

What are the veterinary schools and colleges doing to improve the nontechnical skills, knowledge, aptitudes, and attitudes of veterinary students?

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A great deal of debate and discussion has transpired since publication of the KPMG¹ and Brakke² study results. In specific response to the contention that the present nontechnical skills, knowledge, aptitudes, and attitudes (SKAs) of veterinarians may be inadequate, a project was conducted to identify the core competencies for success in veterinary medicine.³ In addition, several related projects were funded by the AVMA through the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI).⁴ Although these projects have revealed new information related to the SKAs and have led to numerous recommendations in that regard, the question remains as to whether the veterinary schools and colleges will, or can, change in response. Clearly, the greatest leverage point for changing the profession lies within the academic institutions where approximately 10,000 students are currently enrolled.

To determine whether veterinary schools and colleges will or can change, a survey was sent electronically to all 27 US veterinary schools that were in operation at the time of the KPMG study to obtain information on changes that have been implemented or are underway consistent with the KPMG findings. Of particular interest were those programs designed to improve the nontechnical SKAs of veterinarians and veterinary students. Each veterinary school and college was asked to submit a short summary (a paragraph or so) of relevant programs at their institution. The initial request was sent in mid-June 2003, and a reminder was sent two weeks later.

In all, information on the changes being implemented has been obtained directly or indirectly from 23 of the 27 schools polled. Those not responding cannot be assumed to not have new programs underway; it could be that it was just not logistically possible to provide the requested information in a timely manner. Changes underway were in five general categories: admissions, orientation, curriculum, cocurricular, and other.

Admissions

Reported changes related to the admissions process included one school that was conducting an

overall review of admissions processes, including outside (nonuniversity) participants and a daylong admissions workshop. Several schools have initiated a behavioral event interview (à la the PDI study³). Others have increased emphasis on nonacademics in the admissions process or have sought to rebalance the consideration of academic and nonacademic criteria. At least one school has added a prerequisite business course as a requirement for admission. Veterinary schools and colleges involved in these admissions changes include those at the University of Georgia, Michigan State University, University of Minnesota, Mississippi State University, North Carolina State University, Purdue University, and Virginia-Maryland Regional College.

Orientation

A number of schools and colleges are now addressing personal finance topics and conducting team building exercises in their orientation programs. Other new features of orientation programs include an emphasis on emotional intelligence, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, mentoring, and leadership. At one institution, the orientation for new veterinary students has been extended to seven days. Schools and colleges involved in these changes to orientation programs include those at Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, Michigan State University, North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, Virginia-Maryland Regional College, and Washington State University.

Curriculum

Curricular changes were the most commonly reported response to the KPMG study. A number of schools and colleges were in the process of reviewing and revising existing courses, and others reported development of new courses. Several reports^{5,6} identified the Model Curriculum as a useful guide. Primary features of curricular change in this regard included increased emphasis on topics such as team building, business management, marketing, professional and interpersonal skills, law/ethics, personal finance, communication, entrepreneurship, and life skills. Several

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schools reported private practitioner involvement in these courses. One school even reported having a psychologist involved in oncology rounds. Veterinary schools and colleges reporting curricular changes included Colorado State University, Cornell University, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Illinois, Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Michigan State University, University of Minnesota, Mississippi State University, University of Missouri, North Carolina State University, The Ohio State University, Oklahoma State University, Purdue University, Texas A&M University, Tufts University, Virginia-Maryland Regional College, and University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Cocurricular Activities

Cocurricular activities include educational programs developed to complement those available to students within the curriculum. Usually these do not involve college credit. The wide variety of changes demonstrated the ability of faculty and students to be innovative in response to the KPMG challenges. These activities included student clubs, special student conferences (including a number of **Student Chapter of the AVMA [SCAVMA]** organizations that hosted regional School-to-Success Weekend Workshops), student participation in a local Toastmaster's club, an employment contract review service, specially designed Web sites, Zodiac⁷ workshops to teach financial management, innovative approaches to SCAVMA management (along with attending responsibilities and expectations), job search and negotiation assistance, aggressive use of the NCVEI tools, special evening seminars, career counselor, use of a psychologist in teaching, personality testing, development of a business certificate, leadership development activities, and interview training workshops. In addition to faculty and students, many of these activities actively engaged members of the relevant state veterinary medical association. Schools and colleges pursuing these cocurricular activities include the University of California-Davis, Colorado State University, University of Illinois, Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, Michigan State University, University of Missouri, The Ohio State University, Oklahoma State University, University of Pennsylvania, Purdue University, Texas A&M University, and University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Other Programs

Additional changes were reported that did not fit well into any of the previous categories. A number of progressive changes were related to management of the veterinary teaching hospitals. These included enhanced use of veterinary technicians and development of a well-planned marketing program. In addition, three schools reported development of DVM/MBA programs. Others highlighted mentoring programs designed to

support veterinary students and continuing education programs focused on the SKAs. One school reported a noteworthy administrative change—creation of an assistant dean for career development position. A couple of schools commented on research projects or programs related to developing a better understanding of the SKAs. Schools and colleges involved in these changes included those at the University of California-Davis, Colorado State University, University of Georgia, Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Michigan State University, North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, Purdue University, Texas A&M University, and Virginia-Maryland Regional College.

Summary

The KPMG study signaled the need for change in the veterinary profession, and the NCVEI was formed to follow up on the study's findings. As founding organizations, the AVMA, American Animal Hospital Association, and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges remain committed to the cause, as do the NCVEI's corporate sponsors. In addition, it is clear that substantial change is also underway within the individual veterinary schools and colleges. The programs compiled should not be considered exhaustive because of the possibility that not all schools replied to the survey and because of ongoing changes.

Widespread programmatic changes are being implemented in the veterinary schools and colleges, with short- and long-term implications for the veterinary profession. Such changes are not taken lightly in academia, and the schools and colleges are to be commended for their leadership and initiative. The momentum that is apparent can be expected to yield benefits for the veterinary profession well into the future.

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