

**Virginia-Maryland Focus Study:**  
**The Impetus for Action**  
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**Guidelines for Local Action to solve a National Problem**

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**Virginia-Maryland Chapter  
Veterinary Business Management Association**

**Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine  
Blacksburg, VA**

## **Conducting our Focus Study:**

On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008, the Virginia-Maryland Chapter of the Veterinary Business Management Association (VBMA) hosted an economic summit entitled Laying our Hands on the Elephant, facilitated by Dr. Carol Mase. This discussion included students of Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine (VMRCVM), its faculty and administrators, and a number of local practitioners.

The discussion followed in the footsteps of the original economic summit, Inviting the Elephant into the Room, held at the North American Veterinary Conference (NAVC) in January, 2008. The national discussion of the veterinary profession's disproportionate debt:salary ratio was brought into our local community of students, professors and practitioners.

In the wake of this discussion, Dr. Mase asked the Virginia-Maryland VBMA to gather the opinions of the participants, for use in designing local events to turn the discussion into action. Three months after the event, we conducted fifteen interviews, centered around (but not limited to) four questions:

- 1.) What did you think was the most striking aspect of our conversation? Was there anything in particular that you thought about more, or that you thought about differently, after the event?
- 2.) In translating the discussion into action, what do you think should be done, in our community and in the profession? What is the next step?
- 3.) If we continue this discussion, how should we make it different? What have we missed that should be addressed in the future?
- 4.) About what issues are you hearing too much? Are there some issues that are being over-played and given too much airtime when you feel there is really nothing that can be done or nothing constructive being said?

What follows is our report of the popular opinion in our community. This is a compilation of the immediate results of the discussion, intertwined with a synopsis of the interviews conducted three months later. There is an emphasis on the themes that emerged in multiple interviews. Here is what we found.

**1.) What did you think was the most striking aspect of our conversation? Was there anything in particular that you thought about more, or that you thought about differently, after the event?**

*“What I wondered about most after the event was what we could do differently to make our fellow classmates feel empowered to lead change. When I asked some of my friends and peers why they didn’t attend the summit, they said they weren’t sure their presence would do any good.”*

This quote from one student who attended the event illustrates a feeling that was common among discussion participants as well as absentees. In the interviews conducted with students who attended, 1/3 of respondents stated that they were shocked to learn just how disproportionate the debt:salary ratio has become. This led many to feel that the “Elephant in the Room” is, in fact, more of a “run-away train” – one which might be impossible to stop. Although experienced practitioners and faculty/administrators of the college were more familiar with the magnitude of the problem, they agreed that the debt:salary disparity has reached a state of crisis.

Another recurrent theme of our local discussion was that the different stake-holders in the veterinary community are out of touch with one another. Among the three groups represented at the summit (students, college faculty/administrators, and local practitioners), mis-matched expectations were revealed as each group described how their needs are unmet by the others.

From the practitioners, we heard:

- students are not prepared to be productive practitioners upon graduation
  - they are not confident
  - they are not efficient
  - they are not good problem-solvers
  - although practitioners don’t expect new grads to perform at the same level as experienced veterinarians, the new grads they see do not meet entry-level expectations
- this is caused at least in part by the teaching methods in veterinary school(s)
  - the teaching hospital is a referral center, doesn’t mimic general practice
    - the cases students see are exotic, not common
    - students are trained to be thorough at the expense of efficiency
    - efficiency doesn’t seem to be taught at all
  - there is no standardization of curricula among veterinary schools. In hiring new grads from different veterinary schools, you don’t know what skill sets you will get
- this is caused at least in part by the unwillingness of new graduates to “stretch” themselves
  - they are so afraid of being wrong that they won’t use what they’ve learned
  - there is a “generation gap” that is perceived as a lack of work-ethic

- however, new graduates bring value to the practices they join in their ability to use specialized technology and new techniques, in areas where older practitioners lack training

From the students, we heard:

- dismay: “if practices are reluctant to hire new grads, what are we supposed to do?”
- a willingness to try hard to meet expectations
- a few reasons for the lack of confidence
  - students’ hands are tied by animal-welfare legislation that prevents them from getting the practical experience they need and desire (especially in Virginia)
  - the pressure of veterinary school that teaches a fear of being “WRONG”
    - heavy emphasis on grades rather than competency
    - attitudes of professors and clinicians at the school
- surprise
  - at the lack of congruency of curricula at various veterinary schools
  - at hearing the expectations of practitioners – many students expressed gratitude at having the opportunity to hear these

From the faculty of the college, we heard:

- their ability to educate is handicapped by budget concerns
  - ever-increasing cost of education
  - ever-shrinking funds flowing in from state and federal agencies
- surprise at the under-confidence and trepidation expressed by the students
- frustration at the government
  - animal welfare legislation that increases costs and limits opportunities to provide practical experience
  - lack of funding
- agreement with the practitioners on generation-gap issues

Each of the three groups agreed that it was valuable to talk/interact with the others. For students especially, the opportunity to hear off-the-record complaints from practitioners was both novel and extremely helpful. In planning future events, it will be important to keep in mind that the topic of discussion does not matter as much as the honest, candid interaction between practitioners, faculty and students.

Perhaps the most useful outcomes of the discussion lay in revelations about self-worth in the veterinary community. Issues of self-worth are especially poignant in light of the perception that lack of confidence in new graduates drives a large part of the problem. Programs to turn the discussion into action would do well to instill confidence and self-worth in future practitioners. Equally importantly, future programs should provide opportunities for the three groups to work together and gain confidence in one other. As stated in one interview, “We not only have to ask what veterinary medicine will do for us, but also what we will do for veterinary medicine and the public that we serve. If we do right by them, we can ask for more in return.”

**2.) In translating the discussion into action, what do you think should be done, in our community and in the profession? What is the next step?**

*“Right now I feel we are suffering from too many chiefs, not enough Indians.”*

Many respondents stated in their interviews that they were frustrated during the event because brainstorming tended to veer toward whining rather than making concrete suggestions for change. In the three months since the event, however, many of the attendees we interviewed had come up with *actual* suggestions! Some suggestions were general, and some were specific. The most useful of these are outlined below.

General suggestions for local action:

- All agreed that local community action and outreach should be the way to begin solving the problem. “We need to do more than put AVMA billboards in airports,” one respondent asserted.
- We can build confidence in ourselves and each other by increasing opportunities to *see* ourselves succeed – both in practicing medicine and leading change. Whatever goals are formed, they must be executed in such a way that the participants can *see* the outcomes.
- We should organize ourselves into focused committees with concrete objectives. Each objective should have:
  - a clear goal
  - a deadline by which the goal will be met
  - strategies for accomplishing the goal
  - a means to communicate to all participants when and how the goal is met
- To determine what is feasible, each objective should be subject to a SWOT analysis during the planning stages. Each plan of action should be evaluated to determine its Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities, as well as the Threats it presents.
- Programs for action should create leverage. There should be a clear separation between local and national issues, but in each case we should be seeking leverage for the voices of veterinary medicine. For example:
  - Nationally, representatives from AAVMC, AVMA, NCVEI, AAHA and the VBMA should corroborate
  - Locally, actions and outreach should include participants from VCOM (Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine) and other human medical professionals, harnessing the idea of “One Medicine” to increase the perception of value of veterinary services in the community
  - Locally and nationally, corporations should be urged to participate in the action, to reduce the cost of education and help fund outreach.
- It will be difficult but necessary to plan programs that include everyone while still forming small, focused groups working toward concrete, achievable objectives.

Specific suggestions for concrete objectives:

- Lobby the government
  - *For funding.* At state and national levels, lobbying for funding is the most obvious course of action, but it is daunting. Although students seem to feel more hopeful about effecting change this way than college administrators or practitioners, it would be more detrimental to rule this possibility out than to try it. For example:
    - The government can't spare more of its budget to directly fund schools, but it may be willing to lower federal student loan interest rates for those with higher debt loads.
    - This might look like a reversal of the tax system. Those in higher income brackets pay income tax proportional to their earnings. Similarly, recipients of student loans could be grouped into "debt brackets," with interest rates on student loans being *inversely* proportional to the load of debt carried by individuals.
  - *For legislative changes to provide more practical experience for veterinary students.* For example:
    - In the last 10 years, a PETA-inspired law was passed in Virginia prohibiting the use of euthanized shelter animals as teaching cadavers. This has not only increased the local cost of veterinary education, it has done the opposite of creating animal welfare, by forcing the college to buy outrageously priced animals raised on "research dog" farms. Local action groups could work to have this law repealed.
    - Virginia's laws on what veterinary students can physically do are extremely prohibitive. Local action groups could propose and lobby for special status for veterinary students to practice under the supervision of a licensed DVM. This would increase hands-on learning opportunities for vet students, and increase confidence and competence on the part of new graduates.
- Increase communication between the veterinary school and local practitioners, with the goal of revising the curriculum so that new graduates are better prepared to meet the needs of their future employers.
  - This is already an on-going process with mixed reviews from the college and the local practitioners.
    - One faculty interviewee expressed that there is actually a good relationship between the school and the local practitioners, despite the local ill-will created between the school and Banfield when community backlash prevented the formation of a corporate partnership with the school two years ago.
    - However, there is some disconnect that keeps the good school/practitioner relationship from translating into curriculum revision. One goal should be to find out where this disconnect is and repair it.

- The school's obligation to the community is to provide competent and confident entry-level practitioners. Another goal might be to formally define what that is in our local community. There *are* local differences in community need for veterinary services, and if we can communicate to define what our local needs are, the curriculum of the veterinary school can be revised accordingly.
- *Create a centralized and accessible forum for spread of information.* It is critical that, whatever local actions are taken, there needs to be a system by which participants can see their efforts leading to change. There are many avenues by which this can be done.
  - The most obvious methods utilize the internet.
    - Create an on-line, centralized, up-to-date forum to get the word out and keep it out.
    - This can offer information about the local and national issues being faced, as well as delivering news about the progress achieved by local action groups.
    - In addition, there can be a local action blog, with subscriptions offered to participants.
    - The Virginia Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA) already has a prototype of this underway. There is a wiki-page that can be updated by local action groups, which is linked to the VVMA members' website.

Some interviewees were thirsty for more knowledge about the state of the problem. Several students asked things like, "Who are the big guns? Who should we approach next?" There is a willingness to help, but a lack of knowledge of the areas where change can actually be effected. There was an articulated desire to hear from financial experts, not just about practice management and personal financial welfare, but about the state of the economy as a whole and the options we have for affecting it.

Many interviewees expressed the desire to hear more possibilities for local action from outsiders, but many also felt that good suggestions could come from within our local community. More than one participant in the economic summit suggested that we have "Focus Workshops," to determine concrete goals for individuals and small groups. Since the problem faced by the veterinary profession is multidimensional, the solutions must be multi-faceted as well. Thus, we heard the recurrent suggestion of forming small, focused groups with well-defined objectives.

### **3.) If we continue this discussion, how should we make it different? What have we missed that should be addressed in the future?**

Instead of creating a list of topics that have been neglected, this question mainly elicited suggestions for how future events should be run. Since the goal of this focus study is to help design future events to drive local action, perhaps the respondents answered the

question we really meant to ask in the first place. The suggestions of the attendees of our local summit are mostly general, and they are outlined here.

- **KEEP THE THREE GROUPS WORKING TOGETHER.** Students, faculty, and practitioners all expressed a desire to have more interaction with each other.
- Local people are more comfortable talking to one another than distant participants on a national scale. We should capitalize on that as we get to know each other.
- At each event, there needs to be a clear mission statement about what we hope to gain from the audience. Expectations need to be elucidated clearly on all sides.
- The focus of future events should be to propose solutions rather than presenting issues.
- The length of the events needs to be carefully predicted and adhered to.
  - Some participants felt we ran out of time at the local summit; others expressed that we should be more respectful of peoples' time and should not have let it run over so long.
  - Both groups agreed that it's important to allow enough time so that things don't feel rushed and so there is ample time for discussion.
- The need for positive reinforcement for participants was articulated here again. "You need to be told you're doing a good job to get motivated to keep going," one respondent said.

**4.) What issues are you hearing too much about? Are there some issues that are being over-played and given too much airtime when you feel there is really nothing that can be done or nothing constructive being said?**

The answer to this one was resounding and unanimous: enough negativity! Direct quotes from participants illustrate this best:

*"The general response to the topic of student debt was 'no shit', with some mutterings about beating a dead horse."*

*"I'm tired of being told I'll still be paying my loans while collecting social security."*

*"I left feeling deflated."*

*"Focus on what we can do rather than just crying about the problem."*

*"Too much negativity! While awareness is essential, hope is equally important in inspiring change. We need to forget about aspects of the problem we can't change, and focus on what we can."*

The other issue that needs to be left behind is the generation gap. Practitioners and faculty need to stop perceiving the desire for life balance as a lack of work ethic, and consider redesigning practice and school environments so they are less likely to cause burn-out. One faculty member put it best in his interview: *"Older vets need to realize we*

*don't have a monopoly on being offended by the culture of largesse we see in our youth. It is not unique to our profession, and as parents, we created it!"*

Similarly, students and other younger practitioners need to stop taking the “you should suffer like we did” edict as a personal insult, and show their elders there are ways to be hard-working and dedicated without compromising one’s quality of life.

One interviewee suggested that the generation gap is worsened by the veterinary profession’s recent switch from a male-dominated to female-dominated field. It was suggested that some of the most offensive issues stem from younger workers’ demands to have more family-friendly career environments, exacerbated by the elder generation’s hesitance to provide them.

While it may be true that in a free-market system, these issues work themselves out over time, in our case that won’t be good enough. The veterinary profession does not have time to waste in solving the financial crisis we face right now. If all the stakeholders in this discussion are to work together, we need to stop being offended by the generation gap and get over it! We need each other.

### **In Conclusion:**

It is the hope of the Virginia-Maryland Chapter of the VBMA that our work here will be helpful in designing future programs for turning the “Elephant in the Room” discussion into action. We hope that the above report illuminates the desires and sentiments of our community.

It has been inspiring to see the emergent consciousness of community that seems to follow the Elephant in the Room discussions – both nationally at NAVC, and at our own local economic summit. If Virginia-Maryland is chosen as a pilot school for new local-action programs, we promise that the VBMA will be standing by, ready to help.

Thank you so much for taking our opinions and input into consideration.