Dr. Robert Phemister has led an unlikely life, growing up in a suburb with dreams of becoming a dairy farmer. Belief in the importance of agriculture and a strong sense of balance and interconnectedness between fields took him from the United States Public Health Service to the office of the Dean of Veterinary Medicine at Colorado State University, where he developed the College of Veterinary medicine into one of the best in the country.

Born on July 15, 1936, he grew up in a suburban community outside of St. Louis, MO. Despite his suburb life, “and for some reason that I’ve never been able to figure out,” he loved agriculture and dairy farming. During the summers of his high school years, he worked on farms in Iowa and Idaho, at a dairy and a dryland wheat farm, respectively. When school was in session, he was also active in the student government, and those experiences coupled with his academic excellence earned him a scholarship to attend Cornell University.

Phemister’s time at Cornell was marked with the same determination as his high school years, working on farms in Connecticut and Ohio when he wasn’t studying. He realized early, however, that his dream of being a dairy farmer was unrealistic. “It didn’t take long to understand that I would never have the capital, not coming from a farming background,” he explains, and so his interest “sort of transitioned into the medical side of animal agriculture veterinary medicine.” At that time, it was possible truncate undergraduate study in order to enter the veterinary medicine field, so he took full course loads and worked hard every semester to graduate with a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree after six years.

After he graduated from Cornell with his DVM, he joined the United States Public Health Service, where he got the opportunity to take graduate courses at the St. Louis University Medical School and the University of California – Davis before returning to Washington and studying pathology in the armed forces. That job took him to Fort Collins in 1964, where Colorado State University was running a large research project titled the Collaborative Radiological Health Laboratory, or in common speak, the Beagle Project. He “was in charge of developing the pathology section of that and later became the director of that laboratory,” all while taking courses to earn his PhD, which he did in 1967. He started teaching at CSU as an associate professor that year, moving up the ranks to full professor. As a teacher, it was important to him to “provide something of value to the student beyond what they can get on their own,” to go above and beyond the textbooks and combine theoretical study with practical research.

He taught for ten years before joining the administration. As he sees it, “I felt I could kind of marry my background as a professor, as a research scientist, and as an administrator working with people to have an influence on a larger area.” Phemister’s time as an administrator at CSU started when he was asked to serve on a committee that surveyed the current veterinary curriculum; “We visited every single faculty member. We traveled to other veterinary schools. We produced a report that resulted in a shift in the curriculum.” The study also produced a job - Associate Dean for Academic Programs. Shortly after this promotion, the current Dean left, and he found himself the acting Dean and, after a formal selection process, the Dean of Veterinary Medicine, a position he held from 1977 to 1985. As the Dean, he spearheaded facility improvements, including moving the veterinary buildings out of the center of campus and updating the biochemistry and radiation biology building. He also emphasized the balance of teaching and research and worked “to provide comparable [state-funded] rewards for teaching” as for organization-funded research.
Like many involved in higher education, Phemister worries about that funding; “it bothers me a great deal to see the university struggle so to get the support that it needs to be successful,” he says. However, his belief that the work done in universities is “the salvation of society” keeps him hopeful that the funding crisis currently being faced will be overcome.