First, I want to again thank all of those who elected me as your vice president to represent you and our future colleagues for the past year as your representative to the students of AVMA and to the Executive Board. When visiting the veterinary colleges/schools and talking to the students I know our profession’s future is bright. They are problem solvers and they ask excellent questions regarding AVMA, their profession, and their future. The AVMA is doing much to assist with their problems and we should continue to seek more solutions. Most of their primary concerns have been stated previously and center around: educational debt, fewer positions available to them and decreasing salaries in their areas of interest, the need to do residencies and become boarded, whether the educational system is the best for what they need, more animal contact, increasing class sizes, having fewer foreign schools accredited, and having fewer new schools starting in the US. The leadership demonstrated by the students in SAVMA and other allied student organizations as well as their membership is excellent.

The SAVMA governing system is composed of an Executive Board and a House of Delegates. The House representation has two students from each of the SCAVMA chapters. The votes are not weighted by college student enrollment. The House elects the officers, which consist of the president, president-elect, secretary, secretary-elect, treasurer, treasurer-elect, international exchange officer, international exchange officer-elect, information technology officer, information technology officer-elect, The Vet Gazette Editor, The Vet Gazette Editor-elect, global and public health officer, and global and public health officer-elect. The students representing SAVMA in the AVMA House of Delegates are the SAVMA president and president-elect. The majority of the past year those individuals were President Bridget Heilsberg and President-Elect Elise Ackley. The House meets twice annually, once at the AVMA Convention and at the SAVMA Student Symposium. This year the Symposium was held in Baton Rouge. In addition to these meetings there is a monthly conference call of the Executive Board. Dr. Derrick Hall, Student AVMA Advisor and Assistant Director of Membership and Field Services Division, Theresa DeCarli, Program Coordinator, Membership and Field Services Division, and your Vice President are present on these conference calls.

The Veterinary Colleges/Schools I have visited so far this year include: Colorado State University, Auburn University, Tuskegee University, The Ohio State University, Oregon State University, Washington State University, Iowa State University, University of Minnesota, Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, University of Georgia, and Kansas State University. The remaining veterinary colleges will be visited during the next year. During these visits the students attend a presentation during which I present information on the benefits of AVMA and on the multiple student-oriented activities in place to assist them. I also emphasize the advantages of visiting our website and looking at the programs available which will be of value to them. In addition to the presentation, I attempt to have smaller group meetings with students and student leaders. All meetings provide an opportunity to answer questions and provide information regarding concerns for the future. In addition, I usually have the opportunity to talk with the Dean, Dean of Students, and faculty, and to attend a few lectures and/or laboratories whenever possible as well as tour the facility. The students are appreciative that AVMA sincerely cares about them and their future.

So what can AVMA and every veterinarian in this profession do to ease their plight? We can present ideas to every organization including veterinary colleges/schools within the profession.
The ideas may not be possible as we all know but what does presenting them lose? No veterinarian should ever become angered or upset because an idea with which they may disagree was presented. Most great accomplishments on this planet were the result of the cumulative body of knowledge existing prior to the event and someone to put it into a workable solution. What can we do about student salaries? Encourage the presentation of knowledge and techniques, which will add value to our new graduates. This includes mentoring in their areas of interest so they are of more value when entering the “workforce” and, therefore, deserving of an increased salary. This also implies working with veterinary colleges and schools to make it known that practitioners are willing and able to spend time mentoring and improving the skill set of soon to be and the new graduates. This increases the working relationship between colleges/schools and the practitioners in additional ways that will be beneficial for both. This idea only obtains results if colleges and practitioners both see the advantages. The practitioner is still the dominant player in this profession and their involvement I believe is critical to the solutions we will find. This working relationship can achieve great results in all areas of the profession not only practice situations.

The following are thoughts to encourage thinking not to alienate. What can we (the profession not just AVMA) do to lower student debt? We can lobby for more financial assistance programs and we can seek donations for scholarships. Although these approaches are very helpful, they will probably not be the solution that proves most valuable. We can rely on others to fix our problems or we can find new solutions. We must continue to do what it takes to bridge the gap between now and then but we must not stop seeking solutions. How many years of undergraduate education are necessary prior to entry into veterinary college/school? Why do most foreign accredited schools have two to three years less of undergraduate requirements than US colleges/schools? Does taking two to three years off of the undergraduate program save the students that much money? It saves some and it gets them in the work force two to three years sooner. I have been reminded that many students are not “mentally prepared” or “know” they want to be a veterinarian at age 19 to 20. I know this is true for many but it is not true for all. Design with the help of experts a “mental” test to determine desire and maturity and don’t make all wait because of the ones who justifiably so, decide later what they want to do as a career. Can we encourage more time for students to spend in areas of possible interest before or while in veterinary college and earn college credit for the experiences?

Investigate newer teaching models, which is currently being attempted at many colleges/schools and that can achieve the same high quality education but at a lower cost. The easiest possible answer for this is to possibly state it “can’t” be done. Why? Have we truly exhausted all possibilities of highly educating our students for less? Does every veterinarian teaching them need to be boarded? The best resources we have for the future are our students. They will succeed no matter what we do to them or how we teach them. We can slow down the process or speed up the process. We can make it easier or make it more difficult. We can make it enjoyable or make it their worst nightmare. We can steal their confidence or we can build their confidence. They will, however, succeed. Anyone who truly believes they succeed because of us does not know our students of today. Look at the challenges they face and still they charge forward looking for ways to succeed. They will but we can help them by all working together to find as good but less expensive educational models. How often do we listen to practitioners in regard to what they want their new hires to know on day one of practice and provide it? Would they pay more to graduates who brought added value to their practices? How often do we listen to students regarding what they learn and how they learn? They are living the experience and although they certainly don’t know everything that is good for them, possibly some of their ideas could be
utilized and reduce costs. How much can a student learn in a practice situation? How much time should be allocated for this experience?

What can we do to diversify the careers that graduates pursue? Attract students interested in different areas of veterinary medicine and admit them to veterinary colleges/schools. When should this recruitment program begin? My involvement in grade school to postgraduate programs indicates middle school at the latest. This is not a scientifically proven opinion and possibly we should do a five to ten year study to find the answer or we just start the program. We need to find ways to introduce everything a veterinarian is capable of doing in addition to the practice of veterinary medicine which most see as our only value. These presentations need to be interesting and directed. They must not only hold the attention of a middle school student without having a cute puppy to show them, but they must ignite an interest they may never have connected to veterinary medicine. Examples of these could be public health but also aerospace and beyond. We not only attract a potentially different subset of veterinary applicants but we have exposed the next generation to all a veterinarian can do even if they never intend to be one. I believe professional input by those trained to produce these types of promotional materials should be used but veterinarians locally should give the actual presentations where possible.

Do all students need to be boarded and do some create this idea by act or deed? In a recent conversation with a veterinary student during one of my school visits he mentioned that his father was “just” a practitioner. I stopped his comments and asked him what he had just stated. He did not know. Another student pointed out to him what he had just stated. I asked him to please call his father that night and tell him what he said. I also asked him to never again to refer to a practitioner as “just” a veterinarian. In my opinion haven’t we then followed the human medical model of twenty years ago? Do we really want to do that? If someone wants to pursue boards I will fully encourage them as I have obtained mine. However, I believe one does so realizing they do it for love of the specialty and for no other reason. If they make more income with boards great. But I truly believe you do it because you love it. Do all our students need to have boards to have an excellent career, be happy, and be an excellent veterinarian in practice what they most desire doing? No. Additional debt and delaying a family are two excellent reasons to consider why to become boarded verses why not to do so.

The one message I have heard from our students too frequently is that “nobody cares.” Perception as we all know can easily replace reality. The AVMA and we as veterinarians are all in a position to change this misperception. In order to gain and maintain the confidence of our future colleagues we must first be honest. This implies that we do not scare them with untruths regarding their future, but at the same time we must not lie regarding their future potential career availabilities. If one does not acknowledge a problem may exist, no one will seek the solution. Many students question why they are being told two directly opposite points of view regarding their careers by the people they trust on both sides. We must eliminate the “sides” and all present truth whatever that may be. All must present the same truths to this extremely intelligent group or it will erode the confidence that has taken 150 years to develop. We may not agree with the facts and we can state that but we must acknowledge what those are and how we are all going to work together to find a solution.