities in care, and improved health and wellbeing for animals in all communities, when will the veterinary profession fully embrace its oath? While we may have miles to go before we arrive at a solution, let us not forget the words of the Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”