Essentially Unessential

Rethinking Core Competencies for Veterinary Technician Education

Why reassess essential skills?

Essential skills form the foundation of veterinary technician education.

Gaps often exist between classroom instruction and clinical realities.

Objective: To better emulate contemporary veterinary practice and its demands.

What are essential skills?

Defined by the AVMA to ensure entry-level competence.

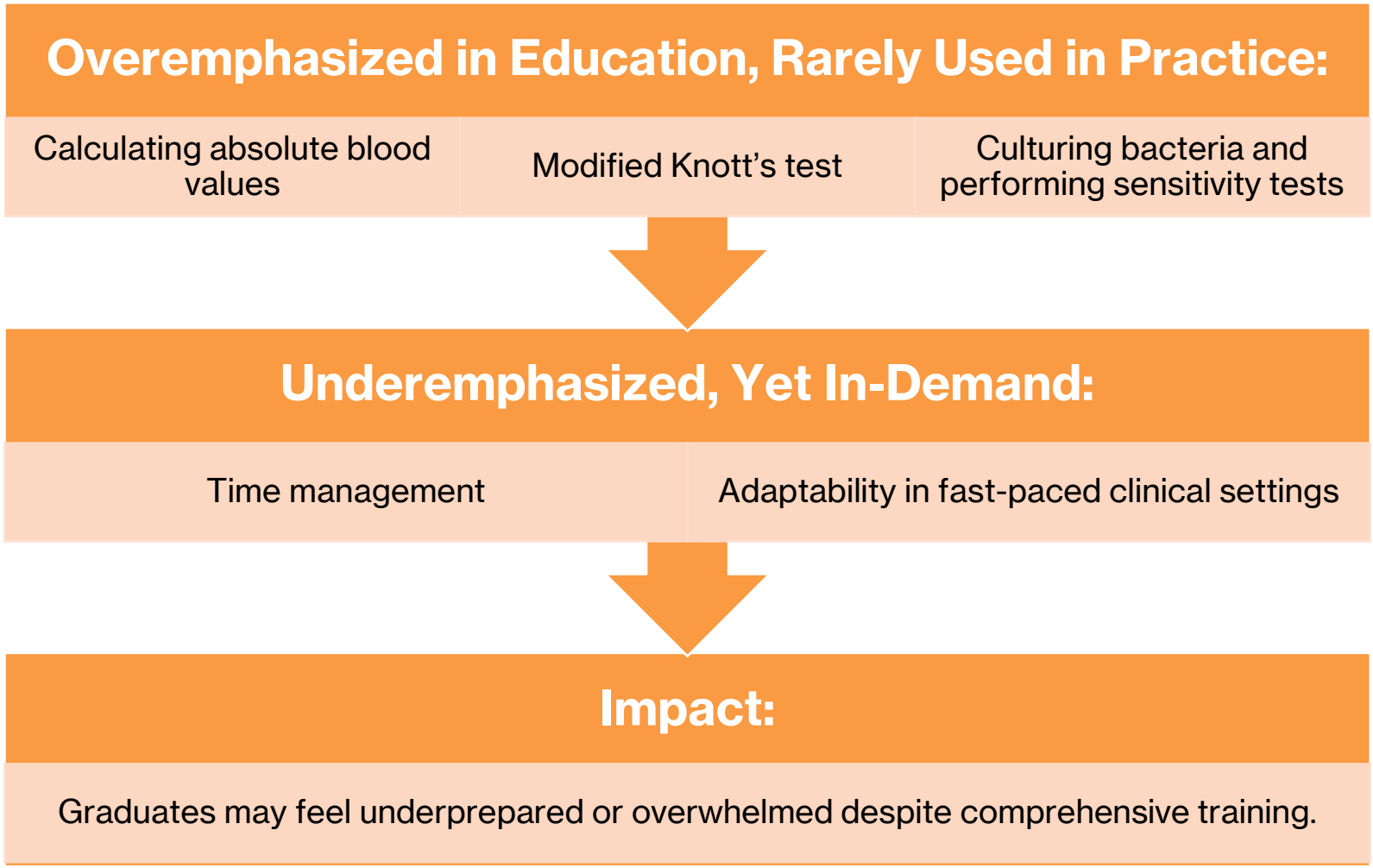
Key categories include:

Clinical Proficiency – e.g., surgical assisting

Interpersonal Skills – e.g., client communication

Professional Attributes – e.g., ethical decision-making

Gaps between clinic and classroom

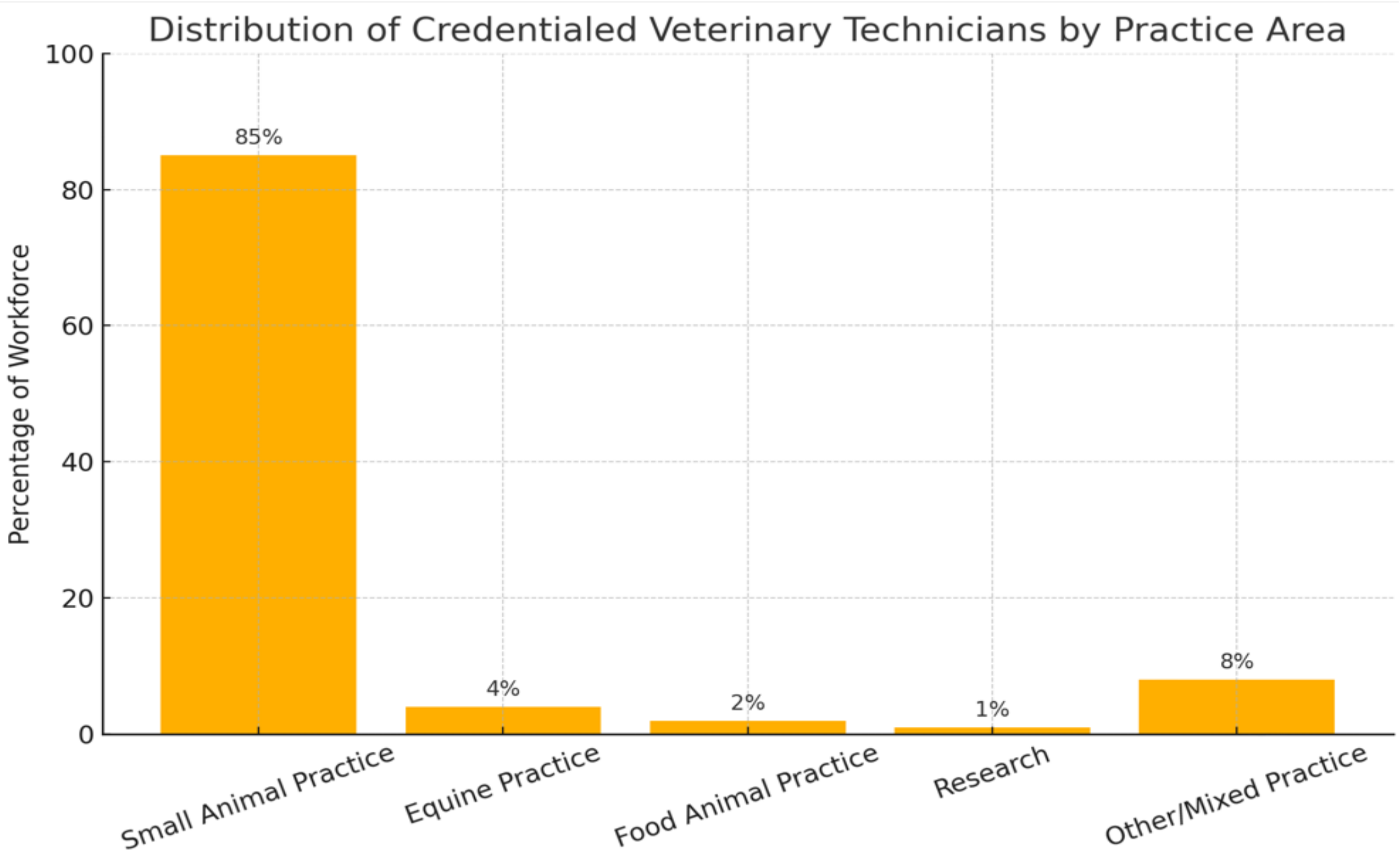


Fear Free

As we promote this in practice and teach the standards in our programs, are we hypocritical to cause pain in animals unnecessarily?

Although statistics are hard to find for technicians, only 3-4% of graduating veterinarians enter livestock practice. NAVTA lists 4% of credentialed technicians in equine practice. US Bureau of Labor Statistics lists 0.9% of credentialed technicians are working in research.

Technicians are being required to perform skills that cause discomfort to animals, despite the fact that some of these procedures are unlikely to be used again in their future practice or performed with true proficiency.


Distribution of Credentialed Veterinary Technicians by Practice Area
Percentage of Workforce
100
80
60
40
20
0
85%
4%
2%
1%
8%
Small Animal Practice
Equine Practice
Food Animal Practice
Research
Other/Mixed Practice

What do employers really want?

Core expectations from veterinary clinics:

- Competency in routine clinical procedures
- Confidence and efficiency under pressure
- Strong communication and client education skills
- Flexibility with scheduling and teamwork dynamics

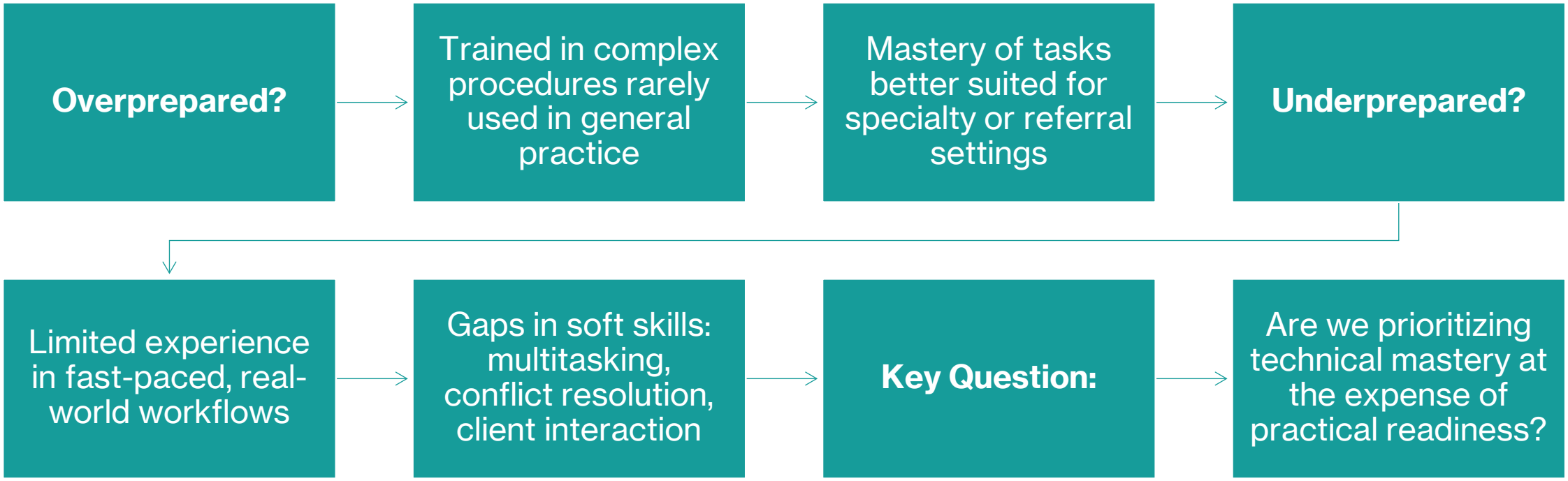
Common feedback themes:

- “We can teach technique – we need attitude and adaptability.”
- “Graduates often need more real-world readiness.”

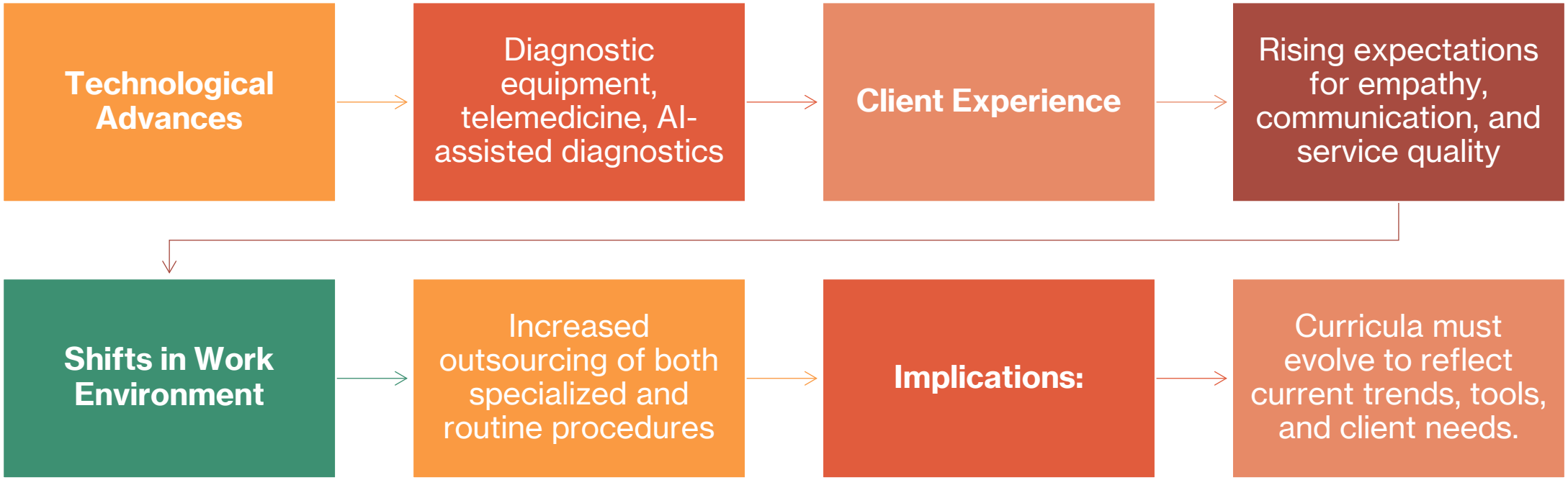
Takeaway:

- Aligning training with actual practice improves confidence, job retention, and clinic satisfaction.

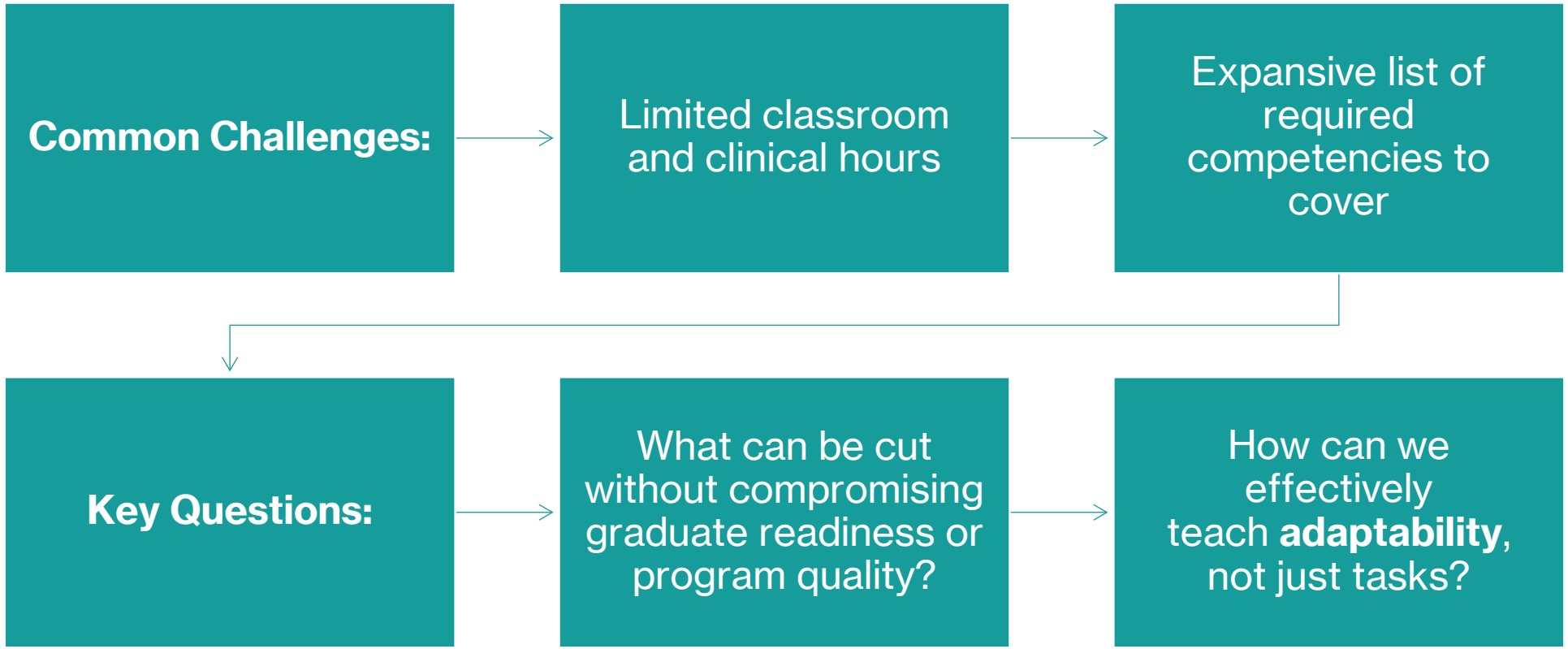
Assessing graduate readiness...



Responding to a changing field...



Balancing depth and breadth...



Adapting education for modern practice...

Curriculum Prioritization:	Focus on high-frequency, high-impact skills Reevaluate time spent on rarely used procedures
Teach for Adaptability:	Scenario-based learning and simulations Emphasis on clinical reasoning over rote memorization
Stronger Clinic Partnerships:	Real-world clinical experience Involve employers in curriculum review
Continuous Feedback & Flexibility:	Regular updates from graduates and employers Agile curriculum design that can evolve with the profession

Evolving education for the future...

Reevaluate the Essential Skills List:

Regularly update the skills list to reflect emerging trends and technologies

Collaborate with industry leaders, clinics, and veterinary technician educators to identify evolving needs

Agility in Program Design:

Integrate flexibility in course offerings, such as electives or micro-credentials

Career Considerations

The demand for **large animal veterinary technicians** vs **small animal veterinary technicians** differs significantly based on geography, industry trends, and workforce availability.

If you prefer **greater job variety, geographic flexibility, and pet-client interaction**, small animal practice may be ideal.

If you are drawn to **agriculture, livestock, equine work, or rural living**, large animal practice offers rewarding but physically demanding roles – often with strong community impact.

Small Animal Veterinary Technicians

High Demand – Especially in Urban/Suburban Areas

Workplace prevalence: Most vet clinics and hospitals in the U.S. and other developed nations focus on companion animals (dogs, cats, exotic pets).

Client volume: Pet ownership is growing, especially post-COVID, and more owners are seeking regular and specialized care.

Job growth: According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), veterinary technician jobs are projected to grow **20% from 2022 to 2032**, much faster than average.

Burnout & turnover: High attrition due to low pay, high emotional labor, and stress makes consistent hiring a challenge – thus demand stays high.

Bottom line: Demand is **strong and consistent**, especially in cities and suburbs.

Large Animal Veterinary Technicians

Moderate Demand – High in Rural Areas but Fewer Job Openings Overall

Workplace limitations: Jobs are concentrated in **rural and agricultural areas**, where livestock and equine practices are based.

Fewer positions: Fewer vet practices specialize in large animals, and many large animal vets operate solo or in mobile practices with limited support staff.

Hard-to-fill roles: Despite fewer job openings overall, **positions are often harder to fill** due to:

- Physical demands
- Lower pay (often compared to effort/risk)
- Remote locations

Critical need in agriculture: As the number of large animal vets decreases, techs who can support livestock health and biosecurity are valuable – especially in food animal production.

Bottom line: **Fewer total jobs**, but **high demand where needed** and often harder to recruit for.

Flexible Tracks or Specializations in Veterinary Technology Programs?

Core Curriculum (Required for All Students)

Regardless of specialization, all students should complete a solid foundation in:

Anatomy & Physiology

Pharmacology

Veterinary Nursing Skills

Radiology & Diagnostic Imaging

Surgical Nursing

Dentistry

Clinical Pathology

Anesthesia & Pain Management

Professional Ethics & Communication

Optional Specialization Tracks?

Each student selects **one or two areas of concentration**, involving:

- Advanced coursework
- Focused labs or skills workshops
- Clinical rotations or externships in that specialty

Large Animal & Production Medicine

- **Focus**: Cattle, horses, small ruminants, swine, poultry
  Skills:
- Herd health and disease prevention
- Large animal restraint and handling
- Reproductive and neonatal care
- Field anesthesia and emergency response
- Biosecurity and regulatory compliance
- **Ideal For**: Students aiming to work in rural or agricultural communities, mobile veterinary services, or food animal operations.

Emergency & Critical Care

Focus: High-acuity cases in 24/7 hospitals or ER clinics
Skills:

Triage and patient stabilization

Advanced anesthesia and monitoring

CPR and critical interventions

ICU patient management

Communication in high-stress settings

Ideal For: Students drawn to fast-paced, high-impact work in specialty hospitals or emergency centers.

Exotics & Zoo Medicine

Focus: Small mammals, birds, reptiles, zoo and wildlife species
Skills:

Handling and restraint of non-traditional species

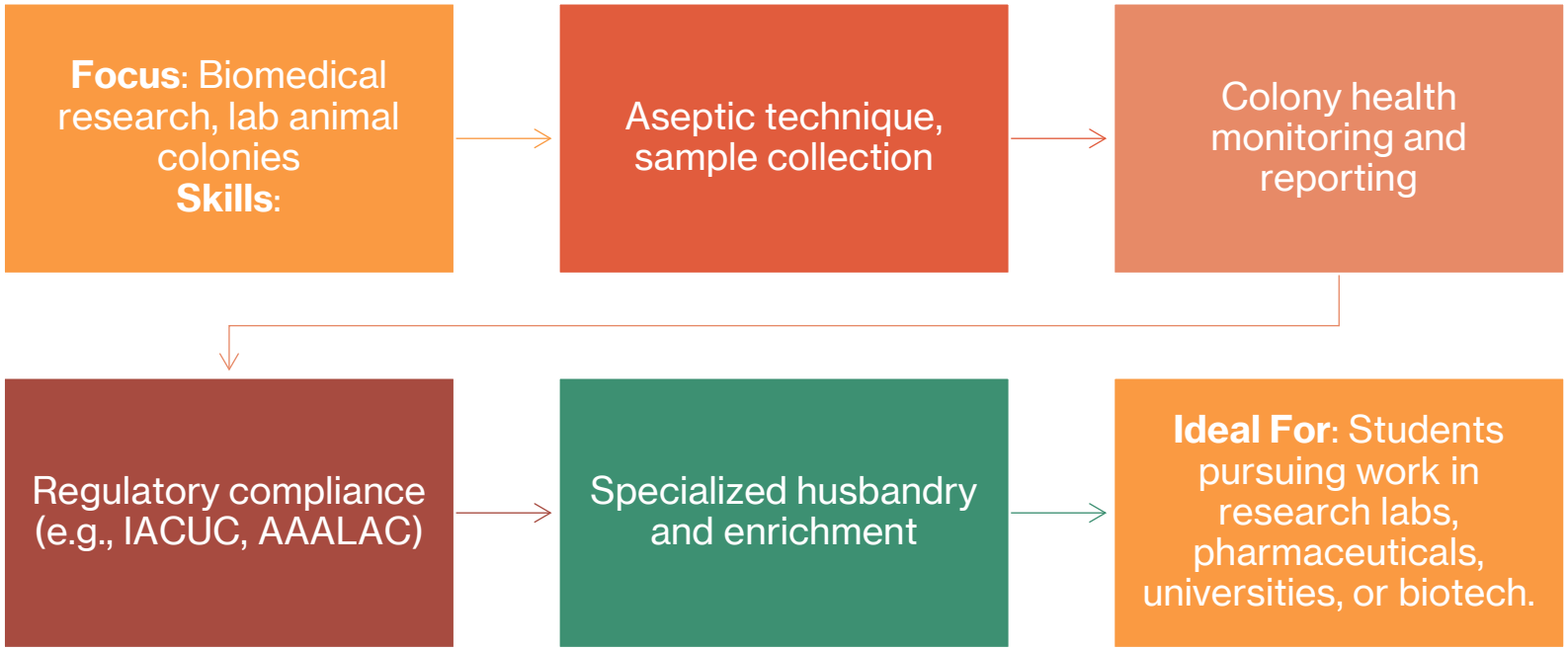
Nutrition and environmental husbandry

Preventive medicine and enrichment

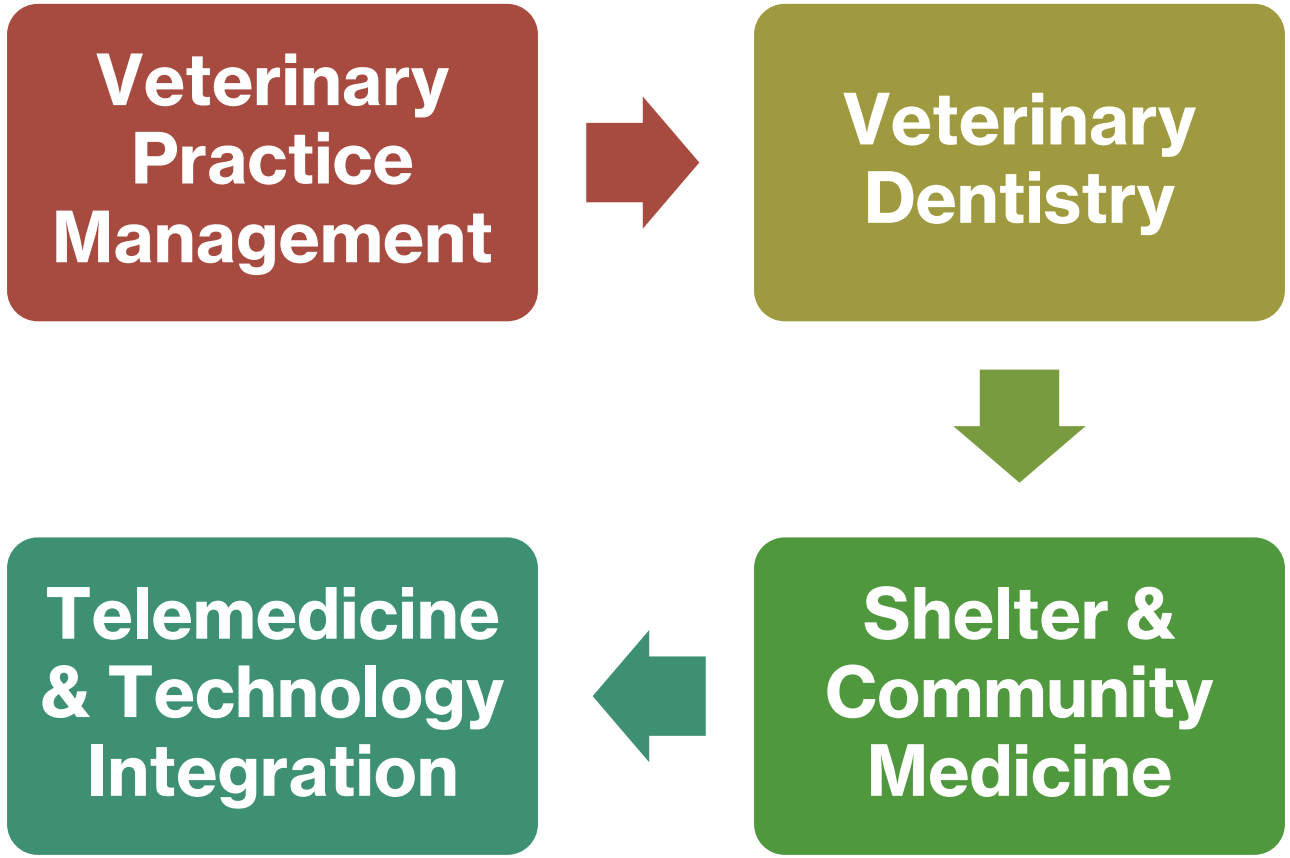
Field triage and wildlife rehabilitation

Ideal For: Students interested in exotic pets, wildlife rehab, or zoo/aquarium careers.

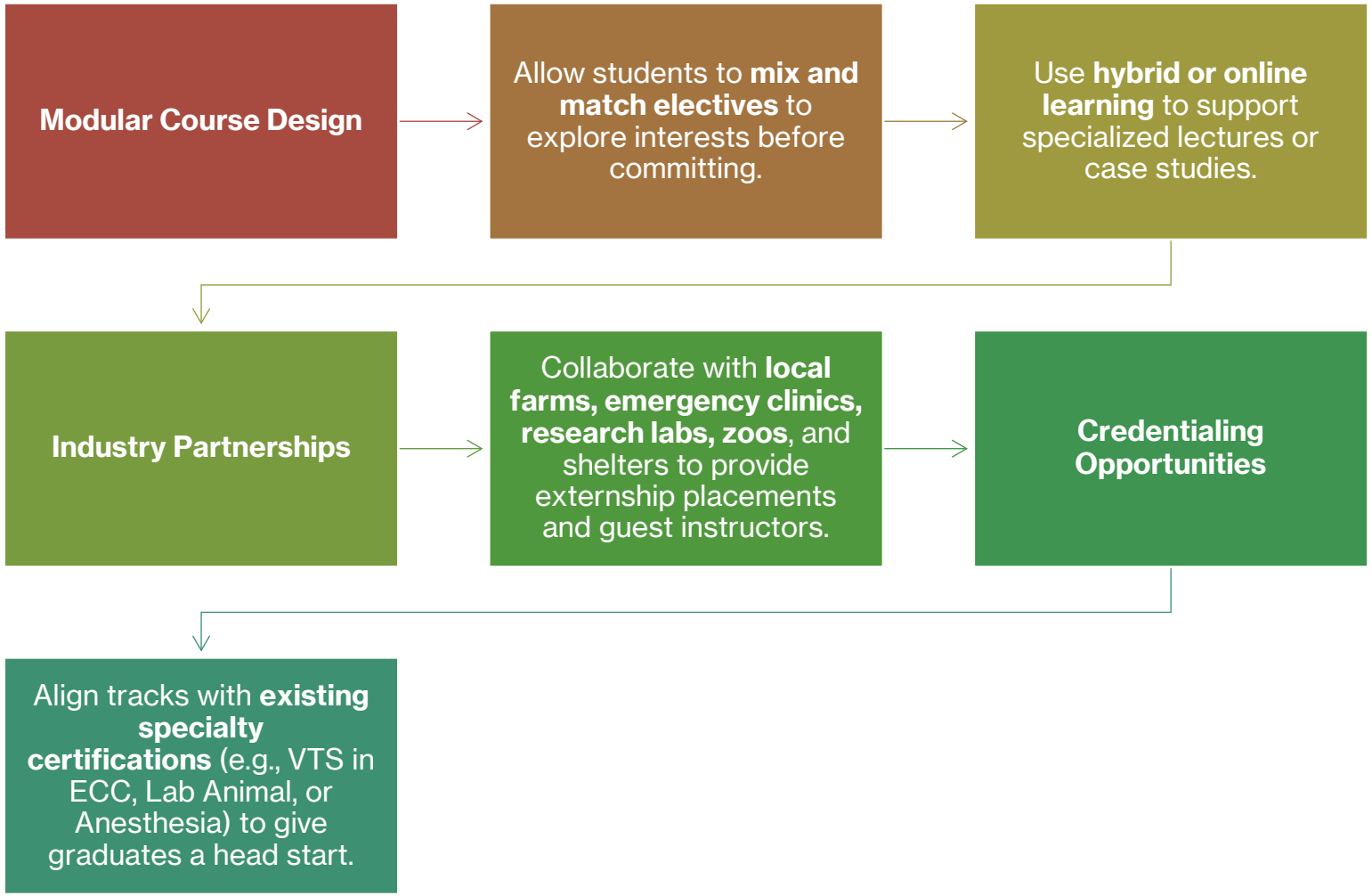
Laboratory Animal Science



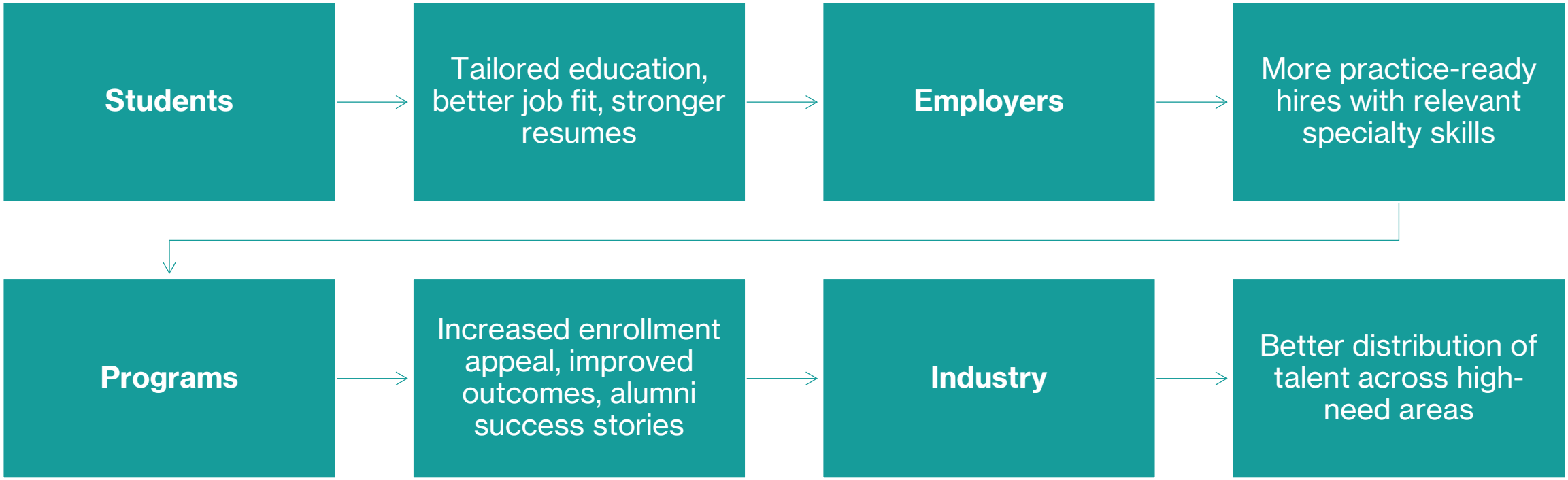
Emerging Tracks



Implementation...



Benefits to Stakeholders



Let’s collaborate...

What skills do you see as most relevant in today’s clinics?

Are there skills you believe should be eliminated?

How can we ensure curricula remain adaptable?

Moving forward...

Final Thoughts:

As the profession evolves, so must the curriculum.

Collaboration among educators, industry leaders, and clinics is key to bridging the gap between classroom theory and real-world practice.

Call to Action:

Let's work together to create a more adaptable, responsive educational framework.

Next Steps: Begin discussions on aligning the essential skills with current clinic needs and explore how we can innovate training for future success.