

Industry experience reinforces student's passion for plant science

Visalia Charter Independent Study (VCIS) graduate McKenzie La Forge selected College of the Sequoias (COS) for the agriculture program's excellent reputation. After growing up on a cattle ranch and raising cutting horses, she planned to go into animal science. She was unexpectedly drawn to plant science. "I also always loved growing things," said La Forge. "I found a pathway to making that a career through the Plant Science program at COS."

Her career plans were further refined through summer employment with Syngenta where she helped raise a variety of plants, trees and crops for scientists conducting trials. "Every day on the job was different but it was the insects that were really interesting to me," said La Forge. "It was fun working with the entomologist looking for bugs."

She'll graduate soon and plans to transfer to continue her studies in plant science, especially in pest management. "Taking classes required for my major combined with physical hands-on work this summer helped me gauge what would be a suitable career for me," said La Forge. "COS is a great place to go to school, with outstanding instructors and resources to help you find what you would love to do for your career."

La Forge credits COS faculty with enticing her to switch her major to plant science. "My teachers shared their wealth of knowledge about the industry," said La Forge. "Both Mr. Fernando Fernandez who taught Ornamental Horticulture and Dr. Allison Ferry-Abee in Plant Science talked about career options based on their experiences working in the field. The more you look into it, the more interesting career possibilities you'll find in plant science."

To gain career experience, La Forge benefited from the support offered by COS Career Technical Education (CTE) Career and Academic Success Coordinator, Cosmo Costales. "It was Cosmo who let me know that Syngenta was hiring," said La Forge. "He helped me revise my resume and highlight skills that qualified me for



the general assistant position at Syngenta. COS also offers events where students can meet employers and learn about employment opportunities.”

From the employer perspective, Costales does a great job connecting businesses with students, according to Syngenta’s Site Operations Lead, Mike Bettencourt. Syngenta is a leading science-based agtech company that helps millions of farmers around the world to grow safe and nutritious food. “At our Visalia site, we grow permanent nut and fruit trees, annual vegetables and crops like cotton, corn and soybeans, and ornamentals so that scientists can run trials on chemicals used to grow and protect plants,” said Bettencourt. “Cosmo is really good at sending students to us who have a desire to learn about crop science. COS helps us find qualified employees.”

Students usually apply during the early spring so they can work during the busy growing season, explained Bettencourt. “Work ethic is the most important attribute we look for in candidates as well as a real interest in crop protection,” said Bettencourt. “Students gain experience growing a variety of crops, work directly with scientists and meet industry professionals who visit our facility. Some summer hires continue working for us during the school year.”

La Forge was hired by Syngenta and works mostly outside caring for plants and harvesting crops. “It is a huge amount of work to plant, prune, irrigate and manage so many different crops; but it is highly rewarding to watch the process from seed to harvest,” said La Forge. “Every day is different. My assignment might be



counting white fly larva on cucumber leaves, harvesting and the juicing cantaloupes to test for sugars, replacing irrigation valves, or driving a tractor and using specialized equipment to plant tomatoes or harvest potatoes.”

The coursework at COS was helpful in preparing La Forge for this job. “What we studied in class helped me to recognize what was going on in the field,” said La Forge. “I can see an issue or notice a deficiency and have an idea what nutrient a plant needs. Understanding how things work chemically in plants from my plant science class was very useful. I was also able to apply what I learned about collecting samples from the soil science class.”

One of her favorite things to do is work directly with the scientists. “It is amazing to have so many smart people around you who are willing to answer all your questions,” said La Forge. “When the entomologist learned of my interest in insects, he sought me out to show me unusual pests. The people at Syngenta are so

nice, it is a good work environment and I've gained a great picture of how to grow and manage many different crops."

As part of the work experience, the general assistant position at Syngenta is designed to expose students to many aspects of the business. "We try to introduce them to a little bit of everything, from irrigation to data collection, so the students learn new things every day," said Bettencourt. "McKenzie has great observation skills so she is my eyes in the field. We are pleased that she be able to continue working for us during the fall semester."

Bettencourt has a great passion for his work in plant science. "It is so exciting to watch a crop from start to finish, and compare the impact of the trials," said Bettencourt. "It feels so worthwhile to see the results of our work. We want students to be exposed to all the amazing careers opportunities in this industry."

La Forge who will soon be transferring to a university in plant science had some last words of advice for students. "While you are at COS, talk with your teachers, meet with a counselor specializing in transfer, get help from the career center, and take advantage of the library and study areas on campus," said La Forge. "Look for work experience that gives you practical skills. By seeing the work environment, you can discover if you love it and want make it a career."