



Why the Current VPA/MLP Model Falls Short and What the Profession Deserves Instead



Jennifer Serling, MVEd,
RVT, CVT
President, NAVTA

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It is universally acknowledged that there are many veterinary hospitals and clinics dealing with overwhelmed, understaffed, underpaid, and burnt-out employees. There are systemic issues facing our veterinary profession that many people and organizations are working to alleviate. At the root of all the conversations about solutions is the desire to provide quality animal health care.

It makes sense that policymakers and academics would begin exploring whether a new category of practitioner, a midlevel provider (MLP) that is similar in concept to a nurse practitioner (NP) or physician assistant (PA) in human medicine, might help fill the workforce gap. That is the idea behind the veterinary professional associate (VPA) currently established in Colorado and tied to a master's-level program at Colorado State University (CSU). Similar legislation is currently being introduced in other states and will likely continue to be for the foreseeable future.

NAVTA takes this conversation seriously. It is why we created a task force and spent the past year conducting a thorough, evidence-based review of the current VPA/MLP model; examining the structure of the Colorado legislation; reviewing the academic programs designed to produce VPA/MLP candidates; and comparing these models to analogous roles in human medicine. Most importantly, we examined whether this model builds upon an already established workforce of credentialed veterinary technicians. What we found was that the current VPA/MLP model, as designed, does not build on the strengths of the credentialed veterinary technician workforce, nor does it fulfill the promise of providing excellent quality animal health care. In fact, it potentially endangers it.

That is the core of what is behind NAVTA's recent statement on the current emerging MLP/VPA models. This article summarizes our findings and outlines the path forward—a path our profession has been attempting to advance for decades.

The Problem With the Current VPA/MLP Model

Advocates for an MLP role have often compared this model to that of midlevel roles in human medicine. In human medicine, the creation of NP and PA roles helped address access challenges and have become a critical part of filling the gap in patient access and care. As such, they provide useful comparisons because both roles require substantial clinical training and progressive educational development. The education pathways for both these roles are rigorous, sequenced pathways that cumulatively build upon a foundation of academic and clinical experience.



An NP enters their graduate program having already completed a bachelor's in nursing, passed the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses, and accumulated between 1500 and 2000 hours of supervised clinical practice—just to be a registered nurse. Their graduate training in either a Master of Science in Nursing or Doctor of Nursing Practice adds another 500 hours of focused clinical work in a specialty population area before they become an NP.

A PA program requires a bachelor's degree with science prerequisites, enrollment in a graduate PA program, and around 2000 hours of diverse supervised clinical experience as part of the graduate curriculum. Once their academic program is completed, graduates then must also take the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination before entering practice under physician supervision.

The VPA/MLP model as it currently exists in Colorado runs through CSU's Master of Science in Veterinary Clinical Care program. This program requires a bachelor's degree for admission (in any field of study), 5 prerequisite science courses (with just 1 on animal anatomy), plus a minimum of 150 hours of verifiable post-high school veterinary work or volunteer experience. There is no requirement that applicants have passed the VTNE and are a credentialed veterinary technician, nor is there a requirement that they have graduated from an AVMA-accredited veterinary technology program. Furthermore, the CSU program is delivered primarily online; hands-on clinical training consists of a single in-person 13-credit semester and a single clinical internship.

This gap between what is supposed to be a master's-level program preparing students for clinical practice is not just a technicality. It has real-world implications for the safety and quality of animal care that is expected to be delivered by this role. We have to be candid about what this model also fails to do: It does not invest in the already existing credentialed veterinary technician workforce.

A Capable Workforce Overlooked and Left Behind

Despite decades of work by countless volunteers on both the national and state levels, the needle on recognizing the vital importance of veterinary technician title protection, utilization, and scope of practice has barely moved in the profession.

We have an extraordinary workforce of credentialed veterinary technicians and veterinary nurses who are graduates of AVMA-accredited programs. They have earned their associate or bachelor's degrees. They have passed a rigorous national examination (the VTNE), completed hundreds of clinical hours, and passed their state boards in order to become a credentialed veterinary technician.

A select group of these individuals have gone even further and achieved VTS certification, demonstrating years of documented clinical experience, case logs, and peer review, performing highly skilled clinical tasks under the delegation of their supervising veterinarians.



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Official
Statement on
the MLP/VPA
model.



Yet, roughly 85% of credentialed veterinary technicians in Colorado who hold an associate degree (instead of the required bachelor's degree) are automatically ineligible for the CSU master's program. Furthermore, with no completion programs in the state that would allow these credentialed veterinary technicians to build upon their existing education, they have no accessible pathway to build upon what they have already learned and meaningfully advance their career. That is a profession moving backward and once again ignoring a capable workforce.

The Missing Rung on the Ladder

While it is commonly known within the profession that there is a shortage of credentialed veterinary technicians, there are continuous structural and systemic barriers that further deepen this shortage. For the purposes of this task force, we looked at one of the key barriers: educational pathways.

There are currently 219 AVMA-accredited associate veterinary technology programs across the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada. Just over 10% (29) of these accredited programs offer a bachelor of science in veterinary technology, and only 6 of these bachelor's programs function as a bridge or completion program for associate degree holders.

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These limitations create a major accessibility issue and have significant implications for technicians looking to advance their veterinary nursing education and career. This is not just an administrative inconvenience: It is a structural and systemic inequity in the university system. As a result, in the current VPA/MLP model, most experienced credentialed veterinary technicians find themselves excluded from career advancement opportunities, while individuals without a veterinary technology education can access master's-level pathways.

The task force further noted that universities may find it easier and more financially advantageous to create nonaccredited master's programs than to pursue the development of AVMA CVTEA-accredited bachelor's programs. However, because master's programs can bypass these accreditation strictures, it is our deep concern that soon a pool of graduates will be matriculating from programs that have no educational consistency, oversight, or clinical quality assurance. The university's desire to turn a profit will come at the cost of the standard of patient care.

This is not a problem that will be solved in the short term. It is going to take stakeholder organizations, including the AVMA, AAVMC, and AVTE, collaborating with NAVTA to prioritize the development of completion programs that make genuine educational progression possible for credentialed veterinary technicians across the country. If we are serious about solving a workforce shortage, shortcutting systems and creating an ill-equipped workforce with the current VPA/MLP model is not the sort of disruption that will solve this problem—it will, in fact, create an unsafe environment for animal care and welfare.

NAVTA's Recommended Path Forward

In order for a midlevel veterinary practitioner to provide quality animal care, we envision a credentialed veterinary technician-centered educational pathway designed to strengthen the profession through progressive advancement.



This educational ladder emphasizes logical education progression, clinical competency development, accreditation oversight, accessibility for current credentialed veterinary technicians, and workforce sustainability. This structure can be accomplished by:

- Continuing to highlight the availability of associate degree programs
- Increasing the availability of bachelor's-level degree programs, including an increase in completion programs, in veterinary technology/nursing
- Reinforcing the importance of VTNE examination and licensure
- Unifying practice act representation and scope of practice across the country
- Providing opportunities to advance to specialty or focused training, including accessible and standardized VTS programs and master's-level advanced veterinary technology/nursing education

This structure creates standardized advancement opportunities, supporting an expanded scope of practice through documented competency, while leveraging our existing credentialed veterinary technician workforce, and ultimately providing safe and quality patient care.

A Workforce Seen and Valued

Our profession faces real and significant challenges, but these challenges bring opportunities. There is an opportunity for an advanced pathway to exist in our profession, but it must be built through the clinical backbone of the veterinary profession: the credentialed veterinary technician. Instead of building around our workforce, we desire to see this crisis addressed in a manner that actually strengthens the team-based model that makes exceptional veterinary care possible in the first place.

This is going to require action. NAVTA is doing its part. NAVTA released its formal position statement in March of this year, has hosted a listening session, and is continuing to educate stakeholders on its position. We have convened a new task force to develop concrete recommendations for credentialed veterinary technician-centered career pathways. Through the work of our District Representatives and Government Relations Committee, as well as key partner collaborations with AVMA, AAHA, VHMA, AVTE, and others, we are engaged in ongoing advocacy work at the state and national levels. However, none of this work has the impact it needs without the voices of the people who will deal with the consequences of these decisions, which is you.

We ask you to follow what is happening in your state. Midlevel practitioner legislation is coming and will be introduced in state legislatures all over the country. It will be shaped in part by how loudly and clearly credentialed veterinary technicians show up and educate the legislators on the importance of this role being built upon strong, clinically relevant, accredited academic programs that include the credentialed veterinary technician. Connect with and get involved in your state veterinary technician and medical associations. Discuss with your practice manager, hospital owner, and other colleagues how these changes could potentially affect your team and patients if this role is not based upon a solid educational pathway. And if you have been considering pursuing further education, whether that is a bachelor's degree, a VTS credential, or something else, let this be the moment that you decide to look into it seriously. **TVN**

NAVTA MLP/VPA Task Force

NAVTA thanks the following individuals for their work on this report, with special thanks to the Chair, Anna Santos, for leading the group and presenting the report.

Anna Santos, LVT, MPH
Task Force Chair and NAVTA President-Elect

Kathryn Carman, MSc, LVT, VTS

Erin Casey, DVM

Autumn Cooper, BBM, LVT

Caitlin Dutcher-Lundy, BS, RVT, VTS (CP-Feline)

Tricia Gorham, MA, CVT, FVTE