Ableism in veterinary medicine
The importance of making accommodations for people with disabilities at veterinary colleges and beyond

By Kaitlyn Mattson

When Dr. Brandy Duhon started attending Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine, she asked for the door handles to be changed so she could open them.

Dr. Duhon, now a clinical instructor of shelter medicine and surgery at the veterinary school, contracted bacterial meningitis in 1995 and, as a result, has damage in both her legs and had both her hands amputated.

“I have had a lot of challenges, to say the least, but overall I have overcome those,” Dr. Duhon said. “I get upset and discouraged, but I have never looked at a task and said no.”

In recent years, veterinary colleges have made efforts to reduce barriers for people with disabilities in veterinary education, but people with disabilities have historically had difficulties gaining acceptance or thriving in higher education.

About 19% of undergraduate students report having a disability, according to 2015-16 data released by the National Center for Education Statistics.

People who have one or more disabilities make up about 9% of academic scientists, according to a recent report on women, minorities, and people with disabilities from the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics at the National Science Foundation. The report was released in May and is available at jav.ma/scientists.

CULTURE
Jay Dolmage, PhD, founding editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies and author of “Academic Ableism,” spoke during the session “Ableism in Graduate Education” at the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges annual meeting, held March 4-6.

“Wherever you teach, your campus is full of stairs,” Dr. Dolmage said during the keynote. “The steps have something to say. Access to the university is a movement upward, and only the truly fit survive the climb.”

According to research, many high school students seek accommodations, but college students don’t. Dr. Dolmage said there is likely something keeping college students from seeking help, whether it is that offices of disability services have low budgets or that accessing accommodations can be challenging, especially for racially and ethnically underrepresented students.

Dr. Dolmage suggests administrators look at their campuses and ask questions. Where is the disability services office, and is it accessible? Are all buildings accessible? Will students with disabilities feel welcome?

FACILITY CHANGES
Dr. Kenita Rogers, executive associate dean and director for diversity and inclusion at Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, said faculty
members, staff members, and administrators should work to make sure students with disabilities can be successful in the program.

At her institution, there was a veterinary student who was paraplegic and used a wheelchair.

“The individual with the disability helped us figure out what they needed from us,” she said. “We don’t have that experience, and they were an active part of the decisions about what was helpful to them.”

Dr. Rogers said it was also helpful to consider what in the curriculum is required for a veterinary education. What does it mean to be a veterinarian? And are there things that must be done during veterinary college, or are some things optional?

“We go into this with all our students when we accept them into the program. We intend for them to be successful,” Dr. Rogers said. “We want them to match up to their dreams. They know what they can do. It is our job to help them get there and for them to be safe.”

She and others at the college found out they had limited ideas of what people can do. “These students have taught us what humans can do and how valuable they can be in the profession.”

The TAMU veterinary college moved into a new building in 2016. Previously, classes were held in an older building, and despite that facility being compliant with all codes related to the Americans with Disabilities Act, some changes needed to be made, such as retrofitting rooms to be more accessible, designating more parking spaces for access to specific buildings, and building larger bathroom stalls for easier wheelchair access.

Dr. Melinda Frye, associate dean for veterinary academics and student affairs at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, suspects most facilities at veterinary colleges across the U.S. meet all the mandated ADA requirements. However, speaking to students who have disabilities about their specific needs can greatly improve their experience.

“We have a student who uses a wheelchair, and we had all the conventional facilities and things in place. We thought we were good to go,” Dr. Frye said. “We quickly discovered, because of his disability, he could not tolerate sitting for prolonged periods. We had to think about additional modifications. In his case, we ended up getting a mattress for the floor of the lecture hall so he could take notes there.”

Dr. Frye said most students who have a letter of accommodations from the disability services office can access necessary modifications easily. Faculty members, after communicating with the student, are typically in the best position to make
CREATING ACCESSIBLE VETERINARY SPACES

Millions of American pet owners have a disability, said Dr. Kate KuKanich, associate professor at Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine.

She spoke during “Optimizing the Veterinary Community to Best Serve Clients and Staff with Disabilities,” a session at the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges annual conference, held March 4-6.

“We are a service-oriented profession, and these are our clients,” she said. “It makes sense financially and morally for us to accommodate and care for all people and pets.”

Dr. KuKanich provides the following advice to increase accessibility in veterinary spaces:

- Improve parking lot accessibility by increasing the space adjacent to an accessible parking space, adding designated signage, and making parking spaces close to entrances.
- An entrance should ideally be paved and flat, have a ramp for level changes, and have a clear sign to indicate where the accessible entry is.
- Offer clients who need assistance help getting into a building by adding a sign in the parking lot near accessible parking that says something like, “For assistance entering the hospital, call this number,” and consider using a similar message when confirming appointments.
- Exterior doors should be automatic or lightweight and at least 32 inches wide with flat thresholds.
- Keep floors dry and clean. Doormats can be trip hazards or hurdles, so make sure they are textured and not too tall.
- Inside a building, the reception desk should be less than 36 inches tall, or there should be a section that is lower for easy communication. The seating arrangement in a lobby should have space for a wheelchair. Televisions can be distracting with sound—consider muting and using closed captions. Interior doors should be light; be at least 32 inches wide; have a handle that can be opened with a closed fist, such as a lever style; and be able to open from both directions.
- Ideally, restrooms should have plenty of space for people who use mobility devices to enter, turn around, and close the door. Add grab bars, and make sure toilet paper is not obstructed. Additionally, restroom soap, paper towels, and hand dryers should be low and reachable. Consider remodeling a space by converting two stalls to one that is more accessible.

“Keep the conversation going, and be alert to accessibility hurdles in the veterinary workplace and suggestions for improvement. Take action, and teach your team,” Dr. KuKanich said.

JAVMA published a report in the Feb. 1, 2020, issue, about accessibility barriers in veterinary hospitals. “Accessibility of veterinary hospitals for clients with mobility-related disabilities” is available at jav.ma/Accessibility.

modifications and usually happy to do so, she said.

For students with disabilities, “it is so important to have conversations upfront to ensure the culture is open to providing accommodations and that it is supportive,” Dr. Frye said.

She added that it is also important for faculty members, staff members, and students to understand that accommodations create equal opportunities, not advantages. She suggests veterinary programs should work closely with the disability services office on campus and build a good working relationship.

Dr. Rogers said equity means that everyone has a fair chance of success.
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“What we forget and overlook if we are able-bodied is we all need help sometimes,” Dr. Rogers said. “Making sure everyone has a great chance to be successful, in the curriculum and in their career, we try to include inclusion throughout. ... Being inclusive is a skill set that we all learn, and this is one piece of it.”

OUT IN THE WORLD
Dr. Douglas Aspros, chief veterinary officer for Veterinary Practice Partners, had a stroke when he was 51 that caused paralysis and loss of speech. Rehabilitation and outpatient care helped him learn how to walk and talk again, but he said he is still not great at either.

At the time, Dr. Aspros was a full-time practitioner, but after physical rehabilitation, he decided not to go back to seeing patients.

“I can use my right hand, but I don’t have much control of it. I was concerned about being bitten by something,” Dr. Aspros said. “Also, communicating with clients would have been difficult.”

Dr. Aspros still has trouble finding words sometimes, and language can be challenging. He said that when you have a disability, the whole world and the built environment become something to navigate.

“Spending time in a wheelchair, the world looks different from there,” he said. “In our educational environments, we make a lot of accommodations, but the real world doesn’t make as many accommodations. People can be dropped into a world that is more challenging because it is not prepared for you in the way education institutions are.”

He thinks this is the case in veterinary medicine, which he says goes back to when the job description of a companion animal practitioner was formed in the 1960s.

“That job description was made for people like me—fully abled, white, male,” he said. “That was the worker, the cohort. Now we find ourselves 50 years later with a different society, workforce. ... I think a lot of institutions, organizations, and employers do things because they’ve always done them that way, and they don’t have to. Accommodation opportunities are there, but they just don’t do them.”

“When you talk about people who require flexibility, you have to re-imagine the role and how to function in it. I think veterinarians have to think about their world being more flexible than they imagine. The way you do things is just the way you do them, but it is not the only way they must be done. Be open to accommodating people whose needs are apparent and unapparent.”

He suggests employers ask questions such as, “What do you need to do your job?”

While Dr. Aspros did not return to seeing patients, he did become more active in the AVMA after his stroke and went on to be president from 2012-13.

Dr. Brandy Duhon said that since she graduated in 2013, people with disabilities who are interested in veterinary medicine have reached out to ask her about her experience. She suggests knowing your limits and asking for help when you need it. She enjoys teaching students and hopes her presence also serves as a lesson.

“It is good for students to see me and see that I am teaching them and they’re learning from me. They won’t doubt if someone comes to them who has a disability,” Dr. Duhon said. “Disabilities are all different, and just because you don’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. I think knowing I went through veterinary school and I am a veterinarian now, it means a lot.”