

Though Russell Melchert was born in Pampa, Texas, he moved with his parents to Liberal at a young age and graduated from Liberal High School in 1985.

By ROBERT PIERCE

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A former Liberal resident has been named the dean of the school of pharmacy at the University of Missouri – Kansas City.

After serving for 15 years as pharmacy academician at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, Russell Melchert will assume his new position on July 1.



Melchert said UAMS has two departments in its college of pharmacy.

“We have a department of pharmaceutical sciences and a department of pharmacy practices,” he said.

Melchert has served as chair of the former department for the past six years. He said he has

always been interested in basic bio-medical science, particularly the effects of chemicals and drugs on the human body.

Melchert completed a bachelor's degree in pharmacy from the University Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, and he would next obtain a PhD in pharmacology from the same school.

"That's the study of how drugs work and exert their beneficial effects," he said. "I study some toxicology too, how drugs exert harmful effects. I discovered along the way what I really liked about all that was teaching."

The science of pharmacology is relatively new, developing primarily in the last 200 years, but Melchert said the routes of the study can be traced back to the Greeks and the use of plants for medicinal value.

"Even today, we study how these chemicals that come from the environment or even those that are man made exert effects on our body," he said. "That's basically pharmacology."

Because of this, Melchert took on an academic position and got involved in teaching and research at UAMS.

"We study drugs and chemicals and how they affect the cardiovascular system," he said. "I've taken more of an administrative role in the past five or six years."

Melchert said his role at UMKC will be more of a global one rather than simply pharmacy education.

"Right now, I'm observing the front lines of it, but with this new appointment, I'll be overseeing the operation of an entire school that involves about 100 faculty and staff and probably about 600 students and interacting with the alumni and the state of Missouri legislature and the state of Missouri board of pharmacy," he said.

Since Melchert got into the pharmacy business, he has seen an increase in the demand for pharmacists.

“This goes back to when I started pharmacy school in 1985,” he said. “As I understand, it had been going on long before then.”

Melchert said the increasing demand for pharmacists has been especially true for rural areas of the Midwest.

“All over the country, there’s a huge demand,” he said. “To respond to that demand, there’s been an increase in the number of colleges with schools of pharmacy.”

Melchert has been in the pharmacy business for about 22 years, and in that time, the number of schools of pharmacy in the U.S. has jumped from 71 to more than 100.

“There’s an increased demand for faculty to teach pharmacy,” he said. “It’s continuing to expand.”

The demand for pharmacy teachers in urban areas has slowed in recent years, according to Melchert, particularly in the state where he currently teaches, but he said more rural areas still have a huge demand for pharmacy practitioners similar to the need for all health care workers.

Melchert was born in Pampa, Texas, and at a young age, he moved with his parents to Liberal. He graduated from Liberal High School in 1985.

Melchert said some of the values he has taken from Southwest Kansas include an appreciation for what he called the “micropolitan environment.”

"It's an appreciation for the rural areas of this part of the country and the values that were instilled in the people that come from here," he said. "That's how I was raised."

Melchert said this includes an enormous amount of time in farming and ranching and other professions that make small towns in the Midwest prosper.

"Because of my upbringing, a place like Liberal instills in me a core set of values to take forward," he said. "It always stems upon trust and friendship building."

Melchert said he took the position at UMKC when the opportunity presented itself.

"There's a little more than 100 accredited colleges of pharmacy in the U.S., and I've been shooting for a dean's position for some time," he said. "There's not many jobs, and you look for a job that's in this part of the country."

Melchert said because of this, the number of options for a job such as his is narrowed quickly.

"When the opportunity came up at UMKC, I jumped all over it," he said. "Like here in Arkansas, like Oklahoma and like Kansas, these are good colleges of pharmacy and good programs in pharmacy that are known nationwide, not just in this part of the country."

Those schools include the universities of Oklahoma, Nebraska and Missouri, as well as the University of Arkansas, where Melchert currently works.

"Those were the top schools on my mind for many years," he said. "When that one came open, I jumped all over it."

