

## **Equine-Specific Skills in Veterinary Technician Education: Bridging Competency Gaps and Enhancing CVT Retention in a Changing Industry**

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In veterinary technician education, equine practice often exists on the margins—an essential yet underemphasized element of training. While less than 10% of CVTEA-required skills are specific to large animal species, the ongoing crisis in equine medicine demands a reevaluation of how we approach technician education in this space. This presentation aims to explore practical, scalable strategies for enhancing equine-specific skill development, supporting the students most likely to enter equine fields, and building stronger connections between educational programs and equine practitioners. In short, the goal is to better prepare students and, in doing so, help stabilize an industry in need.

## **Understanding Equine Practitioners: A Culture of Independence and Precision**

Equine veterinarians differ significantly from their small animal counterparts. Many perform a wide range of services including emergency care, reproductive services, sports medicine, surgery, and diagnostics—often while working alone in ambulatory settings. Even highly trained specialists may also be the ones performing basic procedures in the field. This do-it-yourself ethos contributes to a culture that is often skeptical of newcomers, particularly students. Equine practitioners may hesitate to bring learners into their trucks, and those that do are selective. This skepticism is not unearned—it stems from years of juggling high expectations, demanding clients, and physical labor, often with minimal support.

The field is also shrinking. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), fewer than 6% of recent veterinary graduates are entering equine practice (AVMA, 2023). The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) Equine Sustainability Initiative has echoed this concern, citing burnout, poor work-life balance, and underutilization of support staff as central contributors to attrition (AAEP, 2023). These realities form the backdrop for veterinary technician programs, which must prepare students not only to enter this challenging environment, but to thrive within it.

## **Meeting Students Where They Are: The Importance of Surveying Learner Interest and Background**

One of the most important responsibilities we have as educators is to meet students where they are—academically, emotionally, and professionally. That process begins with understanding who our students truly are, not just who we assume them to be. While our own perceptions—shaped by years of teaching and experience—may feel reliable, they can often misrepresent the actual needs, goals, and backgrounds of the learners in our classrooms.

Each veterinary technology program is unique. Some programs are based in rural areas where exposure to livestock and equine work is a given; others serve urban student populations, where hands-on experience with large animals may be far less common. These regional and demographic differences mean that no single curriculum or clinical model will work equally well across institutions. To deliver meaningful instruction and career preparation, we must be willing to assess the specific needs and interests of our student body.

Data from a summer survey, distributed through five veterinary technician programs, yielded 215 responses from a mix of first- and second-year students, recent graduates, and alumni. Respondent demographics included 28.8% first-year students, 37.2% second-year students, 18.6% recent graduates, and 15.3% alumni who had been out of school for a year or more. One key objective was to evaluate the relationship between equine background and career intent.

As expected, students with prior horse experience were more likely to pursue equine or mixed animal practice. However, the most compelling finding came from students with minimal equine experience: while 40% of these individuals reported plans to go into companion animal practice, a surprising 33% still expressed interest in mixed animal work—and a small but meaningful 3.3% reported that they hoped to work specifically in equine practice. These students are crucial. They may lack the technical background but possess the motivation to join an industry in desperate need of passionate new professionals.

Career intentions varied widely. Approximately 36.7% expressed no interest in equine medicine. Nearly half—47%—reported a general interest but remained flexible about practice type, indicating that while horses may be enjoyable, they are not necessarily a chosen career focus. Another 8.8% said equine medicine was their clear career goal, while 7.4% had a strong interest in the field but felt limited by a lack of opportunities. That latter group represents yet another key target for outreach and support. If we want to build a sustainable future for equine veterinary care, identifying and empowering students who are already motivated—but unsure how to get there—is essential.

The data also reinforce the importance of recognizing regional influence. A program based near working ranches, racetracks, or breeding farms will naturally attract a

different student demographic than one located in a dense urban setting. Understanding these differences and tailoring curriculum offerings to match local realities is essential. A full-scale overhaul of your program may not be warranted—but small, thoughtful adjustments based on student feedback could have a significant impact.

Ultimately, this survey affirmed what many of us intuitively know but sometimes overlook: student interests are nuanced, and their potential isn't always obvious. Programs need to actively survey their learners—not just once, but regularly—to gain clarity on what opportunities should be offered, what enhancements are worth the effort, and which students might thrive with additional support.

Supporting equine-curious students—especially those without a strong equine background—is one of the most strategic things we can do to help address the ongoing workforce crisis in equine veterinary medicine. But we won't know who those students are unless we ask.

## **Enhancing Curriculum Without Full Overhaul**

Given that only a small proportion of CVTEA essential skills relate to large animal species, it is neither practical nor necessary to redesign an entire program to focus on equine content. Instead, programs can enhance student exposure and confidence by elevating existing skills and offering optional, targeted opportunities for those with a demonstrated interest.

Examples of successful approaches include converting basic skills labs into gamified experiences—such as relay-style bandaging races or “truck tetris” organization challenges. For more advanced students, optional projects might involve exploring lameness treatments, developing equine-focused communication materials (e.g., explaining PPID or EPM to clients), or investigating the role of AI in equine recordkeeping. These assignments can be integrated as honors projects, elective modules, or extracurricular enrichment, depending on institutional flexibility.

## **Listening to Equine Clinics: What Do They Want?**

To understand the employer side, a survey was distributed to equine veterinarians through professional Facebook forums, receiving 18 responses. Though a small sample size, the respondents represented a diversity of practice settings: 39% ambulatory only, 33% equine-exclusive clinics, 17% mixed animal hospitals, and 11% hybrid practices. When asked about *current* hiring preferences, 44% primarily hired veterinary assistants, while 28% expressed preference for credentialed veterinary technicians. Encouragingly, 44% reported plans to hire more CVTs in the next five years.

Top hiring factors included equine experience, work ethic, and passion for the field—credentials alone were less emphasized than these intangible qualities. Comments highlighted a need for better technician availability, more flexible pathways for assistants to become CVTs, and greater clarity in how credentialed technicians can be utilized effectively.

These findings reinforce the importance of preparing students not only with technical competencies, but also with strong communication skills, resilience, and professionalism. Programs that produce students with both hands-on aptitude and a strong understanding of equine culture will likely find their graduates more readily employed.

### **Supporting Student Development and Retention**

To help students bridge the gap between classroom skills and clinical application, my program has hosted a variety of optional field experiences tailored to student interest. These include barn vaccine days, equine dental float events, lameness workshops, breeding labs, and even field surgeries. Participation varies by cohort, but the impact is clear: when students are supported in a way that aligns with their career aspirations, they are more likely to engage deeply and develop competence.

Importantly, we also provide resources around resume development, cover letter writing, and professional networking. Encouraging students to join organizations like the AAEPVT, create LinkedIn profiles, and seek out mentorship helps position them for success.

### **Changing the Narrative: Technician Utilization in Equine Medicine**

The underutilization of credentialed veterinary technicians remains a major barrier to equine practice sustainability. This is not a new challenge—it has existed for decades in companion animal medicine—but the equine field is only now beginning to reckon with it in earnest. Both the AAEP and AVMA have recognized the critical role of technicians in improving workflow efficiency, staff satisfaction, and financial viability (AAEP, 2023; AVMA, 2023).

Educators can support this shift by sharing state-specific CVT scope of practice guidelines with equine DVMs, promoting team-based care models, and encouraging dialogue around appropriate delegation and supervision. Many equine veterinarians want to do better but don't always know how.

### **Conclusion: Bridging the Gap with Flexibility and Creativity**

At the heart of this conversation is a call for creativity, flexibility, and collaboration. Not every student wants to work in equine practice, and not every program can support major structural changes. But every program can do something—whether that’s adding a bandage relay, surveying their students, inviting a local DVM to speak, or partnering with an equine vet for a one-day event.

By meeting students where they are and listening to the needs of the equine community, we can build educational pathways that not only prepare students more effectively but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of equine veterinary medicine.

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## **References**

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). (2023). *2023 AVMA Report on the Veterinary Profession*.

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