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IMPLEMENTATION OF A PEER MENTORSHIP PROGRAM AMIDST A PANDEMIC AT VIRGINIA-MARYLAND COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

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INTRODUCTION

The Peer Mentorship Program was developed during a pandemic to meet the ever-growing needs of the first-year students at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine (VMCVM). While all transitions into graduate school are difficult, this is especially true during a time of such uncertainty, where every change is magnified by something out of students' control. To combat the frustration and isolation experienced by this group, a completely virtual program was set into motion in September of 2020.

This program seeks to be the solution to a range of difficulties that too many professional students have encountered during the pandemic. By providing safe and structured spaces for relationships to be fostered, connections to be made, and loneliness to be overcome, this program serves as a systematic response, aiming to alleviate feelings of isolation, confusion, frustration, and stress.

PROGRAM DESIGN

The mission of the Peer Mentorship Program of VMCVM is to ease the transition into veterinary school by providing peer guided support focused on four key themes: mental wellness, relationship building, problem-solving, and goal setting. It offers the opportunity for first-year students to engage virtually in small groups with members of their class to ask questions, share concerns, and seek guidance from senior veterinary students. Most importantly, it is a safe space in which all members can better connect with their community.

Mentees (first-year students) are placed in small groups of 2 - 4 members from their class and assigned a mentor, who is a third-year student at the same institution. Mentors are both allies and resources for mentees. They are responsible for proactively communicating with their mentees while also conducting bimonthly meetings via Zoom that are focused on a specific topic. All meetings are an hour long and conclude with each mentee identifying a goal or setting an intention for the following week. Progress is tracked by using check-in statements at the start of the next session, as well as through post-meeting data that is submitted by mentors at the conclusion of each session.

The Mentorship Coordinator is responsible for creating and organizing the curriculum, as well as effectively communicating the content to mentors. The curriculum covers topics such as understanding imposter syndrome, destigmatizing mental health concerns, understanding and utilizing available resources, networking, building faculty relationships, professionalism, and leadership. Additionally, the Mentorship Coordinator creates and executes the training program

for mentors, as well as facilitates bimonthly de-briefs with all mentors at the conclusion of each meeting.

Each mentor is vital to the success of this program. As such, mentors are closely supported by the Mentorship Coordinator, along with VMCVM faculty and staff. First, mentors are required to attend a training session in which they gain a better understanding of program goals, expectations, counseling skills, and how to best facilitate small groups. In addition to the training session, mentors take part in a 20-minute de-brief session with the Mentorship Coordinator after each group meeting. This allows for mentors to connect and share, as well as work together to problem-solve collective issues and concerns. For their time and contribution, mentors are given one ambassador point for each session they attend, which contributes toward a subscription to VetPrep, a study tool for the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination (NAVLE). In addition to points, mentors gain valuable skills that will be beneficial for their professional careers in veterinary medicine.

ASSESSMENT

Via Qualtrics Survey Solutions, mentors complete a survey after each group meeting that consists of mentee attendance, group progress, and an evaluation of group discussion. It also provides mentors with the opportunity to ask additional questions or privately share concerns with the Mentorship Coordinator. In addition to acquiring mentor data, mentees complete a comprehensive survey at the end of each semester. This data provides invaluable insight into how first-year students have acclimated to the college, their progress in building relationships, and their overall wellbeing. Moreover, it serves as a needs assessment that identifies gaps in the program, which can be used to shape the curriculum for the following semester.

With consideration to COVID-19 and the recent transition to online learning, the data collected also provides new information into how effective the college has been in providing the support, resources and opportunities necessary for first-year students to be successful in a new and ever-evolving learning environment. Furthermore, it sheds light onto how well mentees are able to build and maintain relationships, with peers and faculty members alike, as well as their overall resilience throughout the year.

OUTCOMES

This program continues to provide the following outcomes for both mentors and mentees: (1) a stronger sense of community and belonging to Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, (2) an environment in which all individuals respect differences and seek to understand alternative points of view, (3) a better understanding of communication styles and problem-solving skills, and (4) an increase in motivation and confidence due to strengthening support systems.

The need for peer-to-peer connection has never been more apparent than right now. The academic rigors of veterinary school have not waned in light of the pandemic. As such, veterinary colleges must continue to find ways for students to collaborate and connect, so that they can foster a support system that will sustain them while in veterinary school and propel them once graduating. Learning how to support others while also building skills to better support oneself is the most substantial outcome of all.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Being a veterinarian is more than just playing with cute pets all day. This career requires all veterinary professionals to be proficient teachers, leaders, communicators, mentors and advocates. The Peer Mentorship Program was designed to specifically hone these skills. After assessing the data and reviewing the outcomes, it is clear these competencies should be as integral to the didactic curriculum as anatomy or virology. Active listening, effective communication and empathy are practiced regularly in the Peer Mentorship Program but are not consistently practiced in standard veterinary courses. Thus, creating a framework that integrates the practice of these skills into veterinary curricula, as well as mentorship as a whole, will undoubtedly create more well-rounded, resilient and successful veterinarians.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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