

Returning Student Applies Food Safety Methods During Internship

Jessica White grew up in Reedley and when she graduated from Liberty High School in Madero Ranchos, she was encouraged to explore careers outside of the field of agriculture that had supported her family for generations. “I was strongly discouraged from pursuing education and careers in agriculture,” said White. “There is an assumption that agriculture is all fieldwork but the reality is that there are many highly skilled, science-based and well-paid careers in the agriculture industry.”

As a result of this early advice, White’s education path took a circuitous route before pursuing her passion for agriculture, gaining technical skills at College of the Sequoias (COS) and working an intern at Advanced Food Products LLC. “I attended COS and Reedley College, earning an AA in Anthropology from COS and then transferred to California State University, Fresno where I earned a BA in Physical Anthropology,” said White. “My specialty was epigenetic research, looking at chemical modifications to DNA that turn genes are on or off, affecting behavior and physical changes between generations.”

A few years after graduating, White returned to her agricultural roots, became an entrepreneur and started an ostrich ranch. That led her back to COS, to learn more about the business of agriculture and meat science. “The COS classes offer industry specific training and I became intrigued with food safety,” said White. “It is an advantage that I became HACCP and PCQI certified while at COS as many employers are looking candidates with these qualifications.” The Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification is an international standard for writing, implementing and monitoring food safety plans. Preventive Controls Qualified Individual (PCQI) ensures safe manufacturing, processing, packing and holding of food products for human consumption in the United States.

COS Career Technical Education (CTE) Career and Academic Success Coordinator, Cosmo Costales, told White about the internship opportunity at Advanced Food Products. “Cosmo helped me revise my resume and draft a cover letter,” said White. “He also helped me prepare for the interview by answering all my questions, suggesting what I could ask the employer and running through the questions I might be asked. Cosmo was an amazing resource in helping me secure the position.”

Advanced Food Products is a producer of low-acid aseptically packaged products, explained Tammy Santos, Quality Supervisor, Advanced Food Products (AFP) in Visalia. “Our plant produces cheese sauces, puddings and soup,” said Santos. “Our human resources department worked with COS to collect resumes from interested students. Jessica was selected to be our first intern in the Quality Department. Her familiarity with HACCP and PCQI made her stand out.”



White enjoyed working as a summer intern in the quality assurance lab at AFP. “I was part of a team that kept an eye on multiple manufacturing lines,” said White. “We took samples to check that they met specifications for pH, viscosity, color, taste and consistency.”

Monitoring the automation of food production lines was something White liked about her job. “I loved learning what to expect in each production line,” said White. “I could almost feel how the entire line was working and as we ran tests in the lab, anticipated and mitigated potential anomalies before they became problems.”

The internship at AFP enabled White to take what she learned in the classroom and apply it in the real world. “It was interesting and fun for me to see how food safety procedures functioned in real time,” said White. “It was like being a detective. If a test indicated an issue, we traced back to where something went wrong, and using video could pinpoint the exact moment and cause. It was very demanding, intense work and I enjoyed every minute.”

Santos indicated that the internship was mutually beneficial. “Hosting an intern is a win-win for both the student and the company,” said Santos. “Her qualifications from COS prepared Jessica to get to work from the minute she stepped in the door. She gained valuable work experience as she saw how food safety is applied in a manufacturing environment.”

White highly recommends COS for students interested in pursuing an agriculture career. “COS, especially the Tulare campus, has all the other schools beat, hands-down,” said White. “The faculty and staff know all the students’ names and career goals, if we have them. Their support has been phenomenal. It feels like a tight-knit community where all the students know each other and work together, too.”

Getting an internship has been instrumental in propelling White’s career forward. “I’d recommend attending the on-campus career fair where students can meet representatives from ag relevant companies and industries,” said White. “I absolutely loved my internship and getting hands-on experience applying what I learned in class.”

There are many avenues to careers in agriculture where students can apply their interest in science and technology, according to White. “If you are interested in agriculture, follow your passion,” said White. “Agriculture has so many amazing career options with well-paid local jobs that most people can’t imagine. At COS, you can discover so many interesting agricultural careers, get industry certification and connect with employers.”



Santos indicated that there are many opportunities for students interested in food safety. “I have a passion for manufacturing safe food products,” said Santos. “I love working within our AFP Team and together we make sure everything that we send out to our customers is in compliance with all food safety standards. I’d highly recommend careers in food quality assurance.”

White is planning on taking a few more classes to complete the COS Certificates in Food Safety Management and Veterinary Assisting Technology. “This coursework will help me move forward with my main passion – producing healthy and wholesome meat products,” said White. “And someday, when I am managing my own facility producing ostrich products, this knowledge will be invaluable. In the meantime, I look forward to building my career and experience working for other processors or regulating agencies.”