Students entering an undergraduate university paramedicine program may have had little if any exposure to the profession outside of television shows depicting somewhat unrealistic images of paramedics and the work they do. Students sometimes enrol with limited understanding of the complexity and nature of paramedicine. They assume the majority of work involves lights, sirens and plenty of action (often involving attractive emergency service personnel with well-defined muscles and perfect one-liners). Other myths relate to the frequency and nature of a paramedic’s workload, with movies showing the urban (usually American) paramedic dodging gunfire and speeding through busy streets from one major trauma to the next. It is no surprise that students are perplexed when they are informed of the reality of Australian rural and regional paramedicine.

It is important that students have an understanding of their chosen profession centred on reality and not entertainment industry hype, but there is currently no standard way in which this understanding is achieved. Limitations to ambulance industry clinical placement opportunities are a current reality across Australia. This has meant that university staff members have to find innovative ways to transfer knowledge about the profession, its work practices and culture. Within the La Trobe University paramedicine course, students do not go on placement until the second year of the program, a situation that has potential to affect student understanding of paramedicine, as well as level of satisfaction and overall retention numbers.

La Trobe Rural Health School Paramedicine has designed and implemented a Paramedic Mentoring Program that links each enrolled first-year paramedic student to a qualified rural or regional advanced life support or intensive care ambulance paramedic. These paramedics are currently working in communities throughout central and northern Victoria. The vision of the program was to encourage students to remain in country Victoria given the current deficit of paramedics in many rural and regional towns, and foster a sense of belonging to a community. This presentation focuses on the benefits the program provides without glossing over any of the negatives. It provides a good example of
successful collaboration between academia and the paramedic workforce, and serves to inform students of the realities of working in rural and regional Victoria.