Navigating Diversity and Inclusion in Veterinary Medicine

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Published by Purdue University Press

Greenhill, Lisa M., et al.
Navigating Diversity and Inclusion in Veterinary Medicine.
Purdue University Press, 2013.
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Deliberate diversity and inclusion initiatives have been a part of veterinary medical education for nearly forty years. These efforts can be characterized as having reasonably consistent championship, very limited national and local structural frameworks, and a lack of cohesive approaches to building a sustainably inclusive culture. Consequently, these initiatives have produced modest changes in representation over the years. Discussions in the preceding chapters identify numerous activities, initiatives, or programs that have minimal connections among institutions. A broad range of explanations are offered, providing rationales for either the specific effort or to justify the need based on a compelling understanding of changing societal demographics, the business case, or an interest to being more globally responsible.

The authors detailed definitions of diversity and raised the appropriate consciousness relative to the static condition of the system that continues to perpetuate resistance to change. Career unawareness, issues of access, noncompliant educational systems, and the lack of serious engagement in recognizing that insti-
tutional climate is always in the context of a culture, which privileges traditional perspectives, will continue to cause cycles of redundancy. We will muster interest, establish a task force, sponsor a conference or a workshop, host recruitment fairs, maybe produce a report, wait a period of time, and repeat the cycle. In the interim, populations continue to shift, economic models adjust, and representation of diversity essentially remains stagnant.

The expectations for systemic change across the veterinary profession will not be different if the structural frameworks that support such change are not in place. The structures must be flexible and dynamic, and created with the understanding that the roads to diverse and inclusive environments exist within a larger set of roads, pathways, occasional detours, and pit stops. To be clear: there is no one road map to get to a diverse and inclusive environment. Systems change within the veterinary professions specifically, and society in general. Efforts must focus on learning to read a complex map, then studying, developing, and traveling the various courses to the desired destination.

Our capacity for reading the complex map must include an understanding that pipeline, cultural, and climate development have many concurrent factors of influence. Pipeline influences include, but are not limited to: child and youth development, identity development, self-esteem, self-efficacy, key intervention points for introducing the veterinary profession, and sustaining long-term interest and passion. Participants and leaders of systems change must cultivate greater insights about the range of impact practices and apply them consistently throughout the system of veterinary medical education. Transformation in veterinary medicine will only occur when deliberate patterns of behavior, rooted in evidence-based analysis within the profession and beyond, are initiated by leaders with an expectation of systemic response and embrace.

Some of this evidence exists: data produced from years of internal analysis must be optimized and utilized. Chapter 2 describes intentional efforts to expand the number of women and minorities, specifically African Americans/Blacks, in the late 1960s and 1970, respectively, in veterinary schools and colleges. Chapter 2 also notes that women represent 77.4 percent of the total enrollment in US veterinary schools and colleges for 2011-12, and African American student enrollment has wavered between 2 percent and 3 percent for the last thirty years. However, other racial groups have grown, both proportionally and as a function of the change, in the total population.

We know some strategies work, but the disparities among groups highlighted across these chapters beg more of us. We know that the “story is not in the numbers” (Wubneh 2009, 21). The emerging needs of all populations beg the develop-
ment of the generation of new knowledge and understanding about institutional culture and climate. Institutional culture is shaped by social and economic values (Swanson 2009), patterns of rulemaking (Zhou 1993), and collective beliefs, myths, traditions, and norms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Climate rolls in other measurable dimensions such as communication, leadership, organizational structure, historical forces, standards of accountability, transparency, commitment, vision, and organizational connectedness (Kennedy Group, n.d., DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Culture and climate shape the profession from the inside out. Culture and climate make up the profession’s behavioral map and frame the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. If our map of a more diverse and inclusive profession is pocked with a culture and climate that is tolerant of “subtle behavior” (22) such as “comments made in the context of a one-on-one conversation, gendered comments on teaching evaluation, comments in faculty meetings that border on racist, sexist, etc.” (Wubneh 2009, 22), then it will always be difficult for professionals to navigate their learning and working environments. Imagine the triage complexity for a student who is attempting to be academically successful in such an environment.

So where do we go from here? Will we find a way or make one? The answer is that we will do both, and both actions require a heightened level of adaptability. As stated in chapter 8, adaptation is nothing new to the veterinary profession. Veterinarians have adapted to changes in societal and customer needs, urbanization of communities, advances in technology, and economic instability.

The diversity and inclusion challenge and the required paradigm shift are no different. “Diversity and [inclusion] work must be seen as more than just solving the problem of inadequate representation”; it must be recast as developing the tools to “build innovative, high performing organizations” (Nivet 2011, 1488). More than improved business models and high-functioning, productive organizations, diversity and inclusion work in veterinary medicine, systemically and locally, must underscore the Veterinarians’ Oath to use our knowledge and skills for the benefit of society. It is a professional imperative.

So how do we get there? Systems change of this magnitude requires big commitment, big planning, big plan implementation, and constant monitoring that feeds a continuous system improvement. Commitment to change is the bedrock of change, and it is best demonstrated in this context by organizational time, prioritization of issues, being mission and vision driven, and the allocation of adequate resources to support all requisite activities to effect change. We value how and where we spend our time and resources. If the veterinary profession makes the commitment, diversity and inclusion will be a highlighted topic on every road sign.
on our academic and professional journeys. While change is a naturally occurring phenomenon, this profession must be deliberate in plotting its journey. There must be a clearly stated plan that serves as a systems compass.

Historically, diversity and inclusion planning has occurred in a space of reaction, precipitated by an incident that sets off a chain of events resulting in little or no change (Williams and Clowney 2007). Strategic planning is needed, across the profession, which uses relevant and appropriate planning models for academia, professional organizations, and business, and that focuses on the goals, objectives, and activities necessary to create measurable change. The critically important component of this effort is the necessary synchronization of plans and effort to leverage and maximize the use of resources. Much like the North American Veterinary Medical Education Consortium (NAVMEC) corralled the vast array of veterinary medical stakeholders to chart the future of veterinary medical education, similar efforts must transpire to develop the veterinary profession’s diversity and inclusion plan for the future. Such an initiative produces a professional map for use by stakeholder groups to base their individual journeys to a more diverse and inclusive profession.

Earlier chapters demonstrate that even modest implementation can move us closer to our destination. We must implement our plans and begin the journey. Planning without effective implementation strategies and execution can best be described as feel-good exercises that become part of a vicious cycle that amounts to spinning our wheels with an occasional jolt forward, which is more the result of chance than deliberate effort. Again, the demonstration of commitment is best seen here when leaders of organizational systems within the profession apply the organization’s new knowledge and resources to the task at hand. To extend our thematic cliché one step further: this is where the rubber hits the road, and this is where change happens.

Is it working? Did we move? Evaluation and assessment of the efficacy of our planning and implementation is essential. We must commit to quantitative and qualitative inquiry about our journey. We must test our hypotheses, drive forward, and correct course when necessary. The assessment of our efforts will grow and enhance a fairly thin body of knowledge specific to veterinary medicine that currently exists. There actually is room for redundancy behaviors in the effort to become more diverse and inclusive. Our assessment data is the starting point for greater commitments, next level planning, and further assessment.

The confluence of issues creating the case for diversity and inclusion has been described. The appropriate review from a historical perspective, the current status and analysis to support the compelling rationale, a perspective option for inter-
rogation of the confluence and parallels of social development, and the colliding courses have been presented. There have been and are successful strategies, and there are no failures. The reflections and the efforts to propel us forward will contribute to new understandings as innovation is captured. Comparative efforts by other health professions have been reviewed as part of the diligence in assessing the potential effectiveness of new approaches. Just as new products need a contemporary workforce, developmental steps essential for the future veterinary workforce must draw on current understandings and be applied to the retooling of the methodology used to produce graduate veterinarians.

There is much that needs to be done to change the demographics and improve the progress toward professional inclusiveness and cultural competency of the veterinary profession. Our commitment, planning, execution, and continuous assessment will position the profession to better suit the population of the nation and the world that will be served. The compassion, dedication, and ingenuity, which the veterinary profession is noted for, provides a solid foundation on which to build the essential capacity to overcome the barriers to achieve this goal. We must focus our best efforts to systemically commit to press forward on this journey. There are miles to go before we sleep (Frost 1923).

References


