

Tarleton AgVenture: A Farm-to-Table Experiential Learning Model

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The Challenge

In agricultural higher education, there is often a gap between classroom instruction and the practical, entrepreneurial experience required to succeed in the industry. Employers increasingly seek graduates with both technical expertise and business acumen, but many students graduate without having participated in integrated, real-world agricultural systems. At Tarleton State University, we identified this need by examining student outcomes, employer feedback, and institutional goals for experiential learning. Additionally, our Agriculture Center had underutilized capacity and untapped potential for applied learning in the food animal value chain.

The Plan

Tarleton AgVenture is a student-led, farm-to-table experiential learning program focused on beef and pork production. It provides hands-on, immersive opportunities for students to engage in all aspects of livestock production—from animal care and genetics to processing, marketing, and retail. The program uses Tarleton's 700-acre Agriculture Center, abattoir, and Purple Tractor retail storefront to create a vertically integrated supply chain entirely managed by students and guided by faculty and staff mentors.

AgVenture prepares students to be first-day, career-ready professionals by merging academic content with business operations and applied research. It is designed to be financially self-sustaining through retail and wholesale sales of meat and value-added products. The program aligns with *Tarleton Forward 2030* goals, advancing student opportunity, academic distinction, research innovation, and institutional fiscal sustainability.

Progress

Since implementation began in September 2024, AgVenture has exceeded early benchmarks and continues to expand:

- **Leadership and Infrastructure Development:**

- Created a retail/wholesale manager position to oversee product sales and grow external partnerships.
- Created a Director of Experiential Learning faculty role to coordinate student engagement.
- Invested in additional retail cold storage capacity to expand inventory and customer access.

- **Student Learning and Impact:**

- Students manage all stages of the food animal value chain—from birth to harvest to consumer sales—gaining experience in genetics, nutrition, processing, and marketing.
- Sales are conducted in-person with expansion in 2026 to include online sales and pilot testing of a student club fundraiser model.
- A new internship course supports year-round participation and adds tuition revenue.

Next Steps: The program will expand its research capacity, deepen external industry partnerships, and formalize metrics to evaluate student learning, career placement, and program scalability. Full financial sustainability is expected by year two.

What I Gained from the FSLI Program

The Food Systems Leadership Institute (FSLI) was instrumental in making AgVenture a reality. Through FSLI, I honed my leadership mindset and strategic tools to translate a vision into a cross-functional, institutional initiative. Additionally, it gave me a reason to focus on this project and to bring it to life.