

The Secrets of a Successful Mentor

By Herb Whiteley

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With the start of classes this fall, mentor match-making begins. Theresa Kincaid in the Office of Academic and Students Affairs will be taking on this job, matching students with veterinarians in all areas of practice according to the students' expressed interests.

"About 270 students are able to participate in the mentoring program at any given time," says Mary Kelm, assistant dean for student affairs. "We are thrilled at the response we've had from the Illinois State Veterinary Medical Association membership. We wish every single member could participate."

When asked recently for the secrets of their success, a few long-time participants in the mentor program agreed on several points:

- email is the best way to communicate with students;
- food is always appreciated;
- today's students are extremely busy; and
- there really is no secret or one right way to fostering the mentoring relationship.

But the rewards for the mentor are great: a connection to the future of the profession, a renewed enthusiasm for veterinary practice.

Here's what these Illinois practitioners had to say about what they do, and why.

Dr. Gary Brummet

A&E Animal Hospital, Urbana

"One of the biggest obstacles to mentoring is finding a convenient time to get together. I'm at a distinct advantage by being in the same town as the students, so I schedule lunch with them every 6 weeks.

"Sometimes we talk about veterinary medicine, sometimes we talk about our vacations. We compare notes about the stresses they're experiencing in classes and the stresses when I was in class. It's amazing how similar that still is over the years.

"I get out of it a general awareness of how the profession is developing, and I get a perspective on the College through the students' eyes.

"My advice to would-be mentors is to go ahead and make the initial contact with the student you are matched with. Students can be just a little leery of making that call."

Dr. Greg Mauck

Kaskaskia Valley Animal Hospital, Sullivan

"Medicine really interests and excites me. I impart that enthusiasm to my mentees.

"It's easier to mentor before they get to veterinary school. Veterinary students get so busy or so burned out, they can't do it.

"For the past 10 years or more, I have participated in a program with a local high school that allows seniors interested in the veterinary field to spend an hour every day in my practice. Many of these young people have gone on to become veterinary students, and I have maintained a mentoring relationship with them.

[Note: this includes two current second-year students—one of whom happens to be Dr. Mauck's son—an incoming first-year, and a student who will apply next year.]

"Here's what I do: I immerse them in the science behind everything that happens. In surgery, I go over anatomy. If I'm doing cytology, I show them the slides and point out malignant changes in the cells.

"If people are bored by this, they learn that veterinary medicine is not for them. If they think it's cool and interesting, it really fuels their ambition. It either puts the fire out or it fuels the fire."

Dr. Bill Armbruster

Green Haven Animal Clinic, San Jose

"Once or twice a year I come to Champaign and take my students out to dinner.

"I encourage them to visit my practice, which is only half an hour away. It gives them more exposure to everyday practice. Some veterinary students have primary care exposure, some don't. Even if they already have some exposure, seeing different settings is good.

"The main things we talk about are classes, career goals, their plans for when they get done with school. I give reassurance on what they're doing.

"I do it to help the profession go forward and to connect with the younger generation. I encourage them to go into mixed and large animal practice.

"They are future colleagues."

Dr. Amy Edgar

Hawthorne Animal Hospital, Glen Carbon

"I was having a hard time getting up to Champaign, so I sent my students candy bouquets to let them know that I am thinking of them. I loved getting care packages so much when I was a student.

"I am a mentor because being a student is pretty fresh in my memory. It's important for students to hear from someone who can relate to the stresses and angst and sleeplessness. They need to know that someone is rooting for them."

Dr. Ron Gill

Gill Veterinary Clinic, West Salem

"I send email periodically reporting on 'today's cases.' I share the good times and the bad times: when something interesting comes along, sometimes just routine stuff, the euthanasias, not just all successes."

"For young people I meet who are interested in veterinary medicine, I hand them one of Mary Kelm's business cards and one of mine, and I tell them about the College's annual Open House.

"My practice is two and a half hours away. In all the years I've been doing this, only three or four students have come down. But in May, one of my mentees who is now a fourth-year veterinary student came for one of the new for-credit, two-week primary care practice rotations.

"I was thrilled with her. She was eager and outgoing, and clients had no hesitation or reluctance to work with her. She castrated horses, delivered foals, dehorned calves, vaccinated, and did routine small animal work.

“After one farm visit we got back in the truck bloody and covered in tattoo ink. She turned to me and said, ‘I can’t tell you how pumped I am!’

“Students really make you recognize how lucky you are to get to be practicing veterinary medicine.”

If you’d like to participate in the mentor program at Illinois, please contact Theresa Kincaid at 217/265-0380. To register your practice for the fourth-year primary care rotations Dr. Gill cited, go online at www.VCRCIllinois.org and select “post a position.”

If you have any questions, feel free to reach me at dean@vetmed.illinois.edu.