What critical information do you need to make informed career path decisions?

. . . there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. . . . it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones. D Rumsfeld, 2/12/02

Veterinary medicine is a broad profession with a diverse range of opportunities, having multiple segments with unique sets of skills, knowledge and experiences. AVMA data shows that the traditional mixed practitioner is a rare entity (3%), most practitioners specializing into the AVMA directory listing of 22 species, 34 employment sectors and 22 specialty certifications. Many segments have unique entry pathways requiring specialized preparation. The goal is for you to obtain the important information for making decisions that maximize your opportunity for entering and succeeding in the professional segment of your choice. Because this curriculum facilitates individual tracking, you have considerable flexibility in personalizing your pathway. The downside of this flexibility is that becoming well informed is entirely up to you.

Why begin now? Beginning now gives you more time to build a network in your target professional segment, to seek advice from those making employment decisions in that segment, to participate in professional experiences and, if necessary, to change directions. The sooner you discover that a particular career path isn't financially feasible for you or isn't quite what you imagined, the sooner you can plot a better course. For example, if the lower than average starting salaries in your segment make average debt service difficult, what are options to reduce debt and to increase starting salary? Starting now you have two 3.5 month summers, six week-long mid-semester breaks and three 3 week-long inter-session breaks of time totally under your control. You could shadow mentors, participate in programs designed for veterinary students interested in that specific career, complete online courses or anything else that you arrange. Locations include non-CVM departments, non-WSU CVM's and off campus. Possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

This project has the following components:

- For maximum return on your effort, collaborate with a group of like-minded peers
- **Brainstorm** to identify the questions to which the answers will enable you make the best informed decisions
- Identify resources from which to obtain these answers - journals, books, professional organization resources, veterinarians in your career pathway, client groups, government agencies, . . .
- Obtain the answers. If opinions rather than facts, the more the better
- Share the questions, their answers and the resource citations amongst your like-minded peers
- Establish mentorships with multiple off-campus professionals in your career pathway

_The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge_ T Berger

Suggested questions to consider:

**Professional segment**: What proportion of the profession are engaged in this specific segment? What are the trends in this segment? What is the demand for veterinarians in this segment and where is it located? What are the trends in this demand and what factors are driving these trends? What is the typical remuneration for the employment types in this segment and what factors determine it?

**Excellence**: What KACES (knowledge, attitude, communication, experience, skills) determines excellence in this segment (it often isn't grades!)? Who are the innovators, where are they and what are they doing? Academia is often several years behind private sector innovation. How do you reach the 90th percentile in this segment? What will make you the most competitive for 90th percentile positions? What advice do the 90th
percentile practitioners have? How do they differ in KACES from the median percentile? What questions should you be asking that you aren’t aware of? Who should you be asking that you haven’t thought of? Of the pathway alternatives (e.g., internship, residency, high salary practice first to pay down debt, early ownership, . . .) to reach your goal, which will make reaching it most likely?

**Starting Positions:** What advice do those making employment decisions in this segment have? What are starting salaries and what factors determine them? How competitive is this job market? Where are starting positions located? What advice do recent graduates have? What advice do employers have? What maximizes your competitiveness for the best starting positions?

**Clientele:** Consider the client and business side in your career pathway. Who and where are the 20/80 clients (Pareto Principle - 20% of clients provide 80% of business). How do they differ from the balance of the clients? What problems do the 20/80 clients want solved? How is advancing technology likely to solve clients problems and change their service expectations? What advice do these 20/80 clients have, particularly about Rumsfeld unknowns? Who are the competition, particularly non-professional? What are the potential disruptors of the status quo?

**Professional Organizations:** What professional organizations are relevant to your pathway? Do they offer student memberships that allow access to their resources? What of their resources likely answer your questions and how do you obtain them? How do you use their membership directory to find contacts, such as recent WSU grads in your career pathway, to ask questions of?

Of the organization officials and members selected for awards (awards are likely good indications of the 90th percentile) by their peers, what questions might yield important guidance? What do they know that you don’t but need to (Rumsfeld unknowns)? Who else would they suggest you contact to ask your questions of or to network with?

To reduce the chance of overlooking important questions, to benefit from group expertise, and to reduce workload, do this exercise with 3 to 5 peers having similar career goals. To further reduce duplication of effort and taxing of unique resources, particularly contact people, coordinate with other groups having similar interests and thus likely similar questions.

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**Brainstorm Pathway Questions**

**Step 1: Organize Career Pathway Group**
- Assemble a group of 3 to 5 peers with the same career pathway interest
- For this first part, select a scribe to record brainstorming results

**Step 2: Round Robin Brainstorm**
- Offer questions in a round robin format in which everyone in turn poses a question they think is worth pursuing
- Get everyone’s thoughts down before discussing
- Go for quantity of ideas, withhold any criticism for now and welcome wild ideas in this step
- **Do not stop the round robin to suggest edits, discuss, judge or answer the questions** (changes occur later, the goal is surface all your questions first, no matter how wild or how obvious)
- The scribe simply records each question as it is stated
If a person’s questions are exhausted when their turn, they pass in that round and the rounds continue until everyone’s questions are exhausted

**Step 3: Convert and Categorize Your Group Questions**
- Convert statements into questions
- Review your list for questions that you could improve by changing from open to closed or vice versa. Closed-ended questions are answered with "yes", "no" or one other word or number. Open-ended questions require an explanation and cannot be answered with yes", "no" or with one other word or number.

**Step 4: Prioritize and Revise Your Group Questions**
- Choose questions that most interest your group, organizing them into priority order
- Revise your priority questions; the better the question, the easier to find answers
- Do questions that seem indistinct or complex need more specificity or does a simpler, more fundamental, essential question underlie it?

**Step 5: Compare Questions with Groups Having Similar Career Interest**
- Reduce question duplication, particularly those that involve contacting the same off-campus people or using the same resources if they are scarce

**Step 6: Improve Your Priority Questions and Strategize**
- Revise your priority questions based on input from groups with a similar interest
- Strategize what to do with each question - seek answers, ponder, set aside to address later, share with classmates as a question, . . . ?
- Distribute your priority questions among groupmates in a way that equalizes effort

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**Answer Priority Questions**
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**Step 1: Identify Resources**
- Potential resources:
  - Dr. Suzanne Fricke, Animal Health Library Librarian and small animal practitioner, can help you identify literature resources to answer your questions
  - WSU LibGuide Veterinary Career Resources
  - The WSU Libraries Web of Science is an excellent tool for identifying relevant journal papers
  - AVMA Constituent Allied Organizations - [html](http://www.avma.org)
    - These professional organizations have AVMA House of Delegates representatives with voting rights; several fold more professional organizations don’t have voting rights
  - ABVS-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations (Boards) - [html](http://www.abvs.org)
  - Veterinarian Associations and Organizations - Vet.com [list](http://www.vet.com)
  - WSU preceptor practices - Preceptor Appointments [list](http://www.wsu.edu)
  - Industry technical service veterinarians know the veterinary practices, the veterinarians and on the large animal side many of their larger clients and the key opinion leaders in their territory
    - Identify through student liaisons, company websites, professional organizations (e.g. [html](http://www.avma.org)) and by asking practitioners you know for their contact information
  - Ask faculty for their suggestions on who to contact but realize that unless you intend to be an academic veterinarian, the answers should come from multiple off-campus people in your career pathway, not from faculty, You get plenty from us as it is but the academic environment is very different business model and clientele than private, business and government practice. But by all means, ask!
Step 2: Use Resources and Make Contacts
- Directories with contact information - AVMA, state VMA's, professional organizations such as AABP, AAEP, AVC, ?
- If asking for answer by email rather than in person or via phone, expect fewer than half to respond
- You may get the best response if you send an email with a brief what you are doing and asking them to suggest the best times and number to use
- Contacting individuals individually usually generates better responses than a single e-mail to multiple individuals and much better than a request broadcast on a listserv such as AABP-L
- When an answer is an opinion, ask the contact if they are aware of supporting material that you could read, such as a proceedings paper, a government survey, a company study, . . .
- Ask if contacts were in your shoes again, what would they do more of and what would they do less of
- Ask if there are questions you should be asking but haven’t
- Ask each contact to name one or two other people that they would recommend contacting, particularly those who’ve been out less than a decade or so and have been particularly innovative
- So that you get a good range of new input, for every individual who you’ve known previously, contact at least two that you don’t
- Identify potential mentors among your contacts (see below)

Step 3: Draft Answers
- The goal is to create something that is dense with useful information but easily shareable, such as no more than one sheet per question
- For credit where credit is due, list your group members
- State the priority question
- Write out your answer; the final answer should be a group product having group input
- Cite the sources that you used to develop your answer, including contact information so others can find them
- List any sources that you found unacceptable and include a brief statement why you found it unacceptable

Step 4: Review and Compare Answers
- Exchange answers with groups having similar interest, the method of exchange being your choice (email, J Drive, paper copies, . . .)
- Review other group answers as a group. What information is solid and what is missing? What's clear and what’s unclear? What’s questionable? What do you support and what do you disagree with?
- Provide comments back to the originating group

Step 5: Finalize Your Answers
- Meet in your original group to discuss feedback and consider changes
- Recheck with your sources if necessary
- Show revisions to reviewing group if warranted

Step 6: Share Your Answers - (format and where is a class decision)
- Share by the means the class selects, such as a pdf on the class J: drive or on the course website, that everyone has access to.
- Because these likely have individual-identifying information, the site should like be behind a password-protected firewall. preferably no more than a page per question

References for this section:
  - Website - Unleashing the power of beautiful questions
Networking and Mentorships

Students who engage in independent off-campus activities relevant to their pathway during all four years, not just during fourth year preceptorships and SIPES, and who have invested significant time in networking generally have more and better job offers. This includes spending time in different practices during breaks, doing independent applied clinical research in the field on a question of interest and presenting their results at national meetings of a pathway-relevant professional association. Identifying several off-campus mentors doing what you want to do and spending time shadowing them is most important. Besides guidance, a huge benefit from clinical mentoring is increased clinical confidence, which is a huge advantage when applying for positions.

Finding good Mentors:
Ask faculty in your interest area for recommendations on good off-campus mentors in your geographic region. Ask good mentors who else they’d recommend. The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) Accredited Hospital Locator lists accredited companion animal hospitals and they maintain the career resource My Veterinary Career. As do most specialty boards, the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP) publishes an online directory of diplomates. One of the few boards that you can obtain while in full-time practice rather than by residency, their Applicant Handbook (pdf) details the requirements for certification and lists resources.

Working with Mentors:
Good mentorship is a two-way street, requires thought on both party’s parts, requires pre-planning on the mentee’s part (you), and usually is not a one-time event. These documents are intended to advance the mentoring process:

- **Student Checklist for Successful Mentoring** - pdf
- **Mentoring Session Record** - pdf

Mentoring papers: