The University of Illinois operates 2 off-site primary care practices—Medical District Veterinary Clinic, a 5-doctor dog-and-cat clinic in Chicago, and Midwest Equine, an equine-only practice 25 miles from the college—where students experience a private practice–like environment.

The small animal primary care service located in Urbana, meanwhile, has created a rotation where fourth-year students more fully embody the role of an associate veterinarian in practice.

This approach was made possible thanks to a hospital-wide renovation and expansion project. In 2020, primary care, along with the zoological medicine, wildlife, and shelter medicine services, moved from the specialty teaching hospital to the new Veterinary Medicine South Clinic, a 16,000-sq ft building across the street. Later, small animal urgent and convenient care and zoo ambulatory services were added.

Hands-on experience for students
“Our rotation aims to mirror the real world as much as possible,” said Dr. Gene Pavlovsky, who heads the primary care service. “We operate as any private practice would, with our own practice manager, reception, appointment structure, and exam, treatment, and operating rooms. Students see real-life cases and engage with a financially and culturally diverse clientele.”

Designed to build students’ competence and confidence, this rotation is hands-on in every aspect. Students take the lead in delivering patient care and client communication with each visit. They draw blood, place IV catheters, and perform routine surgeries and dental cleanings. Students also participate in the care delivered through the urgent and convenient care service. Overall, they see more patients, and patients with more common concerns, than they see on rotation in specialty services.

A primary care faculty member stays with the student one-on-one from the beginning to end of each visit. Having observed the students directly, these mentors then provide immediate feedback on students’ communication skills, physical examination technique, and other aspects of their developing skillset.

Learning to care for clients
The primary care rotation teaches that caring for clients is as much a part of everyday practice as giving injections.

“The client experience plays a huge role in the client’s overall perception of care,” said Dr. Pavlovsky. “We instill in students the need to provide care, not just medicine. The client is an important part of the care team who should be included in the decision-making process.”

Students learn to engage clients in a conversation about their pets, to ask open-ended questions, and to ask the right questions at the right time. Effective communication skills are emphasized as foundational to a trust-based relationship with clients and an accurate diagnosis. When presenting treatment options, students are coached to provide their specific recommendation, personalized to the pet, and to explain which option represents optimal patient care.

Dr. Pavlovsky believes the key to developing confident and competent veterinarians is to create a culture of support and acceptance that coexists with accountability and leadership by example. Primary care rounds cover not only cases but also topics like successfully navigating the first 6 months in practice and strategies to make the workday less stressful.