



A REAL-WORLD TEST DRIVE

Turning VIP students into VIP employees

by Ashlie Day

As long as he can remember, Jacob Van Meter (*below*) has been drawn to taking things apart and putting them back together. It started with cars and dirt bikes and turned into an engineering career in the Silicon Valley.

Van Meter started his career at Apple, Inc. in April, three years after graduating from Fresno State. He credits the University's Valley Industry Partnership for Cooperative Education (VIP) Program with helping him gain the experience to transition to the workforce right out of college.

Van Meter, 28, grew up in Oakhurst and transferred from Clovis Community College Center to Fresno State in 2008 as a mechanical engineering major. During his second semester, he joined the VIP Program in the Lyles College of Engineering. The program set him up with internships at Serpa Packaging Solutions and E&J Gallo Winery in Modesto.

Van Meter secured a full-time position with Serpa Packaging Solutions during his senior year at Fresno State and then served on the VIP Program council as an industry member for two years, mentoring students in the same way he was mentored.

"I just wanted to give back to the program that helped jumpstart my career and have an impact on any other students I could," Van Meter says. *"Having mentors encourage me really helped me ignore those negative people in my life who told me I was crazy for wanting to be an engineer and taking calculus courses I would never pass. I think everyone has those people in their life, but you just have to surround yourself in the positives and figure out for yourself what you can and can't do."*

Van Meter's father, an engineer himself, was one of those positive influences. "I chose mechanical engineering because I already loved working on things to figure out how they operate," Van Meter says.

The VIP program was formed in 1999 by Professor Walter Mizuno as a cooperative effort between Fresno State and a number of local companies. The main goal of the program is to provide a richer, better-rounded educational experience for engineering students by giving them an opportunity to work in real-world environments.

Current partner members include Allied Electric, Alpha Research and Technology, Betts Company, E&J Gallo Winery, Gusmer Enterprises, Industrial Automation Group, International Paper, JBT FoodTech, Paramount Farms, POM Wonderful, Rockwell Automation, Serpa Packaging Solutions and Thiele Technologies.

"One of the most valuable things I see students take away from being in the program is confidence," says Nell Papavasiliou, program director. "By giving students a year of experience with two different companies under their belts, they have the ability to adapt to situations better and contribute to the company right away."

Enrollment in the program varies each semester but ranges from 10 to 20 students, depending on internship demands.

Every student in the VIP program has landed a job when they graduate. Most are offered full-time positions prior to graduation and earn \$60,000 to \$80,000 their first year.





Above - Gagan Pandher
Below - Santiago Cerdá

VIP success stories

Other VIP students have gone on to Edwards Air Force Base to work on such planes as the F-35 and the F-22, which can aid in ground attack, reconnaissance, electronic warfare and air defense missions.

More recently, a graduate went to work for Chevron in Bakersfield and another for Hyundai in California City. Many students also end up with full-time positions at local VIP member companies they interned at such as JBT Food Tech in Madera, POM Wonderful, Allied Electric and International Paper.

"One of the many benefits for companies that are part of VIP is that they are able to recruit and develop relationships with these outstanding students," Papavasiliou says. "The talent is kept here in the Valley, and the great part is that we have all of these alumni to mentor our current students."

Lyles College students in the program are required to maintain a strong GPA and have about 60 semester units completed in their major. Students must agree to two, six-month internships where they will take ownership of projects for companies participating in the program.

A pilot program was implemented with two students in June to test the success of summer internship programs to provide students and companies with more options. Ideally, students will be full-time in summer and work at least 20 hours during the fall semester.

"My best advice to incoming students is to not be afraid or intimidated by what other people say," Van Meter says. "Have a strong support group and get involved on campus or through your department. Being in the VIP program was like a real-world test drive for me. It made me realize what an engineering career really consisted of and what I wanted and did not want to do."

— Ashlie Day is a University Communications student assistant.



Cary Edmondson