



**OPENING DOORS**

The Tufts at Tech Community Veterinary Clinic is an example of a community program that exposes students to veterinary careers and offers affordable care.

**DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION**

# Grassroots Initiatives to Grow and Enrich the Profession

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**T**he profession of veterinary nursing has grown significantly over the past 20 years, yet there is still a need to improve the diversity in the workforce, establish pipelines into the profession, and increase community awareness surrounding the role of veterinary nursing. Creating opportunities for young people to learn about the profession introduces the field to a wider audience and opens doors for the betterment of veterinary medicine as a whole.

Courtesy Worcester Technical High School



Rather than waiting for the community to come to the profession, veterinary nursing needs to bring the profession to the community. Starting this process may appear challenging, but there are several ways veterinary nurses can begin grassroots initiatives in their own communities to grow and enrich the profession.

## PIPELINE PROGRAMS

The diversity of the workforce has been a necessary topic of discussion for several years, and efforts have been made to increase both awareness and inclusivity. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has been active in its pledge to promote education surrounding these issues through the establishment of a new commission, creating awareness programs and other resources, and developing a diversity and inclusion policy, goals, and expectations.<sup>1</sup> These resources include webinars, podcasts, and certificate programs such as Brave Space.<sup>1</sup> Veterinary nurses and staff all have access to these resources through the AVMA website. Conferences such as VMX, hosted by The North American Veterinary Community, also include continuing education on these topics, and there are several online trainings through major institutions such as Harvard to learn more information. Once staff are equipped with knowledge and understanding of the need for a diverse and inclusive workforce, efforts can be made to reach out to underserved and underrepresented communities.

Representation matters in health care and is important in veterinary medicine as well. There are efforts to increase the diversity of student populations at the college level through programs, internships, and trainings for healthcare and veterinary professions.<sup>1,2</sup> However, efforts should be targeted to younger students to get them interested earlier in their educational experience in order to prepare them for future careers in veterinary medicine. For example, the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University offers the Adventures in Veterinary Medicine High School Program, which provides hands-on opportunities for students to learn more about the veterinary profession.<sup>3</sup> While this is a robust and competitive program aimed at a younger audience, the cost of the program may be prohibitive (limited scholarship opportunities are available).

Removing barriers and improving accessibility to the veterinary field is important for underrepresented individuals to learn how to enter the field. Pipeline

programs are designed to encourage and promote a diverse student population. Katz, Barbosa-Lekier, and Benavides-Vaello define pipeline programs as “programs at all levels of education intended to target, enroll, and support to graduation certain students, usually underrepresented students including minority, low income, and women, with the goal of increasing their representation in certain fields.”<sup>4</sup> The benefits of pipeline programs can be seen in human medicine examples at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. The University of Massachusetts Medical School collaborated with Worcester Public Schools to create the Worcester Pipeline Collaborative, creating various enrichment opportunities for inner city students to learn about healthcare careers, biomedical science, and research.<sup>5</sup> The Office of Outreach at the medical school also hosts the High School Health Careers Program, which provides educational and mentoring opportunities for high school students to learn about the various careers in medicine (including veterinary medicine).<sup>6</sup> Students are encouraged to continue with additional programs through the medical school as undergraduate students and consider future enrollment at the institution. The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine offers several programs such as internships and research opportunities for high school students from underrepresented backgrounds in the Baltimore area, and participates in Project Pipeline Baltimore.<sup>7</sup> These programs are supported by the university and donations in order to remove economic barriers. Veterinary nursing programs, institutions, and clinics can reach out to larger institutions that may be involved in pipeline collaborations with K-12 education. If this is not possible or available, veterinary nursing programs must be the first to establish a pipeline. Reaching out to the career technical education department of the local school district is a great place to start the conversation and discuss how to get involved.

## GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT

While pipeline programs are excellent resources for students to learn about the profession, they are not the only way veterinary nurses can get involved in the community (**BOX 1**). Starting small with an animal science program, biology department, or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) club can spark interest. Veterinary nurses have a STEM education and can consider reaching out to their local K-12 school districts to inquire about opportunities to volunteer in school programs, career fairs, advisory



## BOX 1

## Examples of Community Outreach Initiatives

- Guest speaker at K-12 schools
- Guest speaker at community centers
- Job/career fair
- Advisory board for vocational/technical schools
- Judge 4-H, FFA, HOSA, SkillsUSA
- Girl/Boy Scouts
- Virtual meetings
- K-12 STEM events
- After-school clubs
- Podcasts
- Career posters
- Mentorship
- Meet-and-greet
- Social media
- Pipeline programs

boards, agriculture clubs, and vocational/technical schools. Unfortunately, veterinary nurses are busy, having limited downtime and experiencing burnout in the clinical setting. Volunteering time may be challenging when a clinic is short-staffed or overwhelmed with an influx of cases. However, from a business perspective, this can be a great opportunity to promote the profession, the business, and allow veterinary nurses the chance to use other skills such as educating, providing a small break from the clinical setting. Interviews with several practice managers revealed a willingness to encourage and compensate employees for participating in community outreach as it promotes the field, and the veterinary nurse can represent the company. For example, Noreen Barber, practice manager at Covington Veterinary Clinic in Covington, Georgia, believes this is a great opportunity to teach the community about the value and knowledge of veterinary nurses, exposing a younger audience to the various careers in veterinary medicine. These students may be future employees and clients of the profession, and early exposure to positive interactions with veterinary professionals can increase trust, confidence, and respect for the profession (N. Barber, personal communication, August 21, 2021). Her additional recommendations include sending a representative who is prepared and supported by the team and reaching out to non-STEM educators such as business instructors and art teachers for different and new perspectives regarding the field.

Reaching out to the community may seem like a daunting task. In addition to sharing information regarding the growth and enrichment of the profession, I would like to share my own personal experiences over the past 20 years in the field.

## SUCCESS STORIES

## Worcester Technical High School and Tufts at Tech Community Veterinary Clinic

In 2006, I left private practice to start a veterinary assisting program at Worcester Technical High School, an inner city vocational technical high school in Worcester, Massachusetts. The program attracted students of various races, cultures, and ethnicities, and introduced them to the various careers available in the veterinary field. Several students of color remarked that they always wanted to work with animals yet did not know where to start. Starting and leading this program introduced pathways for students who were interested in the field yet did not know how to access it. Several graduates from this program have continued working in the veterinary field as groomers, assistants, veterinary nurses, researchers, and students in veterinary school.

One of the ways the veterinary community assisted with the growth of the program was through an advisory board. Every program at the school had members of an advisory board who ensured that career technical programs are aligned to industry standards and provided input into the curriculum and overall program. Career technical K-12 programs need members of the working community to grow their programs, and this is a great way to get involved. When building the advisory board, I reached out to area veterinary clinics and my professional contacts in higher education, research, and the local animal shelter, explaining the program and inviting them to meet to discuss the program twice a year. The advisory board helped expand the program and we started a collaboration with Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. This collaboration led to the start of the Tufts at Tech Community Veterinary Clinic in 2012, which serves low-income patients and pairs fourth-year veterinary students with junior and senior level high school veterinary assisting students.<sup>8</sup> With the increase in diversity at the veterinary school, many students felt represented and empowered to continue in the field. The collaboration continues to be successful and highlighted in various veterinary publications.

## Health Occupations Students of America

Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) is an internationally recognized student-led association that promotes leadership, education, and careers in health and medicine.<sup>9</sup> Students are also able to compete at state and national conferences to showcase health knowledge and skills. I first reached out to the HOSA organization in New Hampshire to learn more about the veterinary science event, and became a judge. HOSA welcomes all health and veterinary professionals to volunteer and help judge events and run educational activities. I eventually joined the HOSA state advisory board for Massachusetts and assisted with creating veterinary-related educational activities at the state conferences.

## Guest Speaking

I have been asked to speak at elementary, middle, and high schools. I started by reaching out to local schools when I heard about the need for guest speakers. I made sure I introduced myself to the principal and asked for their permission to present. Some districts may require a background check; always check with administration. This led to increased opportunities at various schools to also help with science fairs, career fairs, and STEM events. I have also responded to requests to present information regarding veterinary careers and pet ownership for the Boys and Girls Club and YWCA USA. These requests can be found on their social media and/or webpages.

## Girl Scouts

My local girl scout troop has asked me to assist with animal-related activities such as pet safety and responsible pet ownership. I have met with the troop both in person and virtually for the past 4 years. I use the opportunity to share knowledge about career paths to the parents who have children interested in veterinary careers. I have also been a guest speaker for a former student who created a Junior Health Awareness Summer Camp as a senior girl scout project for the past 2 years. This was completed virtually, which expands the ability to reach out to a broad audience.

## CONCLUSION

Veterinary nurses have an abundance of knowledge and education to share with their communities. Growing and enriching the profession benefits the entire field of veterinary medicine by increasing diversity and

encouraging individuals who may not know how to enter the field. This requires veterinary nurses to interact and reach out to the community if the community is not reaching out to veterinary nurses. If you want to be active in the community but are unable to attend events in person, consider virtual meetings, creating a career poster to contribute to a career fair or STEM event, and communicating with schools or groups via email or social media. Sharing the profession with the community is rewarding, and your help can make a difference in young people's lives. **TVN**

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Dr. Melvin works as a full-time high school biomedical science instructor and part-time general practice veterinary nurse in northern Virginia. Dr. Melvin's professional interests include One Health, health literacy, and health education. She previously started and directed a high school veterinary assistant program in Massachusetts, and is passionate about introducing veterinary medical careers to young students.