The Healer’s Art (HART): Veterinary Students Connecting with Self, Peers, and the Profession

Beatrice Meyer-Parsons ■ Sarah Van Etten ■ Jane R. Shaw

ABSTRACT
This case study sought to understand veterinary students' perceptions and experiences of the Healer's Art (HART) elective to support well-being and resilience. Students’ “mindful attention” was assessed using the MAAS-State scale. Course evaluations and written materials for course exercises (artifacts) across the 2012-2015 cohorts of Colorado State University's HART veterinary students (n = 99) were analyzed for themes using a grounded theory approach, followed by thematic comparison with analyses of HART medical student participants. HART veterinary students described identity/self-expression and spontaneity/freedom as being unwelcome in the veterinary curriculum, whereas HART medical students described spirituality as unwelcome. HART veterinary students identified issues of “competition” and “having no time,” which were at odds with their descriptions of not competing and having the time to connect with self and peers within their HART small groups. HART veterinary students shared that the course practices of nonjudgment, generous listening, and presence (i.e., mindfulness practices) helped them build relationships with peers. Although not statistically significant, MAAS pre/post-scores trended in the positive direction. HART provides opportunities for students to connect with self and foster bonds with peers and the profession, factors that are positively associated with resilience and wellness.

Key words: wellness, mental health, mindful attention, personal congruence, sense of coherence, resilience, the Healer’s Art

INTRODUCTION
There is a growing discussion of and call to action to foster mental health and wellness within the veterinary profession.1-4 Mental health is a complex interaction between individuals and environmental factors, and it has been suggested that veterinary education co-creates a higher mental health risk for veterinary students.5-6 Complicating the matter further, veterinary students and veterinarians are less likely to seek help given negative associations with mental illness.3,7

Declines in veterinary student well-being have been associated with progression through the veterinary curriculum, with students experiencing rising rates of anxiety and depression8-13 and overall declines in empathy.14 Time pressure, financial worries, academic concerns, and difficulty fitting in with peers have been described as potential stressors.15,14 Reisbig et al.9 identified the following four sources of veterinary student stress: academic, transitional, family health, and relationship.

Medical and veterinary programs and their respective student populations share commonalities. Programmatically, they have competitive admissions processes, intense workloads, and high-stakes testing; and on the population level, traits such as perfectionism and conscientiousness may be common for students in these programs. Given these shared traits, faculty and a student counselor at Colorado State University (CSU) looked to medical schools for resilience or well-being curricula, selecting the Healer’s Art course.

The Healer’s Art Course
Designed in 1991 by Rachel Remen, MD, a faculty member at UC San Francisco, the Healer’s Art (HART) is a 15-hour elective course offered in over 90 medical schools. HART engages students with humanistic practices and meaning in the medical profession.15,16 In accordance with Dr. Remen’s guidelines, the HART curriculum used in veterinary schools is the same as in medical schools. CSU, University of California Davis, and Oklahoma State University presently offer HART as an elective in their DVM curricula.

HART is a prescribed sequence of five sessions: Wholeness, Grief and Loss (two sessions), Mystery and Awe, and Service. Each session begins with a large group gathering, with a physician or veterinarian sharing a "seed" talk or story followed by a reflective exercise.
Participants then gather in their small groups, typically four to five students with one or two facilitators, to generously listen to each other’s stories, “to suspend judgment, comparison, competition and the need to fix others and simply listen in order to know what is true for another person.” 17(p. 313) Another description is giving mindful attention or presence to another. 18

Two CSU veterinary college faculty members and one licensed psychologist attended the HART Faculty Development Training. The Healer’s Art was first implemented in veterinary medicine at Colorado State University in 2012. HART small-group facilitators are volunteers from the veterinary or medical professions, who are recruited from the veterinary college faculty or the surrounding community. The facilitator pool includes a physician; an interdisciplinary PhD in human development, counseling, and educational leadership (first author); a certified veterinary technician; and community and faculty veterinarians. Facilitator training is conducted within Finding Meaning in (Veterinary) Medicine (FMVM) group sessions, which follow the same sequence, structure, and practices as HART, “sharing stories, feelings or experiences, identifying insights that rise and reflecting on what touched their hearts.” 19

PURPOSE

Building upon educational research with medical students who participated in HART, 20, 21 the central research question for this study was “How do veterinary students describe their experiences with the Healer’s Art?” There is no literature on HART for veterinary students. Two course artifacts (wholeness/one quality exercise and mission statements) and course evaluations described student perceptions of the course. Course artifacts capture the words or phrases that students provide in response to two reflection exercises in the course. To measure the impact of HART on student mindfulness, “mindful attention” 18 was assessed at the start and end of the course.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Themes in HART course evaluations and artifacts from veterinary students and medical students will be similar due to commonalities in educational practices and professional cultures.

Hypothesis 2: Themes in HART course evaluations and artifacts from veterinary and medical students will be different due to differences in educational practices and professional cultures.

Hypothesis 3: Mindful attention will remain the same or increase between the first and last HART sessions due to HART practices such as generous listening.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This was a case-based study of 99 first-, second-, and third-year veterinary students enrolled in HART at CSU College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences from 2012 through 2015. The study received IRB approval for the use of human subjects from CSU’s Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office (RICRO). HART is an elective and students self-selected into the course.

Data Collection

Wholeness/One Quality Exercise

In the first session, a faculty facilitator shared a “seed talk” or story on wholeness, recognizing the need and responsibility for self-care and remembering the self. In response to the following prompt, students reflected on a part of themselves that they felt was is not welcome in veterinary school:

Please make a drawing of a part of yourself that you are wary about showing or actually do not show in veterinary school. Perhaps this is a part that you feel has no place here or a part you may not feel comfortable showing to others in a professional context.

Halfway through their time drawing, students are asked to pause and reflect on this question: “If your drawing was a symbol for a human quality, what would that human quality be? Please write the word for that human quality on your drawing.” Students and faculty facilitators brought their drawings to their small-group discussions and facilitators collected the quality word from each student. Data from the wholeness/one quality exercise were collected in 2014 and 2015.

Mission Statement Exercise

In the last session, faculty share a “seed talk” or story on service, calling, and commitment and the importance of preserving a sense of personal meaning in the practice of veterinary medicine. Students are asked to remember their service impulse and respond to a reflective prompt:

What if your work was simply an opportunity to express your highest values into this world? Now ask for help in bringing this dream of service closer to your everyday work life. Write three or four sentences in the language of help (i.e., show me, give me, or enable me to).

Students and facilitators presented these mission statements in their small-group discussions and facilitators collected individual student mission statements. Mission Statements were collected from 2012 to 2015.

Course Evaluations

After the course, students completed an anonymous, standardized course evaluation used in all HART courses via CSU’s online learning platform. Evaluation data were downloaded and compiled for 2012 to 2015.

Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) State

“Mindfulness is most commonly defined as the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present.” 16(p.632) The MAAS-State is a 5-item scale designed to assess mindfulness. The MAAS-State items are drawn from the longer MAAS Trait scale, which has excellent psychometric properties (Cronbach’s alpha = .92) and has been validated in undergraduate and nationally sampled adult populations. 22 The MAAS-State was administered as an anonymous paper-based test. MAAS-State data were only collected in 2015. See Appendix I for the MAAS-State Form.
DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative descriptive statistics were conducted on the course evaluations and course artifacts. To maintain confidentiality, we did not collect student demographic data. As a result, participants were not matched for repeated measures and the Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare the MAAS-State pre- and post-scores.

Thematic analysis of the wholeness/one quality exercise, course evaluations, and mission statements was done by means of a grounded theory approach,21 led by the first author, an ethnographer familiar with educational case studies. Grounded theory analysis is focused on "the actual production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings."22(p-xv) Because we are interested in the veterinary students' experiences, descriptions, and meanings within the social context of the HART elective, grounded theory analysis was methodologically appropriate.

During phase one of the qualitative thematic analysis, the first and second authors read through all the data and wrote analytic memos, identifying words and phrases that could be grouped together. For phase two, the second author grouped data and labeled key themes, providing exemplars for each theme until no new themes emerged, reaching data saturation. At the same time, the first author read through the initial coding, identified themes, and developed a concept map.

The coders then met and queried coding, groupings, and themes, looking at consistencies and inconsistencies. Once coders reached an agreement on the themes for each year, they created a preliminary codebook and revised the concept map. In the third phase, both coders looked across each year's thematically coded data and finalized thematic categories in the codebook. In the fourth phase, the first and second authors compared the HART veterinary student and medical student codebooks (provided by Drs. Remen and Rabow) contrasting the themes and coding rules.

RESULTS

Participants

Due to concerns for student confidentiality, demographic data were not collected. Student enrollment was as follows: 32 students in 2012, 28 students in 2013, 13 students in 2014, and 35 students in 2015. Across the 2012–2015 cohorts, the majority of participants were first-year students (61%), followed by second- (30%) and third-year students (9%), with third-year students only eligible to enroll since 2013. Compared with the total population of eligible veterinary students (i.e., 140 students per class), there was 3%–11% participation in HART from 2012 to 2015.

MAAS-State

Although student self-assessments trended toward greater mindfulness over the course, this trend was not statistically significant (pre-test mean = 3.96; post-test mean = 4.19; p = .60; p = .60).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Veterinary student wholeness/one quality data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<td>Identity/self-expression</td>
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<td>Freedom/spontaneity</td>
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<td>Values</td>
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<td>Emotional engagement</td>
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<td>Creativity</td>
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Wholeness/One Quality Exercise

Veterinary students (n = 51) most often chose identity/self-expression as the quality not welcome in their veterinary program, followed by negative emotions, freedom/spontaneity, values, emotional engagement, relationships, creativity, and spirituality (see exemplar qualities listed in Table 1). For example, identity/self-expression qualities included veterinary student descriptions such as "aloha," "outgoing," and "optimist." HART veterinary student themes differed in terms of ranking from medical students (see exercise data in Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Similarities

1. Identity/self-expression (veterinary students ranked it first, medical students ranked it third) and freedom/spontaneity (veterinary students ranked it second, medical students ranked it fourth) were common themes for both student groups.

Differences

1. Veterinary students assigned a higher ranking to negative emotions (third) than did medical students (eighth). Negative emotions included sadness, loneliness, and emotional insecurity.

2. Spirituality, the top theme for medical students, was ranked seventh by veterinary students.

3. Self-care (ranked sixth) and joy/happiness (ranked eleventh) appeared as themes for medical students but not for veterinary students.
Mission Statement Exercise
In their mission statements (n = 102), HART veterinary students expressed four themes in the decreasing order of frequency (see exemplar statements in Table 2 and exercise data in Figure 3):

“Personal congruence” (52%) was a description of holding to personal values and identity in the midst of the veterinary curriculum and becoming a veterinarian, for example “Help me find my path, free of compromise, to achieve my goal of impacting my community” or “Help me remember to stay true to myself even if it’s difficult.”

“Personal skills” (20%) was a description of self-awareness and the development of capacities that address a perceived gap in skills, behaviors, or attitudes, for example “Help me to be less judgmental and be more open to all types of experiences that can be had” or “Allow me to be more accepting of others and be more easy-going.”

“Professional identity” (17%) was a description of becoming a veterinarian, for example “Help me to diagnose and/or treat my patients with compassion, competence, and confidence” or “Let me lead my team, and have them feel like I am the best example, and that my actions reflect my words.”
Table 2: Mission statements (veterinary students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal congruence</td>
<td>“Help me to not lose faith in myself and why I did this in the first place—the animals.”</td>
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<td>“Strengthen me to get past this whirlwind of examinations and get to remind me why I have chosen this profession.”</td>
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<td>“Help me to achieve becoming the man I want to be and not the man I could become.”</td>
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<td>“Help me remember to stay true to myself even if it’s difficult.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal qualities</td>
<td>“Help me to be less judgmental and be more open to all types of experiences that can be had.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Allow me to be more accepting of others and be more easy-going.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Enable me to be open in relationships.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional identity</td>
<td>“Enable me to stand up for my patient and keep his/her best interest at heart.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Give me the knowledge and the courage to become internationally welcomed as an expert.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Help me to practice good quality medicine with every patient I come across, without passing judgment.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional skills</td>
<td>“Give me the knowledge and expertise to best help my client.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Help me to build genuine relationships with my team and my clients.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Help me to listen to my patients and clients, and make sure they can see that I am there for them.”</td>
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Figure 3: Mission statements (MD/DVM students)

“Professional skills” (11%) was a description of developing particular skills to become a veterinarian, for example “Help me to have the knowledge and expertise to best help my client” or “Help me to build genuine relationship with my team and my clients.”

Course Evaluations

Of the veterinary students who completed the course evaluation (n = 99), 96% would recommend HART to their classmates, 90% rated the course quality to be excellent/very good, and 100% strongly agreed/agreed that HART offered an educational experience not available elsewhere in the veterinary curriculum.

Three themes emerged from coding across cohorts (see exemplar statements in Table 3). Of the three themes, the dominant theme was “connecting with peers,” with “connecting with self” and “connecting with the profession” following in frequency (see Figure 4). HART was an opportunity to

1. **Connect with self:** reflect on personal values, emotions, and strengths, be self-aware, and recognize the need for self-care.
2. **Connect with peers:** engage in sharing, presence, and nonjudgment in an open and trusting environment rather than the competitive and “having no time” atmosphere of the professional program and life.
3. **Connect with the profession:** re-commit to professional aspirations of being a caring veterinarian and practice skills of presence, listening, and nonjudgment to create relationships with peers and future clients.
Table 3: Course evaluation (veterinary students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Exemplar</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with self</td>
<td>“I learned that I need to believe in myself and that I am a stronger person than I give myself credit for.”</td>
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<td>“I think that I will also be able to not lose myself in the art of practicing and that it will be easier for me to remind myself why I wanted to get into this profession in the first place.”</td>
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<td>Connecting with peers</td>
<td>“I learned that my classmates feel the same way I do and that I am not in this alone.”</td>
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<td>“It was a more trusting and beneficial experience and a place to share with classmates without feeling judged.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting with the profession</td>
<td>“I felt like I could open up a little more in Healer’s Art because everyone was sharing personal experiences and I knew it was confidential.”</td>
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<td>“Healer’s Art helps to bring the focus back to why we have chosen this profession in the first place—to serve our patients and clients with the utmost care and understanding and to advocate for the improvement of health and well-being of all species.”</td>
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<td>“I learned that when I get out of school and go to work, my colleagues/employers do not expect me to be perfect, and they know I have the knowledge and skills, and understand I will need time to get experience in practice. I had an idea about these things before, but now I know, and feel more confident about my career as a veterinarian.”</td>
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DISCUSSION

A CSU HART veterinary student shared the following:

I signed up for this course because it sounded like some of our sharing activities at first-year orientation. Those moments will forever stay with me because those were what made me feel like I belonged in the veterinary profession and that my peers shared some of the same feelings I did. I also took the course because I recognized that I would need a stress-reliever for my busy schedule; having a scheduled class time forced me to take time off of studying to really focus on my emotional health.

Thematically, across all data sources and cohorts, veterinary students described participation in HART as an experience of connecting with self, with peers, and with the veterinary profession:

Connecting with self—Veterinary students talked about reflecting, being self-aware, and reconnecting with their values and strengths. For example, “I learned that I need to believe in myself and I am a stronger person than I give myself credit for.”

Connecting with peers—In their small groups, veterinary students recognized commonalities and empathized with their peers: “HART was a more trusting and beneficial experience and a place to share with classmates without feeling judged.”

Connecting with the profession—Veterinary students connected with why they chose to become veterinarians, aligning personal and professional identities: “HART brings focus back to why we have chosen this profession in the first place—to serve our patients and clients with the utmost care and understanding and to advocate for the improvement of health and well-being of all species.”

In addition, in the course evaluations, HART veterinary students described competition and “having no time” or a lack of time as being aspects of their experience in their veterinary program. This was in contrast to the HART experience, where “you had time to relate to each other” and “lost track of time and had meaningful conversations.” Connecting with the profession was most often described in the mission statements, where student descriptions mirrored themes in the wholeness/one quality exercise. They expressed a desire for self-expression but also fears of being inadequate or not good enough (i.e., perfectionism).

CONNECTING WITH SELF

According to one HART veterinary student, “The course came at exactly the right time in veterinary school—right when I needed to be reminded to not be as hard on myself, to remember who I am.” HART veterinary students described the importance of connecting with self in the course evaluations; in the wholeness/one quality exercise, where they described identity/self-expression as not being welcome in their veterinary curriculum; and in the mission statements’ personal congruence theme. Personal congruence was described as the desire to be oneself, to be whole and complete, to have one’s identity and self-expression “accepted” while becoming a veterinarian, for example “Help me to not lose faith in myself and why I did this in the first place the animals” and “Help me to stay true to myself even if it’s difficult.”

Personal congruence is an alignment between one’s values and one’s actions, or between one’s espoused theory (how you say you would behave) and the theory of action (how you actually behave). Feeling misalignment between what they are told to be and what they see in action, as well as who they are and how they
need to behave, could manifest as dissonance. HART practices seemed to address personal congruence, providing a forum for discussion and allowing students to describe the gap between their values and their experiences in veterinary school.

Self-care and joy/happiness did not appear as themes for veterinary students in the wholeness/one quality exercise, yet they did for medical students. "Self-care" may not be as strong a narrative for these HART veterinary students. It may also be in conflict with other professional narratives of being a veterinary student or veterinarian, such as "competition" and "having no time," themes that were also described by the students in the course evaluations. There may be a relationship between the sense of competition and "having no time" that leads to higher levels of perceived stress than actual stress.5

Finally, in the wholeness/one quality exercise, medical students described spirituality as the most unwelcome quality, which contrasted with veterinary students describing spirituality least. There is a lack of research around student spirituality in both professions. Although medical students described spirituality as not being welcome or valued in their programs,30 many students believed spirituality was inherent in practicing medicine.25 Anecdotally, spirituality may be more accepted within the veterinary profession, with a narrative around the connection between spirituality and animals. Paradoxically, believing in this connection may also lead to veterinary students' moral distress when faced with euthanasia.36

CONNECTING WITH PEERS
HART veterinary students described developing understanding, empathy, and appreciation for peers, creating connection, and realizing commonalities: "I learned that my classmates feel the same way I do and that I am not alone" and "Understanding yourself as a person alone is great, understanding yourself as a person in the context of a profession driven by interpersonal experiences is invaluable too."

In evaluations of another veterinary college's student support program, veterinary students stated that they were reluctant to utilize the services because of their preference for friends, family, or staff; concerns over confidentiality in a small community; and their perception of the veterinary school environment as being too competitive to trust peers.6,27

In contrast, HART veterinary students learned to trust in the small-group process and in each other. Students described peer validation as a shared experience of the environment (i.e., "they feel the same way I do"). In their HART peer groups, veterinary students fostered their sense of coherence, making sense of the veterinary school environment, developing tools and resources, meeting the demands of the environment, and finding meaningful engagement with each other.28

HART students used tools of listening, nonjudgment, and presence to engage and connect with each other and provide a sense of support. In another study, veterinary students who built social relationships with other veterinary students proactively managed their stress symptoms.29 Social isolation and a lack of support from peers and supervisors is correlated with higher levels of self-reported stress among veterinary surgeons in their first years of practice.30 And as with veterinary students, research with veterinarians and workers in veterinary contexts strongly suggests that social support or focus groups help mitigate stress.31

CONNECTING WITH THE VETERINARY PROFESSION
A HART veterinary student shared the following:

I learned that when I get out of school and go to work, my colleagues/employers do not expect me to be perfect, and they know I have the knowledge and skills, and understand I will need time to get experience in practice. I had an idea about these things before, but now I know, and feel more confident about my career as a veterinarian.

Professional narrative scripts are the "ideas about the kind of self/one ought to become and shape students' ideas of what desires, attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions are expected or unbecoming of professionals."25 161 According to Suchman,15 HART is a course in which medical students integrate self into professional practice. HART veterinary students described identifying with being a veterinarian, taking on the expectations and norms of the veterinary profession.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, faculty and administrators are a primary source of professional narrative scripts through actions as well as words.32,33 Such professional narratives are what constitute the informal or hidden curriculum, a powerful influence on students' emerging professional identities.15,34 For example, in the previous quotation from a HART student, we hear the narrative of "perfection," of needing to be perfect as a veterinary student and as a veterinarian. A shadow side of both perfection and competition narratives could be that veterinarians may experience stress and social isolation.33

HART veterinary students did describe positive narratives (e.g., "we care for animals and their owners"). They also described "competition" and "having no time," negative narratives, as ways in which they experienced veterinary school. Veterinary students experience time as a scarce resource. Narratives that treat competition and lack of time as normal could affect a student's decision to participate in the HART elective. HART participation does not contribute to a student's biomedical knowledge or class standing and "takes away" from study time.

A lack of time is an often stated reason for not using veterinary student support services.35 Adding yet another course, even a 15-hour elective, could seem prohibitive. Yet, as the HART veterinary student quotation indicates, perhaps students need to have "required time" to devote to connecting to self, peers, and the profession. When HART was required for all students at one medical
school, those who would not have elected to take the
course described similar experiences to those who would
have.36

IMPLICATIONS

“Resilience is the capacity to respond to stress in a
healthy way, such that goals are achieved at minimal
psychological and physical cost.”37(p.361) Given the con-
sistent finding in the literature that veterinary students
experience stress, developing a student’s capacity for
resilience is critical. This study suggests that the HART
elective, given its small-group process, provided oppor-
tunities to practice connection with self, peers, and
community, factors that are positively associated with reduc-
ing stress and increasing resilience.

Veterinary students in this study expressed both issues of
“personal congruence,” (e.g., asking for help not to
give up something of value to them), and a lack of a
“sense of coherence” (e.g., asking for advice to meet
the challenges of their environment). Personal congruence
and coherence are positively related to self-directed or
intrinsic goal achievement and daily mood.38 Sense of
coherence (and meaningfulness as its most important
component) may have a protective or resiliency effect.39
Based on these findings, a second implication of this
study is the need for curriculum and learning activities
that enhance student self-awareness, coping strategies
(e.g., emotion-focused vs. problem-focused strategies40),
and wellness-enhancing strategies (e.g., mindfulness41).39

Third, making the hidden curriculum and narratives
transparent, conscious, and open for discussion may be
the first step toward transforming veterinary professional
narratives and culture. There appears to be a strong
veterinary narrative around not seeking help and a lack-
ing optimism around mental health interventions.33,35,40
And at the same time, work is underway in veterinary
professional contexts to identify positive coping strategies
and resource or well-being models.2

Peer Groups as Practice Contexts for
Self-Development and Professional Resilience

Based on the HART data, practicing skills such as listen-
ing, presence, and nonjudgment are meaningful and
helpful coping skills for veterinary students, leading to
connections and an increased sense of well-being. Becom-
ing competent in these skills takes practice, and veterinary
students need a context in which to feel safe to share of
themselves and to listen to others. Students experienced
their HART small groups as a “safe container, free from
judgment and competition.” Facilitators heard HART
veterinary students describe that they arrived for the
evening class feeling tired and overwhelmed by their
schedule and workload (“having no time”), and yet by
the end of the night they felt better, energized, and more
optimistic.

The peer-support program at the Royal (Dick) School
of Veterinary Studies is another example of allowing
veterinary students to experience peer support, giving
them time without competition.42 One of the paradoxical
findings in Spielman et al.’s study of the Royal (Dick)
peer-support program was that, although the intent was
to help other students, the peer supporters themselves
may have experienced the most impact, “producing stu-
dents who feel competent to deal with life’s ups and
downs... who are able to translate these coping skills
into their professional life.”43(p.181) Peer groups in which
students feel safe and are able to practice generous list-
ing, presence, and nonjudgment may be practice contexts
for self-development and professional resilience.

Both because of and despite the “having no time”
narrative, veterinary students in this study seem to be
describing a paradox: we may need to look within exist-
ing veterinary curricula for opportunities to form peer
groups and introduce practices of self-awareness, presence,
and nonjudgment to those groups. Studies on small
groups in medical education do in fact report benefits
such as stress reduction,41,42 satisfaction with the small-
group process, and an increased ability to work in a
team—benefits that speak to professional practice.

As each individual student and peer group makes
steps toward changing narratives that enhance resilience,
there is still the larger context of organizations within the
veterinary profession, such as veterinary colleges and
veterinary associations. There are no published studies
of organizational change at veterinary colleges; however,
one medical school engaged in organizational change
wherein each level of the organization fostered a social
environment that reinforces the values of its formal com-
petency-based curriculum. They employed similar methods
to the HART discovery process using storytelling that
“reminded the community of its own quality, its deep
reservoirs of caring about patients, students and col-
leagues and its widely shared passion for service, learn-
ing and discovery.”34(p.507)

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

A major strength of this study was the high response rate
from HART veterinary student participants. Depending
on the year, 93%–100% of all course evaluations were
completed. All whole/one quality responses (100%)
were submitted in 2014 and 2015. This response rate
ensures that the results are representative of the target
population under study and reduces the impact of self-
selection bias. As an additional strength, 4 years of data
were compared and themes were consistent across
cohorts. A third strength is that, while there were differ-
ences in themes between medical and veterinary students,
there were also similarities, providing an opportunity to
view veterinary students through a comparative lens.

As for limitations, this study provides detailed data for
several cohorts of an elective program in a veterinary cur-
riculum at one institution, therefore the generalizability
of the findings to other veterinary colleges is unknown. The
findings may represent a particular kind of student who
self-selects to participate in this elective. In addition, 3%–
11% participation is not representative of first- to third-
year students in the veterinary program at CSU. A third
limitation is that the data sources are limited to self-report
assessment (MAAS-State) and written artifacts and course
evaluation. There may be clarifications the participants
would have made to their descriptions and to the analyses performed.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS
Adding HART student data from other CVMs would provide further conceptual clarification and/or identify possible differences in college cultures and/or student populations. Interviews and focus groups are needed to deepen and clarify our understanding of how veterinary students are describing or experiencing "having no time," "competition," and other descriptive themes present in the written data sources (i.e., spirituality, self-care, and perfectionism). Another question to address in these interviews/focus groups is why certain students choose not to take this course.

Based on the HART veterinary student descriptions, the HART small groups seemed to be a place where students "practice" being themselves and becoming the veterinarians they hope to be. There are few studies looking specifically at the potential emotional and/or social benefits of small-group or team-based learning in medical or veterinary school curricula. Veterinary student experiences in other wellness interventions (i.e., mindfulness-based stress-reduction programs), small-group processes, and team-based veterinary student groups need to be investigated further.

Others have called for studies of resilient and "high"-wellness students and veterinarians to identify the reasons for their success and for initiatives to improve resilience. In this regard, although the MAAS-state pre- and post-measure did not reveal a significant effect, the direction was positive, toward more mindfulness or presence in the moment. We recommend continuing to measure MAAS-State as stress reduction and resilience are highly correlated with mindfulness, and a larger sample size may increase significance.

Finally, given the HART veterinary students’ descriptions and research on other veterinary small groups, how could CVMs address the impact of the "having no time" and "competition" narratives? What would it be like to make a course like HART a core curricular requirement to directly challenge these narratives? And, extrapolating beyond graduation to being in practice, how does what students learn in their program about being a professional affect their outcomes, including resilience?

CONCLUSION
Across data sources, HART veterinary students described developing connections with self, peers, and profession. HART veterinary students also described "having no time" and "competition" in their veterinary school experience, in contrast with their descriptions of the HART small groups. In the HART elective's context of nonjudgmental presence or mindful attention, "no competition," and "having time," the HART veterinary students described recognizing issues of personal congruence and developing a sense of coherence in being on the path to becoming the veterinarians they hope to be.

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REFERENCES


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APPENDIX 1: MAAS-STATE FORM: EXPERIENCES AT TIME OF SIGNAL

Instructions: Using the 0–6 scale shown, please indicate to what degree you were having each experience described below tonight when we began class. Please answer according to what really reflected your experience rather than what you think your experience should have been.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I was finding it difficult to stay focused on what was happening.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I was doing something without paying attention.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I was preoccupied with the future or the past.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I was doing something automatically, without being aware of what I was doing.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I was rushing through something without being really attentive to it.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>