

## **Bridging the Gap: Structured mentorship program can help new grads**

By Kristen Britton; Stith Keiser; James Wilson, DVM, JD; Nan Boss, DVM

There are numerous obstacles facing recent veterinary school graduates and students about to enter the veterinary profession. Not only are professionals just entering the field experiencing barriers, but practice owners are also increasingly frustrated by high turnover rates as well as limited options for exiting from private practice.

Issues confronting students and recent graduates include:

1. Overwhelming increases in student debt<sup>i, ii</sup>;
2. Remarkable increases in the number of students being admitted to veterinary schools<sup>iii</sup>;
3. No work force shortage in the profession<sup>iv, v</sup>, diminished numbers of job offers per graduate<sup>vi</sup>;
4. Two consecutive years of lower starting salaries, <sup>vii, viii</sup> ;
5. Decreased opportunities for clinical training while in veterinary school;
6. Lack of any quality assurance of internships<sup>ix</sup>;
7. Evidence that completing an internship has no significant effect on associate income, irrespective of the number of years post-graduation<sup>x</sup>;
8. Ten years of decreasing case loads and transactions per full time equivalent (FTE) veterinarian<sup>xi</sup>; and
9. Rising costs for veterinary practices to hire and train new graduates to become productive team members. Some of these contributing factors are summarized in Figure 1.

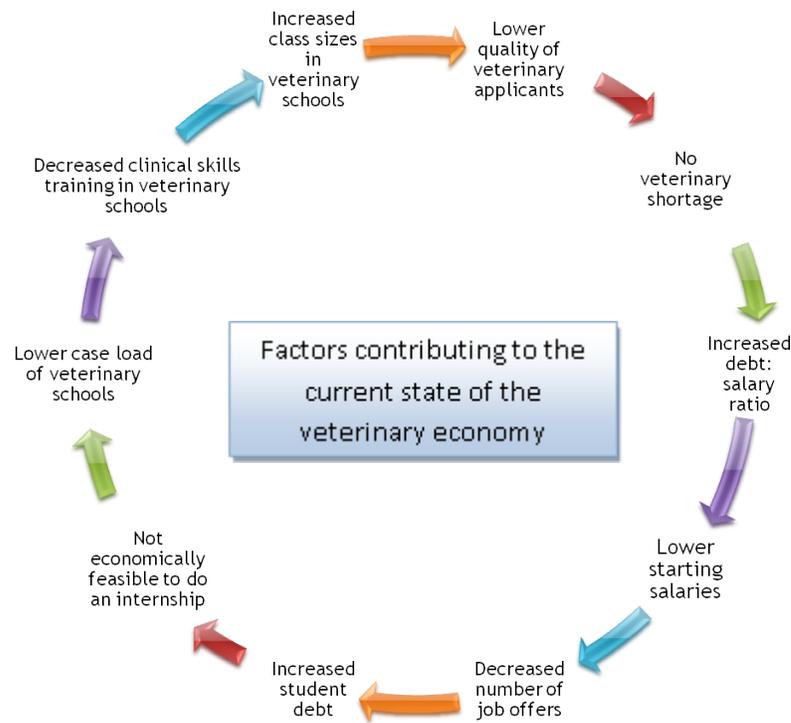


Figure 1: Factors contributing to the current state of the veterinary economy<sup>1-12</sup>

These barriers to success were identified during the 2008 through 2012, 5-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 January.

These 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 continued to gain traction. It focused on the importance of creating a structured, staged and accountable mentorship program for new and/or recent graduates.

### **The skill gap**

As a result of expectations set by today’s employers and new graduates, there is an ever increasing need for graduates to possess practice ready competencies on day one of employment.<sup>xii</sup>

All too often, graduates do not possess these skills. In fact, there appears to be a sizeable gap between academic graduation and being practice ready. In order to bridge this gap and set both employers and new employees up for success, the authors believe that a structured mentorship program is necessary.

A mentoring relationship benefits both parties leading to improvements in patient care, better medicine and therefore better business. Having mentoring veterinarians committed to the continued education of new and recent graduates allows a transition to the practice setting and provides a stronger foundation for the next generation of veterinarians to practice quality medicine and become practice owners.

The authors agree that mentorship has been deterred in the past by the absence of structure. They also agree that its presence is critical for recent graduates who are seeking long-term career enjoyment and success.

Coupled with the need for inexpensive labor by the country's specialty practices, this dichotomy has led to the creation of over 825 matching internships in the Veterinary Intern Residency program (VIRMP). And, though the completion of these internships has been reported to improve the competencies and confidence of participants, *JAVMA* articles indicate that the desired commensurate financial gains are lacking.<sup>xiii</sup>

Mentorship can be gained through an internship, and internships absolutely have a place, particularly if the intern is seeking a residency or equine practice, but it is the authors' goal to offer another alternative for recent graduates seeking an internship specifically for the hope of being mentored.

### **Helpful on many levels**

In the veterinary profession, mentorship is defined as a relationship between an experienced veterinarian and a newly or recently graduated veterinarian who seeks expansion of his or her knowledge, confidence, productivity and clinical skills in a private practice setting.

Mentorship is essential to the retention of veterinarians in a practice and lack of mentorship has been cited as a main reason for leaving a place of employment among recent graduates.<sup>xiv</sup>

The cost of hiring a new veterinarian can be a huge hardship for a clinic. It can be upwards of \$140,000 to hire a new veterinarian for a practice and with the 30% turnover rate of the veterinary industry, this can get expensive quickly.<sup>xv,xvi</sup>

Mentoring, on the other hand, can provide employees a reason to stay and thrive at a clinic. Mentoring can also reduce the turnover rate of veterinarians within their first year of practice, which can be an extreme cost for a practice owner.

Current mentorship resources provide a foundation for mentorship that can be further developed. The current mentorship resources that are widely available to the profession include the AAHA Mentoring Guidelines (written for those entering and currently transitioning in small animal private practice) and the AAEP Shadow a Veterinarian mentorship program (written for veterinary students interested in equine practice).

Canada's vet2vet program has a mentorship program that offers online training in mentorship and placement for mentees. There are also individual mentoring programs through state veterinary medical associations and individual veterinary schools. None of these gives a framework for exactly how the details of compensation, time, clinical competencies, and progression during the mentoring period should be addressed. Being that there is no current

guide for mentoring, it is of no surprise that mentoring data is practically non-existent for the veterinary profession.

AAHA's recent graduates task force, My Veterinary Career, and the VetPartners Career Development Special Interest Group (formerly the Career Development Committee), primarily Stith Keiser and Drs. Jim Wilson and Joel Parker, in 2011 worked on a proposal for employers and new associates (primarily new graduates).<sup>xvii</sup>

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 from this proposal sparked the revision of this proposal and the need for more data related to mentorship in the veterinary medicine. It also gave insight to how such guidelines would be perceived by new graduates.

### **Survey says**

Through the work of these groups, a survey was prepared with the ultimate goals to gather more knowledge about veterinarians who are currently participating in or offering a mentorship based program, and to further develop a recommended structure and implementation process for a model mentorship program.

Two surveys were created. One survey 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. The survey was sent via email with a response deadline of two weeks. The survey was sent to 6,091 AAHA member clinics with a represent from 382 of them responding within the specified time. This produced a 6.3% response rate for the mentor version of the survey. The mentee survey was sent to 1,759 recent graduates on the AAHA member list serve. Responses from 140 people in this group produced an 8% response rate.

The questions were aimed at gaining a better understanding of the current mentorship programs in place and the need for more structured mentoring guidelines. The types of questions in each survey revolved around time commitment for mentors and mentees, clinical skills gained, compensation, and the structure of the mentee/mentor relationship. Not all questions had to be answered for responses to be included in the results. The results of the surveys were split based on answers indicating the respondents were mentors vs. mentees. With the survey results and other background information, the Mentorship Program Guidelines were compiled.

Key findings from the AAHA's mentorship survey can be found in Figures 2-5.

**If your practice were to implement a mentorship program, which of the following criteria would need to be clearly returned to justify the investment in the mentee? Please check the top two criteria.**



Figure 2

**If a potential job applicant provided a mentor with a prepared AAHA 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**



Figure 3

**Experience has led me/us (mentors) to the decision that a new graduate who had completed an academic internship would be preferred.**



Figure 4

## Experience has led my practice (mentors) to the decision that I would prefer to hire a new graduate who had completed a private internship.



Figure 5

### Guidelines Coming Soon

The VetPartners CD SIG has created “Mentorship Program Guidelines” in the form of a toolkit with an assortment of materials that can be customized for individual practices and veterinarians. The Mentorship Program Guidelines were developed with the veterinary economy as the driving force.

The Mentorship Toolkit contains resources and support for a revised, detailed mentorship program to help associate veterinarians become successful team members. The Mentorship Program Guidelines provide an outline for both mentees and mentors to have an effective and successful relationship for the transition for associate veterinarians and mentoring veterinarians.

The Mentorship Toolkit will include:

- **Evolution and support for mentorship (white paper, executive summary and PowerPoint):** This resource provides background information on the economic forces driving the economy and the support for mentorship guidelines. It also includes survey results from mentees and mentors on what is missing from current mentee-mentor relationships to help with the evolution of new mentorship guidelines.
- **Knowing when to hire:** In order for a mentee-mentor relationship to be successful, it is necessary for the practice to be in good financial health. Without an opportunity to thrive, the mentee-mentor relationship cannot succeed. Having the capability to hire an associate is the first step to creating a thriving long-term relationship with an associate.
- **How to bring up mentoring with an employer:** Sample cover letters that can be utilized to bring up mentoring utilizing the Mentorship Program Guidelines as a reference.
- **Mentee and Mentor Goals and Expectations Inventories:** The Mentee and Mentor Goals and Expectations Inventories were created in order to set measureable standards

for both parties to adhere by. Utilization of these inventories will allow both mentees and mentors to form a successful relationship centered around effective communication and expectations.

- **Written protocols:** Outline of protocols expected from mentees. These are meant to be completed by the mentor and gives guidelines for the mentee to follow.
- **Time and compensation recommendations:** In order to ensure all parties are aware of what mentorship takes in regards to time and appropriate compensation understanding that mentors make a significant investment in hiring an associate and becoming a mentor.
- **Surveys for mentees and mentors:** Taking these surveys throughout your mentee-mentor relationship will allow for data supporting mentorship for the future. It will also allow feedback to let the creators of the mentorship program guidelines to take into consideration your thoughts and suggestions for future improvement.
- **Resources for mentees and mentors:** These include resources and references to support mentorship.

It's easy to get caught up in all of the recent negative press and issues facing our profession, but ultimately it is our responsibility to create solutions to overcome these hurdles. Mentorship may not solve all of the challenges facing today's students, recent graduates and practice owners but it does offer a clear path, with tangible results, for battling many of them.

Choosing mentorship, though it may not be right for everyone, is a strategy for controlling what we can control—our knowledge and skills as associates, our practices' financial health, and our exit strategies.

A mentoring relationship benefits both parties leading to improvements in patient care, better medicine and therefore better business.

Mentorship is essential to the retention of veterinarians in a practice and lack of mentorship has been cited as a main reason for leaving a place of employment among recent graduates.

There is a sizeable gap between academic graduation and being practice ready.

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- <sup>xvii</sup> 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.