Virtual Mentorship and Selecting an Externship
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Abstract

The topic of mentorship is increasingly important due to changing demands on young veterinarians, particularly those in mixed or cattle practice. Many young practitioners rely on a mentor within their practice to help guide them through many day-to-day challenges. With multiple ways to communicate on social media or other technology platforms, virtual mentorship is a way to supplement other mentorship a young practitioner may receive from colleagues at their practice.

Performing externships while in veterinary school are critical to immediate success in large animal practice. Externships serve a valuable purpose by allowing students to gain clinical skills and non-traditional service knowledge and to expand their general knowledge base. Students are able to utilize multiple funding sources and methods of networking with practices to gain the best experiences.

Key Words
Mentorship, Virtual, Externship

Mentorship is based on the premise that “the better they are, the better I am.” Providing guidance to others can be a rewarding experience to watch them grow and develop. Mentorship and retention of young cattle veterinarians in bovine
practice is absolutely necessary to future success. Mentorship provides a framework for success by helping young veterinarians practice better medicine, develop relationships with clients, and deal with hardships in practice. In addition, developing a system of mentorship helps prevent cattle veterinarians from leaving bovine practice for other endeavors.

The urge to leave bovine practice can come from many areas. The AVMA now reports that starting salaries for food animal exclusive and mixed animal positions have fallen behind companion animal exclusive and predominant positions\(^1\). There are other challenges such as weather, emergency duty, and general work-life balance that may lead young veterinarians out of bovine practice. Mentorship affords young practitioners the opportunity to see the lifestyle benefits, potential community impacts, and career fulfillment of being a mixed or bovine veterinarian.

The mentor for a young veterinarian can be developed organically, such as the owner of the practice, or more officially in a formal mentorship program such as is available through the American Association of Bovine Practitioners. Traditional mentors, such as colleagues in the practice or practice owners, typically help with day-to-day mentorship. Topics might include handling of emergency calls, clinical skills, problem clients, etc. Mentorship programs typically match mentor/mentee pairs in different geographic regions, so other forms of communication must be employed. This style of “virtual mentorship” allows young veterinarians to have another option to supplement the mentorship they might receive close to their practice. Virtual mentorship may certainly help young veterinarians with day-to-
day challenges, but perhaps even more importantly, can provide someone to help
guide major decisions for a young veterinarian. Some questions that virtual
mentorship might help answer are: What services should I look to provide to meet
the needs of my clients in the future? How do I make sure my practice has a future
in cattle medicine? Should I buy in to my practice and what questions should I be
asking? An outside perspective provided by the virtual mentor can be a tremendous
asset to a young veterinarian.

Creating a situation where mentorship works requires effort from both sides.
Mentors should be enthusiastic, show genuine interest, be approachable, and
respond to inquiries in a timely manner. In addition, the mentor should recognize
that the level of mentorship that is needed is based on individual situations. The
“situational leadership” model may help guide the level of support, direction, and
coaching that the mentee may need. Young veterinarians are often quite adept at
performing clinical tasks such as a cesarean section on a cow, however, may be
much less confident in their ability to consult on a calf scours outbreak. Mentors
need to recognize the level of support versus direction that they need to provide
based on the individual task or situation at hand. Mentees must also put forth effort
to make the relationship work. Mentees need to show they care and to ask
questions when they arise. They need to show they are committed to success in
bovine practice, not just passively interested. In addition, mentees are likely to be
more adept at various forms of communication. They should make an attempt to
find the best means of communication with their mentor.
Mentorship failures are not uncommon. There are many reasons why mentorship does not work, particularly when it is part of a formal program and the pairs have been matched. Mentors may contribute to mentorship failure due to insecurity, ego, failure to see success in others, communication challenges, and lack of training in proper forms of motivation and mentorship. Mentees may add to challenges by lack of response or availability, personal insecurity, communication differences, and intimidation. These challenges are typically quite easy to overcome if the pair recognizes them and makes attempts to solve the problem. As with any relationship, it is important not to come to conclusions without having a discussion so that information exchange is solid and not simply inferred.

Another key piece of success in bovine practice is preparation. Veterinary colleges typically do an outstanding job preparing students for many aspects of veterinary practice, but there are some areas where students need additional training. Veterinary student externships are an excellent way to prepare students for practice in many different areas. Clinical skill formation and non-traditional veterinary service provision are two areas that students can develop and refine during an externship. Future success in bovine practice is often hinged upon initial preparation. There is no better way to become prepared than to see practitioners in action.

Many veterinary students are under current and future financial stress due to student loans. There are numerous opportunities for externship funding through national organizations such as AABP and Academy of Veterinary Consultants, state veterinary associations, state veterinary groups such as Ohio Dairy Veterinarians,
and pharmaceutical companies. The food animal veterinary profession has done an excellent job setting up the framework for success for students. Money is readily available to interested students.

Choosing the right externship and setting goals for the experience are also important. Oftentimes, students choose practices based on word of mouth from other students who have had good experiences. It is important for students to continue to network with practitioners to create a pipeline of externship opportunities. Students might consider practices that perform new and interesting non-traditional veterinary services. It is also important to consider finding a practice that performs traditional services well as those skills will serve as the foundation for young practitioners.

Students should set goals for externships, communicate those goals to practitioners, and be engaged and involved in meeting those goals. Students should seek out experiences, even during emergency hours, to try to gain the most out of their externship. Relationships that are built during externships can last a lifetime and can result in future employment or mentorship.

References