How to Volunteer for the American Association of Equine Practitioners

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The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) depends on its member volunteers to plan and implement programs that improve the health and welfare of the horse and provide professional development opportunities for the equine veterinarian. Investment of volunteer time and talent is repaid through advancement of the equine industry and deepening of professional friendships. Author’s address: Washington State University, French Administration, Room 324, PO Box 641030, Pullman, WA 99164-1030; e-mail: dsellon@vetmed.wsu.edu. © 2012 AAEP.

1. Introduction
The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) was founded in 1954 by a group of veterinarians with a desire to volunteer their time and energy to benefit equine veterinary medicine and the equine industry. Today, the AAEP membership includes more than 10,000 veterinarians and veterinary students in 57 countries. The mission of the AAEP is to improve the health and welfare of the horse, to further the professional development of its members, and to provide resources and leadership for the benefit of the equine industry. In the 58 years since its inception, the AAEP has provided countless hours of quality continuing education for equine veterinarians, produced practice guidelines and recommendations in a wide range of areas, advocated vigorously for the health and welfare of the horse, advanced educational standards for veterinary students, and distributed timely and accurate information to horse owners on important equine health issues. The AAEP has an outstanding professional staff based in Lexington, Kentucky, that is dedicated to the advancement of the association, but it could not begin to accomplish its important mission without the many members who donate their time and talents.

Current AAEP Governance
The AAEP is led by a volunteer team that includes the Executive Committee and Board of Directors working in close collaboration with the AAEP staff led by the Executive Director. The Executive Committee consists of the current President, President-Elect, Vice President, Treasurer, and Immediate Past President. The members of the Board of Directors are elected to represent distinct geographic districts in the United States (nine board members) and Canada (one member). In addition, there is one member representing the equine industry (non-veterinarian), one member representing international membership, and three director-at-large positions. The five members of the Executive Committee also serve on the Board of Directors, making a total of 20 volunteers participating in this aspect of AAEP governance.

Currently, members of the Board of Directors who represent a specific geographic region are nomi-
nated by members (or self-nominate) and elected by majority vote of the members in their region. Nominees for positions representing industry, the international membership, and the directors at large are identified by the AAEP Nominating Committee and elected by the Board of Directors. Nominees for service on the Executive Committee are identified by the Nominating Committee from a list of individuals who have previously served on the AAEP Board of Directors. A new Vice President is recommended to the Board of Directors each year by the nominating committee. If that recommendation is approved, that individual joins the executive committee and moves up the ladder each year (President-Elect, President, then Immediate Past President), before rotating off the executive committee.

Governance Changes
In 2011, in response to changes in membership demographics, the need for a quicker response time to member concerns and professional issues, and changes in communication strategies, the AAEP charged a Governance Task Force with evaluating the AAEP system of governance. This Task Force worked with an external consultant to review input from AAEP members and current governance volunteers. The core recommendations of this group were aimed at:

1. Improving efficiency by decreasing the size and changing the composition of the Board of Directors, creating more effective and diverse representation of AAEP membership in governance;
2. Developing a system to identify future professional leaders and provide them with opportunities to enhance their leadership skills;
3. Creating a more nimble and responsive strategy for addressing important issues affecting the organization and the industry through the increased use of task forces;
4. Increasing opportunities for member participation.

To achieve these goals, the AAEP Governance Task Force made several recommendations that have subsequently been endorsed by the current Executive Committee and Board of Directors. Changes to the Board of Directors will require changes to the AAEP Constitution and Bylaws. The proposed changes will be put forward at the annual AAEP membership meeting in Anaheim, California, at the Annual Convention in December 2012. These changes will require approval by a majority vote of members present at the meeting. In summary, the changes propose the following:

Changes in the AAEP Board of Directors
There will be a decrease in the total size of the Board of Directors from 20 members to 12 members. The new Board will comprise the 5 members of the Executive Committee and 7 directors-at-large. The expectation is that a smaller Board of Directors will be more flexible in their operations with a quicker response time; as a result, Board members will be more actively involved in decision-making processes. This change will happen gradually as board members serve out their current terms and new positions come open. Members of the board will no longer be chosen on the basis of geographic region. Instead, the organization will strive to elect a Board of Directors that reflects the demographic and professional diversity of the membership as a whole, with an emphasis on selecting individuals with demonstrated leadership ability and commitment to the welfare of the horse. The Nominating Committee will recommend nominees for the Board of Directors, with an effort to maintain a diversity of member leadership and demographic characteristics on the Board. Nominees will be elected by the AAEP membership. There will be no designated international or industry positions on the Board, but these demographics will be considered as part of the need for diversity on the Board.

Formation of a Leadership Development Committee
A Leadership Development Committee has been formed as a standing committee of the AAEP and is working to develop a database of AAEP members with an interest in volunteer service to the organization. This database will include information about volunteers related to their specific professional training and experiences, leadership experiences, skills, and interests. The database will be populated by direct member input and searchable by characteristics or categories related to leadership opportunities in AAEP. The Leadership Development Committee will use this database to select names of appropriate individuals to recommend to the Executive Committee and Board of Directors for possible service opportunities. The Committee is now in the process of developing policies and procedures to achieve these goals. The Leadership Development Committee will also make recommendations to the Board of Directors regarding strategies for identification of potential leadership candidates and implementation of specific leadership development opportunities within the organization.

Creating a More Nimble and Responsive Organization
The Governance Task Force determined that the AAEP may be more effective at addressing member needs and industry concerns by maintaining fewer standing committees and increasing the use of targeted task force groups that focus on a defined problem, issue, or goal with a specified time line. Once the task force completes its charge, it is sunsetting. Task forces have the advantage of engaging more members who are more actively engaged in the process. Under the new governance plan, either the Board of Directors or the Executive Committee can create and appoint task forces. Several standing committees of the AAEP have been or will be sus-
settled. After the AAEP Convention in San Antonio last year, the Biologic and Therapeutic Agents, Equine Insurance, Dentistry, Owner Education, and Public Policy Committees were retired. An Equine Welfare and Public Policy Advisory Council will be created to make recommendations to the Board of Directors on topics of concern to AAEP and the equine industry.

Membership Rounds
A number of special interest group listservs have been created as a means of allowing more members to participate in discussions of interest and to serve as another conduit back to the volunteer leadership in the many areas of AAEP’s involvement (welfare, racing, pre-purchase exams, reproduction, business education, etc . . ., including a Rounds devoted to Parenting). Rounds operate electronically during the year and will culminate with face-to-face meetings at the Annual Convention, similar to the previous Forums.

How to Volunteer
The Leadership Development Committee has developed a draft of a Web-based survey instrument that will be used to identify AAEP members who desire to become more actively involved with the organization. AAEP members will be able to access the database and volunteer for service to the association at the time of membership renewal or at any time they choose through the AAEP Web site. When you receive your notice to renew AAEP membership, you will be directed to the Web site to verify basic member information. After verification of the basic information, you will be asked if you are interested in volunteering with the organization. If you indicate affirmatively, you will be directed to the volunteer survey. This survey asks a variety of questions related to professional background, current and past employment experiences, special skills, and volunteer interests. If you desire to volunteer at some time of the year other than the time of membership renewal, you only have to access the AAEP Web site (www.aaep.org) and search the site for volunteer instructions. Completing this survey will ensure that your information is available in the AAEP volunteer database.

When volunteers are needed for any AAEP initiative, the database will be queried for names of individuals with the desired training, experiences, and attributes. The list of names produced by that query will be used for selection of volunteers. The AAEP hopes to use the database to assist with identification of volunteers for traditional committee, task force, and rounds assignments as well as for more targeted volunteer opportunities such as responding to horse owner and industry queries, speaking at owner education events, advising the AAEP on defined issues or problems, obtaining member feedback on specific AAEP initiatives, and similar endeavors. The AAEP anticipates that the governance changes that are occurring will provide an increased number of opportunities for volunteer service.

2. Conclusions
The dedicated veterinary professionals who are members of the AAEP have a vast breadth of knowledge and experience. Working together, we can accomplish our mission to improve the health and welfare of the horse, to further the professional development of our members, and to provide resources and leadership for the benefit of the equine industry.