

Investing for Practice Success:

Help Us Teach Students a Must-Have Skill

By Herb Whiteley

Dean, College of Veterinary Medicine

What skill is most important to you when you look for a new associate? Diagnostic know-how? Surgical finesse?

Or is it the same skill that clients of veterinary practices cite as their primary reason for choosing a particular veterinarian? The skill that has been shown to improve diagnostic accuracy, patient health status, client adherence, and client and clinician satisfaction, while decreasing liability claims?

Communication as a skill that can be taught and evaluated was long overlooked in veterinary education, but today the AVMA Council on Education includes “opportunities for students to learn ... to communicate effectively with clients and colleagues” among the standards of accreditation.

Our new Illinois Integrated Veterinary Professional Curriculum emphasizes clinical skills throughout the four-year program. To augment the new curriculum, our Clinical Skills Learning Center has grown over the past two years to become the nation’s most comprehensive veterinary facility of its kind. (If you haven’t had a chance to see this facility in person, I urge you to make the trip to Urbana. We will be happy to give you a tour.)

With financial support from alumni and other sources, we are planning to create a “communications center” in our skills lab, so students can practice key communication skills along with the dozens of large and small animal medical and surgical procedures for which we have training stations.

The communications area will have four mock examination rooms, each equipped with digital video cameras and in-ceiling microphones as well as furnishings that can be rearranged to evoke a variety of typical clinical settings.

Students will be coached and evaluated on communication skills used in client interactions such as taking the patient's history, making treatment recommendations, and discussing euthanasia. They will practice reflective listening, learn the value of open-ended questions, learn to recognize non-verbal cues, and gain empathy for other perspectives as they role play clients, practitioners, and other veterinary staff members.

We hope you will assist us in enhancing our facilities so that our students—your future colleagues—will enter practice well prepared in this important skill.

If you'd like to find out how you can help, please call Brenda Betts, associate dean for advancement, at 217-333-5545 or contact me at dean@vetmed.illinois.edu.