Students value relationship building in a student mentorship program

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OBJECTIVE
To assess the needs and values of students regarding a new mentoring program.

METHODS
An online survey was developed and sent to veterinary students through institutional email at the beginning and end of the year of initiating a faculty-student mentorship program.

RESULTS
In September and May, the most commonly desired outcome of the program for students was the building of relationships. In the fall, the most anticipated concerns were that the meetings would not occur or there would be incompatibility between mentors and mentees. In the spring, the most common concerns were that some faculty were disinterested or meetings did not happen.

CONCLUSIONS
The experiences of veterinary students in the faculty-student mentoring program were often positive but variable. At the outset, students were hoping to build relationships through the program, and in May, some of them reported that this objective had been fulfilled. However, some students expressed frustration with faculty disengagement with the program. A faculty-student mentorship program has the potential to build relationships between students and faculty when faculty are engaged participants in the program.

CLINICAL RELEVANCE
Based on our findings, students are eager to build relationships with faculty within the context of a faculty-student mentorship program, and this goal is achievable. However, much depends on the engagement and participation of the faculty, which was incomplete using our approach of assigning all faculty to participate.

Keywords: students, veterinary, mentorships, faculty, mentorings

We have taken a preliminary step in addressing the lack of information about the mentoring of veterinary students by soliciting student perspectives at the beginning and completion of the first year of a new faculty-student mentoring program at the Texas Tech University School of Veterinary Medicine (TTU SVM). This information provides baseline evidence for continued refinement of our institution’s mentorship program and for other veterinary schools seeking evidence regarding best practices in efforts to either build or revamp their current mentorship programs.

It is agreed upon in published literature that the nature of professional schools lends itself to mentoring versus academic advising. Mentorship is commonly defined as faculty members or other professionals in the discipline providing their mentee with knowledge, advice, counsel, and support as the mentee pursues becoming a recognized member of...
the profession. This differs from the role of advisor who usually provides advice in a singular area or field based on expertise. Consequently, throughout this article, we will refer to the program described as a mentoring program.

Mentorship can play a pivotal role in the development and success of individuals in professional schools, fostering a supportive environment that goes beyond traditional academic instruction. A mentor-mentee relationship can provide students with valuable guidance, encouragement, and personalized advice, helping them to navigate the complexities of their chosen field. As mentors, faculty members are uniquely positioned to offer insight into veterinary school and the development of professional identity as well as sharing practical experiences and helping students hone essential skills. This personalized approach cultivates a sense of belonging and confidence in students. Studies of students in human health care professions have consistently shown the positive impacts of mentorship on career development, professional identity formation, and overall satisfaction with the educational experience. Developing a culture of mentorship in professional schools has the potential to contribute significantly to the holistic growth and success of future professionals.

Law et al. describe 3 models of faculty-to-student mentoring: the academic model, the undergraduate research model, and the psychosocial model. For academic mentoring, systems were established before the admission of the first class at the TTU SVM to identify students with academic challenges and assist them with academic counseling, tutoring, and access to credentialed professional counselors at the school. The TTU SVM also quickly established a mentoring program for veterinary student research through a summer research scholars program. Before the work described here, no psychosocial mentoring program was in place at the TTU SVM. In a systematic review of publications regarding the academic mentorship of undergraduate students, Law described 4 possible mentoring purposes: student success (including academic success), competence development, career development, and the remainder of the studies, which had mentoring objectives including increasing the overall student experience, reducing anxiety, and increasing students’ identity development. Mentoring toward career development of SVM students is the role of faculty at the school who serve as clinical mentors to third-year students and of practitioners with a formal instructional and mentorship relationship with the students. The mentoring program described here was not specifically focused on research, academics, or career development but rather on the psychosocial model to improve the well-being and feelings of social inclusion of students.

At the outset of the new program, in light of the already established systems for research experiences, career development, and academic support, students were asked what they hoped to gain from the new mentoring program. At the end of the first year, students were asked to report what they found most valuable about the experience.

The objective of this project was to determine the perspectives of first- and second-year students on a new faculty-student mentoring program at TTU SVM in an effort to judge the effectiveness of the program from their perspective. We hypothesized that students would see the new program as an opportunity for psychosocial mentoring and that the program would provide value in that area as reported by participants.

Methods

For the TTU SVM mentorship program, students in the classes of 2025 and 2026 were randomly assigned to groups including 6 to 8 students from each class and 4 to 5 faculty members. First-year veterinary students were randomly assigned a faculty mentor from the group, while second-year students chose a faculty mentor from the group. Each group was instructed to meet as a whole at least once within the first 6 weeks of each semester, usually in an informal setting such as lunch. In addition, faculty mentors were instructed to meet individually twice in the fall semester and once in the spring semester with their first-year student mentees and once per semester with second-year student mentees. Students were permitted to change mentors among the 4 to 5 faculty members in the mentoring group.

All school faculty were included in the program. Students and faculty members were provided with an outline of the procedures (as described above), and faculty were provided academic performance information (access to up-to-date course grades for the current semester) for their student mentees and a list of resources for students (e.g., tutoring or counseling services). All faculty members must maintain active Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act status in accordance with TTU policy and only had access to the academic performance information of their assigned mentees. In addition, at the outset of the program faculty were offered a seminar in which a school counselor presented best practices for student mentoring.

Anonymous online surveys were created using commercial polling software (Survey Monkey) and distributed via institutional group emails to the classes of 2026 and 2025, who were then in their first and second years of veterinary school. The surveys were designed to collect information regarding student expectations and hopes about mentorship at the start of the school year and reflections on their experiences at the end of the school year. Most questions involved Likert scale responses on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree/disagree/neutral agree nor disagree/agree/strongly agree) about expectations (in September) and evaluations (in May) of the efficacy of individual mentor/mentee meetings and mentee group meetings and the program as a whole. There were also 3 free-text questions asking the
students to share desirable outcomes, concerns, and words associated with the program. There were 11 total questions on each survey. The unabridged surveys are provided (Supplementary Material S1). The first survey was open for responses from September 12, 2022, to September 15, 2022, and no follow-up prompts were sent after the initial invitation to participate. The second survey was open for responses from May 19, 2023, to June 19, 2023, and in addition to the initial invitation, students were prompted by email to complete the survey on June 5, 2023, and June 14, 2023. No external incentive for survey completion was offered for either survey.

Survey data were downloaded from Survey Monkey as Excel files with a sheet for each question and its responses. These data files were used to obtain response counts and descriptive statistics. Each question was evaluated independently; survey completion was not required for the inclusion of responses in our reporting. Thematic analyses of qualitative data were based on the method described by Braun and Clarke.5 Briefly, all qualitative responses were read, then patterns were identified, and responses were coded and grouped by similarity (most often based on use of a particular word). Codes were reviewed and combined into themes when relevant. Themes were then reviewed, defined, and named.

This project was exempted from review by the TTU Human Research Protection Program under IRB2022-757.

Results

The September survey was distributed to 148 students. Ninety-one percent of students (n = 136) completed all or part of the survey in the fall. The May survey was distributed to 148 students, and 38% (n = 56) complete or partial responses were received.

Student responses: quantitative

Students held a favorable view of being in a mentor group with the majority (60% [82/136] in September and 62% [35/56] in May) agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “I enjoy/enjoyed the experience of being in a mentor group” at the beginning and the end of the year.

Most students (74% [101/136] in September and 71% [40/56] in May) agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident about interacting with their assigned faculty mentors in both the pre- and post-survey. There was a numerically higher percentage who strongly agreed with the statement that they felt confident to interact with faculty mentors in May compared to September (Figure 1).

Student positivity about both group and individual mentor meetings was lower in May than in September. Students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that mentee groups will be/were an effective type of mentoring were 70% (95/136) in September and 45% (25/56) in May. Similarly, students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that individual mentor meetings will be/were an effective type of mentoring were 75% (103/136) in September and 58% (33/56) in May (Figures 2 and 3). Feelings about the relative utility of group versus individual meetings stayed constant across time, with 17 ± 1% (23/136 [September]; 9/51 [May]) feeling group meetings would be or were more effective than individual meetings, 45 ± 1% (61/136 [September]; 23/51 [May]) feeling that individual sessions would be/were more effective than groups meetings, and 38 ± 1% (52/136 [September]; 19/51 [May]) feeling that group and individual meetings would be/were equally effective in both fall and spring surveys.

Students reported that faculty mentors followed through with the program directive for groups for the most part, with 72% (40/55) of groups meeting twice

![Figure 1—Student agreement with the statement “I feel/felt confident to interact with/interacting with my faculty mentors” as expressed in surveys before and after participating in a year-long mentoring program.](image-url)
during the school year as recommended. However, the prescribed frequency of individual meetings (2 in the fall semester and 1 in the spring semester) was not met for 54% (13/24) of first-year students with 33% (8/24) of respondents reporting only 1 meeting and 21% (5/24) reporting only 2 meetings with their faculty mentor during the school year.

**Student responses: qualitative**

In the September survey, students were asked an open-text question, “What is/are the most desirable outcome(s) of the TTU SVM Mentoring program?” (n = 112 responses). The most common themes of desirable outcomes (with example responses) were making connections/building strong relationships (37% [42/112], “building relationships”), guidance/advice (20% [23/112], “ease of getting opinions and advice”), and career resources (4% [5/112], “finding a good path for my career”). The students were also asked, “What are your greatest concerns about the TTU SVM mentoring program?” The most common response themes (n = 113) included program failure/not meeting (31% [35/113], “lack of participation”), incompatibility with the assigned faculty mentor (11% [13/113], “potential issues with faculty/student compatibility”), and the time required (11% [13/113], “time requirement”). In the fall survey, the students were asked, “When you think of the TTU SVM Student Mentoring Program what 3 single words come to mind?” (n = 113). They most commonly used the words relationships (22% [25/113]), community (19% [22/113]), and support (14% [16/113]) in their responses.

In the May survey, the students were asked, “What were the most desirable outcome(s) of the TTU SVM Mentoring program?”; there were 35 responses to this question. The most common response themes were building relationships (26% [9/35], “to build relationships with professors”), interacting/getting to know people (23% [8/35], “to get to know faculty and students”), and receiving guidance (20% [7/35], “having someone to go to for questions or thoughts”). The question “What are your greatest concerns about the TTU SVM mentoring program?”
received 35 responses. The most common themes (25% [8/35] for all) were disinterested faculty mentors (“mentors that aren’t into it”), failure to meet (“I never once had an individual meeting with my mentor”), and no concerns (“none”). In the spring survey, the students were asked, “When you think of the TTU SVM Student Mentoring Program what 3 single words come to mind?”; there were 34 responses. The most frequently chosen words were community (32% [11/34]), relationships (21% [7/34]), and contact with designated faculty members may in itself touch with designated faculty members in students in human health professional programs are already in place. Our survey response rate was excellent in the fall and good in the spring, indicating that students were interested and engaged with the idea of a faculty-student mentoring program. It is likely that the marked drop in response rate in the spring among students was at least in part due to an unforeseen delay in releasing the survey, which was not distributed until the last day of finals week.

The students’ greatest desired outcome as the program began was increased connection with faculty and other students, and the benefit they valued most from the program was an increased number and quality of relationships with faculty and peers. The loosely structured program met the primary expressed need of many of the students; whether meeting this need enhances academic performance or perceived well-being is the next logical question. For the students, just having regular arranged contact with designated faculty members may in itself have been a benefit, as reflected in student increases in confidence in interacting with faculty members from the start to the finish of the school year.

Although research evidence of the benefits and drawbacks of mentoring programs specifically for veterinary students is lacking, based on research in other types of postsecondary education, having a faculty mentor theoretically should improve veterinary student well-being,1,6,7 confidence, and success, especially during the early years of their veterinary education. It has been demonstrated that developing and sustaining positive mentor-mentee relationships supports personal resilience among veterinarians after graduation.8,9 In a survey of veterinarians regarding their experiences with mentoring, those who had a mentor reported more career success than those who did not; however, in that study, most mentors were from before or after veterinary schooling.10 Only 19.3% of mentors recalled by the veterinarians in that study were a teacher or advisor, and this percentage included undergraduate teachers and advisors. Studies11,12 of students in human health professional programs find that students seek a caring, authentic, available, and knowledgeable mentor who can assist them in their journey to becoming a healthcare professional. Our students sought some of the same qualities in their mentors, as reflected in the theme of relationship building in their hopes for the program, and the most commonly mentioned shortcomings of mentors in May were disinterest or unavailability.

Some flaws in the mentoring program were discovered through our survey. One is that faculty participation in the program was uneven; some met with the students the prescribed number of times throughout the school year, while others did not. More than half of first-year students reported meeting with their faculty mentor fewer than the prescribed 3 times during the school year. In error, we neglected to include “zero” as an option for the number of times a student met with their mentor, so the deficit in meetings between mentors and mentees may have been greater than was reported. It is unknown if this lack of meeting frequency was due to lack of invitation by the mentor or lack of acceptance on the part of the mentee. It was established at the outset that responsibility for initiating meetings between faculty members and student mentees belonged to the faculty member, so the responsibility for the failure to meet with the frequency prescribed by the program guidelines was most likely due to lack of faculty engagement.

The variation in student attitudes about the mentoring program at the end of the year may reflect the variability in faculty willingness or ability to engage with the students. Faculty were not selected for the program nor did they volunteer; rather, all faculty were assigned to participate. This is a conundrum for the development of such programs: if all faculty are assigned to participate, some will be less engaged and less capable in the role of mentor, and consequently, their student mentees will have poorer experience than others. On the other hand, if only volunteers or selected faculty are included in the mentoring program, there is a high risk that the program will become unsustainable due to the high demands placed on a limited number of faculty.

Students felt that individual meetings between mentors and mentees were more effective than group meetings of all mentors and mentees within the mentoring group. No activities were required or suggested for group meetings and anecdotal reports were that they were casual and unstructured in nature. Prescribing activities to increase engagement during group meetings, such as assigning partners from different classes to query and introduce themselves to each other, may improve the utility of group meetings and especially help students acquire friendly contacts in other classes, which they expressed their desire to do.

The lack of evidence of benefits from faculty-student mentoring during veterinary school is due at least in part to the difficulty in defining and measuring outcomes for such a program. The effect of mentoring during veterinary school on practitioner competency and well-being would be difficult to measure and especially difficult to separate from the effects of many other factors encountered before, during, and after formal veterinary education. What
we did learn, however, is that providing scheduled engagement of the students with particular faculty members improved student confidence in interacting with faculty and largely met their need for increased knowledge of and relationships with faculty and other students, especially students from other classes.

We learned that most veterinary students, similarly to medical students, find that a faculty/student mentorship program helps them to develop a sense of belonging and support when faculty are engaged participants in the program. Continued exploration of best mentorship practices in veterinary medicine will be crucial to the development of programs that are sustainable by the faculty and meet the needs of veterinary students. This study provides initial evidence of what may prove to be a fruitful approach.

In summary, faculty-student mentor groups developed for the purpose of providing mentoring in the psychosocial aspect can be efficacious and meet the students’ needs for relationships, community, and support. These types of mentoring programs are likely most beneficial for first- and second-year students as they begin to develop their professional identity, and they depend on the participation and engagement of faculty mentors.

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Supplementary Materials
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