Using A Student-Centered Orientation Program to Foster Community in the Veterinary Curriculum

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Abstract: *A veterinary college created the Florida Leadership Event (FLE) to help students recognize the diversity and talents of their class and faculty and to promote an awareness of benefits of team engagement. Using the StrengthsQuest™program(www.strengthsquest.com), students completed questionnaires designed to identify and further develop their unique talents. Students completed a survey before and after the orientation that assessed perceptions of their academic concerns, comfort with meeting other students and faculty, awareness and comfort with seeking campus resources, awareness of personal strengths, and level of tolerance for inappropriate behaviors among their classmates, faculty or staff. Findings showed significant differences in students' knowledge regarding how to access academic, social, wellness and spiritual resources and comfort in using spiritual and social resources. There were significant differences in students' reported discomfort and intent to identifyinappropriate behaviors, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment by other students, and by faculty or staff. The FLE was associated with increased student awareness of academic, social, wellness and spiritual resources, and decreased sense of discomfort in using social and spiritual resources. FLE seemed to reify their rights to an environment free of inappropriate behaviors, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment.*
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I.   Introduction

Orientation programs are an integral part of professional schools. Colleges of Veterinary Medicine around the country have incorporated similar orientation programs that promote teamwork, professionalism and communication skills.[1]While these components are essential to becoming a veterinary professional, the prior version of our orientation program, the Veterinary Leadership Experience (VLE) lacked a university-, student- or class-specific structure aimed at building capacity and relationships among students. That program focused on small and large group team building activities and general orientation information, which was specific to the University Of Florida CollegeOf Veterinary Medicine (UFCVM). VLE lacked discussions about faculty expectations for students or student expectations of the program. As the college embarked on re-organizing itsorientation program, a review of the North American Veterinary Medical Education Consortium (NAVMEC) report core competencies was also completed.[2] That report and recent veterinary education publications[3-8]guided our approach to introducing professional competencies.

During the new orientation program students were introducedto a cultural environment whereby faculty, students and staff function as a team. Goals of the program were to:inculcate a spirit of working together, accomplish college goals,and cultivate shared respect.[9,10]Students were provided with information about the available campus resources such as the university's general wellness programs and faculty consultants for conflict management. During small group breakout sessions case examples were presented and later discussed these in the large group. As we provided this information, our intention was to embolden students to ask for help when needed. Another program goal was to create a 'safe to fail' environmentand move away from the sphere of competitiveness that typically characterizes undergraduate experiences.[11-13]A 'safe to fail' environment encourages taking risks while communicating with one another even when answers might be incorrect. Creating such an environment is designed to: (1) help students recognize the value of helping each other, (2) promote conflict resolution and (3) instill a sense of pride in being a member of the college's professional program.

Highly functioning teams exhibit trust, commitment, accountability, an ability to embrace conflict constructively, and pay careful attention to results.[14]By nurturing communication, cooperation, and collaboration among students and faculty members, we encouraged students to become responsible partners in the learning process. With the inception of this program, we designed a this study to assess changes in students as a result of their participation in this new orientation program, the Florida Leadership Experience (FLE). The following research questions were assessed.
1. What is the difference in students' perceptions of their academic concerns before and after FLE?

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2. What is the difference in students' comfort in: (a) meeting other students; (b) meeting faculty; (c) reporting inappropriate behaviors among their classmates; (d) reporting inappropriate behaviors among their faculty or staff before and after FLE?
3. What is the difference in students': (a) likelihood to use academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources; (b) awareness of academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources and (c) knowledge of how access academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources before and after FLE?
4. What is the difference in students' comfort in seeking out academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources before and after FLE?
5. How does assessing StrengthsQuest skills differ among students before and after FLE?

Table 1: Relationship between Learning Objectives and Orientation Activities

Learning Outcomes	New Orientation Activities
Foster the development of a learning community characterized by a culture of respect between classmates and faculty	When did you become a Gator?How did it feel to get into veterinary school? Zip Line, Ropes Course, Rock Wall,Take a Seat, Make a Friend
Engage the community in discussions about expectations for each other, the faculty and the curriculum	Expectations contract.Wellnessseminar.You matter, we care.Conflict resolution.Case studies
Identify, develop and learn how to apply each student's unique talents in order to achieve academic, career, and personal success	StrengthsQuest 101 - A piece of the puzzle. Keeping your bucket full

1.1 FLE Program

To achieve the goals set forward, faculty members from the College of Veterinary Medicine collaborated with faculty from the university's Office of theDean for Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution to establish programmatic goals and articulate objectives. Program objectives were linked to the two-day experience and identified related activities. Students were introduced to available support programs on campus. During the orientation, small and large group active learning activities were employed o encourage students' critical evaluation of dilemmas that they might face in a professional educational setting. **Table 1** shows the relationship between the program's learning objectives and orientation activities. The program's objectives goals and related activities of FLE follow.

1.1.1Program objective 1. Foster the development of a learning community characterized by a culture of respect between classmates and faculty

The first step in developing a program designed to foster a sense of community and teamwork was to provide the students and faculty opportunities to get to know one another and learn about the mission and vision of college and team that they were joining. We wanted the culture of college to be exemplify mutual respect and hoped to instill a sense of pride in becoming part of the UFCVM. Aimed at helping the students to understand the history, identity and culture of our college, we used videos from across the campus to highlight special aspects of the University of Florida (UF) that are celebrated university-wide including athletic program successes, UF inventions and national and international awards, clinical research breakthroughs and outreach activities to underserved countries to highlight how far and wide the UF degree could extend. Faculty participated in large group discussions to relay their sentiments regarding how they felt about being a part of UFCVM.Small group sessions were held to encouragestudents to talk among themselves and with 2nd year students about how they felt after learning that they had been admitted into veterinary school. We also hosted discussions about the differences between veterinarian as an occupation versus veterinarian as a profession and the importance of this distinction is in terms of their professional development and growth.

1.1.2Program objective 2. Engage the community in discussions about expectations for each other, the faculty and the curriculum

To bring the class and college together and emphasize the importance of reciprocity, collaboration and cooperation in a learning community, small group break-out sessions were held following large group discussions regarding students, faculty and staff expectations. Small group break-out sessions were prompted by questions such as: What are expectations you have of each other as classmates?;What are expectations you have of your faculty?; and What expectation do you think the faculty have of you as students? At the same time, the faculty and staff had similar discussions of what expectations they had of the students. During the large group session, a contract was built in which everyone agreed upon the shared goals and themes of communication, empathy, respect and professionalism. We also discussed that creating a 'safe to fail' environment went both ways – it was 'safe' for students to fail and ask each other and their faculty for help and assistance and it was equally 'safe' for a faculty or staff member to fail and seek input from the students. This exercise was used to reinforce the belief that offering such a learning community would foster interdependence

and reciprocity throughout the entire college. Students were also introduced to readily available campus resources that they could utilize if theyfelt overwhelmed and stressed because we were in a 'safe' community. Also stressed was the importance of seeking help from any classmate, faculty member or main campus resource whenever it was needed.

1.1.3*Program objective 3. Identify, develop and learn how to apply each student's unique talents in order to achieve academic, career, and personal success*

The final componentin building the type of learning community we envisioned was to create a positive and proactive way for students to recognize their own strengths and those of cohort group and faculty. We felt that building and maintaining synergy among the class and faculty would provide a way for students to develop self-awareness, create an environment of collaboration and move away from the competitive environment characteristic ofmany undergraduate experiences. Using the Gallup Education Practice tool,StrengthsQuest™ program,[15] students and faculty facilitators completed questionnaires to identify their unique talents and consider how to use these strengths during their professional program.

II. Methods

Several days prior to FLE, students were sent an email and were invited using the professional encrypted version of SurveyMonkey to participate in the study. The 11-item researcher-constructed survey asked questions related to participants' academic concerns, comfort level in meeting other students and faculty, and their awareness and comfort level in seeking campus resources. Students were asked to indicate their awareness of personal strengths and their level of tolerance for inappropriate behaviors among their classmates, and faculty or staff. Following completion of FLE students were invited to take the post-test version of the same survey.

Students were asked what they were most concerned about upon entering veterinary school and selected one of five response categories: Sense of belonging, Academic success, Managing daily living expenses, Maintaining personal relationships, and I have no present concerns.Five closed-ended items were scored on a Likert-type scale where $1 =$ Very Comfortable, $2 =$ Comfortable, $3 =$ Uncomfortable, and $4 =$ Very Uncomfortable. Three questions required a Yes or No response.One question asked participants to rank order from a group of 11 choices (Counseling, Friends, Family, Faculty, Vet Med Advisor, Associate Dean, Clergy, Significant other/ spouse, Classmates, Medical doctor, and Specific support groups), the types of support they would seek in situations if they were distressed. One question asked participants to indicate how the StrengthsQuest assessment assisted them in identifying their personal strengths and selected one of four response categories: Reaffirmed what I already knew,Provided greater insight about how to utilize my strengths, Provided new information about myself, and Provided insight on how to use my strengths for professional growth. There were two open-ended questions. Participants were asked to indicate how they thought their strengths would benefit them and the kinds of learning challenges they anticipated having during veterinary school.

Following completion of the survey and for purposes of analyzing the data, items were grouped in the following categories: Perceptions of academic concerns, Comfort meeting students and faculty, Reporting inappropriate behaviors among classmates, and faculty/ staff, Likelihood to use, awareness of, and knowledge of how to access academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources, Comfort seeking out academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources, and Helpfulness of StrengthsQuestAssessement.

One hundred twelve incoming veterinary medicine students were invited to participate in the study. 96 students, 88% of the sample, completed the pre-test survey while 58 (52%) completed the post-test survey. Descriptive statistics were reported for close-ended responses. The independent samples *t*-test was used to compare pre-test and post-test responses. Fisher's exact test was used for analysis. Hypothesis testing was set at a level of .05 to ascertain statistical significance. SAS version 9.3 (Cary, N.C.) was used for all data analysis. Responses to open-ended questions were open-coded and analyzed thematically.

III. Results

3.1 Responses to Close-Ended Questions

Table 2: Perceptions of Academic Concerns by Percentage and Frequency

Item	Pretest (n=95) %/n	Posttest (n=58) %/n
As you enter vet school, what are you most concerned about?		
Sense of belonging	10.4 (10)	7 (4)
Academic success	57.3 (55)	76 (44)
Managing daily living expenses	18.8 (18)	10 (6)
Maintaining personal relationships	9.3 (9)	7 (4)

I have no present concerns	4.3 (4)	0

3.1.1 Perceptions of academic concerns

A descriptive analysis showed that prior to FLE, that more than half of students (n = 55, 57.3%) reported being concerned with their academic success as they prepared to enter professional school (see **Table 2**). Nearly one fifth (n = 18, 18.8) expressed concern about feeling a sense of belonging (n = 10, 10.4%) and maintaining personal relationships (n = 9, 9.3%). Following the FLE, 44 students (76%) expressed concern about their academic success while concerns about managing daily living expenses, feeling a sense of belonging and maintaining personal relationships decreased.

Table 3: Comfort Meeting Students and Faculty, and Reporting Inappropriate Behaviors among Classmates, and Faculty/ Staff by Percentage and Frequency

Item	Pretest (n=95) %/ n	Posttest (n=58) %/n
How do you feel about meeting your classmates?		
Very comfortable	16.7 (16)	48 (28)
Comfortable	72.2 (70)	45 (26)
Uncomfortable	7.3(7)	7 (4)
Very uncomfortable	2(2)	0
Other	1 (1)	0
How do you feel about meeting your faculty?		
Very comfortable	15.6(15)	47 (27)
Comfortable	76 (73)	52 (30)
Uncomfortable	8.3 (8)	2 (1)
Very uncomfortable	0	0
How comfortable would you feel reporting inappropriate behaviors that you may encounter while in Vet school, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment by fellow students?*, +		
Very comfortable	14.6(14)	41(24)
Comfortable	63.5(61)	43(25)
Uncomfortable	21.9(21)	14(8)
Very uncomfortable	0	2(1)
How comfortable would you feel reporting inappropriate behaviors that you may encounter while in Vet school, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment by faculty or staff? **, +		
Very comfortable		
Comfortable	12.5(12)	38(22)
Uncomfortable	58.3(56)	47(27)
Very uncomfortable	26(25)	12(7)
	3.1 (3)	3(2)

*Notes: * denotes 21 non-respondents to the pretest and 9 non-respondents to the posttest question.*
*** denotes 28non-respondents to the pretest and 9 non-respondents to the posttest question.*
+ denotes statistical significant differences between pre-test and post-test

3.1.2 Comfort meeting students and faculty, and reporting inappropriate behaviors among classmates, and faculty/ staff

About 90% of the participants reported feeling very comfortable or comfortable about meeting their classmates. This increased slightly to 93% following FLE. In the pre-test a small number of students (n = 8, 8.3%) reported feeling uncomfortable about meeting faculty, while only one student reported this in the post-test.

Prior to FLE 75 (78.1%) of the students reported that they were very comfortable or comfortable reporting inappropriate behaviors, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment by fellow students, while 21 (21.9%) students reported feeling uncomfortable. Following FLE, there was a statistically significant decrease, p = 0.0011 with only 9 (16%) students reported feeling uncomfortable (see Table 3). Prior to FLE 28 (29.1%) of the students reported that they would feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable reporting inappropriate behaviors, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment by faculty or staff. Following FLE, there was a statistically significant decrease, p = 0.002, with only 9 (16%) students reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable.

Students who felt comfortable or very comfortable reporting inappropriate behaviors, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment by fellow students, that they might encounter while in professional school, typically felt comfortable or very comfortable reporting the same instances if they occurred among faculty and staff in both the pre and post-test (see **Table 3**).

Table 4: Likelihood to Use, Awareness of, and Knowledge of how to Access Academic, Social, Wellness, and Spiritual Resources by Frequency

Item	Pretest (n= 95)	Posttest (n= 58)
What types of resources do you anticipate utilizing while in vet school? Y/N		
Academic	95/0	56/2
Social	90/5	51/7
Wellness	79/16	39/19
Spiritual	41/54	12/45
Are you currently aware of UF Campus resources in any of the following areas? Y/N		
Academic[+]	49/47	51/7
Social[+]	39/57	49/9
Wellness[+]	56/40	54/4
Spiritual[+]	25/71	33/25
Do you know how to access resources in the areas below? Y/N		
Academic[+]	54/42	52/6
Social[+]	54/42	51/7
Wellness[+]	58/38	55/3
Spiritual[+]	31/65	35/23

[+] *denotes statistical significant differences between pre-test and post-test*

3.1.3*Likelihood to use, awareness of, and knowledge of how to access academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources.*

Prior to FLE many students lacked an awareness of the campus resources such as academic (n = 49, or 52%), social (n = 39, or 41%) or wellness (n = 56, or 59%) programs. Most of the students, 71 (75%) were unaware of spiritual resources. However, following FLE, the majority of students were aware of academic (n = 51 or 88%), social (n = 49 or 84%) and wellness (n = 54 or 93%) resources. There was a statistically significant decrease in students who were unaware of academic resources, 47 versus 7, $p \leq 0.0001$. There was a statistically significant decrease in students who were unaware of social resources, 57 versus 9, $p \leq 0.0001$. There was a statistically significant decrease in students who were unaware of wellness resources, 40 versus 4, $p \leq 0.0001$. There was a statistically significant decrease in students who were unaware of spiritual resources, 71 versus 25, $p \leq 0.0001$.

Prior to FLE, many of the students reported that they were unaware of how to access academic, (n = 42 or 44%), social (n = 42 or 44%), wellness (n = 38, or 40%), and spiritual (n = 65, or 68%) resources. There were statistically significant decreases in the numbers of students who were unaware of how to access these resources following FLE for all categories, $p \leq 0.0001$.Following FLE, six students reported not knowing how to access academic resources compared to seven, three and 23 who did not know how to access social, wellness and spiritual resources respectively.

Prior to FLE, students were asked to select the type of support they would seek if they were distressed. The three most frequently cited sources were: friends (n = 92, 97%), family (n = 93, 98%) and classmates (n = 66, 69%). The same sources were most frequently cited following FLE: friends (n = 53, 91%), family (n = 55, 95%) and classmates (n = 41, 71%) (see**Table 4**).

Table 5: Comfort Seeking Academic, Social, Wellness, and Spiritual Resources by Frequency

Item	Pretest (n=95)		Posttest (n=58)	
My level of comfort in seeking out these resources is:				
Academic	Very comfortable	42	Very comfortable	29
	Comfortable	44	Comfortable	26
	Uncomfortable	9	Uncomfortable	0
	Very uncomfortable	0	Very uncomfortable	0
Social	Very comfortable	24	Very comfortable	24
	Comfortable	55	Comfortable	28
	Uncomfortable	15	Uncomfortable	3
	Very uncomfortable	0	Very uncomfortable	0
Wellness[+]	Very comfortable	26	Very comfortable	23
	Comfortable	55	Comfortable	25
	Uncomfortable	13	Uncomfortable	3
	Very uncomfortable	0	Very uncomfortable	1
Spiritual[+]	Very comfortable	13	Very comfortable	11
	Comfortable	39	Comfortable	25
	Uncomfortable	23	Uncomfortable	5
	Very uncomfortable	6	Very uncomfortable	7

[+] *denotes statistical significant differences between pre-test and post-test*

3.1.4Comfort in seeking academic, social, wellness, and spiritual resources

Nearly all of the students reported that they would use academic, social and wellness services during professional school. The majority of students reported that they were also comfortable or very comfortable in seeking these resources. Less than half of the students (n = 41, 43%) planned to seek spiritual resources. Following FLE, there was a statistically significant decrease among participants (n = 12, 21%) who reported that they would seek spiritual resources, p = 0.008. In the pretest, the majority (n = 81, 85%) reported feeling very comfortable or comfortable, while 13(14%) reported feeling uncomfortable using wellness resources.In the posttest, there was statistically significant decrease in the number (n = 4, 7%) reporting feeling uncomfortable using wellness resources p = 0.05. Twenty-nine students (30.1%) reported that they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable in seeking out spiritual resources in comparison to 12 or 20.7% in posttest. Although 45 (78%) did not plan to use spiritual resources, this was unrelated to their level of comfort (see **Table 5**).

Table 6: Helpfulness of StrengthsQuestAssessment by Percentage and Frequency

Item	Pretest (n=95) %/n	Posttest (n=58) %/n
How did the StrengthsQuest assessment help in identifying your personal strengths?		
Reaffirmed what I already knew	42.7(41)	28(16)
Provided greater insight about how to utilize my strengths	30.2(29)	55(32)
Provided new information about myself	14.6(14)	9(5)
Provided insight on how to use my strengths for professional growth	12.5(12)	9(5)

3.1.5Identifying and using strengths

Prior to FLE, students (n = 41, 42.7%) reported that the Use of the StrengthQuest Assessment reaffirmed what they already knew, provided greater insight about how to utilize their strengths (n = 29, 30.2%), provided new information (n = 14, 14.6%) and provided insight on how to use strengths for professional growth (n = 12, 12.5%). Following FLE, students reported that the StrengthQuest Assessment reaffirmed what they (n = 16, 28%) already knew, provided greater insight about how to utilize their strengths (n = 32, 55%), provided new information (n = 5, 9%) and provided insight on how to use strengths for professional growth (n = 5, 9%) (see**Table 6**).

3.2 Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Participants were asked to indicate how they thought their strengths would benefit them; 95 responses were received. The three most frequently cited comments pertained to how their strengths would help them succeed in school, assist in teamwork, and manage their studies. These results were also the most frequently cited among the 58 responses received following FLE. Examples describing how their strengths would help them succeed were exemplified by the following comments: "Now that I am more aware [of my strengths] they will help me navigate Veterinary School successfully" and "They will help me focus on and prioritize my academics." Examples of how knowledge of strengths would assist in teamwork were that they would: "Allow me to recognize my best position on a team … and help develop my teammate's strength for the good of all" and "Show me how I can be best be utilized in a team." Participants reported that knowing their strengths would assist in them in managing the workload. Statements such as, "They will keep me on track with class" and knowing that I "great at organizing and time management" were representative of their awareness.

When asked the kinds of learning challenges they anticipated having during veterinary school, 96 of the participants responded during the pre-test. Most of the respondents reported that they would experience challenges with taking in large amounts of material, managing their time, and keeping up with the pace of course work. The same types of responses were received from 58 participants following FLE. One representative comment pertained to information intake was: "Acquiring a ton of information in a very short time-span." Time management was exemplified by comments such as: "Keeping up with the material" and "Keeping up with studies night to night and not falling behind." The pace of coursework was described as "The speed at which I need to learn seems next to impossible at times" and the "fast pace."

IV. Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that the program reduced participants' academic concerns, expanded their willingness to use social and spiritual resources, and enhanced their recognition of the right to an academic environment characterized by fairness, integrity and safety. On a large academic campus with many undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs, resources may not be easily found, particularly when professional schools are located away from main campus. For students who are new and potentially struggling within an academic program, not knowing how or where to access services is an additional stress. Although this might seem intuitive this information typically is not provided in professional orientation programs. Providing this information within an orientation program and introducing students to who, how, when, and where they can

find help if needed was something that previous orientations program did not provide. Giving the students an introduction to main campus faculty and initiating conversations centered on issues that often arise within professional degree programs was thought to be an important and crucial first step at creating a learning community where all members feel supported and engaged.

The use of the Strengths Quest program helped participants recognize how their strengths would help them succeed in school, assist in teamwork, and manage their studies. StrengthsQuest also brought attention to the challenges they might experience in taking in large amounts of material, managing their time, and keeping up with the pace of course work. Having an awareness of both strengths and potential challenges are important to student success. Awareness of strengths helps students identify, develop and begin to learn how to apply their unique talents in order to achieve academic, career, and personal success, thus serving as a tool for amplifying successful performance. Recognition of challenges can help students avoid unwanted outcomes. Using an orientation program, aimed at building a sense of shared community, communication and teamwork, this study.showed that students experienced a reduction in academic concerns, decreased discomfort in their likelihood to seek social and spiritual resources if needed, and that they expected an academic environment characterized by fairness, integrity and safety.

This finding suggests that FLE was empowering to students and reified their rights to an environment free of inappropriate behaviors, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior, or sexual harassment. While designed for veterinary orientation purposes, the structure of this program is one that could be used for any graduate or professional program. This type of program may be of particular benefit to large schools that utilize central resources that are often difficult to locate when struggling students find themselves in need. Limitations of this study are that it was conducted at a single site and as such the findings are not generalizable. Also, since the survey was researcher-constructed, its reliability and validity is currently unknown. However, this work provides avenues for continued research. Future studies could: (1) explore the sustainability of these findings, (2) describe in greater detail how the StrengthsQuest information aids students in their program of study, or (3) determine whether or not students experience didactic and clinical learning in an academic environment that is characterized by fairness, integrity and safety.

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