Navigating Diversity and Inclusion in Veterinary Medicine

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The Veterinary Profession

W. Ron DeHaven, DVM, MBA

A diverse veterinary profession is a strong veterinary profession, strategically positioned to meet societal needs and well equipped to serve animal, human, and public health. If we are to provide the services required by the mosaic that is American society, excellence in the profession will require a workforce representative of our communities. That’s why the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is committed to helping build a more diverse veterinary workforce.

A special 2010 report published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* captures why a diverse veterinary workforce is critical if we are to meet our professional and ethical obligations to our clients and the animals we serve. “Embracing diversity is vital if the veterinary profession is going to continue
to fulfill its mission of serving all of society and all animals to the best advantage,” the report concludes. “From improving communication with clients to providing a better understanding of cultural attitudes and practices that affect animal care to recognizing how differences in gender attitudes affect the work environment, diversity touches every aspect of the profession” (Kahler 2010, 369).

Nurturing a diverse society and encouraging participation by underrepresented groups in everything this country has to offer should be important to each and every American. Embracing our diversity and promoting inclusion are part of our social fabric, from the inscription on the Statue of Liberty to our constitutionally protected rights. It is what sets the United States apart from so many other nations. It is what sustains our belief in the American dream.

But this is about more than lofty goals and idealism—a lot more. For the veterinary profession, embracing diversity and inclusion can also produce tangible business results. Improving the diversity of our profession and promoting inclusion will enhance our productivity and profitability. The numbers speak for themselves.

According to the US Census Bureau, minorities today make up about one-third of the US population. By 2023, the Census Bureau estimates that minorities will comprise more than half of all children in the United States. By 2042, minorities are expected to become the majority, with the nation projected to have reached 54 percent minority in 2050 (US Census Bureau 2008).

What is their purchasing power? Projections by the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia’s Terry College of Business estimate that minority spending will have topped $2.9 trillion dollars by 2012 (Dodson 2007). That number is expected to grow dramatically and is becoming an increasingly important part of the United States economy. The veterinary profession must actively market to this growing segment of our population if we expect to maintain and grow our economic viability. Just as some women prefer to go to a female doctor, many minorities prefer a veterinarian of similar ethnic background.

A lack of diversity on our health care teams has the potential to make it more difficult for us to communicate with, and relate our animal-health messages to, an increasingly larger percentage of our potential clients. This inability to reach and serve a dynamic portion of our society will lower our influence and our income potential. It will also prevent us from fulfilling our oath to serve the health and protect the welfare of the animals we treat.

Considering the makeup of the veterinary profession presented in chapter 2, it is obvious that we are way behind the curve. The AVMA’s Diversity Task Force released a report in 2006 titled “Unity Through Diversity.” The AVMA continues
to actively incorporate many of the report’s elements and recommendations into its evolving strategic plan. And the AVMA is constantly striving to be more inclusive in its activities and practices so as to attract more underrepresented groups to the veterinary profession, as practitioners, researchers, veterinary technicians, and educators.

We have urged our members to hire employees—especially bilingual employees—from the neighborhoods surrounding their clinics, which builds both credibility and respect among those animal owners who live nearby. We continue to produce educational materials in both English and Spanish to reach the broadest audience possible and to expand client knowledge about pet care, disease, and public health.

The AVMA continues to host a diversity symposium at its annual convention, bringing together the brightest minds to help us build on the incorporation of diversity into our profession. While our veterinary colleges and schools are the true gatekeepers when it comes to boosting minority enrollment, veterinarians also need to help raise the numbers of underrepresented groups in the profession. Recruitment is the key to this challenge, and it starts with each and every member of the veterinary profession. Veterinarians are the best ambassadors and mentors the profession has to offer. Who better to provide personal insight on the wonderful rewards and opportunities that accompany working with animals? That’s why veterinarians have to get out of the office and attend career days at their local elementary and high schools. That’s why veterinarians have to invite students—all interested students—to their practices for a behind-the-scenes tour of what they and their staff do on a daily basis to serve their community. As a profession, veterinarians need to do a better job of marketing themselves to all segments of society. They need to reach out to those who have an interest in one of the noblest of professions. They need to become true evangelists for the profession they love.

Adaptation is nothing new to us. Veterinarians have constantly adapted. The veterinary profession was all about horses and livestock one hundred years ago. However, over the past fifty years, veterinarians have seen tremendous growth in services provided to companion animals. The profession, in effect, embraced diversity in the animal population it served, doing so because it made good economic sense.

Veterinarians have done it before. We evolved and adapted as our communities and our clientele changed. Today’s challenges are no different. For us to remain credible and productive, for us to maintain our influence and protect our economic viability, we need to continue that evolution and heighten our commit-
ment to diversity and inclusion. Doing so will underscore our pledge to use our knowledge and skills for the benefit of society.

References


The Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) is one of seven centers within the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), with its headquarters in Rockville, Maryland (http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/default.htm). The CVM regulates the manufacture and distribution of animal feed, food additives, and drugs that will be given to animals. These include animals, from which human foods are derived, as well as feed, food additives, and drugs for pet (or companion) animals and minor animal species. Minor animal species include animals other than cattle, swine, chickens, turkeys, horses, dogs, and cats. With five hundred full-time employees, staff members of the CVM determine the safety and effectiveness of animal drugs. The CVM’s mission is to “Protect human and animal health, while its vision is “Excellence, Leadership, Innovation.” Embodied within the CVM’s core values and behaviors is the call for every employee to embrace diversity, openness, fairness, and respect. As we have adopted these ideals, the experience of each employee is trusted and valued, and our organization has responded with ingenuity to the challenges we face every day. We also embrace and promote the philosophy of inclusion, and we strive for a work environment that fully engages and motivates a diverse workforce. The CVM’s workforce reflects the nation’s diversity, which strengthens our ability to know and understand the population that we serve. This enhances our adaptability and efficiency as an organization, and aids us in serving the public.

The CVM’s Work Culture and the High-Performance Organization Model

One of the ways we foster the philosophy of inclusion is by operating under a workplace model focused on “continuous improvement with internal and external input,” known as a high-performance organization model (HPO). The HPO model was first introduced at CVM in January 1998, and all employees become familiar with the model by attending a two-and-one-half-day workshop. The model is competency-based, focuses on continuous improvement, and trusts that those who do the work are in the best position to update the work processes. This level of empowerment requires that we are clear about ground rules and

1. The views expressed in this section are those of the authors and must not be taken to represent policy or guidance on behalf of the US Food and Drug Administration.
expectations. To that end, we developed a series of guiding principles, management philosophies, goals, and a vision and mission statement. We also identified acceptable behaviors as well as managerial and individual competencies. The centerpiece of an HPO is that leadership is an attitude more than a title, and it is the responsibility of everyone to become a steward of the success of the CVM and find ways to make the workplace better. This philosophy and practice drive our short-range and long-range goals, and help us orchestrate the changes needed to achieve our mission—protecting public and animal health—in a continuously evolving environment.

The key to our culture is that every employee’s opinion is valued. Managers solicit employee input on matters within the CVM and strive to incorporate their ideas in the decision-making process whenever feasible. The “consultative” aspect of the work culture occurs continuously and depends on daily interactions between supervisors, direct reports, coworkers, and working groups, up and down the management chain. As stewards of the larger organization, each employee is called upon to participate in one-on-one conversations with their supervisors and colleagues, and to attend meetings and group discussions continually, to add their voices to a shared dialog. Time for planning and reflecting is vital, and each member of the CVM team is encouraged to take a step back from the urgencies of the regular workday to ask questions such as, “Are we doing the right things in the right way?” and “Are we meeting the current needs of our stakeholders/customers, and will we be in a position to meet their needs in the future?” We find that the more diverse the group, the better the ideas and solutions that ensue.

Promotion of Diversity and Inclusion

We believe that not only is our model essential in promoting diversity and inclusion in our work culture, but the reverse is also true. Diversity and inclusion are central to the achievement of high performance. Diversity takes many forms, including race, religion, ethnicity, thought, and background. The journey toward a higher performing organization is supported by a positive, safe, and caring work environment where members share a set of core values and behaviors.

The CVM convened a cross-CVM group, and with a facilitator, the group trained in the principles of HPO developed a set of CVM-wide values and behaviors. One of the behaviors includes striving for and embracing diversity and inclusion. Our employees are expected to be sensitive to differences (e.g., cultural, ethnic, gender, or disabilities); build respectful relationships; seek and encourage input from diverse sources (e.g., different education, culture, and experiences);
be receptive to new ideas and different points of view; and inform others of the rationale behind a decision (e.g., provide explanation/justification for a decision).

The CVM senior executives and managers are also responsible for upholding and modeling these values and behaviors. Critical elements within their performance plans address this issue: senior executives, managers, supervisors, and team leaders must demonstrate support for EEO/diversity and employee worklife quality and foster a cooperative work environment where diverse opinions are solicited and respected. This is coupled with participation in updating and implementing succession plans for current and future staffing needs. As hiring managers, they must be attuned to increasing the diversity of their staff, as well as continually assessing how they are augmenting awareness and sensitivity to others in their particular offices and/or divisions within the CVM.

**Initiatives in the FDA/CVM**

Our programs are driven in part by executive branch initiatives, but also by our own CVM and FDA efforts. To attain a highly skilled and diverse workforce, hiring managers within CVM collaborate with the CVM’s human capital strategists to assure outreach and marketing for a vacancy is targeted and inclusive. The approach is strategic and extends to retention, engagement, and development practices. Our recruitment and human capital planning efforts for achieving diversity within the CVM have been steadily increasing over the past years. The CVM has worked extensively with underrepresented groups such as the veteran community, people with disabilities/targeted disabilities, and the Hispanic/Latino population. Our outreach includes but is not limited to the following: the Veterans Administration; Wounded Warrior Project; Hire Heroes USA; Operation Second Chance; RecruitMilitary; Corporate Gray; Department of Health and Human Services’ Diversity Recruitment and Outreach Office within the Office of Human Resources; JobZone’s Pentagon Career Fair; Military Officers Association of America Career Fair; Career Expo for People with Disabilities; 50+ Employment Expo; LatPro/The National Society for Hispanic Professionals Job Fair (largest fair for Hispanic and bilingual career placement); and Federal Hiring Event for People with Disabilities, hosted by the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy.

The CVM conducts outreach for many of its scientific positions where there is a significant Hispanic presence, as indicated by US Census data (e.g., Florida and New York). The CVM recognizes that there must be a variety of developmental opportunities for all employees, to ensure a diverse and capable workforce. Within
that vein, we emphasize the use of individual development plans (IDPs) aimed at assisting employees with their career advancement goals. In alignment with this effort and with the competency-based talent management program the CVM exemplifies, employees are presented with different learning options to augment the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to maximize performance within their occupations. We also offer diverse leadership programs for managers and supervisors, to provide a skill-building foundation in diversity management as well as an emphasis on topics that focus on antidiscrimination laws, federal employee classification, time, and attendance policies, as well as hiring and separating federal employees. Participants are provided with strategies on how to conduct and address performance issues effectively and with confidence. Other topics include conflict management and resolution, giving and receiving constructive feedback, and supporting employee career development. Some of these seminars include: Leveraging Diversity: Engaging a Multigenerational Workforce; EEO Compliance Training for Managers and Supervisors; Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback; CVM as a High-Performance Organization; and Preventing Violence in the Workplace.

Within the CVM, we now have a dedicated staff member who is responsible for organizational development and facilitates interpersonal interactions, and who helps bridge the inevitable communication gaps that occur in our organization (as happens in any organization). With this resource in place, we can proactively intervene early and help employees and managers to understand why differences of opinion or interpretation arise in daily interactions. Understanding how people from different cultures respond in a given situation is important. To broaden our organizational development work, the CVM has begun to expand our understanding of our interpersonal interactions by selecting two additional staff members who are enrolled in a yearlong facilitator training program. One is the head of the FDA’s Diversity Council and has been instrumental in focusing the commissioner’s office on increasing the effectiveness of the FDA’s Diversity Management Program.

Another great example of our commitment to diversity is a Cultural Awareness Program that was started by one of our senior managers approximately four years ago. The program shares the unique richness that diversity adds to the workplace. We have enjoyed and learned from our employees as they share their heritage, often with photographs, artifacts, maps, and sometimes foods from their homelands. They explain the demographics of their native populations as well as how political, economic, and sociological factors have influenced their careers and their choices. We have had employees with disabilities share their stories; in one
case, a staff member described what it was like growing up on a farm with a physical disability and then going on to earn a PhD in animal science. We had another session on what it means to be gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual at the CVM. The session was well attended and the presentation was engaging and informative.

This Cultural Awareness Program has become very successful. Participation is energetic, probing, and inquisitive, with many questions that provoke both serious and humorous discussions. We have seen staff become more respectfully engaged with each other, and we attribute this to the way we celebrate diversity and inclusion.

Future of the Expansion of Diversity and Inclusion in the CVM

We will continue to improve our outreach and public education programs. We will continue to augment our in-house recruitment, development, and advancement programs for minority populations who are underrepresented in our workforce. Quite apart from our federal mandate to increase our hiring and retention of underrepresented populations, we sincerely and enthusiastically believe it is the right thing to do.

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Corporate Veterinary Medicine

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The Business Case for Diversity

There can be no doubt that a commitment to strengthen diversity and inclusion in the workplace contributes to business success. A diverse and inclusive workforce benefits the corporation because it: increases employee engagement and productivity, leading to increased performance; challenges the “status quo”; allows employees to look at issues from multiple perspectives; challenges employees to engage in experiences that differ from their own and to expand their cross-cultural understanding; encourages creativity and innovation; provides a variety of backgrounds and experiences, adding to diversity of thought; increases flexibility, allowing the organization to better adapt to a changing marketplace; and offers a connection to diverse communities and customers, helping the organization to better understand and meet the needs of those communities (Corporate Leadership Council 2008).

Diversity Drives Dividends

Empirical studies (Herring 2009) make clear that increased gender, ethnic, and other measures of diversity can lead to measurable increases in productivity and revenue, market share, profits, and corporate stock valuations.

Given that many organizations—across many industry segments spanning both the private and public sector—suffer from a lack of diversity in their employee base, it is critical when opportunities present to fill open positions, to select employees from a broad and diverse candidate pool to achieve an expansive cross-section of individuals. Greater diversity translates to higher quality opinions and ideas—a fundamental component of business innovation.

In fact, studies have shown that diverse perspectives improve collective understanding and problem solving (Hong and Page 2004). Indeed, advocates of diversity in problem-solving groups conclude that identity-diverse groups typically outperform homogeneous groups. In an environment where success depends on continuous innovation and the introduction of new products, companies will miss opportunities if they fail to realize that increased diversity is a profit engine for the organization.
The Role of Leadership in Advancing Diversity in Corporate America

As with many corporate initiatives, without a strong business case, there will likely be limited commitment to diversity at any level. Further, without strong leadership from the top—often defined by the senior most leaders in the organization, these initiatives are often doomed to failure or marginalization. Senior leadership is essential to gain institution-wide credibility and inspire employee engagement.

Fortunately, it is becoming readily apparent that diversity does have a positive and demonstrable impact on organizational profitability and performance, at all levels—thus making senior buy-in more likely.

Within corporate America, we are witnessing myriad ways that organizations and their senior leadership are approaching the need and the methodologies to improve diversity. Indeed, many of the largest publicly traded companies either have embarked on or are in some stage of implementing some of the following strategies: appointing a chief diversity officer; establishing active diversity councils/affinity groups; actively recruiting a diverse pipeline of candidates; developing accelerated advancement opportunities of high-potential, diverse candidates; partnering with external groups (e.g., INROADS, Inc.) that specialize in strengthening cross-cultural competencies and creating internships for diverse candidates; and establishing clear objectives, metrics, and measures to track progress.

Successful corporate diversity programs start at the top. However, for the senior-most leaders to ensure that the expected benefits of diversity are realized and sustained, they must be fully committed. There needs to be “skin in the game.” The success of an organization’s efforts to strengthen diversity and inclusiveness needs to be reflected not only through internal and external messaging, but actions need to be equally visible internally and externally. A focus on achieving impact with diversity initiatives also needs to be woven into objectives, performance assessments, and executive compensation.

Merely paying lip service—without a true commitment or accountability by the senior-most leaders of the organization—only serves as window dressing and threatens to negate all other advancements related to diversity and inclusion embraced within the company.

Overall, improving and leveraging diversity plays an increasingly important role in business today. Organizations must continuously seek to improve their performance by expanding their customer base, exploring various ways to engage and interact with this broader set of customers, and frequently incorporating cus-
customer insights from across their customer base to ensure that the right products and services are developed and ultimately deemed relevant by these customers. In today's dynamic and hypercompetitive business environment, a “one size fits all” approach will not work.

With this as a backdrop, let us now take a closer look at diversity and inclusion within the veterinary industry specifically, and how one company is working to strengthen diversity within its ranks. The intent is to provide some ideas for other entities across the veterinary/animal health industry to consider adopting as they face similar challenges.

**Diversity in the Veterinary Industry**

Of all the health and life science professions, the lack of minority group representation in the United States is most apparent in veterinary medicine—extending well beyond veterinary practices to include academia and other allied organizations that support the veterinary/animal health industry.

While the causes of this disparity are multifactorial, two of the primary reasons for this challenge are cultural and economic. Human health-oriented programs are typically considered more prestigious, and they may be disproportionately attractive to members of groups that have historically been excluded from those professions. Further, the relatively low income of veterinarians compared to physicians may also play a disproportionate role in the choices of some minority group members.

Surveys have found that African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino undergraduates are significantly less attracted to veterinary medicine than their Caucasian/White counterparts. While veterinary graduates make up 7 percent of all students earning degrees in the health professions, that percentage drops to 2 percent of minority students. Approximately 95 percent of all veterinarians in the United States are Caucasian/White (Elmore 2004).

In 2009, only about 5 percent of successful applicants to veterinary schools and colleges represented by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) were Hispanic/Latino; about 5 percent were Asian, and only about 2 percent were African American/Black (AAVMC 2009).

Veterinary medicine, the country’s most male-dominated profession at the turn of the last century, has been experiencing a dramatic change in gender composition in the past thirty years (Weeden 2004). Further, the overwhelming majority of incoming students to US colleges of veterinary medicine are female (and these students are overwhelmingly Caucasian/White).
The veterinary practice in general has experienced a significant increase in the number of women practicing in all fields of the profession, and the small animal practice has seen extraordinary feminization—specifically among Caucasian/White women.

However, this shift is not due to the flight of male incumbents. Indeed, the gender integration of veterinary medicine has resulted almost exclusively from the increase in the number of female practitioners (Verdon 1997), which, accordingly, stems from changes in the gender composition of professional veterinary education (Lincoln 2010).

While the inroads made by women in the veterinary profession have been impressive, especially when compared to other professions where female representation still lags their male counterparts, the dramatic feminization of the veterinary profession has created yet another challenge in achieving broader gender and cultural diversity. To achieve a more balanced diversity mix, the goals will be to encourage practice ownership among a diverse population and to increase the appeal of veterinary medicine as a viable career choice beyond traditional practice, especially in light of the global importance of animal agriculture, food security, and sustainability.

Similarly, animal health organizations that work closely to support the veterinary profession have also experienced a diversity gap, as many of the employees in their ranks as well as the customer segments they interact with share common origins. These organizations must also develop strategies to address the fundamental challenges related to diversity. Given the symbiotic relationship between these organizations and the veterinary profession they serve, successful strategies that help to strengthen diversity within these organizations can be shared with the veterinary profession to contribute to its evolution as well.

Now that we’ve outlined some of the inherent challenges related to diversity in the veterinary profession (some similar to challenges faced in corporate America and others unique to this particular industry), let’s take a closer look at how one company serving the veterinary profession—Pfizer Animal Health—has addressed the challenges and the opportunities of diversity.

A Case Study in Commitment to Strengthen Diversity: Pfizer Animal Health

Within its US operations, Pfizer Animal Health has seen firsthand the need and the value of a commitment to strengthening diversity and inclusiveness, from its impact on recruitment to its collective ability to generate innovative ideas and solutions on how they engage various customer segments.
The company has endorsed several key initiatives and activities to promote the development of an increasingly more diverse and inclusive workplace environment, as part of its parent company’s (Pfizer, Inc.) overall diversity and inclusion strategy. The Animal Health Division has translated this strategy in ways that reflect the unique nature of the business as well as the diverse needs of its employee, customer, and stakeholder base. The leadership team of Pfizer Animal Health endorses, supports, and monetarily funds an organization-wide Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Council comprised of leaders from across the organization.

The primary benefit of a D&I Council is its inherent ability to proactively advise, challenge, and engage senior management on approaches to create and maintain a diverse workforce and culture of inclusion. The D&I Council also promotes an inclusive culture where colleagues feel empowered, enabled, and supported; they feel their presence and contributions are valued; they are engaged in the business and feel a strong sense of belonging.

From a hiring and recruiting perspective, the D&I Council supports Pfizer’s overall human resources strategy by working to promote the need for and the benefit of assembling a diverse pool of candidates for every available open position.

*Promoting a Culture of Diversity and Inclusion*

From the onset, Pfizer Animal Health’s leadership and its D&I Council recognized that an organization could foster a culture of increased diversity through its commitment to training and benchmarking success. To that end, surveys and training initiatives have played increasingly crucial roles in helping the organization quantitatively assess its success in awareness-building activities and improve employee attitudes toward diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Initial surveys measuring D&I-related attitudes and opinions immediately uncovered a hard truth: colleagues within the organization were challenged to understand the broadest definitions of diversity, and that lack of understanding could have some negative ramifications on the business.

The tangible commitment to diversity and inclusiveness starts at the top. The leadership team of Pfizer Animal Health has become increasingly more diverse over the years—defined in multiple ways: gender, racially/ethnically, geographically, and even distinctions among veterinary leaders and nonveterinary leaders. This senior-most leadership team not only articulates its expectation for strengthening diversity and inclusion, but these expectations are clearly outlined in group and individual objectives. These objectives are reviewed on a quarterly basis—both in one-on-one meetings with the supervisors and as a team—so that the entire group is jointly accountable.
Armed with this information, the company set out to create a number of initiatives that more frequently and intentionally emphasized the importance of the D&I goals and strategy. These included: establishing D&I content to be included in newsletters for each department in the organization; developing an online D&I training tool to instruct colleagues on how to work within diverse teams to successfully manage the business and meet customer needs; creating an online “Managers Toolkit” to help managers better advise their teams on the benefits of D&I, based on actual incidents that have occurred that illustrate clear examples of intolerance, lack of understanding, and/or not creating an inclusive environment; conducting quarterly live “Leadership Webinars” for managers to gain insight into D&I initiatives and pass their new knowledge on to their teams; and educating and creating awareness and enthusiasm for ongoing D&I initiatives at senior leader staff meetings, where the D&I Council shares updates on current initiatives, outlines new programs to be considered, and ensures that the relevancy to the business is clearly understood.

Since these D&I initiatives have been established, recent surveys indicate that employees’ level of understanding has increased, attitudes toward diversity-related initiatives have improved, and the organization is creating a more inclusive working environment.

**Focusing on the Next Generation: Pfizer’s Commitment to Veterinarians**

Pfizer’s efforts around diversity and inclusion have not only been internally focused. As part of its “Commitment to Veterinarians” initiative, Pfizer Animal Health has also made a commitment to help educate and mentor the next generation of veterinarians through training and education, investment in the future of the profession through internship and externship programs, research and development, and a strategic approach to philanthropy.

Pfizer has ensured that each of the various programs also helps to address the ongoing need for greater diversity across the profession. Training and education initiatives range from sponsorship of local and national organizations that address multicultural issues to educational programs that enroll large minority populations, summer jobs programs that expose inner-city students to active veterinary practices, and interactive educational programs that enable high school students to discover more about the profession.

The company’s internship and externship programs send diverse students around the country to veterinary practices, farms that raise livestock, colleges of veterinary medicine, and Pfizer departments—from research and development to commercial operations.
In addition to its focus on student education and development, Pfizer Animal Health sponsors a number of diversity-related programs and events, including the biannual Iverson Bell Symposium, which promotes diversity within the field of veterinary medicine, multicultural clubs at various colleges of veterinary medicine, such as Veterinary Students as One In Culture and Ethnicity (VOICE) chapters, and the Diversity Summit at the annual American Veterinary Medical Association Conference.

Demonstrating a commitment to the veterinary workforce of the future is important. However, more work needs to be done to break down the cultural, social, and structural economic barriers that exist, making the veterinary profession less appealing to people of diverse backgrounds. In addition, many of the initiatives currently underway tend to be focused on the finite few who have already chosen the veterinary profession. Clearly, more work needs to be done to engage the future of the veterinary profession before they are enrolled in veterinary school or college—while they are still in their formative years (elementary, high school, and college).

These questions are central to Pfizer Animal Health and other organizations if they are to be ultimately successful in addressing the diversity imbalance.

Third-Party Recognition

Independent recognition also sends a strong signal to a company’s colleagues, management, industry peers, and even prospective employees that the organization is on the right track regarding diversity—that the organization believes in it, takes it seriously, and is incorporating diversity into the framework of how it conducts business.

As a result of its diversity and inclusion initiatives, Pfizer Animal Health has been recognized as having one of the top twenty-five D&I Councils in the nation, regardless of industry, for two consecutive years by the Association of Diversity Councils. The company was also recognized by DiversityInc as one of twenty-five noteworthy companies because its diversity management initiatives have demonstrated measurable impact.

Other Examples within the Animal Health Industry

Pfizer is by no means alone in its recognition of the diversity gap in the veterinary profession/industry. A number of other companies have made a tangible commitment to improve diversity, both within their own organization and across the industry.

After recognizing that its veterinary professional employee base did not fully reflect their diverse customer base, Banfield Pet Hospital began to recruit from
over one hundred veterinary schools and colleges around the world. Today, Banfield has one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse staffs among all veterinary practices in the world. By hiring the most diverse workforce possible, the practice is able to better attract and educate a larger base of pet owners to give more pets the care they deserve.

Clearly, a lack of an appreciation for a diverse workforce has the potential to make it more difficult to communicate with and translate animal health messages to an increasingly larger percentage of the population. AVMA President-Elect Larry M. Kornegay experienced this firsthand, when he reevaluated his own veterinary practice in Houston, Texas:

Little did I know that the demographics of my area had changed so much since my wife, Chris, and I opened our practice in 1977. When we started practicing and up to just a few years ago, most of our clients looked just like us. They spoke like us. They grew up where we grew up. That is not the case today. According to the 2000 US census data, Whites represented only 18.9% of the population in our practice’s ZIP code, whereas 67.8% were Black or African American. In addition, 21.5% of the overall population identified as Hispanic. Because of these changes in population, Chris and I have changed. We have diversified our staff. We have hired bilingual employees, and we have taken other steps to better serve our wonderfully diverse clientele. . . . We have reached out to our neighbors, many of whom are Vietnamese, to learn about their veterinary needs and how we can best meet those needs. This has helped us build relationships and has resulted in favorable responses from our clients. (Kornegay 2011, 1104)

The same basic concept can also be applied to academia and school curricula, where there is a greater need for programs that reach out and expose students to educators and professionals from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Over time, this will directly affect the level of diversity within the candidate pools for business, colleges of veterinary medicine, and across the veterinary industry.

Beyond that, however, is the empirical evidence underscoring the importance of diversity: organizations with active diversity and inclusion initiatives tend to achieve greater business success. Further, they tend to benefit from higher employee morale and generally better overall business performance than organizations without strong diversity and inclusion programs (Herring 2009).
A Call to Action

First, if we accept the increasingly global demand for safe and secure food and the increasing demand for companionship from pets, then we should also accept that there will be a corresponding increase for higher standards of animal care, husbandry, and wellness. These factors in turn will continue to drive an increasing demand for veterinarians. However, many of these ongoing macro trends will also challenge the way in which traditional veterinary care is delivered, where it is delivered, and how it is delivered. A diverse set of opportunities will require an equally diverse mix of veterinarians from different backgrounds, cultures, genders, races, and ethnicities, all equipped with the skills to fully meet these opportunities.

It is clear that the diversity gap in the veterinary profession today will need to be addressed if the profession and those entities that depend on a “healthy” profession are to be ultimately successful. It is also clear that the current issues impacting diversity in the profession are not “homogenous.” They are, in fact, diverse and multifactorial—hence the need for a diverse and multifactorial solution.

Progress is being made, albeit slowly. Both in the private sector and in the public sector, in private veterinary practices, in corporations, and in academia, there are real pockets of success. It is therefore incumbent on those looking to change their current circumstances as it relates to diversity, to look for and learn from those entities having success, and to apply those best practices in a manner that fits one’s organizational model.

The corporate sector recognizes that there is much to be shared on both sides to address the challenges associated with diversity. We invite the veterinary profession, schools, and other organizations to reach out to companies that have a demonstrated record of accomplishment and commitment to diversity and inclusion, enlist their intellectual capital, share best practices, and consider collaborating with them to advance the diversity agenda.

The veterinary profession and the animal health industry, in all its forms, will be best served by working together to advance this suggested roadmap for greater diversity—one that reflects the best thinking and efforts of everyone—in order to capture the broadest thinking and perspectives possible.

As we have outlined in this chapter, the road to success in strengthening diversity so as to gain the benefits that come from having a diverse organization is ultimately no different, regardless the makeup of the organization. Success will come to those organizations that fully “get” the importance of diversity; where leaders—from senior-most down—are committed to lead the charge, and where
all available levers are utilized to enable the organization to change. The call to action therefore is to “act.” Those that do will get the results.

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Academia

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The benefits of incorporating diversity in its broadest sense into academic institutions throughout the United States have been well documented (Shouping and Kuh 2003; Umbach and Kuh 2006; Denson and Chang 2009; Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2009; Sorensen et al. 2009; Bowman 2010). There are convincing arguments from many sectors that placing importance on diversity-related activities ultimately benefits not only individual students, but also the institution and society as well. Creating a diverse student body, faculty, and staff creates a learning environment that increases the probability that, after graduation, students will not only be willing, but will actually actively seek out ways to meaningfully interact with peers, faculty, staff, and ultimately, individuals within their communities who are different than themselves. While this leads to a more harmonious community with many cultural benefits, it also increases the earning capacity or financial well-being of professionals within their communities.

While diversity has in the past usually denoted racial, ethnic, and cultural differences among individuals, in the context of academic institutions, it must now incorporate not only these individual characteristics, but also gender differences, generational differences, individuals with varying physical abilities, religious and political or ideology differences, variations in sexual orientation, dietary preferences, geographical origins including places of birth and childhood development, educational experiences, family unit configurations, and socioeconomic levels. Ultimately, knowledge and understanding about these differences become important from a small business perspective if local veterinarians wish to make their services available to all members of their respective communities. Embracing diversity can increase the economic well-being of small business owners such as veterinarians within any community.

Understanding the differences in pet attachment and animal ownership among diverse populations can help veterinarians serve their communities most effectively. Not only are there differences in animal ownership and pet attachment, as documented by various nationally conducted surveys (Elmore 2003; Elmore 2004), there are animal owners “below the grid,” as demonstrated during natural disasters such as when Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans during August 2005 (Greenhill 2011). Hidden animal owners and people who do not own animals represent a large marketing opportunity for veterinarians and others in related businesses such as animal services and animal product providers.
Understanding the differences in pet attachment and animal ownership is also crucial to recruiting a diverse student body in veterinary colleges. Populations who have traditionally not owned animals, do not usually score high on pet attachment surveys, do not routinely use the services of veterinarians, or are “below the grid” represent large groups of individuals who are not likely on their own volition to naturally select veterinary medicine as a career of choice (Gelberg and Gelberg 2007; Greenhill et al. 2007). Strong overt enlistment efforts are required to recruit individuals from these populations into veterinary medicine.

Not only does understanding and embracing diversity in the broadest sense make good business sense for veterinarians and the institutions educating future veterinarians, but it is ethically correct and necessary if the profession is going to relate appropriately to a changing society. The many benefits of animal ownership and the opportunity to participate in veterinary medicine must be made available to all interested persons.

Several previous papers have described three forms of diversity that are important and present to various degrees on college and university campuses throughout the United States (Shaw 2005). Structural diversity is simply the number or ratio of students of color or other underrepresented students within a student body. It is likely that any given student will interact with another student who is unlike himself/herself in a student body with great structural diversity. It is a great understatement to say that the student bodies within the twenty-eight veterinary colleges within the United States lack structural diversity (Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges 2011).

Great structural diversity within the faculty and staff of institutions also leads to increased interactions with individuals who are different. Again, structural diversity as measured by counting the number of faculty and staff members of color and other diverse groups is woefully lacking in most of the twenty-eight colleges of veterinary medicine located throughout the United States (Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges 2011).

Curricular diversity refers to the number and nature of formal diversity-related opportunities made available by academic institutions (Shaw 2005). Curricular diversity opportunities include elective or required multicultural or diversity courses within the curriculum as well as required diversity orientation for new students. Inclusion of diversity classes within the curriculums of the twenty-eight colleges of veterinary medicine within the United States is currently not the norm.

The third form of diversity defined in various papers is referred to as diversity interactions (Shaw 2005). Although many of the interactions that occur through this form of diversity are between individuals, there are examples where these
interactions are facilitated through student organizations, both locally and nationally, such as Veterinary Students as One in Culture and Ethnicity (VOICE). Many veterinary colleges have student clubs devoted to the promotion of international travel and activities that help students engage in diversity activities outside of their comfort zones.

The three forms of diversity within a college of veterinary medicine can be most easily achieved if the host university has a strong infrastructure devoted to diversity. For example, the College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University (KSU) benefits greatly because Kansas State University has developed and promotes the Tilford Multicultural Competencies (The Tilford Group 2001). Multicultural competency is defined by the KSU Tilford Group as the knowledge, skills, and personal attributes needed to live and work in a diverse world.

The Kansas State University Tilford Multicultural Competencies include:

I. KNOWLEDGE—Awareness and understanding needed to live and work in a diverse world.

*Cultural Self*—The ability to understand one’s ethnic identity and how it influences identity development.

*Diverse Ethnic Groups*—Knowledge of diverse ethnic groups and their cultures.

*Social/Political Frameworks*—Awareness of how economic, social and political issues impact race and ethnic relations.

*Changing Demographics*—Understanding population dynamics related to ethnic minority and majority citizens.

II. PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES—Traits needed by those who live and work in a diverse world.

*Flexibility*—The ability to respond and adapt to new and changing situations.

*Respect*—An appreciation for those who are different from one’s self.

*Empathy*—The ability to understand another person’s culture by listening to and understanding their perspective.
III. SKILLS—Behaviors and performance tasks needed to live and work in a diverse world.

*Cross cultural communication*—Verbal and nonverbal communication skills in interaction with those who are culturally different from one’s self.

*Teamwork*—The ability to work in culturally diverse groups toward a common goal.

*Listening*—The ability to attend to what others are saying.

*Conflict Resolution*—The ability to resolve cultural conflicts that occur between individuals and groups.

*Critical Thinking*—The ability to use inductive and deductive reasoning.

*Language Development*—The ability to speak and write more than one language.

*Leadership Development*—The ability to provide multicultural leadership. (The Tilford Group 2001)

All students enrolled at Kansas State University are encouraged to personally obtain as many of the Tilford Multicultural Competencies possible. This includes professional degree students enrolled in the veterinary college. Because of the commitment of the highest level of administrators at Kansas State University to the Tilford Multicultural Competencies, an environment of inclusion exists in which the KSU College of Veterinary Medicine has developed the three traditional forms of diversity as previously described.

It is a great understatement to say that recruitment of veterinary students (structural diversity) from underrepresented populations has been and continues to be difficult. Various reasons for the lack of interest in the pursuit of careers in veterinary medicine by underrepresented undergraduate students have been suggested. These include differences in the rate of animal ownership among the various racial populations in the United States, differences in levels of pet attachment, lack of appropriate role models, and expected annual income for veterinarians (Elmore 2003; Elmore 2004).
Recruitment of veterinary students from underrepresented populations within the veterinary profession requires building ongoing personal relationships between recruiters, potential students, their families, and school counselors and advisors. To be effective, veterinary college recruiters must go where the students are located. Relying on electronic media, mailers, and other indirect recruitment methods has not proven to be highly successful.

The College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University has addressed curricular diversity by creating a course for veterinary students entitled “Practicing Veterinary Medicine in a Multicultural Society” and by infusing the Tilford Multicultural Competencies into other professional degree courses, such as the “Ethics and Jurisprudence” course. In the “Practicing Veterinary Medicine in a Multicultural Society” course, guests lead discussions regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics and differences; sexual orientation; physical abilities; dietary preferences; religious practices; gender issues; generational differences; and so forth. Students are required to complete projects including writing papers about potential practice locations from a demographic perspective, reading a book regarding appropriate communication skills when addressing a diverse client base, and writing a paper following a diversity experience created to get each student out of his/her comfort zone. The goals of the course include creating an awareness of our similarities and differences, appreciating and celebrating our differences in a safe environment, and illustrating how being aware of diversity issues can create a positive economic practice benefit following graduation.

The third form of diversity, that experienced by interactions, is facilitated through student club activities, international travel, and having a very diverse student body, faculty, and staff. Speakers with diverse backgrounds have been invited to present seminars, workshops, cultural events, and so forth for students, staff, and faculty.

Diversity within an academic institution can only be achieved if there are deliberate, proactive, multifaceted actions executed under the leadership of dedicated administrators, faculty, and staff. A long-term, focused commitment of the college leadership and a core of committed faculty who are supportive and who provide distributed leadership is essential.

In addition, significant funding to facilitate multicultural programs is a must. The College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University has been able to facilitate many of its diversity programs through direct funding from the college’s resources and through significant extramural support from commercial companies dedicated to promoting diversity programs. For diversity programs to be facilitated in academic institutions, diversity must be a priority.
References


Veterinary Students

Cara E. Williams

What is the students’ perspective of the importance of diversity in veterinary medicine? I’ve always had a strong, almost innate sense of the importance of diversity in all aspects of society, but when I was asked to answer this question in writing, the answer didn’t immediately present itself. I know my own perspective. My idealistic activist voice eagerly shouts, “Equal opportunity.” But the students’ perspective? Well, to begin with, I’m not like most veterinary students.

I grew up in the great city of Chicago, the daughter of an interracial couple who had fled the disapproving looks of their small hometown in Ohio. I experienced the injustice of racism early in life. Before I was even born, I had been disowned by my White family, but embraced by my Black family. In an effort to shield my siblings and me from further discrimination, my parents moved to one of the most diverse cities in the United States, and they entered us into an elementary school that specifically enrolled equal numbers of students from the different races. I thrived under such an environment that valued diversity. I appreciated the differences in lifestyles and beliefs that my colorful group of friends held, and I acquired a passion for learning about different cultures, religions, and languages. I grew up thinking that diversity was a natural way of life, and to be different was actually normal.

It wasn’t until I went off to college that I realized that very few people in the United States feel the same way about diversity. The students at my predominantly White undergraduate school held an ingrained belief in the idea of otherness of certain peoples, which I had never before considered. They had expectations of how these “others” would behave, and the types of lifestyles that “others” could have; expectations of who I would be. My complexion often confused my classmates, so I experienced the difference in treatment when they thought I was White or Black, Latina or mixed (or even Egyptian, Indian, or Australian Aborigine). I saw that the expectations that society has for different segments of society can feed into a person’s expectations for herself, and this quickly creates a world of limited options.

Growing up with an appreciation for diversity and having witnessed the endless possibilities for ways to live life is probably what made it possible for me to choose a career in veterinary medicine. With so many options to choose from, I didn’t decide to work with animals until I was in college, and in fact, I had never met a veterinarian until I sought them out late in my undergraduate career. I had...
always been told by my family and teachers that I could be whatever I wanted to be, so when I decided to become a doctor, and to use my skills to work with animals, I had no doubt in my mind that was a viable option for me.

Eventually, the years of pressure under society’s expectations, all through undergraduate school, and now into my graduate career, did begin to take a toll on my view of life’s possibilities. *A city girl? A Black city girl at that? Your only options are public health or treating dogs and cats.* Two years in veterinary school, and I had already learned the expectations of the rare Black veterinarian. To be fair, those were the only types of Black veterinarians that I or anyone else at my school had ever seen. So I followed those paths to see where they might take me. I got a part-time job working in the small animal veterinary medical teaching hospital, followed my passion for cultures with a certificate in global health, and furthered my studies with a master’s degree in public health. Despite all this, in the few years that I have been working with animals, I’ve found that I enjoy working with farm animals the most. Only just recently have I finally found the courage to say that. Despite the expectations that my teachers, my classmates, and even my future clients may have for me, I want to work with cattle, so I’m going to become a large animal veterinarian. Certainly, I will surprise many people along the way, but I will also undoubtedly change a few people’s opinions of Black people, city dwellers, and women.

Diversity is important because when diverse people work together, they realize that their expectations of each other aren’t always correct. Those who have learned from “others” learn to think outside the box, creating new solutions for the world’s difficult problems. Expectations break away to reveal a world of limitless possibilities for the students, the medicine we will practice, the profession, and our society as a whole.

So back to the original question. What is the students’ perspective? Since the start of the profession, most veterinary students have been White. Through the 1980s and 1990s, enrollment shifted from majority White males to majority White females, but the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities has not changed. While I may not be like most veterinary students, my unique upbringing has made it relatively easy for me to become friends with people from all types of backgrounds, so I’ve had the opportunity to have candid discussions about diversity with many of my classmates. My interest in the subject led me to become the Wisconsin chapter president of a student organization called Veterinary Students as One in Culture and Ethnicity (VOICE). Later, I became the national president of VOICE, which allowed me the opportunity to talk with students and faculty from around the country about diversity in veterinary medicine.
VOICE began as a student organization dedicated to promoting sociocultural awareness among veterinary students at Cornell University in 2001, and has since spread to twelve chapters nationwide. The VOICE organization attempts to promote diversity on three fronts: in the clinics, by training students and faculty how to appropriately communicate with diverse clientele; on campus, by improving campus climate to be more welcoming to students from all backgrounds; and in the pipeline, by reaching out to underrepresented youth to increase interest in preparing and applying for veterinary school or college. The organization advocates for diversity in veterinary medicine along all aspects of life, including gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and ability.

To say the least, “diversity” is a touchy subject among most veterinary students. Understandably so, as many veterinary students have not had experiences in diverse atmospheres. “Diversity” has somehow become synonymous with the “others,” with minorities and affirmative action. Students seem to think that being White excludes them from being diverse, and even excludes them from having a valid cultural identity that can be celebrated by diversity. Most students seem to think that diversity is intended to benefit someone other than themselves, so it has been difficult to get them on board with promoting diversity. As VOICE president, I often reached out to my fellow classmates, explaining that we need White, heterosexual, Christian students to join in our efforts. Without your participation, we are missing a vital component of American society. We need your perspective in order to achieve our goal of bringing together diverse perspectives to advance the field of veterinary medicine.

Increased diversity in veterinary medicine will, of course, benefit minority populations as well as the majority. Most veterinary students would agree that all children ought to have equal opportunities to pursue whatever career their dreams might lead them to. What is less understood by veterinary students is why many children don’t have that opportunity, despite having legal rights, and they don’t understand that they can or should do something about it. Furthermore, the misunderstanding of the meaning of diversity has led many students to feel that they are under attack from those who advocate for diversity, as though they are to blame for the misfortune of other socioeconomic groups. Veterinary medicine is one of the most competitive professions to enter. No student feels that despite all of her hard work, her spot in a veterinary medical class should be denied to her on the basis of her White coloring in order to provide a seat for a minority applicant. Advocates of diversity agree that no student should be denied access to veterinary education based on skin color. Rather, that we need to increase the number of qualified applicants from all walks of life, and to better train vet students to serve a broader clientele.
VOICE reaches out to veterinary students and faculty to try to dispel many of these misconceptions of the meaning and importance of diversity. More and more students are beginning to grasp the benefits of diversity, and of an open and welcoming learning environment. As the message of our mission continues to spread throughout the veterinary community, more students and faculty are jumping on board. There are still many barriers that we need to overcome. For example, as VOICE national president I’ve been approached by students for advice on how to initiate a desperately needed VOICE chapter at their school or college when their classmates tell them that no one wants to join “the Black club,” and even some faculty members discourage them from starting a club that “distracts students from focusing on their studies.” The makeup of the American veterinary medical profession has been fairly monotone for a very long time. Change requires an institutional shift in the culture and values of veterinary medicine, and it will take some time for the profession to become more inclusive. The first place to start is in the exploration of the benefits of diversity to the field of veterinary medicine.

Defense against Epizootics

Currently, the Caucasian/White community makes up about 72.5 percent of the US population (Humes et al. 2011). United States demographics are rapidly changing, and within forty years, minority groups are expected to constitute 42 percent of the population (Ortman and Guarneri 2009). Veterinarians tend to serve areas similar to where they originated, and with nearly all veterinarians belonging to the Caucasian/White population, many regions of the United States may be underserved by the veterinary profession in ways not anticipated or even easily measured. Unless the veterinary medical profession takes the initiative to actively change the demographics of veterinary professionals to match the changing demographics of the United States population, an increasingly larger portion of the country will be left without veterinary care.

This is a disturbing scenario for all of the US population, as rapid transportation, overpopulation, climate change, water insecurity, and other new age factors have created an unprecedented opportunity for the rapid dissemination of zoonotic and animal-specific pathogens. As veterinarians, we are the first line of defense against the spread of important diseases such as rabies, foot and mouth disease, and parasitic infections, and we are leaving whole segments of the population completely unprotected and unmonitored.

Though zoonotic disease transmission has been understudied in minority populations, there is evidence that disease burdens are significantly higher in impov-
erished, mostly African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American populations (Hotez 2007). For example, *Toxocara sp.* are roundworm parasites from dogs and cats that cause the disease visceral larval migrans in people, with the potential for blindness, asthma, and other disease states. In 2007, seroprevalence for exposure to this parasite among the poor in the United States was reported to be as high as 23 percent. Inner city children, mainly of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino descent, are reported to be at high risk of infection, with urban playgrounds serving as particularly rich sources of exposure (Hotez 2007). By increasing the socioeconomic diversity of the veterinary profession, we will be able to increase our reach to better serve and monitor all communities in the United States.

**Protect US Agriculture**

Like the US population as a whole, rural America is also rapidly changing, as a larger percentage of the population is moving to urban areas, and suburbs continue to encroach upon farmlands. Public interest in supporting rural agricultural communities is low, and veterinary medicine is struggling to fill a shortage of large animal practitioners and large animal medical professors. There is an enormous lack of awareness of agriculture among urban populations, and regardless of race or identity, people need to be educated about where our food supply comes from and how to protect it. VOICE reaches out to inner city youth to increase awareness of the veterinary profession. One active member of the Wisconsin VOICE chapter, Kristi Ackman, grew up on a dairy farm in a small and shrinking White rural community. She says her main goal in participating in VOICE activities is to reach out to urban communities to increase interest in preserving and protecting American agriculture, and the more people she can recruit to be agricultural advocates, the better.

**Diverse Solutions for Complex Challenges**

Veterinary medicine faces complex, system-wide challenges, and our small profession has taken on the responsibility of providing ever more services, from highly specialized companion animal care to wildlife conservation, the protection of our food sources, and beyond. Diverse perspectives are essential to creating multifaceted solutions to these challenges, particularly when human cultural and behavioral factors add to the complexity of the problem.

A prime example of this is demonstrated in the epidemiologic conservation research of veterinarian Dr. Tony Goldberg. He researches bacterial and parasitic
transmission between primates, people, and livestock in rural areas of Uganda. His team provided evidence that pathogen transmission between these populations increases significantly, proportional to the amount of deforestation that occurs (Goldberg et al. 2008). Further exploration of the factors increasing transmission revealed that human cultural practices also play an important role. An anthropologic study revealed that the farmers in one of the studied areas adopted the practice of applying cattle dung to ears of maize on the edges of fields bordering forest fragments, in an attempt to deter primates from crop raiding (Goldberg et al. 2008). Veterinarians well-versed in complex systems thinking and cross-cultural communication are needed to be able to identify and resolve problems such as these.

In the school setting, working with a diverse student body broadens the students’ understanding of the world, enabling them to make connections about how their professional and personal decisions can affect broader populations. The result is the production of more responsible veterinarians who are better prepared to serve their communities at a time when veterinary challenges have become more complex than ever.

**Variety of Values**

Diverse populations bring unique values that can enhance our profession. A great example of this can be seen in the human medical profession. Historically Black Medical Schools often go unranked in the standard *US News & World Report* medical school rankings, which influence a great many students’ choice on where to complete their medical education. The rankings often emphasize NIH-funded research and cutting-edge technology, while ignoring institutional mission and social values. A 2010 study of medical schools’ commitment to social missions found three Historically Black Medical Colleges ranked highest among the nation’s medical schools (Mullan et al. 2010). Historically Black Medical Colleges outperform *US News & World Report* top-ranked medical schools in producing a diverse workforce dedicated to providing community service in underserved areas (Mullan et al. 2010).

While it is important that we continue to advance the veterinary profession through clinical research, improved technologies, and specialization, we also need to place emphasis on correcting our shortcomings in reaching communities that are in need of veterinary services. Recruiting a diverse student body with a wide variety of values and ambitions can ensure that the veterinary medical profession achieves all of these goals.
Chapter 8

Fulfill the Veterinary Oath

All American veterinarians swear an oath to benefit society through the protection of animal health and the promotion of public health (American Veterinary Medical Association 2011). As veterinarians, we have a moral obligation to ensure that all peoples have adequate access to culturally appropriate and local veterinary care to protect their animals, and that all people can benefit from our skills at reducing zoonotic disease transmission and animal-related human injuries. As such, we have an obligation to train our professionals to be culturally competent to be able to provide such care, and a moral obligation to ensure that our profession is inclusive and accessible to all.

Student Contributions to Increasing Diversity

Many students recognize the need for diversity in veterinary medicine, and we are taking the initiative to promote issues of diversity on our campuses. For sixty years, the International Veterinary Students’ Association (IVSA) has long recognized the benefits of bringing together diverse perspectives to advance veterinary medicine around the world. American chapters of the IVSA continue to send American students to international IVSA conferences, and to host IVSA international students at Student American Veterinary Medical Association (SAVMA) Symposia here in the US. The information and global opportunities that American IVSA students provide to their classmates are invaluable, enhancing the campuses of participating chapters.

In addition to VOICE, several veterinary student organizations promote inclusivity and provide a welcoming environment for various segments of the student body, including the student chapters of the Lesbian and Gay Veterinary Medical Association and the Christian Veterinary Fellowship. Organizations like these are crucial to creating a campus climate conducive to supporting a diverse student body.

Several VOICE chapters have developed creative and successful events to achieve the organization’s mission. The University of Missouri chapter established the ¡VAMOS! Program to provide tips for veterinarians and students for communicating with Spanish-speaking clientele. Most chapters are able to put on events that celebrate various cultures in an effort to improve campus climate, such as themed potlucks, dances, and film festivals. Several events directly address campus climate, such as the diversity student panel that the University of Wisconsin chapter organizes annually for the new student orientation. Additionally, VOICE members spend countless hours networking and organizing within local commu-
nities to reach out to underrepresented youth. The University of Florida chapter organized a guided tour of the Santa Fe Teaching Zoo for forty low-income teenagers, and the Cornell University chapter and other chapters organize visits to inner city elementary and middle school classes to give demonstrations and talks about veterinary medicine. In addition to these activities, VOICE chapters regularly host guest lecturers at their veterinary colleges, who talk about diversity in veterinary medicine or offer insight into providing culturally appropriate veterinary care. Chapters also provide students and faculty with the opportunity to share their international and local multicultural veterinary experiences with the rest of the college. More information on the ongoing activities of this passionate student organization can be found at www.vetvoice.org.

Beyond the veterinary student organizations, many veterinary students put forth additional effort to increase diversity within veterinary medicine. Students take advantage of school breaks to teach veterinary internships for underrepresented youth through pipeline programs, such as the PEOPLE Program in Wisconsin, and to provide veterinary services to underserved areas through supervised opportunities, such as the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association’s Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS) trips, among other opportunities. The student contribution to increasing diversity is tremendous, but with the heavy demands of the veterinary medical curriculum, we need support and leadership from faculty, administration, practicing veterinarians, and the entire institution of the veterinary medical profession to bring about the amount of diversity required to sustainably serve the veterinary needs of the US.

**Action Steps**

Within the colleges of veterinary medicine, a good place to start to increase diversity is to actively correct the misconceptions of diversity by increasing awareness of the many benefits. Veterinary college administrators need to ensure that diversity is an overt objective of each college, and that valuing the college’s diversity statement is a requirement of all faculty, staff, and students admitted to the colleges. The benefits of diversity and issues of culturally appropriate communication can be taught to students during orientation and professional lectures as part of the veterinary curriculum. Professors can also incorporate issues of diversity within case studies and offer historical stories that highlight contributions by minorities to the field of veterinary medicine.

Once the veterinary community recognizes the importance of diversity to the profession, making a concerted effort to improve campus climate and reach out
to underrepresented students will become a tangible reality. Faculty, staff, and all students will put forth a little extra effort toward mentally assessing and letting go of their prejudices, and will offer themselves as mentors for all incoming students.

Veterinary schools and colleges will recognize the need to allocate funds and faculty time to develop and sustain pipeline recruitment programs, and leaders in the veterinary community will offer more substantial and numerous scholarships to students that increase diversity in the field. Veterinary associations will increase efforts to promote better animal care and awareness of veterinary medicine in underserved areas, and will provide financial incentives for veterinarians to serve in these underserved parts of the country. Furthermore, the profession as a whole will lobby more enthusiastically for financial support from the government for basic veterinary services for people who cannot afford veterinary care. Additionally, veterinarians will more commonly offer affordable alternatives, such as services provided by certified or registered veterinary technicians to expand our reach in low-income areas.

There is much that needs to be done to change the demographics and improve the cultural competency of the veterinary profession to better suit the population of the nation that we serve, but with the compassion, dedication, and ingenuity that the veterinary medical profession is so famous for, we will undoubtedly be able to overcome the barriers to achieve this goal.

References


