

VETERINARY GRADUATES OF TODAY: A GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression. The Cold War. The personal computer. Digital media. Significant events and changes in society help to shape a generation, their world view, and subsequently their motivations and values. We will discuss some of these forces and explore how the landscape of veterinary medicine has changed over the last half-century.

GENERATION CATEGORIES & DEFINING FEATURES

We are all familiar with the concept of the generation and have heard terms like Baby Boomer or Millennial. But what does that really mean? These generational constructs are broad categories that help us better understand motivations and ultimately behaviors of groups of the population. First, we need to recognize that these concepts refer to the population in general and not to any one individual. Individuals are unique, but when examined as a group, commonalities tend to emerge. It is these commonalities that really comprise the generational construct. Let us first examine the generations and some of their common defining features and common core values. There are currently 328 million people and 5 generations in the United States:

Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z.¹ Some general defining features and core values are listed in the following table:²

Traditionalist 1922 – 1945 24.44 million	Baby Boomer 1946 – 1964 72.56 million	Generation X 1965 – 1980 65.45 million	Generation Y 1981 – 1999 72.06 million	Generation Z 2000 – 2016 90.55 million
<u>Defining Features</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WWII • Great Depression • The New Deal • Experienced hard times while growing up followed by times of prosperity 	<u>Defining Features</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil Rights • Vietnam War • Sexual Revolution • Cold War • Post War babies who grew up to be radicals of the 70's and yuppies of the 80's 	<u>Defining Features</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual income families and single parents • Increase divorce rate • Latchkey kids • Milk-carton kids • MTV • Challenger disaster • AIDS • Personal computers • Y2K 	<u>Defining Features</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oklahoma City Bombing & 9/11 • School shootings • Participation trophies • Technology • Globalization • Digital media 	<u>Defining Features</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post 9/11 world • Iraq War • Online retail • Obama elected • Tea Party • Helicopter parents • Great recession • Technology!!
<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adheres to rules • Conformers • Contribute to the collective • Dedication/sacrifice • Discipline • Don't question authority • Duty before pleasure • Family focus • Hard work • Law & order • Patriotism • Patience • Respect for authority • Responsibility • Savers • Stabilizing • Trust in Government 	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-war • Anti-government • Anything is possible • Equal rights • Equal opportunities • Extremely loyal to their children • Involvement • Optimism • Personal gratification • Personal growth • Question everything • Spend now, worry later • Team oriented • Transformational • Trust no one over 30 • Youth • Work • Want to 'make a difference' 	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance • Diversity • Entrepreneurial • Fun • Highly educated • High job expectations • Independent • Informality • Lack of organization loyalty • Pragmatism • Seek life balance • Self-reliance • Skepticism/cynical • Suspicious of Boomer values • Techno literacy • Resourcefulness 	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement • Avid consumers • Civic duty • Confidence • Diversity • Extreme fun • Fun!! • High morals • High tolerance • Very competitive • Like personal attention • Self-confident • Sociability • Members of a global community • Most educated generation • Extremely tech savvy • Now! – instant gratification 	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dismal view of country/leaders • Pragmatic and realistic • Digital natives • Social media • Diversity/equality is a must • Financially conservative • Socially progressive • Entrepreneurial • Rely on Google for health advice • Least likely to turn to doctors • Salary is the most important thing when looking for a job • Less emphasis on work-life balance

GENERATIONAL VIEWS ON WORK

Of the 5 generations listed above, only 3 currently comprise a large percentage of the workforce. Those are the Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y which approximate 25%, 33%, and 35%, respectively, accounting for 93% of working adults in the U.S.³ The general perspective on work varies between the generations. This can at times lead to conflict in the workplace.⁴

In general, Boomer's tend to be the workaholic generation spending long hours at the office.² In many ways, the Boomer identity is closely intertwined with their identity. Success in work = success in life. Put another way, hard work will result in financial success.⁴ Boomers tend to be very loyal to the organization.⁵ Visibility among their peers and experience translate into higher status in the organization. Boomers are also process-oriented, focusing on the pathway and procedures.⁶ Boomers prefer face-to-face communication rather than relying on digital communication.⁴ Boomers are generally comfortable operating with little to no feedback, unless there is need for correction.⁴

In contrast, members of Generation X were the children of workaholics and therefore place greater value on work-life balance.^{4,5} Their "latchkey" upbringing lead to self-reliance and pragmatism. Many saw parents lose their jobs in corporate downsizing and struggle during a stagnant job market. This led many Xers to be more comfortable with change. This generation also tends to have less organizational loyalty and will readily seek new employment for more meaningful work, higher salary, more challenging work, or better benefits.⁵ The emergence of nontraditional work schedules were noted with Xers. This group tends to be results-oriented rather than process-oriented.^{2,5} From a communication standpoint, Xers prefer whichever method is the most efficient for the circumstance moving between in-person and digital communication as needed.⁴ They can also be impatient and tend to have poorer people skills.⁵

Generation Y, also known as Millennials, are digital natives.⁶ They have never known a time without technology and are extremely comfortable with its use, adapt quickly, and readily adopt improvements.^{4,6} Additionally, there was renewed focus and emphasis on the importance of the child. Parents and school systems placed great importance on self-esteem. Many families had improved financial means and fewer children which resulted in "parental excess".^{4,6} This has given parents of this generation the term "helicopter parents" due to their tendencies to hover in their children's lives.⁴ In some cases, parental involvement extends into college and even employment.⁴ GenYs not only embrace diversity, they expect it.⁵ They are frequently referred to as optimistic, flexible, civic minded, and having high levels of confidence.^{2,4,6} Like Xers, GenYs are results-oriented. As long as the job is completed, completed well, and on-time it shouldn't matter how, when, or where the work was performed.^{2,4,6} GenYs also value work-life balance, but are reported to have an improved work-ethic over Xers.⁵ Being digital natives, GenYs prefer to communicate digitally rather than face-to-face. This extends into difficult conversations where news may be bad or there is conflict to resolve, which can result in workplace tension between Boomer's and Xers who would prefer to have these conversations face-to-face.⁴ Another unique feature of GenY is their desire for feedback. In general, GenYs prefer to receive frequent feedback to ensure that they are doing the job correctly.^{2,4,5} This likely stems from heavy parental involvement in their formative years.⁴

CHANGES IN THE VETERINARY PROFESSION OVER THE LAST 50 YEARS

The veterinary profession has undergone significant changes in the last half-century. In 2015, the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges, published a review of the last half-century of veterinary medicine.⁷

Many of their findings will be discussed here. We will begin with the dramatic shift in gender. In 1969, women accounted for approximately 11% of the graduate population.⁷ By the late 1980s the population of men and women was equivocal and by 2019 women account for around 80% of graduating veterinarians.⁸ There are many speculations as to the cause, but no single identifiable explanation exists.^{7,8}

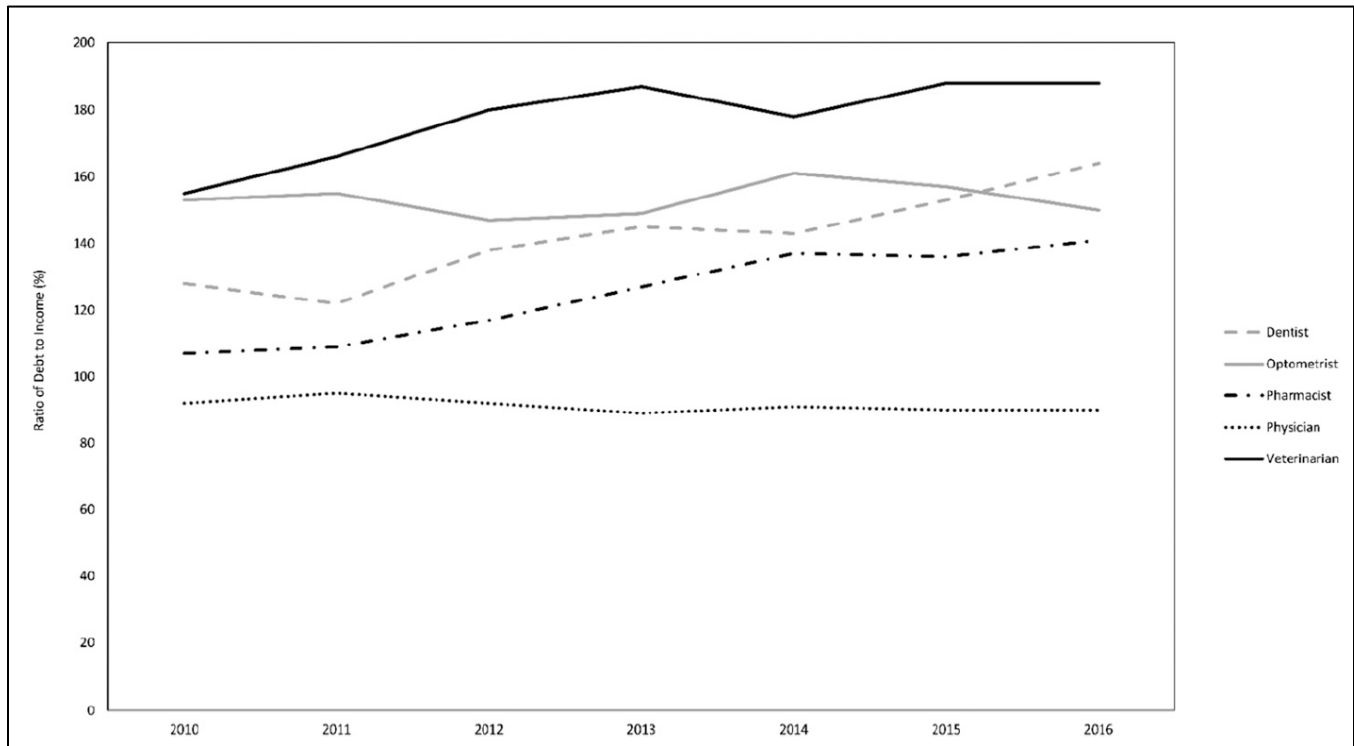
Diversity in the veterinary profession has lagged behind other professional fields. We are seeing some slow, upwards trends in this area.⁷ Underrepresented students only accounted for around 5% of the student population in 1975. This has increased to roughly 20% in 2020.⁸ Latinx is currently the fastest growing racial group in veterinary medicine accounting for around 11% of applicants.⁸

The United States is becoming more urbanized as evidenced by sustained growth in urban/suburban areas and no growth in rural populations. In 1969, the urban/suburban population of the U.S. was 73.3% and has increased to around 82.5% in 2019.⁹ Likewise, veterinary medicine has also seen a decrease in applicants from rural areas. In 1969, approximately 50% of applicants to veterinary schools were from a rural background. In 2019 the number has decreased to around <25%.^{7,8} Following graduation, fewer than 20% of enter rural communities to practice.⁸ A longitudinal study followed 3 classes of veterinary students over their training program to assess their interest in rural practice. Findings showed a significant decrease in interest in rural practice at the onset of their veterinary training (orientation) compared to at the end of their veterinary training (after completing all clinical rotations). Rural appeal, work-life balance, and inter-professional teamwork were the specific factors that were significantly decreased. The authors concluded that "Perceived professional, social, and recreational opportunities in rural veterinary practice environment may influence a veterinary student's career choice and career location."¹⁰

Beyond geographic location of practice, there have been significant changes in career goals of new graduates. In 1969 most graduates entered traditional private practice with many having confidence to immediately pursue practice ownership. Currently approximately 40% of new graduates pursue additional training, like internships, immediately following graduation.⁷ This may be in part related to the continued rapid expansion of knowledge. Veterinary education in the U.S. in the 1880 was a mere two years in length, with each educational year lasting 6 months in duration. The prerequisites for admission to the program: the ability to read and write.¹¹ Approximately 20 years later a third year was added to the curriculum then a fourth year in the 1920s and 1930s. Prerequisites at this time were a high school degree, but in the late 1930s one year of college education was added as a prerequisite, followed by a second year of college prerequisite in the 1940s. Then in the 1950s, the veterinary curriculum expanded from a 15 credit-hour semester to a 20-22 credit hour semester, accounting for an approximately 30% increase in material.¹¹ The general structure here, two years of pre-requisite college courses followed by four years of robust professional education, is roughly what exists today. Despite the relative stability of veterinary education, the knowledge explosion has continued. According to the National Library of Medicine (PubMed.gov), in 1969 there were around 440 articles published pertaining to veterinary medicine. The number of articles pertaining to veterinary medicine exceeded 26,000.¹² This expanding amount of information might be a component of the drive for students to seek additional training post-graduation. Both graduates entering private practice and those pursuing internships emphasize the desire for good mentorship, particularly during their first year of practice.¹³ Insufficient mentorship was found to be a leading cause of a veterinarian leaving their position.¹⁴

Lastly, there have been substantial changes in tuition and debt over the last half-century with more modest changes in starting salary. From 1990 to 2010, state funding for Colleges of Veterinary Medicine were reduced by 26.1%. During this same timeframe, tuition increased by 112%.⁷ A 2015 AVMA report demonstrated that the

average veterinary student debt is approximately \$150,000, with some students owing around \$400,000 at the time of graduation.¹⁵ While salaries are improving in the profession, they do lag behind other medical professions and the rate of debt is growing more rapidly than salary. Veterinary medicine has a higher debt to income ratio among other health professions (physician, pharmacist, optometrist, & dentist).¹⁶ The following graphic was taken from this aforementioned study.



MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Transitioning into the workforce is challenging for any new graduate. Veterinary medicine has its own unique challenges, some of which were outlined above. Most commonly, the mentor/mentee relationship is bigenerational. Established, successful veterinarians are likely to fall into the Boomer or Xer generations with new graduates in the later stages of the Millennial generation with Generation Z on the horizon. Differences in worldview, core values, preferred communication style, work and lifestyle choices, and feedback preferences are likely different between mentor and mentee.^{2,4-6} Understanding these differences, and developing appreciation for rather than disapproval of those characteristics are a good place to start in building a foundation between mentor and mentee.

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