

Learning all about agriculture

Students eyeball careers at a Fresno State program.

By Margaret Slaby / The Fresno Bee

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Xavier Magana places a cutting of a pathos plant into a 6-inch pot and gently presses soil down around it.

He sets the pot aside, grabs another and repeats the process. Magana, 18, is spending the morning in Fresno State's ornamental horticulture lab as part of a free, two-week summer program aimed at teaching students about agriculture.

Twenty students took part July 29-Aug. 10 in the Fresno State College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology's Ag Summer Bridge Program. Some were recent high school graduates. Others were students at Fresno City College or California State University, Fresno. The program was funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture outreach grant.

"It educates kids to opportunities," says Lonna Torrico, program manager. "It's to give them an orientation to the university, expose them to agricultural careers and to have them network with people that can help them in the future."

Guest speakers, campus tours, work study, field trips and job shadowing were part of the program. Field trip locations included the Sun West Fruit Co. in Parlier, Campus Bros. Farms in Caruthers and Sun Maid Growers of California in Kingsburg.

Students stayed in Fresno State dorms the first week. The second week was spent shadowing industry leaders.

Magana, a Fresno City College freshman, wanted to get a better career idea. He plans to earn a degree in business management but isn't sure how to fit that into agriculture.

"That's why I'm here. I'm trying to figure it out," he says. "I want to see what job opportunities there are in ag. It's a big business here in the Valley."

While Magana spent a morning of work study in the ornamental horticulture lab, Fresno City students Casey Merritt, 22, and Magdalena Lopez, 20, were busy at Fresno State's Center for Irrigation Technology.

Mechanical engineering student Dave Bernard, 40, discussed water-pressure measurement devices. The students also operated a winch to hoist a steel pipe onto a rack.

Lopez, who plans to transfer to Fresno State in two years, hoped that she would be able to see how earning a degree in math could be used in the ag industry. Merritt, who will transfer to Fresno State in the spring, says the program opened his eyes.

"Ag has so much to offer," says Merritt, who expressed an interest in earning a degree in agriculture business.

"I just thought ag was growing stuff or raising animals," Merritt says. "Now I know there is so much more than that."

And that, organizers say, is what they are striving for.

"The idea is to show them all the various jobs that are available in agriculture, whether it's ag accounting, ag business or whatever," says Denis Bacon, who manages Fresno State's graduate laboratory. "It's also to get them familiar with campus."

Calliope Correia, 35, who manages the Fresno State nursery, thinks the program's approach is important. "It's a lot different when they come out here," Correia says while watching Magana

pot plants. "They get to see what it's really like."

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