

Chicago VMA column for May/June 2010

“An Amazing Journey”: Year One of Our New Curriculum

By Herb Whiteley

It's impossible to convey how very proud I am—and you should be too—of our students, staff, and especially our faculty for the extraordinary creativity and just plain hard work that has gone into developing and implementing the new Illinois Integrated Veterinary Professional Curriculum.

Maybe what one student in the Class of 2013 had to say after the first eight-week clinical rotation portion of the program will give you some idea of the impact of our new approach to veterinary education:

“I think this experience will hands-down be one of the best experiences of my life. I loved every week. I was forced to meet new people and put myself in challenging, often uncomfortable, situations and learn to adjust. It was an amazing personal journey...”

Another student said this about starting the year in the clinics:

“I have had anatomy, physiology, and histology before, and the [clinical rotations] made me regret not paying attention as much as I could have in those classes in the past. If I had gone straight into classes again in vet school, I likely would have just done the work to get the grades and not focused as much on actually LEARNING the material. Now I really want to understand everything.”

We are using every method available to us to gather feedback on our new curriculum. With a medical education software program called E*Value we can anonymously survey not only the students but also faculty, clinic staff, and fourth-year students who engaged in peer-teaching during the clinical rotations. This tremendous volume of input is helping us monitor and refine the curriculum.

In addition, in April I met with the students pioneering this new curriculum to give them a chance to provide good old-fashioned face-to-face feedback.

They confirmed the need for refinements. For example, some of the clinical rotations had too many students and not enough activity or not enough physical space. Some lectures in the three didactic courses that rounded out the year need tighter focus on core material versus information better suited to an elective course.

Students also told me that having clinical experiences early in their studies opened their eyes to aspects of veterinary practice they hadn't known about and now wanted to explore more fully. The Clinical Skills Learning Center and its technician coaches earned high praise from students.

The approach of receiving only one recorded grade per eight-week block in the didactic courses, with only one mid-term, one final, and a small number of practical exams and quizzes, took some getting used to, but by April some students were commenting that they had less test anxiety and better study skills.

I was especially pleased to hear the perception of one faculty member that the Class of 2013 seems to be integrating basic and clinical information more effectively, and sooner, than previous classes.

These comments reaffirm the overarching goals of the curricular changes we're making and add to our commitment to adjust and improve this innovative program.

I look forward to the fall, when half our students—first-years and second-years—will be engaged in the new curriculum.

To learn more about the new curriculum or to arrange a visit to the Clinical Skills Learning Center, please see our Web site (vetmed.illinois.edu/asa/) or contact me at dean@vetmed.illinois.edu.