During the early part of our development, a colleague shared what would prove to be transformative advice. This succinct advice was to embrace being the second publicly funded veterinary school in Texas. This awareness freed us to define and build our program around a simple purpose. It has the following 2 elements:

- Serve the veterinary educational and veterinary service needs of rural and regional communities
- Provide access to affordable, high-quality education

To pursue this purpose in a very deliberative fashion, we developed 3 interconnected strategies:

- Recruit and admit students with deep life experiences in rural and regional communities
- Deliver a curriculum to prepare students for general veterinary practice in rural and regional communities
- Provide experiential learning in the context of rural and regional communities

Fortunately, the School of Medicine at our sister institution, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, had a similarly narrow purpose to prepare physicians for rural family medicine and primary care. They introduced us to a proven holistic review framework. Within this framework, the admissions process is individualized to balance each applicant’s academic metrics, life experiences, and personal attributes relative to the School’s mission.

For example, GPA is not considered in the admission process if the applicant meets the minimum GPA required. Review of application materials and the interview process is based purely on alignment of the applicant’s academic metrics, life experiences, and personal attributes relative to the School’s mission.

At the time of publication, 2 cohorts are enrolled. All enrolled students have deep life experiences in rural and regional communities. Approximately two-thirds call home a rural, agricultural, or sparsely populated community, and one-third are a first-generation student.

Our purpose-informed curriculum is developed using a competency-based framework. In part because of our purpose, an overarching philosophy is to prepare graduates to practice at distance from a referral hospital. An example of how this philosophical perspective permeates throughout our curriculum is that we assign each student a handheld ultrasound device during their first week of class. Students are expected to use it at every opportunity throughout their education. Our clinical and professional skills programming is built sequentially over 6 semesters to provide students with the ability to practice, grow skills, and become confident and competent. This includes purposeful incorporation of these ultrasound devices so that they become a natural “extension” of our students’ toolkit. Course activities and assessment thereof build ultrasonography competence—and confidence in this competence—so that they excel at point-of-care ultrasonography upon graduation.

Our inaugural class enters their clinical year in May 2024. Our model to deliver the clinical year can be considered a hybrid, community-based approach in which students undertake rotations both on campus within our facilities and off campus with our community partners. These off-campus veterinary partners are purposefully selected to meet our curricular needs, to reinforce the regional and rural context of our program, and for their willingness to mentor students.

We have much work ahead of us. We have grown to almost 300 students, staff, and faculty. When fully developed, we anticipate 400 DVM students, 75 graduate students, and 125 full-time equivalent staff and faculty.

At the center of what we do as a School is our simple guiding purpose.

References
