

Bryan D. Rank



September 28, 2024

Dear Search Committee Members:

Please accept this letter as my formal application for the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CASNR) position at Texas A&M University - Commerce. My curriculum vita and list of professional references are enclosed. I am excited by the potential opportunity to collaborate with your faculty, students, and stakeholders while leading a diverse and dynamic college that has a long history of serving Northeast Texas.

As I consider the leadership challenges and opportunities enumerated in the position description, I am excited by the opportunities that exist. I have been familiar with Texas A&M University - Commerce for many years and have been to campus many times with students as an agriculture science teacher prior to my graduate school and university faculty experiences. I always thought highly of the CASNR faculty and am thrilled by the growth and forward-focused development that has occurred since the last time I visited campus.

Among the challenges and opportunities, I see opportunity in leveraging the historic strengths of CASNR as well as the broader university to develop synergistic initiatives to integrate academic units across the college to drive innovation. I am particularly excited by the potential that the Dallas campus presents. Although my personal background is incredibly rural, I see the need for local food production and envision sustainable urban agriculture as a viable emerging market for college graduates with the necessary education. As I think about sustainable urban agriculture, my thoughts go beyond the technological aspect. Although the technology is essential, I can envision courses and certifications that focus on leadership, NGO management, marketing, and communications as ways to enhance and build the current program.

I am also excited about the traditional agriculture production at the farm near Commerce. Students need to learn the modern industry practices in each of the units at the farm. In addition to the traditional production model, I envision an overarching holistic resource management system that would potentially include a regenerative grazing system for the beef herd. There are federal grants available to offset the cost of fencing for regenerative grazing as well as grants focused on soil health and carbon sequestration research. I envision the farm being an example of what is possible with regenerative grazing and holistic resource management in Northeast Texas.

One of the themes that stands out to me in the description is the sense of belonging that is articulated as a priority throughout. A sense of belonging is essential for a department, college, and university to function. At the base, if students do not feel valued, or worse, feel marginalized at one university, they will find another university to attend. Encouraging and empowering faculty is an essential component of student engagement. Faculty and staff are the face of the

university. Research has shown that connections to faculty are among the top influences in agriculture students' choice of university.

As Dean, actively listening to faculty and staff to help them achieve their goals is essential. Each stage of faculty life is unique. Early career faculty need to be encouraged to explore and develop their teaching and research. In my current position, I help early career faculty think strategically about their teaching, research, and service so they can get the most out of their efforts. Mid-career faculty need to feel valued and heard. They have experience and their perceptions are valuable. Mid-career faculty should also be encouraged and enabled to explore leadership positions if they so choose. Late career faculty can be a tremendous asset. The most experienced faculty need to be encouraged to do those things that they have always wanted to do, but haven't had the opportunity, such as developing new and innovative programs. If faculty are engaged and continuously growing in the profession, their energy will extend to the students and positively impact recruitment and retention.

Currently, I am an Associate Professor of Agricultural Education and Program Director for Agriculture at Arkansas Tech University. My responsibilities in this position are to lead the agriculture program and teach undergraduate courses within the agricultural teacher education and agricultural business programs.

The program director portion of my position includes administrative duties including scheduling courses, recruiting students, academic advising, mentoring faculty, and essentially leading the agriculture program. The agriculture program consists of agricultural business and agricultural education majors. The agricultural business students may also choose an option in animal science, pre-veterinary medicine, or horticulture. In this position, I have secured external funding through a congressional appropriation (\$730,000) to modernize our agricultural education lab spaces as well as helped to raise over \$500,000 to build an agricultural mechanics lab facility.

My teaching experience in this position includes teaching the Applied Agricultural Systems Technology, Methods in Teaching Agriculture, Personal Leadership, Team Leadership, Youth Organizations, and Global Perspectives courses, as well as student teacher supervision. Student course evaluations have been positive and my evaluation scores consistently exceed the departmental and college mean scores. In addition to teaching these courses, I have served as academic adviser to eighty-two undergraduate students, mentor to two undergraduate researchers, and developed the first study abroad course offered by the Arkansas Tech agriculture program.

In addition to my teaching and administrative appointment, I have continued to develop a focused research agenda exploring experiential learning in agricultural teacher education. My research has led to published manuscripts that explore the meaning students make from early field experience as well as three studies that explore the skills needed by teachers entering the profession in the curricular areas of agricultural mechanics, plant systems and animal systems. Most recently, I was a co-author of a study that explored the factors that influence students' choice to major in agriculture at regional universities. The findings of the study will help inform recruitment and retention initiatives in the coming years.

In my current position, I have also had the opportunity to serve on university, college, and department committees, as well as serve on the Curriculum for Agricultural Science Education (CASE) Advisory Committee and the Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) Advisory Committee at the national level. At the university level, I am currently a member and have served as chair of the Institutional Review Board. Additionally, I have served on the university International Travel Advisory Council and the university Athletics committee. I have also served on numerous search committees for faculty, department head, and dean positions. Student engagement is important to me. Currently, I advise the Pre-Vet Club, Rodeo Club/Team, and the Gamma Zeta Chapter of Alpha Gamma Rho. In spring 2023, I was able to re-start the Arkansas Tech Rodeo Team and have students compete in the Ozark region of the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association after a nearly forty-year absence. I was also instrumental in the founding of the Gamma Zeta Chapter of Alpha Gamma Rho and have served as adviser since its induction in 2018.

Prior to beginning my doctoral program at Iowa State University, I served five years as an agriculture science teacher and FFA Adviser in East Texas. During my time at Marshall ISD, my colleagues and I developed and implemented recruitment strategies to increase enrollment and participation. Marshall FFA grew to become one of the largest as well as one of the most diverse FFA chapters in Texas. One strategy we used to increase the participation of underrepresented populations was to participate in the chapter affiliation program to remove the barrier of paying dues for FFA membership. As a result, in 2013 Marshall FFA was the second largest chapter in Texas with 689 members and 5 agriculture science teachers in the department. I also taught at Sulphur Bluff ISD. Sulphur Bluff is a small school district and gave me experience in a single-teacher rural program. Both programs have given me the experience and background needed to understand and be part of Northeast Texas culture.

In summary, because of my professional experiences and solid academic preparation, I believe I can significantly contribute to the mission and vision of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Texas A&M University - Commerce. My experience as an associate professor and program director, ranch manager, as well as my experience as an agriculture science teacher in Texas have given me the solid foundation to immediately contribute as Dean to serve the university and the region. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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Associate Professor and Agriculture Program Director
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Enclosures