

Agricultural company invests in education to tackle Central Valley workforce problem

Reporting

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(Photo Credit:
Violeta Vaqueiro)

Roll Global is a company that you may not have heard of, but there's a good chance you've sampled some of [their products](#). The \$3 billion, privately held company has 7,000 employees worldwide and more than half of those work in jobs in California's Central Valley.



The company has a challenge that many employers face—finding qualified workers. They have to hire approximately 300 people a year in their vast Central Valley operations. And finding qualified workers isn't easy.

“Jobs in agriculture are technology dependent more than ever before,” said [Noemi Donoso](#), who is Roll Global's Senior VP of Educational Initiatives.

And how do you solve that problem? By thinking long-term and, in a way, by going into the education business.

“If we can improve the education outcomes at the K-12 schools in our area, we think we can improve the workforce and by extension the community,” said Donoso.

Last summer, Roll Global launched the Paramount Agriculture Career Prep program which partners with high schools and community colleges in the Central Valley. Ninth graders at three high schools, Sanger H.S., Avenal H.S., and Paramount Academy, are finishing their first year.

It is a blend of an agricultural career academy and an early college program. Students will graduate from high school not only with a diploma, but also a community college degree and workplace certification that can get them placed in a job immediately after graduation.

The community college partners—Bakersfield College, Reedley College and West Hills College—provide professors who teach the free college courses on the high school campuses and college tutors in every college class. Students

also will earn a technical certification and an Associate of Science Transfer (AS-T) degree.

“Investing on the front end and inspiring young people to the great opportunities that exist in agriculture is a good business decision,” said Donoso.

What are those skilled jobs?

Students can major in three main areas:

1. Plant Science—where a student can learn to become Pest Control Field Scout, Crop or Spray Technician, Analyst Coordinator or Manager in Training.
2. Mechanics—where a student can become an Equipment Operator, Machine Operator, Plumber, Electricians or Welder to name just a few.
3. Business Management—where a student can work to become an Accountant, Procurement Specialists, General Administrator and a Supervisor.

On its website, Roll Global talks about investing millions in improving education outcomes in the Central Valley and around the country. The Paramount Agriculture Career Prep is not cheap. The company has invested up to \$300,000 thus far at each high school to build a greenhouse, add orchards and other state of the art equipment on the campuses.

Donoso said that it isn't just success in the classroom that makes this program so promising. Students are being exposed early to real-life situations. They tour orchards, production and packing facilities, attend industry conventions and work with mentors who are working in the area of interest and will be guaranteed a paid internship at one of the Paramount Ag Companies.

[Reedley College](#) President Sandra Caldwell is a big booster of the program.

"The impact is tremendous," Caldwell said. "Frankly, this opens up college access and potential to a group of students who might not have otherwise gone to college or might not have been successful in college with such an abrupt change from high school to college."

The metrics thus far are very promising and for the 230 ninth graders who started last summer, it's off to a great start.

"Ninety-two percent of our ninth graders passed two college courses with a C or better and are enrolled in their third college course," Donoso reported. "Students improved an entire grade level in English Language Arts and Math in the first semester."

Donoso estimates about 80 percent of the students will finish the program. About half of those will start a job and the other half will enroll full-time in a four-year college.

"We understand not everyone is going to wind up working at one of our Paramount Agricultural Companies, but if they come back to agriculture or a STEM Career, that's good for the Central Valley," said Donoso.

The company, which is looking for other agribusinesses to join in the effort, is going to expand the program in 2015. Three more high schools, Wasco, Reedley Middle College H.S., and Washington Union will start the program this summer.

Paramount Agricultural Companies, part of Roll Global, comprise the largest farming operation of tree crops in the world. Paramount's products can be found in the produce aisles of grocery stores nationwide under popular retail brands.

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