

Mentoring in the Veterinary Profession: A Call for Structure

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Introduction

Recent veterinary school graduates and students about to enter the veterinary profession face numerous obstacles. These include: 1) overwhelming increases in student debt^{1,2}; 2) remarkable increases in the number of students being admitted to veterinary schools³; 3) no work force shortage in the profession^{4,5}; 4) diminished numbers of job offers per graduate⁶; 5) two consecutive years of lower starting salaries^{7,8}; 6) decreased opportunities for clinical training while in veterinary school; 7) lack of any quality assurance standards for internships⁹; 8) evidence that completing an internship has no significant effect on associate income, irrespective of the number of years post graduation¹⁰; 9) 10 years of decreasing case loads and transaction per full-time equivalent (FTE) veterinarian in private practice¹¹; 10) increasing practice-ready competencies required for the first year post graduation¹²; and 11) increasing amounts of time and rising costs for veterinary practices to hire and train new graduates to become productive team members.

These barriers to success were identified during the 2008 through 2012 five-year series known as “The Elephant in the Room” (EITR) symposia held in conjunction with the National Veterinary Business Management Association (NVBMA) annual meeting at the North American Veterinary Conference each

¹ Larkin, M. Higher debt, lower salaries, a continuing concern for grads. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012; 240:248-251.

² Wilson, J. Educational debt burden of veterinary students, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012; 240:803.

³ Larkin M. Will veterinary education hit a tipping point? *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2011; 238:256-61.

⁴ Reimer, K. No Veterinary workforce shortage, study finds. *DVM 360*, 2012:1-4.

⁵ Dicks, M. A short history of veterinary workforce analyses. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2013; 242:1051-1060.

⁶ Kirkpatrick, D. *Veterinary school graduates see drop in job offers, starting salaries*. Schaumburg, Ill: AVMA, 2012.

⁷ Employment, starting salaries, and education indebtedness of year 2011 graduates of US Veterinary Medical Colleges. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2011; 229.

⁸ Facts & Figures: Employment, starting salaries, and education indebtedness of year 2012 graduates of US Veterinary Medical Colleges. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012; 241., Volume 241, No 7.

⁹ Geller J, Bartels A, Wilson J, Pion P, Commentary A call for internship quality control. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2012; 240:949-942..

¹⁰ Fanning, J. Impact of internship on veterinarian salaries, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2011; 239:768-769.

¹¹ 2010 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study, www.ncvei.org

¹² Greenfield, C. Frequency of use of various procedures, skills and areas of knowledge among veterinarians in private small animal exclusive or predominant practice and proficiency expected of new veterinary school graduates. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004;224:1780-1787.

January. The conferences were planned by the VetPartners™ Career Development Special Interest Group (CDSIG), formerly the Career Development Committee (CDC), and implemented via a strategic alliance with the NVBMA.

Among the many ideas that surfaced during the EITR conferences, one has continued to gain traction. It has focused on the importance of creating a structured, staged, and accountable mentorship program for new and/or recent graduates. The VetPartners™ CDSIG, in collaboration with the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) and NVBMA, have created “Mentorship Program Guidelines” (MPGs) in the form of a toolkit with an assortment of materials that can be customized for individual practices and veterinarians.

Factors Contributing to the Current State of the Veterinary Economy

There are many challenges facing today’s graduates, including student debt, finding the right job, and transitioning into a career with little to no guidance. The pictorial in Figure 1 shows the current factors contributing to the downfall of the veterinary economy. Unfortunately some of this adversity, particularly student debt and the shortage of clinical training in primary care, lies in the hands of the cash strapped, tertiary-care-driven veterinary schools and the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC).

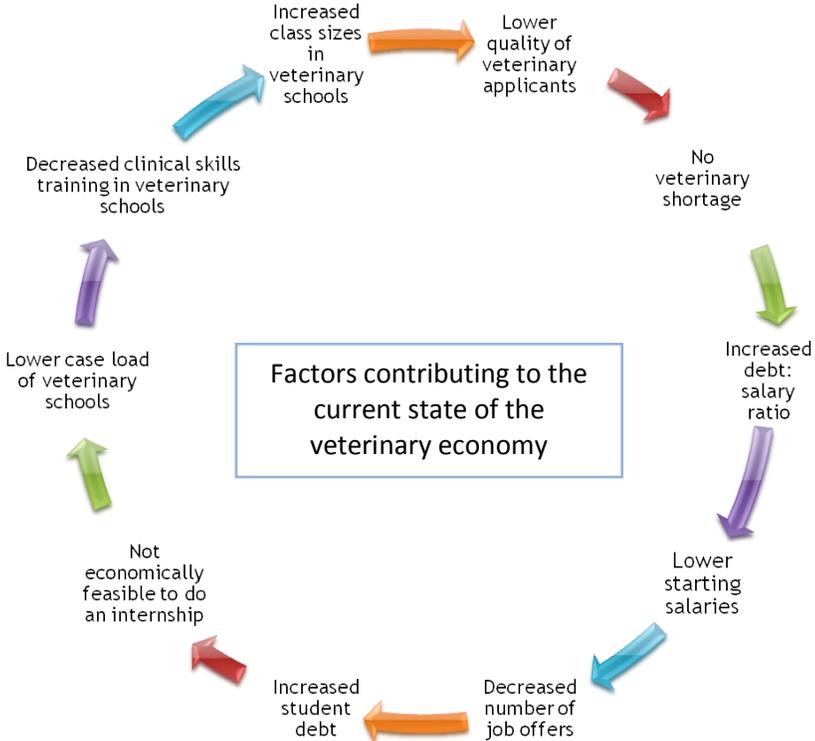


Figure 1: Factors contributing to the current state of the veterinary economy.¹⁻¹⁴

A veterinary education is expensive and has increased in price drastically over the past 10 years, according to the annual AVMA senior surveys.^{1,2,13} In 2012, student debt rose to an average of \$151,672.¹⁰ Adding insult to injury is the fact that as of July 1, 2012, the federal government, as the primary provider of student loans, no longer subsidizes the cumulating interest on any of the money borrowed by graduate students while they are in school or during their internships or residencies.¹⁴ This alone adds nearly \$10,000 of accumulated interest by the time they obtain their veterinary degrees and another \$10,000 or more upon completion of their residencies.

Not only is the cost of a veterinary education rising, the same is true of the number of veterinarians due to increasing enrollment at veterinary teaching institutions. As noted in the JAVMA article, “Will veterinary education hit a tipping point?” the AAVMC’s Veterinary Medical College Application Service’s historical data reveals a gradual decrease in the applicant-to-seat ratio. The article states:

“The decrease in the applicant-to-seat ratio despite the increase in the number of applicants reflects the slow and steady growth in the number of school seats, which has increased annually at a mean rate of 1.8 percent for the past 30 years, or by about 54 percent (overall).”³

The number of veterinary school graduates entering the workforce every year is increasing, fueling the problem of too many students competing for the same clinical resources while in school. As noted by the JAVMA article, “A short history of veterinary workforce analyses,” the problem stems from insufficient funds of our veterinary institutions.

“One explanation given for the increase in enrollment was the need to compensate for inadequate resources at the veterinary colleges in regard to clinical faculty and specialists. In a period of sharp economic downturn and persistent declines in state funding of public education, increased enrollment had become an important means of maintaining revenues.”⁷

This is a serious problem in today’s society in many sectors of the higher education market and is outside the scope of this paper.

The 2013 AVMA U.S. Veterinary Workforce Study is the most recent and prominent study illustrating the oversupply of veterinarians. An excerpt from that study follows.

“The demand for veterinary services in 2012 was sufficient to fully employ just 78,950 of the 90,200 veterinarians currently working in clinical and nonclinical settings, resulting in an underuse of services equal to the labor of 11,250 veterinarians, study results show. Moreover, the nation’s veterinary services

¹³ Eden, Meyers, DVM. Just Vet Data. JAVMA Employment Data. Available at: http://www.justvetdata.com/javma_employment_data . Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

¹⁴ Department of Education. Student Loans Overview for fiscal year 2013. Available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget13/justifications/r-loansoverview.pdf>. Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

capacity is likely to be underutilized by 11 to 14 percent through 2025, or the equivalent of an underemployment of as many as 12,300 veterinarians annually."⁶

Although all of these veterinarians are not unemployed, it does raise the question of the usefulness of the extra 11,250 veterinarians, the costs they incurred for their education with money borrowed at 6.8% or higher, and the decision to continue increasing class sizes at colleges of veterinary medicine.

Analyzing data provided by the AVMA Senior Graduating surveys over the past decade, as compiled by Just Vet Data, reveals a consistent decrease in the number of graduates headed into what Just Vet Data terms “real jobs,” i.e., full pay, private practice (figure 2).

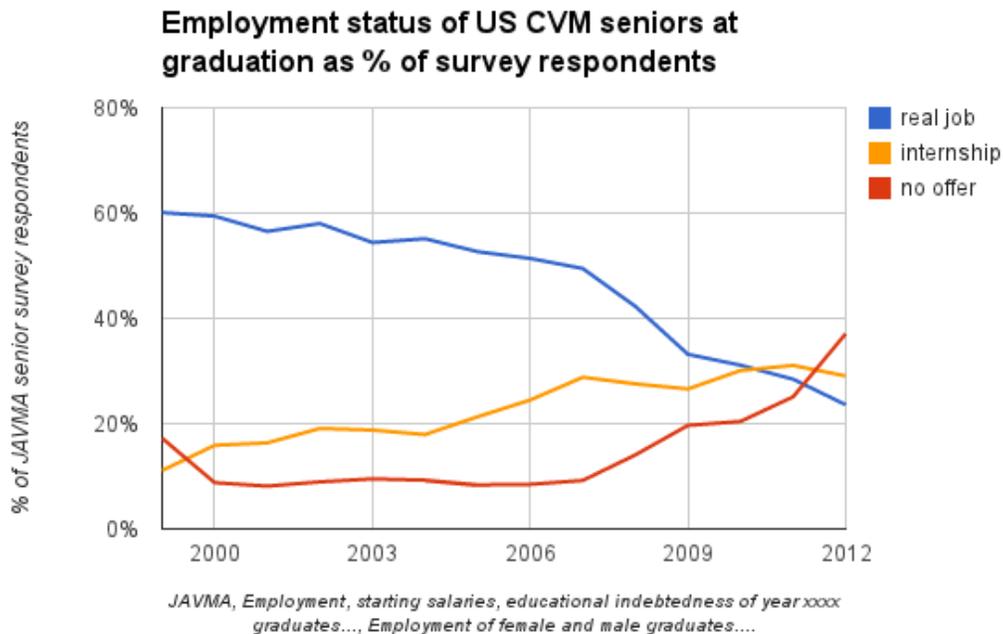


Figure 2: Employment of U.S. veterinary seniors at graduation.

These data show that the percentage of new graduates with no offer rose from 19 percent in 1999 to 39 percent in 2012.¹⁴ Also, the offer-to-job-seeker ratio was 0.9 for the seven years from 2000-2007, but has declined every year since and now stands at 0.6 job offers per job seeker. It is startling, but not a surprise, that a higher percentage of 2012 graduates are pursuing internships or are unemployed than are going into practice. It is where the jobs are.

Not surprising, the National Academies of Science 2012 data reported that “new veterinary school graduates are carrying educational debt that cannot be serviced practically with the salaries that they can command”⁵ due to increasing debt and decreasing salaries.

Anecdotally, there appears to be decreasing clinical case loads per student at the nation’s veterinary schools. This is occurring as a result of 1) more pet owners with less disposable income during the recent recession; 2) increased case management competition from conveniently located private practice secondary and tertiary care centers; 3) expanding class sizes at U.S. schools; and 4) the rapidly growing number of fourth-year students from outside the U.S. completing their clinical education at schools inside this country. Even if veterinary school caseloads remain constant, the 10-40 percent increase in

class size at so many U.S. academic institutions results in fewer opportunities for students to refine clinical skills.

The combination of these factors is leading to a growing disconnect between job ready client communication, and technical and problem solving skills among new graduates. This sours employer-associate relationships and generates situations that are unsustainable for practices hiring such graduates. The authors contend that this has created a need for structured mentor-mentee relationships during the first year post graduation. We must create an alliance between practice owners who embrace mentorship and mentees who seek it. A caveat is that if the profession expects to help these new veterinarians realize their full potential, it may be necessary for them to accept lower salaries than they need, want, and/or think they deserve immediately post-graduation. However, with the structured mentorship programs advocated and introduced by this white paper, in most cases these salaries will be nearly or more than double those received by interns.

With the growing number of specialty private practices offering low-paid, advanced-study internships, in recent years many new graduates have opted for that track as the best way to assure a “job” at graduation. Surveys of new grads indicate that roughly 40 percent of them lack confidence and do not feel they are practice-ready on graduation day.¹⁵ They expect that completing an internship will allow them to fill the clinical skills training deficit absent or insufficient in their veterinary school education. With limited to no options available for mentored training after graduation, this has become a key driver in their willingness to accept the low mean salaries paid by the nation’s \$29,500 per year internships, even though it results in huge personal and financial drains.

Mistaken Perceptions

Although students routinely hear from faculty and residents that the completion of an internship will lead to a higher salary in general practice, the facts do not support this. According to the *JAVMA* article “Impact of internship on veterinarian salaries, 2009,” the completion of an internship fails to produce an economic benefit unless interns complete residencies.¹² Moreover, because of the lack of standards and high variability in the quality of internships, these first jobs may or may not offer the critical aspects of mentoring and assurances of quality control that are expected. These findings appear repeatedly in the report of the AVMA’s Task Force on Veterinary Internships.¹⁷

When one adds together the costs of 1) a one-year relocation; 2) a mean of \$10,000 of cumulating interest on student loans; 3) \$40,000 lower compensation than that received from a regular job; and 4) the delayed initiation of the repayment of any principal on one’s student debt, it is easy to comprehend the difficulties students encounter when choosing an internship versus going straight into practice. Historically, the pursuit of a mentored year of clinical training has been deterred by the difficulties caused by the absence of structured guidelines with accountable employer commitments as well as the struggle to find competent, motivated mentors willing to commit the time needed for success. As a result of recent pressure from SAVMA and others, the AVMA’s Task Force on Veterinary Internships has culminated in the generation of a report publishing the AVMA Internship Guidelines, adopted now as official AVMA policy.¹⁶ Less has been done with respect to structured mentorship programs but as the

¹⁵ Boosinger, T. *Report of Task Force on Veterinary Internships*. Schaumburg, Ill: AVMA, 2011.

¹⁶ <https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Veterinary-Internships-Guidelines.aspx>

survey results that follow show, mentees report that they have received considerable value from their mentorship experiences.

When asked “Why are you pursuing an internship?,” 40.7 percent indicated that it was because they wanted to practice higher quality medicine, 38 percent planned to pursue a residency, 18.3 percent believed they needed more training, and 3 percent marked “other.”¹⁰ In a climate where 62 percent of those pursuing internships are doing so for reasons other than becoming eligible for residencies, and where there are fewer jobs, more debt, and decreasing starting salaries, it is crucial for new graduates to be better prepared for the workplace using resources other than low-paid internships. The completion of a mentor-mentee relationship within an accountable, structured mentorship program can be a valuable opportunity for new grads as well as an asset for practice managers and owners seeking buyers for their practices. It is the authors’ belief that a well-conceived mentorship opportunity is imperative for new graduates to be able to become self sufficient, productive, competent, and confident team members in private practices.

It is well documented that the veterinary profession has hit upon hard economic times. This fact has been made clear by numerous studies, surveys, and papers within recent years, the most prominent of which is the 2010 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study.¹³

Efforts are underway to try to reverse this trend. Among them are the 2012 Partners for Healthy Pets program, a multimillion dollar alliance between industry, the AVMA, AAHA, and other veterinary associations.¹⁷ Additional efforts include the CATalyst program¹⁸, stimulating an increase in veterinary care offered to cats; the AAFP’s Guidelines to a Feline Friendly Practice¹⁹; AAHA/AVMA Preventive Healthcare Guidelines;²⁰ and Veterinary Pet Insurance’s (PAWS) preventive care and wellness service that assists veterinary practices with the creation of their own preventive care plans and, for a reasonable fee, administers them. These efforts are outstanding, but none have focused on improving rapid job readiness in new or recent graduates.

Regardless of the chosen path after graduation, mentoring should be part of any employment. New graduates need more confidence and training, and mentoring can help foster a relationship to create confident veterinarians ready to take on the next set of challenges in the profession. The thesis of this article is that the pursuit of well-conceived and structured mentorships will catapult job readiness and productivity forward without the loss of income inherent in today’s low paying internships.

Developing a Structured Mentorship Program

¹⁷ Partners for Healthy Pets. Available at: www.partnersforhealthypets.org, Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

¹⁸ CATalyst Council. Available at: <http://www.catalystcouncil.org/>. Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

¹⁹ American Association for Feline Practitioners. “Cat Friendly Practice” Available at: <http://catfriendlypractice.catvets.com/>. Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

²⁰ Development of New Canine and Feline Preventive Healthcare Guidelines Designed to Improve Pet Health. *Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association*. September/October 2011.

Local, state,^{21,22} national,^{23,24} and species-specific veterinary associations²⁵ have, or are now pursuing, mentorship programs. Historically, few have succeeded beyond simply connecting students with volunteering mentors. It is the authors' experience that most mentorship programs are generated to assist students with career decisions and job hunting while in school. Few, if any, have developed in-depth guidelines for employers to use in post-graduation employment situations. Instead of proceeding with mentored first-year employment options post graduation, senior students have been encouraged by faculty, residents, and others to pursue internships despite career goals that do not include residencies.

The result has been that the number of U.S. veterinary post-graduation internships has skyrocketed to nearly one thousand. Of these, approximately 80 percent²⁶ are within the Veterinary Internship Matching Program (VIRMPP – www.virmp.org). The remaining 20 percent are in unmatched programs offered by a multitude of species-specific veterinary associations and/or by self selected specialty practices. Although structured mentorship programs will not solve all the problems identified previously, they are being developed to change the paradigm and encourage adoption. The product of this effort is a fully developed, Internet-based mentorship toolkit filled with practical, easily accessed tools. Its existence will allow veterinary students to introduce this resource to employers who will then be motivated to develop their own programs.

Previously published mentorship resources cited herein provide a foundation that can be further developed. They include the AAHA Mentoring Guidelines²⁵ (written for those graduates entering and currently transitioning in small animal private practice) and the AAEP Shadow a Veterinarian mentorship program²⁷ (written for veterinary students interested in equine practice). Canada's vet2vet program has a mentorship component that offers online training in mentorship and placement for mentees.²⁷ Unfortunately, none of these offer a thorough framework as to how compensation, time and scheduling commitments, clinical competencies, and progression during the mentoring period should be addressed.

VP-VBMA-AAHA Mentorship Survey

²¹ University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign College of Veterinary Medicine. Veterinary Career Partnership Program. Available at: <http://vetmed.illinois.edu/advancement/alumni/vcpp.html> . Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

²² Washington State Veterinary Medical Association. Mentoring Program. Available at: <http://www.wsvma.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=393#howdoesitwork>. Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

²³ Tait J, Carpenter T, Davidson S, et al The AAHA mentoring guidelines; *AAHA Trends* May/June 2008 p. 2-8.

²⁴ Mentorship initiative moves forward. *J Am Vet Med Assoc News* 2013.

²⁵ American Association of Equine Practitioners. Shadow a Veterinarian Mentorship Program. Available at: http://www.aep.org/shadow_a_vet.htm. Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

²⁶ Wilson, J; Internships and residencies hand out. (Analysis of all VIRMP internships and residencies by type and salary and an accounting of the known sources available outside the VIRMP.)

²⁷ Vet2Vet.ca Mentorship at work for vets. Available at: <http://www.vet2vet.ca/>. Accessed Mar 20, 2013.

In the veterinary profession, mentorship is defined as a relationship between experienced veterinarians and newly or recently graduated veterinarians who seek expansion of their knowledge, confidence, productivity, and clinical skills in a private-practice setting. Mentorship is essential in the retention of veterinarians in practices and lack of mentorship has been cited as the primary reason new grads leave their places of employment.²⁸ The cost of hiring new veterinarians can be a huge hardship for employers. Costs can be upwards of \$140,000 to hire and train new veterinarians.^{29,30} This is an expensive way to manage a business when the turnover rate is 30 percent. The objective of the mentorship toolkit is to reduce turnover and allow practices and their mentees to thrive.

In 2011, AAHA's recent graduate task force, MyVeterinaryCareer, and key members of the VetPartners Career Development Special Interest Group, worked on a proposal for employers and new associates titled "Developing post graduate mentorship employment programs with employers."³¹ This proposal was presented to a group of 127 veterinary students at the annual Veterinary Business Management Association national conference held in January 2012. Feedback sparked revisions and the need for more data related to structured, veterinary mentorship programs. It also provided insight as to how such guidelines would be perceived by new graduates. Through the work of these groups and the NVBMA, a survey was prepared to gather information about veterinary practices offering mentorship-based programs and associates who have completed them.

Survey Methods

Two surveys were created via a joint effort from AAHA's Recent Graduates Task Force, My Veterinary Career, NVBMA officers, the VetPartners CDSIG, and a group of third-year University of Pennsylvania veterinary students. One was designed for mentors; the other for recent graduates, i.e., veterinarians graduating within the last five years who were asked to respond as mentees. In September 2012, surveys were sent via email to 6,091 AAHA member hospitals. Within the specified two-week time period, 382 responded, producing a 6.3 percent response rate for the mentor survey. The mentee version was sent to 1,759 recent graduates on the AAHA member list serve. Responses from 140 people in this group produced an 8 percent response rate.

Questions were aimed at gaining a better understanding of the structure of current programs and the perceived need for better guidance. Questions in each survey focused on time commitments for mentors and mentees, improved clinical skills, compensation, and the structure of the relationship. Not all questions had to be answered for responses to be included. A complete version of both surveys can be found in Appendix A. The results of the surveys were split based on answers from mentors vs. mentees.

²⁸ Jelinski, M. Factors associated with veterinarians' career path choices in early postgraduate period. *Canadian Veterinary Journal* 2009:943-949.

²⁹ American Animal Hospital Association. 2008 *Compensation & Benefits*. Lakewood, CO. AAHA Press.

³⁰ US Department of Labor. 2010. *Labor Statistics*. Washington, DC US Department of Labor.

³¹ Wilson, J. Keiser, S. Parker, J. 2012 *Developing Post Graduate Mentorship Employment Programs with Employers*. AAHA's Recent Grad Task Force, MyVeterinaryCareer, and VetPartners Career Development Committee.

The answers to all of the survey questions are found in Appendices B and C. Responses from questions most pertinent to this paper follow.

Mentee Responses

The most notable findings and recurring themes relate to overall satisfaction, compensation, time committed or required, staged progressions, acquisition of clinical skills, qualifications, and expectations of the mentoring relationship.

Results showed that 31.68 percent of mentor respondents have participated in a mentorship program while only 27.25 percent of mentee respondents did so. Although less than a third of respondents have participated in these programs, the satisfaction rate was over 75 percent for both parties.

The decision to pursue mentorships varied. Of the 24 mentee respondents, 58.33 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that their decision was based on their perceived compatibility with and trust for the mentor. 16.67 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was an important criterion while 16.67 percent neither disagreed nor agreed, and 8.55 percent marked this as non-applicable. (Figure 3)

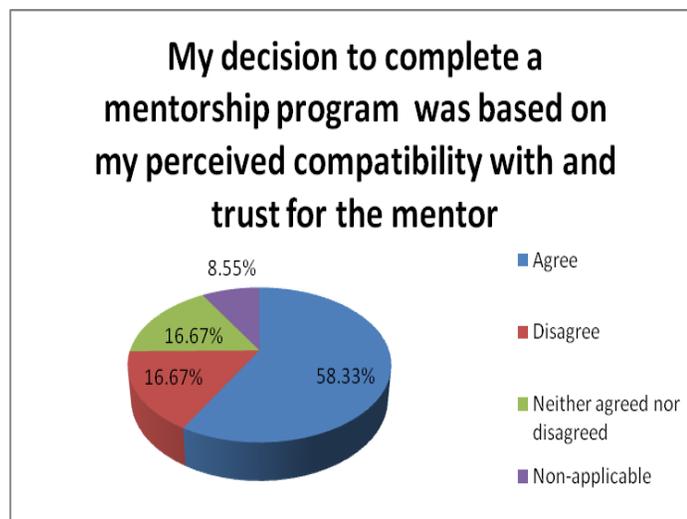


Figure 3: Mentee survey results show the decision to complete a mentorship program was based on the mentee’s perceived compatibility with and trust for the mentor.

To the question, “My decision to pursue a mentorship program was monetarily driven so I could earn considerably more than I would in an internship,” 54.17 percent stated that they either agreed or strongly agreed, 16.67 percent stated they neither agreed nor disagreed and 25 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed. (Figure 4)

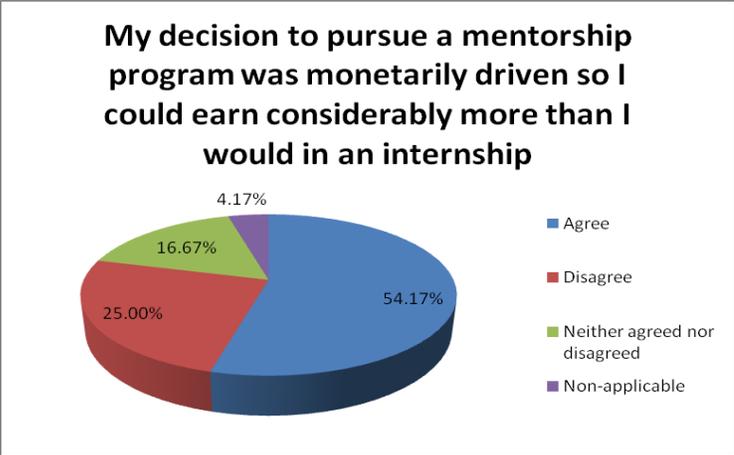


Figure 4: Mentee survey results show that the decision to pursue mentorship was partially monetarily driven.

75 percent of mentees agreed or strongly agreed that their decision to complete a mentorship program was based on a need to improve their clinical skills. (Figure 5)

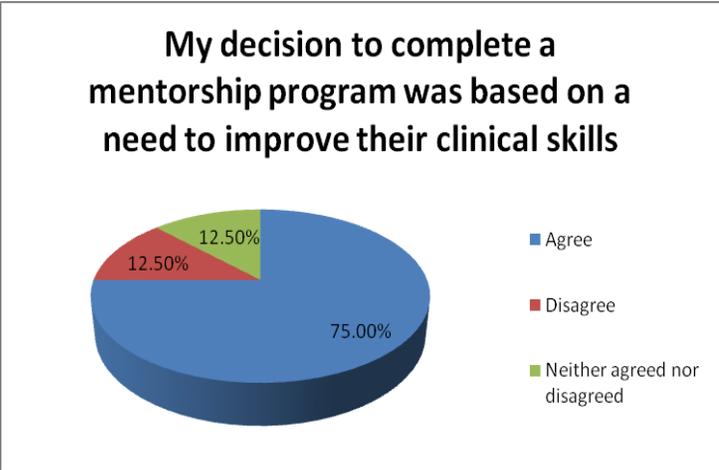


Figure 5: Mentee survey results show that the decision to complete a mentorship program was based primarily on a need to improve clinical skills.

Discrepancies were apparent between those answering the mentor vs. mentee survey. Overall, it can be concluded that the mentees and mentors disagreed on the set time commitment required for the mentorship relationship. The majority of the mentees disagreed with the statement that their mentorship program was effectively structured in terms of time commitment expected by them as mentees. Conversely, the majority of mentors felt the time commitments were appropriately established and met from their perspectives.

Mentor Responses

When mentors were asked to identify the two criteria clearly needed to justify the investment in a structured mentorship program, 79.86 percent answered strong work ethic, followed by evidence of

strong medical and surgical competencies, at 54.06 percent. 45.5 percent answered that a willingness on the part of the mentee to stay more than one year was important. (Figure 6)

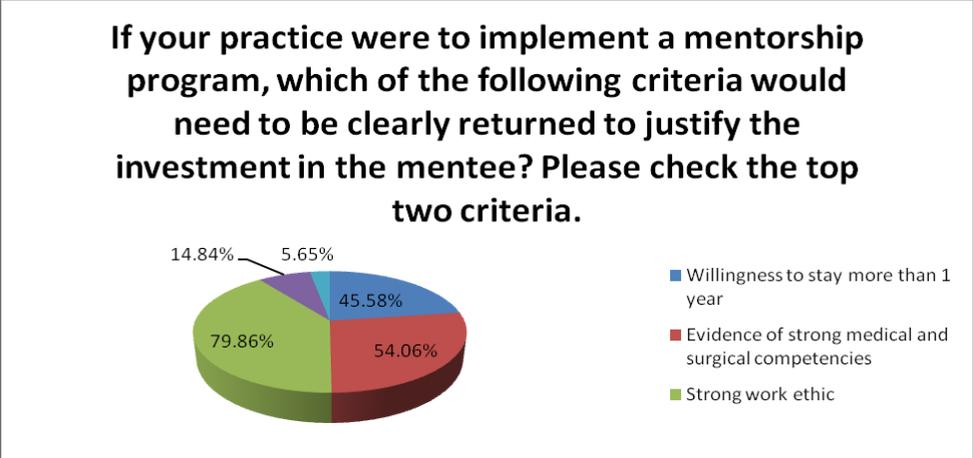


Figure 6: Survey results showing the criteria that would need to be met to justify a mentor’s investment in a mentee.

Most—63 percent—of mentors agreed or strongly agreed that if potential job applicants provided them with prepared AAHA or AVMA approved mentorship plans that included time commitments, salary structure, and program development plans, they would be more inclined to hire such applicants. A mere 10.5 percent of mentors answered that their practice would be hesitant to hire potential veterinary job applicants who suggested a mentorship program while 69.29 percent disagreed or highly disagreed. (Figure 7)

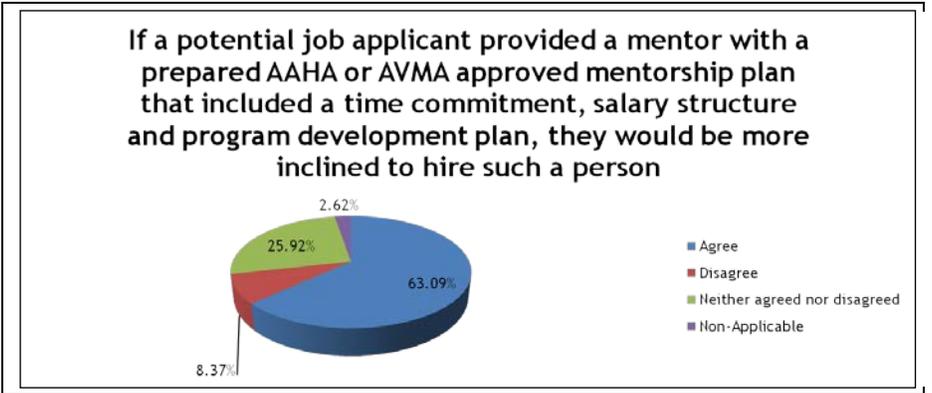


Figure 7: Survey results showing that mentors are looking to hire mentees that suggest an approved mentorship plan.

With respect to new-grad qualifications, Figure 8 illustrates that 27.9 percent of the mentors agreed or highly agreed that experience led their practices to decide they would prefer to hire new graduates who had completed private practice internships while 32.1 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

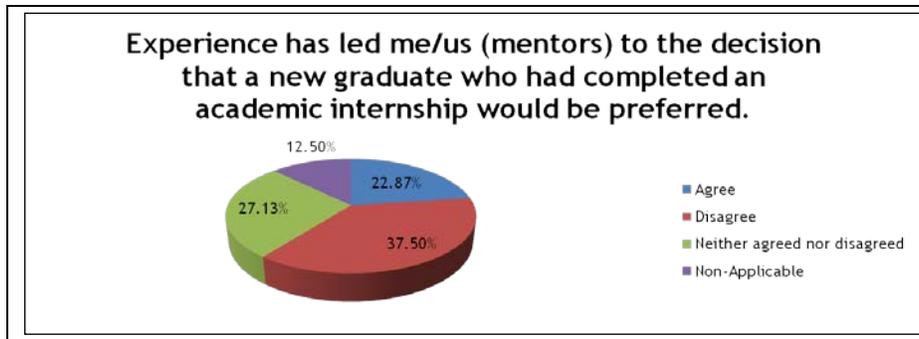


Figure 8: Survey results showing how prospective mentors feel about hiring veterinary grads who had completed academic internships.

Figure 9 considered the same question by comparing the desirability of hiring applicants who had completed private practice vs. academic internships. Only 22.87 percent either agreed or highly agreed that experience led them to prefer new graduates who had completed academic internships while 37.5 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. .

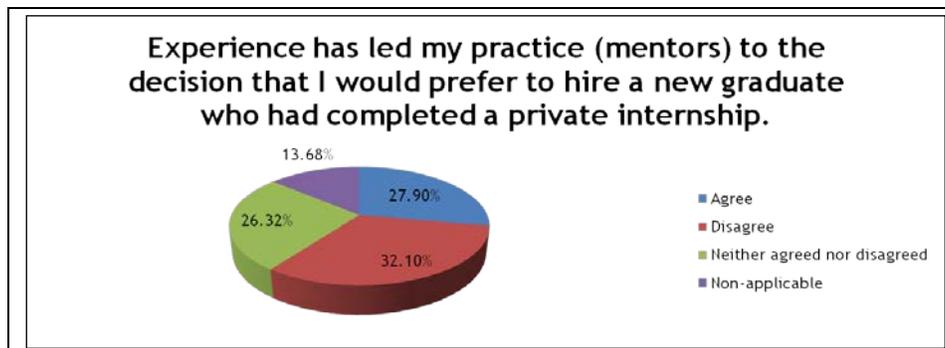


Figure 9: Survey results showing that prospective mentors are not looking to hire those who completed a private practice internship.

Figure 10 exhibits the fact that the majority (70.25 percent) of respondents who had previously provided mentorship reported a willingness to pay mentees a standard new-graduate salary and benefit package for an entire year. A minority of these respondents (14.88 percent) reported paying their mentees lower salaries for the first few months. It can be inferred that this was to offset costs incurred and time required to provide the mentorship but no question was asked as to why practices chose each method of compensating their mentees.

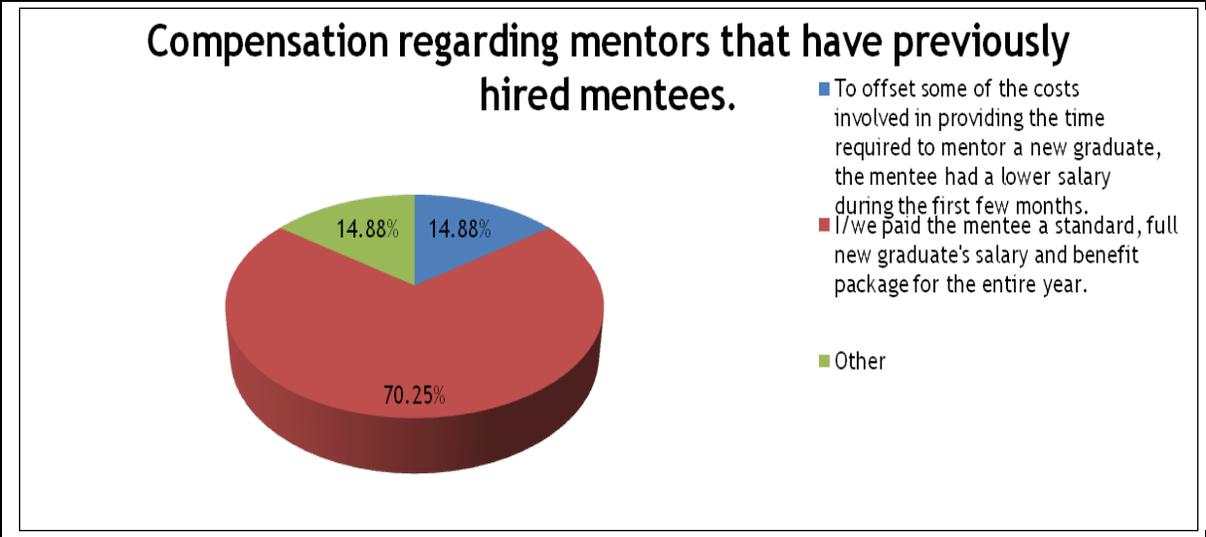


Figure 10: Compensation paid by mentors who had previously hired mentees.

When it was offered as an option, Figure 11 illustrates that over two thirds (64.31 percent) of the mentors who previously had hired mentees supported the position that, to offset costs and time, it would be important for recipients to accept lower salaries during the first few months. Only 35.69 percent indicated a willingness to pay mentees a standard, full, new-graduate’s salary and benefit package for the entire year.

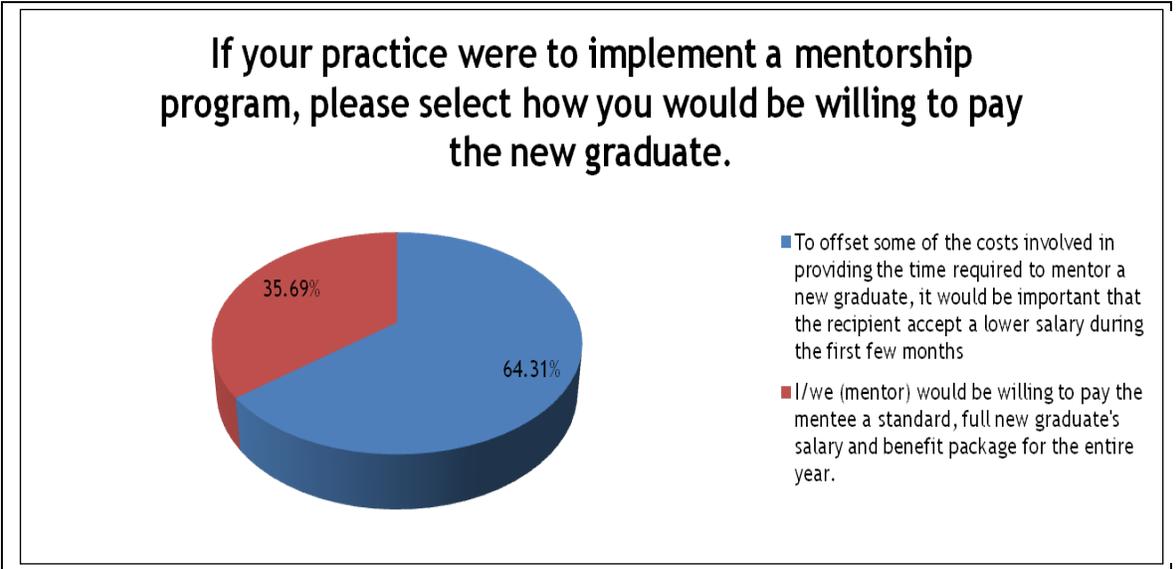


Figure 11: Mentors’ views regarding how they would compensate mentees.

Among the most important survey questions was one that focused on starting salaries and the structure of progressive raises. Many mentors (40.34 percent) agreed that the mentorship relationship they had utilized was adequately structured in terms of starting salary and staged progression toward higher compensation for their mentees. (Figure 12)

The relationship mentors had employed was adequately structured in terms of starting salary and staged progression toward higher compensation for the mentee.

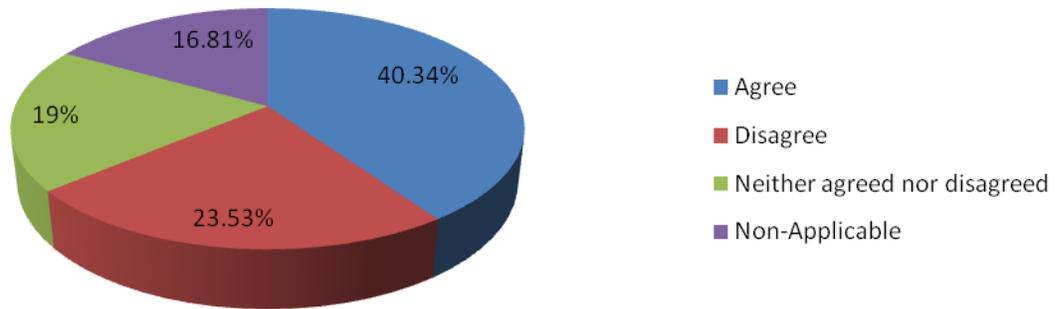


Figure 12: Mentors' attitudes regarding their starting salaries and staged progressions towards higher compensation.

Unfortunately, as seen in Figure 13, a third of the mentees disagreed with this statement. Nonetheless, a quarter agreed that this was structured appropriately while 38 percent neither agreed nor disagreed or felt the statement was inapplicable. The reason for this high percentage could be that there was no structure at all in place for a staged upward adjustment in compensation.

The relationship mentors had employed was adequately structured in terms of starting salary and staged progression toward higher compensation for the mentee.

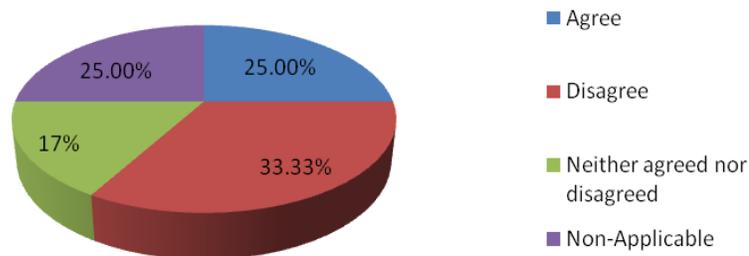


Figure 13: Mentees' attitudes regarding their starting salaries and staged progressions towards higher compensation.

A serious disconnect between mentors and mentees occurs again with respect to figures 14 and 15. The majority of mentors felt that the mentorship was effectively structured as to what was required to exit one stage and earn a higher compensation in the next. A quarter of the mentees disagreed while 20.83 percent answered "not applicable." This leads one to believe that they may not have participated in a well-conceived, structured, and/or highly defined mentorship with a staged salary progression in the first place, or simply had no idea what one would have looked like. (Figure 14)

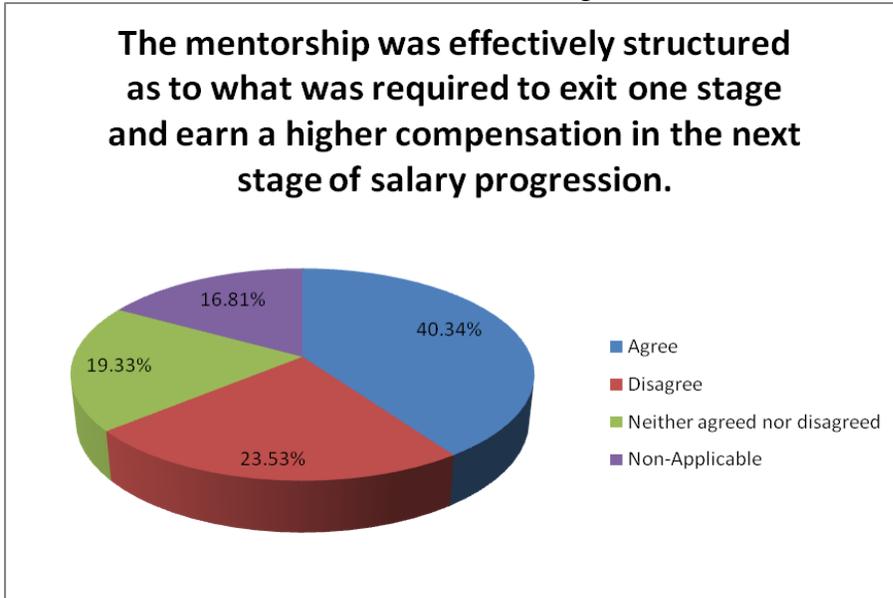


Figure 14: Mentees' perspectives regarding their structured progression through each stage of compensation.

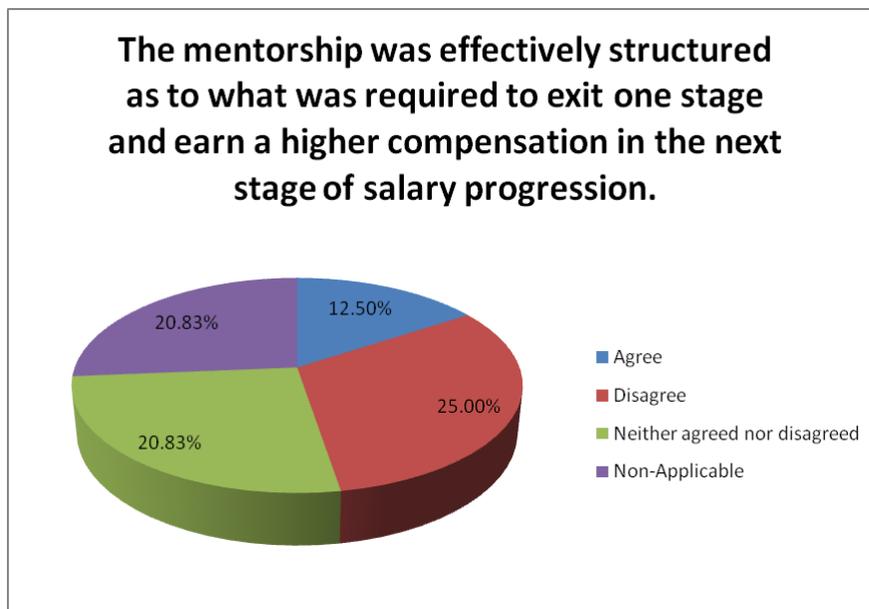


Figure 15: Mentees' perspectives regarding their structured progression through each stage of compensation.

It was refreshing to learn that 64.28 percent of mentors agreed or strongly agreed that members of their practice and/or the mentors themselves enjoy mentoring and would be willing to take on mentees while only 11.38 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 16). Although the survey could be skewed by the number or curiosity of the mentors who responded, this bodes well for the implementation of the plans and tools in the toolbox that are being developed.

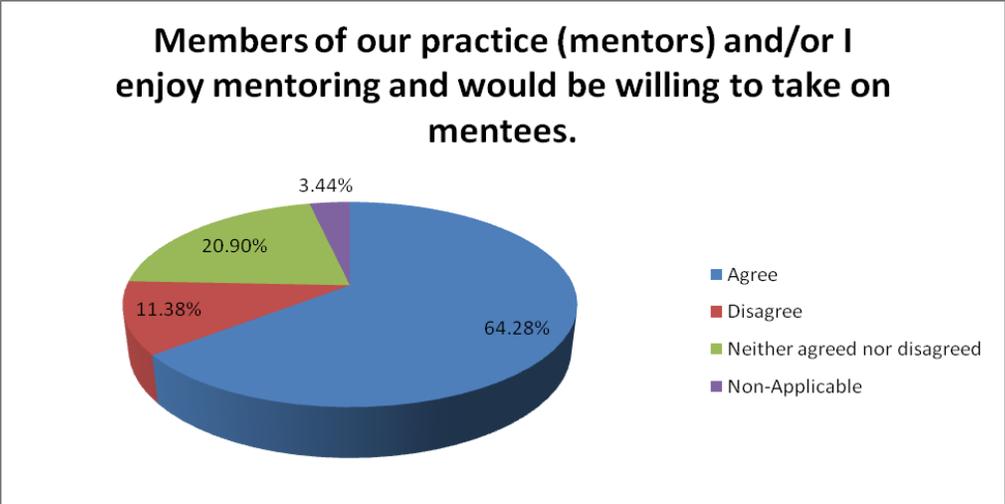


Figure 16: Survey results showing that mentors are willing to take on mentees.

Discussion

The results of both surveys show that the majority of mentors or new graduates are not involved in mentorship programs but that both graduates and mentoring practitioners are willing to adopt such programs in the future. The majority of both groups agreed that they were satisfied with their overall experiences in mentorship programs. Most mentors also agreed that the first-year mentee progressed and became the associate veterinarian they were seeking.

Over half of the responding mentors agreed that the mentoring experience they had led them to conclude that they would engage in such programs again. Over two thirds of the mentees felt that they became the associate they wanted to become and that their mentorship experience was positive. Fortunately for new graduates who want to pursue being mentored, there was strong agreement from mentors that they enjoy mentoring and would be willing to continue offering such programs.

As seen in Figure 10, 70 percent of the mentors who have previously employed mentees were willing to pay them a standard new graduate salary and benefits package for an entire year. This finding came as a surprise. However, it could have been because they:

- 1) Had never heard of and, thus, did not consider alternatives
- 2) Did not want to make mentees feel less valuable
- 3) Found the mentorship experiences valuable even though their mentees may have been overpaid
- 4) Used a production-based compensation system and, because of their effective mentoring process, their mentees routinely earned bonuses that allowed them to exceed their first year’s base salary

In well-led and managed practices, this scenario produces strong compensation for the mentees and profits for the mentors, exactly what the authors hope will be the outcome for others who embrace this program.

In contrast, those mentors who had no prior experience with mentorship programs were more inclined to ask their mentees to accept lower salaries during the first few months. It is assumed that this was to offset some of the costs required to provide their time-consuming mentorship. The survey showed that most of the mentees who completed programs were provided with standard new-graduate salaries and benefits.

It was suggested during multiple open session discussion periods with students that most employers were likely to offer mentorship only if mentees accepted lower compensation. Not surprisingly, this was met with considerable resistance by students, who were convinced their veterinary degree should be worth a higher first-year salary. To remedy this, the mentorship program incorporates a production-based or “pro-sal” compensation structure, with a base salary and percentage of production, whichever is higher.

This pay system already exists in over 50 percent of the nation’s small animal practices.³² Including this concept allows employers to pay lower, yet competitive, base salaries, during the initial two to six months while providing supplemental monthly compensation in the months during which the mentee’s production times the percentage exceeds the base salary. In this way, the salaries that mentees receive will not drop below the established base salary. However, they are not capped at that level. Perhaps even more importantly, though, it allows the mentees to earn more than double that which would be paid if they were completing internships.

In fact, the best of all worlds would illustrate that because of exceptional mentorship programs, mentees would generate enough revenue to beat their base salaries during most or every month of their mentorships. When they do, theoretically, everyone wins. Practice owners win because revenue production by their mentees grows rapidly. This allows them to pay higher salaries and, as long as the practice is a profitable business, the owners’ profits grow because of their mentorship efforts.

After explanations for this structure, its objectives, and the ingredients in a formal mentorship program were provided to the 130 national, regional, and chapter officers attending the 2012 National VBMA Symposium, 80.3 percent of those surveyed indicated a willingness to accept lower base salaries in exchange for accountable mentorship.³³

During the open-forum discussion at the 2012 NVBMA Symposium, the key words needed before students voted in this fashion were “staged salaries are acceptable as long as their employers are held accountable for fulfilling their mentor responsibilities.” A serious distrust was apparent among students. This was because the word “accountable” was not included or defined in any existing programs, nor

³² *Compensation and Benefits, 7th Edition*, AAHA Press, 2012. Table 2.2, 38% of 236 respondents paid associates a flat salary, 43% paid salary plus a percentage of production and 19% paid straight commission for a total of 62% with a production component to associate compensation.

³³ *Veterinary Business Management Association National Meeting 2012 Survey Results*. National Veterinary Business Management Association. Used with permission from Kristen Britton. January 15, 2012.

were there any compliance, accreditation, or outcome assessment systems in place, nor ratings provided by any credible agencies. It was this disconnect that has become the primary motivator for the Mentorship Toolkit that accompanies this white paper.

Why Hire New Grads When There Is An Overflow Of Job Applicants?

Many practice owners will ask, “Why hire a new grad?” To help answer this question, new grads must be able to defend their perspective, especially in an economy where they are competing for jobs with experienced veterinarians. Figure 17 examines the whys and why-nots with respect to decisions to hire new graduates. The objective of this figure is to show mentors and mentees how important it is to understand the perspectives of the opposite party. Without this, it is impossible to understand where either is coming from.

Why NOT Hire a New Grad?	Why Hire a New Grad?
There are more than enough experienced veterinarians applying for the same jobs	They are filled with enthusiasm, contemporary knowledge, and, hopefully, a willingness to work hard
It takes time, energy, effort, patience, and money to select, hire, and train a new grad	Many are eager to invest the time, effort, and energy while accepting lower pay, because this is more financially motivating and rewarding than completing an internship
They may not be able to generate enough revenue to cover their salary—even if it is reduced and adjusted based on production	Hopefully, they are willing to earn less if unable to produce required revenues but receive valuable mentorship in the process
With a lower base salary than for an experienced person, there is a low risk of overpaying them	With ample caseloads, hard work, and customer service skills, there is a good chance they can produce sufficient revenue to beat their base and national average salaries
Because of unexpected influences on personal lives and careers, they may be unwilling to stay a second year	With accountable, outstanding mentorship, they could become the next partner or owner of the practice
They have no or insufficient references to adequately evaluate their emotional intelligence as well as their life and clinical skills	They arrive without prior bad habits acquired and imbedded via prior jobs and veterinary employers
Some are biased, as they don't want inexperienced people working on animals belonging to clients they have nurtured and spoiled for the life of their practice	Clients may prefer these newbies over existing doctors because of the contemporary ideas they bring to the table

Figure 17: Why or why not hire a new graduate?

The Importance of and Tools in the Mentorship Toolkit

One of the most important learning points from the survey is that practices need structured tools such as those in the toolkit that is being introduced along with this document. A synopsis of them follows:

Mentorship Program Toolkit Contents

1. *Materials on the evolution of and support for mentorship, including this white paper, an executive summary, and a PowerPoint presentation explaining the use of the tools in the toolkit.* These resources provide background information on the forces driving the economy and the support for mentorship guidelines.
2. *Materials for veterinary students and new graduates to present the idea of a structured mentorship with potential employers.* Sample cover letters are offered here that tactfully query whether or not future employers would consider a mentored first year.
3. *A Word document and spreadsheet to help practices determine whether they need—and can afford—to hire a mentee associate.* In order for a mentee-mentor relationship to be successful, it is necessary for the practice to be in good financial health. Knowing when it is appropriate and having the financial capability to hire and support a new associate is the first step to creating a thriving, long-term relationship with associates. The spreadsheet in this section helps both parties evaluate the practice's readiness for an associate.
4. *Resources for mentees and mentors.* This section includes training tools, general resources, and references currently in publication that will support mentorship.
5. *Mentee and mentor goals and expectations inventories.* Spreadsheets containing skills and goals lists were created in order to identify and track areas of competence vs. those needing improvement. The tool in this section of the toolbox will assist both parties as they set measurable standards for competencies.
6. *Written protocols.* This resource includes outlines of protocols for mentees to use for case management. The protocols should be completed by the mentor and provide guidelines for the mentee to follow. A tool to help with protocol development is included.
7. *Time and compensation recommendations.* Mentors make significant investments when hiring associates and becoming mentors. This resource ensures all parties are aware of the time invested and appropriate compensation required in the process.
8. *Surveys for mentees and mentors.* Completing these surveys at the end of the mentee-mentor relationship will generate data to help provide improvements for the future. It will also provide crucial feedback for the creators of the mentorship program to take into consideration as they continue to develop the program.

Call to action

It is evident from both the mentee and mentor perspectives that formal mentorship program guidelines (MPGs) are needed if the profession expects to be able to implement successful, structured, accountable mentorships with staged progressive salaries. The majority of mentors and mentees agreed that if clear, practical guiding materials were available, they would likely work hard to try to implement customized examples.

Despite the statistics showing the gloomy drift toward lower or flat starting salaries and an oversupply of veterinarians, there are options for new graduates to minimize the effect of these trends. The survey results show a clear demand for veterinary graduates possessing certain attributes and a mentorship plan that can nurture and teach these attributes.

Two characteristics of mentees are vitally clear from those practitioners who are willing to serve as mentors. First and foremost, they must possess a strong work ethic. Secondly, the schools need to send their graduates out into the workforce with strong medical and surgical competencies. Anything short of this will prevent mentors from being willing and able to justify the investment of time and energy in the mentees they hire.

Mentees should take note of two other attributes that were noted as desirable in new graduates seeking mentorship. These included a willingness to stay more than one year and a sense of personal appreciation for the mentorship. Fortunately for new graduates, as noted in Figures 8 and 9, the completion of an internship is not something that is highly sought by practitioners who are willing to become mentors. This fits nicely with the responses from prospective mentees, who answered the survey by saying that they would recommend completing a mentorship program rather than an internship.

Perhaps the most striking call for structured mentorships comes from the overwhelming agreement of mentors with the statement that if potential job applicants provided them with a prepared AAHA/CDSIG or AVMA approved mentorship plan that included a time commitment, salary structure, and program development plan, they would be more inclined to hire such a person. This attitude should help motivate fourth-year students and new or recent grads who are willing to present such plans to their potential or current employers. Supporting this position is the fact that most existing mentorship programs originate from prospective mentees who provide all or most of the direction and goals for the mentorship program.

According to mentees, proposed mentoring guidelines should outline a basic curriculum which includes: 1) a structured approach for regularly occurring time dedicated to mentoring; 2) formal case rounds; 3) live-animal, one-on-one clinical training and skill development; 4) attention to successful client communications; and 5) efforts to provide business education. As difficult as it is to transfer oral thought to written plans, in order to assure accountability, the parties must draft guidelines to which they can refer. Ideas for this exist in the toolkit under the section entitled “Time and Compensation Recommendations.”

The goal of this effort is that well-conceived plans linked to developed skills and enhanced compensation will, over time, be shared broadly across the profession. This, then, will allow practitioners to hire new graduates and mentor them in constructive manners that help them evolve as colleagues and, potentially, as long-term associates or practice owners. Ideally, such a plan could be adopted for other subsets of the veterinary industry.

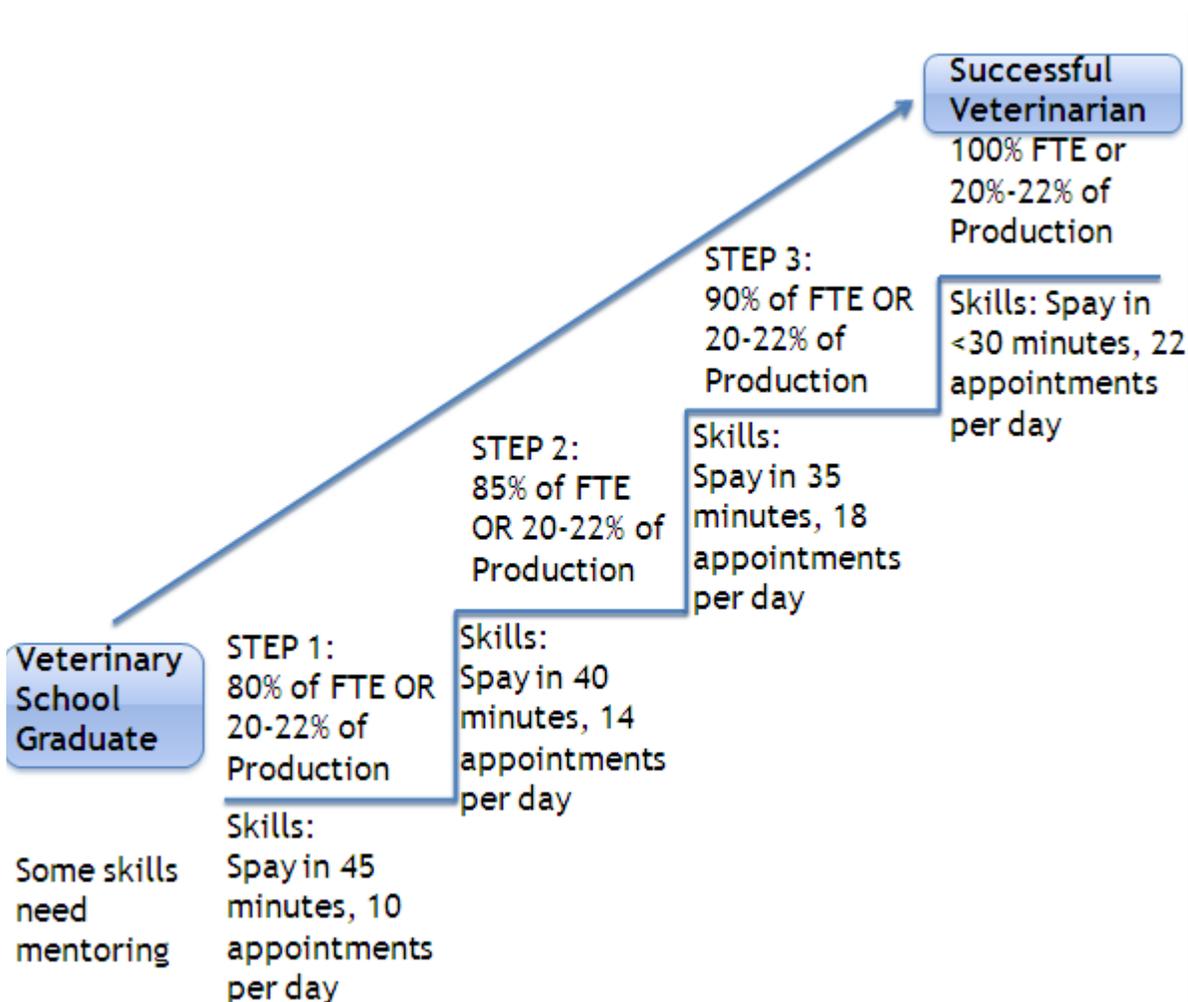


Figure 18: Example of an abbreviated mentorship plan with staged progression.

Conclusion

The problems facing the profession are overwhelming for practice owners, managers, and new graduates. In addition to the decrease in starting salaries and job offers per graduate, there is growing competition from job-seeking veterinarians with years of experience. Repayment of the skyrocketing educational debts of today's graduates who leave school with a lack of confidence in their clinical skills makes the need for mentorship even more clear. Although mentorship may not be able to solve all of these problems, enhancing the implementation of successful mentorship programs would be a huge step forward.

The evidence supported by the survey results has led to a revived look into mentorship in veterinary medicine. Although mentorship is by no means a new topic, it is a topic that has been used as a buzz word among new graduates but not taken seriously by any overarching veterinary body until now. The Mentorship Program Guidelines (MPGs) and tools in the toolkit that are introduced and supported by this paper provide examples for compensation, time periods, staged progressions, expectations, and accountability needed in a mentoring relationship. The ball is now in the court of students, new and recent grads, and veterinary practice owners and managers to put them to work.

Additional Figures:

Appendix A: Complete version of the survey

Appendix B: Mentee Survey Results

Appendix C: Mentor Survey Results