In 2009, our college introduced an innovative DVM curriculum that focused on clinical skills and clinical thinking from the first day of the first year. We moved 24 weeks of instruction out of the classroom and into a clinical setting.

In years 1 through 3, core course material previously taught as 5 or 6 courses/semester was transitioned into 9 comprehensive 8-week courses taken sequentially in a quarter system. The resulting core curriculum reduced redundancy, integrated clinical relevance into basic sciences material, and created space for students to devote 8 weeks in each of their first 3 years to clinical rotations.

First- and second-year rotations often combine working alongside fourth-year students on clinical rotations with developing practice-related clinical proficiencies in our 16,000-sq ft Clinical Skills Learning Center. Rotations created specifically for first- and second-year students cover topics such as professional communication, history taking, physical examination, diagnostic planning, biomedical safety, introductory surgical skills, large animal handling and techniques, and critical thinking skills.

Illinois students spend the 6 weeks immediately before graduation pursuing individual interests they arrange with the help of a faculty advisor. This Professional Development module can include externships or advanced rotations and courses, such as equine techniques and a business management course.

Innovations and fine-tuning
Since we made this dramatic shift in the curriculum, we’ve implemented a number of adjustments. To ensure that first-year students receive initial anatomy training, we shifted the clinical quarter from the first to the second half of fall semester for first-year students and to the first half of spring semester for second-year students.

Because the new curriculum required more condensed and integrated delivery, we hired 3 course coordinators to handle the logistical burdens associated with core courses involving dozens of faculty experts.

Our Clinical Skills Learning Center has continuously developed new modules and simulations. Students now learn over 300 discrete clinical skills via life-sized models and wet labs before performing the procedures on a live patient.

We have also expanded student opportunities in primary care practice through our Medical District Veterinary Clinic in Chicago and our small animal and equine primary care services in central Illinois.

Ten DVM classes later ...
In 2022, we graduated the 10th class educated under the Illinois Integrated Veterinary Professional Curriculum. What has the impact been?

On applicant interview day, our curriculum is the reason most frequently cited for students’ interest in Illinois. On surveys of senior students, self-reported confidence in clinical proficiency has almost doubled over the reports from students educated under our previous curriculum.

Further, the reduced classroom time has not impacted Illinois students’ performance on the national licensing examination: over the past 9 years (academic years 2013 through 2021), the mean pass percentage for Illinois (96.5%) was higher ($P = .003$) than that for all other takers of the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination over the same period.

We believe our curricular innovations foster our students’ ability to think like clinicians, provide more and earlier exposure to veterinary career paths, and prepare students with skills to excel immediately in the workforce.