

DIVERSITY TOOLBOX

The First Step: Acknowledge Inequality

Ensuring diversity in veterinary medicine requires reframing our thinking and actively helping all children to achieve their dreams.

BY LISA M. GREENHILL, MPA, ED.D.

Did you know that the word “meritocracy” has been used pejoratively? While the root, “merit,” has always meant achievement based on intelligence and performance, “meritocracy” has been used as a satirical critique of an overreliance on selection processes that lack transparency and depend upon inherently biased tools such as standardized testing. Michael Dunlop, a noted British sociologist, suggested in 1958 that an overemphasis on power structures based purely on merit served to create a homogeneous elite class whose members were at risk of complacency and likely to maintain the status quo and their positions of privilege.

Fast-forward more than 60 years and the concept of meritocracy is very much a part of how we think we understand achievement and advancement in society. Those who achieve do so because of demonstrated merit; those who do not simply do not have what is needed to succeed.

We like to believe that meritocracies



are based on level playing fields in which equal opportunity and access exist. Certainly, many of us think everyone has the same amount of access to opportunity, but the reality is different. I am not talking about how people of every gender, racial and ethnic group and economic strata make poor decisions that lead to their downfall. I am talking about the truth about structural inequities that allow us to gaslight communities into believing they (or we) are not merit-driven.

Stereotypes Abound

For the past year, I have made numerous presentations, tweeted threads and

written articles about the relative lack of diversity in veterinary medicine. Typical responses include calls for research into why individuals of marginalized identities are not entering the profession. There are suggestions that:

- ▶ Children of color do not consider the profession because of a lack of exposure.
- ▶ Families of color do not have pets.
- ▶ Children of color are not earning entry because of a lack of competitiveness. (The claim further suggests intelligence and social performance deficiencies, but I digress.)
- ▶ They lack the economic capital to pursue the profession.
- ▶ Minoritized, low-income, first-generation and rural students do not want to be veterinarians.

Well, from the 25,000-foot level, the reason for the diversity issue is systemic inequalities that hide in plain sight, making it easy for all of us to blame those we say we want to attract for their absence from the profession. We do not need more research, although as a researcher, I always want more of it. We simply need to break down the pathway to the profession to see how inequity bars us from truly embracing the meritocracy that so many of us say we believe in.

A Certain Time and Place

Housing discrimination remains a major concern. According to the Urban Institute, studies have shown that people of color, low-income families, same-sex couples, transgender people and people with disabilities routinely experience housing discrimination. Even when choice vouchers are available, access to safe, affordable housing can be limited. These people are often left to live in marginalized neighborhoods that are food and health care deserts. Limited access to housing leads to many other issues, such as crime and

economically depressed communities.

Low-performing schools, often underfunded, are in neighborhoods where marginalized people and families live. Inequality in public education funding starves schools that need more resources and punishes children already living in precarious environments. Underfunded schools often do not have enough teachers, books, technology, extracurricular programs and supplies, but they can afford on-site police officers and metal detectors. School policies often criminalize student behavior that across town might be effectively dealt with through standard classroom management strategies.

Furthermore, school vouchers, seen as a solution to failing schools, siphon more money from public schools and leave behind children unable to secure spots via a lottery or in-district residence. Children in these communities, often living in substandard housing, are expected to compete academically with children across town when their preparation is anything but equal.

According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, exposure to overt and systemic discrimination has lasting effects on children's health, emotional well-being, and academic and economic performance. The potential pool of veterinary school applicants includes young people from these backgrounds who essentially clawed their way to the application process. While exploring the profession is potentially difficult for all students, systemic discrimination and inequality make the task nearly impossible for some students, much less be prepared to pursue it.

And yet, students from such backgrounds dream of success, academic achievement, college and careers. They also dream about being veterinarians. The issue is less about a lack of exposure to veterinary medicine or any other profession than about a lack of equal opportunity.

LEARN MORE

▶ [AAVMC Admissions: Report of 2019 Student Survey Analysis: bit.ly/3tRCSpl](#)

▶ ["A Look at Housing Inequality and Racism in the U.S.": bit.ly/2QwCmyX](#)

▶ ["Nice White Parents" podcast: nyti.ms/3uT6y6l](#)



▲
DR. LISA M. GREENHILL
The Diversity Toolbox columnist is senior director for institutional research and diversity at the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges. Her work focuses on managing the DiVersity Matters initiative at the national and local levels as well as promoting the veterinary medical profession within underrepresented and marginalized communities. AAVMC's "Diversity & Inclusion" podcasts are available at bit.ly/2APLtk4.

What We Can Do

As veterinary medicine considers its ability to serve an increasingly diverse population, we can do several things to broaden opportunities for students with marginalized backgrounds.

1 Volunteer in Underserved Communities

The best way to understand the dynamics and challenges of marginalized communities is to volunteer. Spend meaningful time there and understand how access to housing and quality education shapes young people's lives.

2 Create Targeted Opportunities

A monograph published by the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges found that veterinary school applicants who were racially or ethnically underrepresented or from low-income backgrounds reported greater difficulty obtaining veterinary experience. Applicants of color were less likely to spend time shadowing a veterinarian. Change the reality by being intentional about providing experiential opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds.

3 Participate in STEM Partnerships

If promoting equitable school funding is not for you, please make your way to the nearest Title I school and volunteer as a partner in programs promoting science, technology, engineering and math. Use your time and talent to support pupils who need to learn and see what is possible in terms of academic achievement, persistence and careers. These students, more than any, need interventions to thrive and one day enter the veterinary pipeline.

4 Assume That High Performance Is Achievable

Anyone who has spent time around children knows the importance of having confidence in one's ability and being exposed to different opportunities. The challenge with the simplification of meritocracy is that someone can easily believe that classes of children will not advance beyond high school, much less into the veterinary college application process.

Within veterinary medicine's diversity discussion, we need to reframe our thinking and assume that high performance is achievable for all children regardless of their background and acknowledge that circumstances beyond their control hinder some of them. If we can recognize that truth, we can pivot to considering large-scale systemic changes that would level the playing field for our future professional colleagues.

As I end my time as a Today's Veterinary Business columnist, I challenge everyone to better interrogate our biases and the countless rationalizations we have constructed to explain the lack of diversity in veterinary medicine. **TVB**