

CREATING AND REPLICATING HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A GUIDE FOR BUSINESSES AND SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY

The Wonderful Company

Preparing Students for Careers in Agriculture through Experiential Learning

California's Central Valley



Carl Vinson Institute of Government
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

The Wonderful Company

Preparing Students for Careers in Agriculture through Experiential Learning

The Wonderful Company in California's Central Valley is creating its own future workforce. The \$4 billion privately held company offers 11 brands, including POM Wonderful pomegranate juice; Wonderful Pistachios, Almonds, and Halos; and Teleflora. Beginning in 2012, the company began a significant investment in education in the Central Valley. This investment encompasses two public charter schools and Ag Prep, a public-private partnership of seven feeder middle schools, seven partner high schools, three community colleges, and two campuses of the California State University system, in addition to other agriculture companies in the region. Ag Prep gives students the opportunity "to earn college credits and gain work skills, free of charge (including an associate's degree); obtain career experience through paid internships in the agriculture industry; and benefit from other work-based and college-prep opportunities."¹ The Wonderful Company launched Ag Prep to help meet its future workforce needs and produce the highly skilled STEM workers that modern agriculture requires.

Ag Prep starts with students the summer before eighth grade and continues with them through college. During that first summer, interested students attend a weeklong camp hosted at a local community college. Students learn about every facet of agriculture including sessions on AutoCAD, tractor simulations, geographic information systems micro-irrigation, food science, and much more. Then, during eighth grade, they continue taking STEAM (the A is for agriculture) courses and decide if they want to enter Ag Prep in high school.

Upon entering Ag Prep in high school, students choose one of three agriculture-themed pathways: Ag Business, Ag Mechanics, or Plant Science. Students complete a college-prep curriculum and earn enough credits to graduate from high school with an associate's degree. During their freshman year of high school, students attend an agriculture industry convention where they learn about recent innovations. The students must interview three people related to these ag innovations and write a report. In addition, in conjunction with a yearly theme, they must come up with an innovative product of their own and present it at the end of the school year in front of a Shark Tank-type panel.

During the first semester of their sophomore year, students attend an expo that familiarizes them with a variety of agriculture-related fields and career opportunities are shows them why particular skills are important. During their second semester, they attend a daylong job shadowing event and complete a related assignment.

Continued on following page



The Wonderful Company

Preparing Students for Careers in Agriculture through Experiential Learning

During the first semester of their junior year, students shadow workers, building upon what they learned in their sophomore year. During their second semester, they attend a symposium that helps them with work etiquette and portfolio building, attend mock interviews that include feedback, and participate in workshops on such subjects as how to avoid workplace drama, how to maintain a social media presence, and how to set up a LinkedIn account.

Finally, the summer before their senior year, students participate in a two-week paid internship and make a presentation at the end of it. For the last several years, the president of each Wonderful Company group in which the students have been interning attends these presentations. Upon entering college, students can earn up to \$18,000 in scholarships.

Each partner school and higher education institution agrees to provide the curriculum and teachers for the required Ag Prep courses, as well as some additional learning supports for the students. The program, however, is entirely managed by Wonderful Education, the philanthropic arm of the Wonderful Company, taking much of the burden off their partners. The Wonderful Company invests more than \$1.6 million each year in Ag Prep. Ag Prep grew from 190 high school students in 2014–2015 to 2,170 middle and high school students in 2017–2018. The first cohort of students to complete the full Ag Prep program graduated in May 2018.



¹Nodine, Thad. Jobs for the Future, Fall 2017. *Partnering for Student Success: How Ag Prep Brings Together Schools, Colleges, and Industry*. Accessed at static1.squarespace.com/static/59a09484ccc5c50e494ed921/t/5ac6805203ce647c69e90dad/1522958426768/Dark+Green+JFF.pdf.