

The NEW Rural CTE: A Promising Development

By Nancy Hoffman and Charlotte Cahill



On a hot, dry day this past summer in California's San Joaquin Valley, community college faculty, a facilitator and employees of The Wonderful Company¹ are gathered to work on the design of several agriculture career pathways. Most community colleges have employer advisory groups, so this looks like one of them. But if you were to listen in on the conversation, you would hear a different order of business: Company employees are back-mapping skills that young people in the Valley will need to get the well-paying jobs open at the company once they complete their associate degrees. Community college courses, high school pathways and work-based learning (WBL) opportunities are already better attuned to the 21st-century workplace as a result of this work.

Agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley is a high-tech enterprise, and employees

need math, IT and science knowledge, along with technical and soft skills (e.g., team work, interpersonal communication, leadership, etc.). Positions from engineering to business administration to plant science pay well in the farms of the Valley, but education has not caught up. Good jobs are open, but too many ambitious young people leave for urban areas where they believe opportunities are greater. Other young people simply drop out and wait to see what life will bring, contributing to the unemployment rate that is now over 35 percent. Unfortunately, too few realize the opportunities at home or are prepared to take advantage of them.

However, The Wonderful Company has taken matters into its own hands. A major employer in this rural environment, several years ago the company decided to expand its scholarship programs for the area's youth by implementing the Wonderful Agriculture Career Academies (see the

Wonderful Agriculture Career Academies on the next page) in area high schools, a move that is now preparing the Valley's young people for agricultural career pathways in agribusiness, plant science and agriculture mechanics—careers suited to the rural environment.

Six high schools and three community colleges in the San Joaquin Valley are engaged in the work, which is funded by the company and the California Career Pathways Trust. Our organization, Jobs for the Future, carries out technical assistance and documentation of the development of the three agricultural associate degree pathways: agribusiness, plant science and agriculture mechanics.

Results from 2014–15, the first year, are promising in terms of student achievement and employer engagement:

- 500 ninth- and 10th-graders across six high schools are enrolled in the career academies



The Wonderful Agriculture Career Academies

The Vision: To prepare youth in the San Joaquin Valley for college and career success, and advance tomorrow's agricultural, business, science and technology leaders.

The Work: To create a fundamental change in the educational experience, so that more high school students are engaged in a rigorous, relevant curriculum that gives them direct experience in college

classes, agricultural careers and WBL.

The Model: WACA combines an early college model that provides a rigorous academic program of study with substantial college credits while in high school, and a career academy with three agriculture-themed pathways that lead directly to well-paying, mid-level career positions in agriculture.

The WACA Model

Early College	+	Career Academy	=	College and Career Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Curriculum focused on science, technology, math ■ Substantial college courses while in high school, including an associate degree in science for transfer ■ Integrated academic and CTE education ■ Intensive student supports 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ School-within-a-school structure, with student cohorts and teacher teams ■ Three career pathways in agriculture ■ WBL, including interdisciplinary, hands-on projects, guaranteed paid internships, job shadows, mentorships and externships 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Associate degree by high school graduation or within one term after graduation ■ Fully prepared for four-year colleges and universities ■ Meaningful work experience with paid internships



- ninth-graders averaged two years of growth in reading and math in just one school year
- 90 percent of ninth-graders passed their first four college courses
- 79 percent of ninth-graders passed all Univ. of California/Cal State requirements (typically 33 percent rate among grads from partner schools)

The Wonderful Company states that its core purpose in working in education is to move its employees and their children out of poverty to break the cycle that has impacted generations in the Valley. The agriculture programs were developed because they realized that unless high school and community college expectations and quality of teaching and learning were transformed, youth unemployment would remain high and good jobs that should go to local youth would go vacant—an attitude, backed up with actions, that is bringing other large employers in the region to the table.

Why Focus on Rural High School Through College Pathways?

The Pathways to Prosperity team at Jobs for the Future has taken a leading role in supporting partnerships between educators and employers. We believe that the formative middle and high school years are a perfect time for young people to get started on a career, spend some time in a company and learn what the adult world might expect of them.

Rural areas of the United States are too often left behind when it comes to education innovation and change. If few students perceive in any visceral way the connections between classroom learning and what we call “the real world,” the problem is exacerbated in rural areas where it is difficult for young people to observe diverse careers in the course of their daily lives, let alone visit varied enterprises or try out work roles.

Since the release of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's (HGSE) 2011 report, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*, Jobs for the Future, in partnership with HGSE, has been working to build more effective systems for supporting young people as they learn

about work and learn *how* to work. Today, leaders in the 12-state Pathways to Prosperity Network are building pathways for grades nine through 14 in over 50 regions of the country, many of them rural. In these settings, officials often believe there are limited opportunities for young people to mix work and learning, but looking beneath the surface that is not the case.

Indeed, small businesses do exist and their number is growing, such as IT services for local businesses, commercial farms with jobs that range from human resources functions to plant science, and manufacturing. Large European and Japanese automotive, pharmaceutical and chemical enterprises are moving into rural areas as well, adding to the pool of home-grown openings. With this growth, state and county services are also expanding, and education institutions are stepping up to meet the need.

In urban areas, most employers wouldn't dream of having 16- and 17-year olds do productive work on a shop floor or at a tech company. But in areas like the San Joaquin Valley, as well as rural Georgia and Tennessee, employers with open jobs and a commitment to the economic well-being of their communities see that with retirements looming and the city asserting its pull, unless they start early to work with young people, they won't be able to build the talent pipelines they need. New families are not moving into these areas, so young talent is at a premium, and investments pay back.

Tanner Health Systems and Eastman Chemical Company

Tanner Health Systems in rural Carroll County, Georgia, and Eastman Chemical Company in the Appalachian mountains of northeast Tennessee are two concrete examples of the kinds of rural work and learning programs that are developing in many parts of the country. Both are revising CTE to meet their own needs, which are more extensive than and different from what high schools and community colleges have provided in the past. And both are committed to building a regional talent pipeline in their area.

Tanner Health Systems serves nine counties in western Georgia. It offers students opportunities to learn about the occupations and careers available in hospital

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settings. In the Teens in Action program, students from five school districts explore careers in health care and IT.

In addition, the Tanner Connections program is a more intensive WBL program developed through a partnership between Tanner and Carroll County Public Schools. Students complete semester-long internships where they spend 15 hours per week in both clinical and non-clinical settings, such as in radiology, intensive care, nursing, engineering/heating and cooling, IT, marketing and public relations, emergency management, and safety and security.

Tanner employees serve as supervisors and mentors for students, and students participate in monthly training sessions focused on soft skills development. Those who successfully complete either program earn academic credit.

To the west, leaders from Eastman Chemical Company, local governments, chambers of commerce, and secondary and postsecondary institutions are working to develop the Earn and Learn program, which is modeled on the work in Georgia. Eastman, through its Putting Children First initiative, is already collaborating with community organizations and eight school districts in an effort to encourage students in this very rural area to pursue postsecondary education and STEM careers.

Eastman is also a partner in the Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing (RCAM) in Kingsport, Tennessee. Operated by Northeast State Community College, RCAM offers programs of study designed to meet industry needs, which include college credit programs, industry training and apprenticeship programs. RCAM's leadership is now building out pathways that are “reverse-engineered” from labor-market demand to postsecondary programs to high school curricula, just as The Wonderful Company's are. In addition, RCAM's Mobile Learning Classroom and

Tech Explorer program are designed to expose young people to careers in advanced manufacturing.

At the postsecondary level, students in RCAM programs participate in year-long paid internships. RCAM is supported by the Advanced Manufacturing Partnership, a public-private partnership that bridges education, industry and government. Eastman and Domtar, a paper manufacturer, are key employer partners, and the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce serves as an intermediary.

A Better Future

According to the report *What District and School Leaders Can Do to Prepare Rural Students for a Brighter Future* (2015), nearly half of all school districts in the U.S. are rural, and young people in those districts confront distinct hurdles as they pursue education and careers. But efforts like those in the San Joaquin Valley, and rural Georgia and Tennessee, have proven to be particularly powerful in bolstering regional economic development and helping rural youth find their place in the world and creating better futures for themselves. Tech

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REFERENCE

Barton, R. (2015). *What district and school leaders can do to prepare rural students for a brighter future*. Retrieved from <http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/stem-rural-students.pdf>

ENDNOTE

1. The Wonderful Company, though it may sound like a fictitious construct, is the actual name of a global company dedicated to harvesting healthy foods. To learn more, visit www.wonderful.com.