

Early Exposure Breeds Success



By Cindy Seel, Executive Director, PMA Education Foundation

Think about how you landed your first job or made your first great business deal. Chances are, it was because you'd made a connection — through a mentor, a mutual friend or networking. Business (and life) is all about connections — meeting the right people at the right time.

What if, early in your career, you'd had a gateway to important business connections that might have eased or enhanced your career path?

Some of today's students have that opportunity, thanks to the Pack Family/PMA Career Pathways Fund, a collaborative initiative started by Jay and Ruthie Pack and managed by the PMA Education Foundation (PMAEF). Hailed by educators as one of the best industry/student programs available from any industry, the Pack scholarship enables selected students and faculty from seven domestic and five international universities to attend Fresh Summit. Students learn, network and discover the breadth and depth of the opportunities offered by the produce industry — all in one place.

"We take students to numerous trade shows and conventions each year," says Jerry Bradley, director of the food marketing cooperative education program at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. "The exposure they get at Fresh Summit is fabulous! Nowhere else do senior executives and CEOs get personally involved, and nowhere else are students invited to participate in everything. This program is highly successful because of the genuine interest the industry shows these students."

That interest is paying off for Career Pathways alumni and the produce industry. "Some [of our students] who have attended Fresh Summit have expressed that it expanded their horizons on the types of career paths they're considering," says Roberta Cook, cooperative extension economist in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California, Davis (UCD). "The program has formed a bridge between people with high-level backgrounds in science and the produce industry." Half of UCD's student participants, who would never have considered fresh produce as a career path, are either now working in the industry or seriously considering it as a direct result of being a Pack scholar. In fact, the Pack program has at least a 40 percent success rate among students who have graduated.

The program has been so successful in its four years of operation that Michigan State University (MSU) is now selecting sophomores for participation. "In the past, we chose mostly juniors and seniors," notes Larry Zink, industry relations liaison in MSU's Agricultural Economics Department. "However, we've discovered that by their senior year, students already have their internships; they go to Fresh Summit and see the opportunities, and it's too late for them to change." Earlier exposure to the industry, he believes, will result in more students seriously considering careers in produce.

One critical component of future program success is the

word-of-mouth support generated by Pack alumni who go back and tell their friends about the experience. "The students are excited when they come back," says Kristen Park, a Cornell University research associate who helps coordinate the selection process. "We don't have to do a lot of recruiting; former Pack scholars do it for us when they talk to other students."

The Career Pathways program is just one PMAEF initiative. Its success proves the point many educators make — purposeful exposure to the produce industry brings tremendous returns to students and leads to highly talented employees for industry companies. And purposeful exposure is just what foundation leaders envision for the future.

When asked recently what the foundation could do to aid in encouraging students to consider the produce industry as a career path, a group of educators involved in the Pack program gave us a clear message: exposure. Getting "face time" with students on a regular basis is critical to ensure they know the jobs are there — and the types of jobs are comparable to other industries. "The companies students think about are the companies on campus," adds Zink.

Cook agrees. "I can't emphasize enough how important it is to get through the 'clutter' bombarding students; it's not enough to just set up a Web site. The industry needs to work with both academic and career services departments."

PMAEF is planning that combination of activities. The foundation's business plan includes creating partnerships between industry and institutions to provide students with internship opportunities, job shadowing, a job bank, career-resources Web site and a variety of activities that will put industry members and their companies in front of students.

Of course, it won't happen all at once. And it will take industry participation in a variety of ways, most importantly in these early stages through financial contributions that will help make these plans reality. No one else is poised to take on this challenge industry-wide. Ed McLaughlin, professor of marketing and director of the Food Industry Management Program at Cornell University, recently summed it up when he said, "PMAEF provides for the first time a nationally organized effort to bring creative solutions to attracting young people to the produce industry." McLaughlin feels so strongly about the effort that he has personally contributed to the foundation's cause, as have other educators including Cook.

It's been said it takes a village to raise a child; in our case, it will take an industry working together to ensure the future of our companies and our industry.

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