



MILKEN INSTITUTE

# The Power of Ideas

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Insights for Building  
Meaningful Lives



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**“Ag Prep... aligns high schools, colleges, and industry to create real-world learning experiences...”**

## To Change the Future, We Went Back to High School

*What happens when the available workforce isn't qualified for the jobs of the future?*

Most people hear “agriculture” and think “picking fruit.” But today’s Ag has gone high tech. Yes, technology has replaced many workers in Ag. But it has also created a vast number of amazing, highly skilled, year-round jobs that pay well...and require a college degree.

California’s Central Valley produces 50 percent of our nation’s fruits and vegetables—so just like in Silicon Valley, continuous innovation is essential. Today’s crops are processed using technologies that help us conserve water, minimize pesticides, automate farm operations, and ensure the best quality, freshest produce reaches all 50 states as quickly as possible. Every single day.

Picture a processing plant the size of 17 football fields where citrus fruits zoom along miles of conveyor belts like a scene from Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. This massive operation requires thousands of skilled workers. That’s exciting! And a huge problem.

U.S. News & World Report estimated that 50,000 high-skilled, STEM-based Ag jobs will open by 2020, with fewer than 36,000 qualified graduates to fill them. That’s a significant skills gap.

Good news: Tons of jobs. Bad news: Few qualified candidates and a staggering 37 percent youth unemployment rate in the Central Valley.

My husband Stewart and I own The Wonderful Company, one of California’s largest Ag businesses. As a fully integrated operation, we grow, harvest, process, and market our pistachios, almonds, pomegranates, and countless varieties of citrus. But with the existing public systems, particularly education, unable to produce the employees our future needed to get the job done, it was clear that we needed to change our future.

To do so, we had to go where the employees of the future already were...in high school! So we created Wonderful Agriculture Career Prep, or Ag Prep for short.

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This innovative high school career pathways program helps students select their field of choice, become dream employees, and work in their dream jobs. Ag Prep achieves this by aligning high schools, colleges, and industry to create real-world learning experiences that prepare students for high tech Ag jobs. Introduced three years ago, the program's mission is to increase college grads, reduce unemployment, and generate local economic growth. All we had to do was re-invent high school in a region where less than 30 percent of students traditionally met state university admission requirements.

In addition to their core curriculum, our high schoolers take courses conducted by college professors, earning college credit, so they're actually going to high school and college at the same time.

Our program offers three core career pathways: Plant Science, Ag Business Management and Ag Mechanics. Our students are exposed to brilliant mentors,

job shadowing, and industry conferences, and seniors are guaranteed a paid internship, providing invaluable real world experience in their chosen pathway. Imagine a high school that doesn't just teach history, it teaches the future...your future!

At graduation, students earn their high school diploma and an associate of science degree. Grads can enter The Wonderful Company's skilled workforce with a guaranteed \$35-50,000/year job, or attend a four-year college, starting as a junior and finishing in half the time at half the cost.

Next year, we expect 130 students in our first graduating class with 91 heading on to a four-year college as juniors and 39 ready for hire. By 2020, we will serve 2,000 middle school and 1,300 high school students annually across our region of the state.

Ag Prep has the potential to give The Wonderful Company a substantial competitive edge, but it's not a trade secret. We want to share our

program with others. We are working with corporations and nonprofits to help them replicate our model.

Most importantly, we are making a real difference in the lives of Central Valley youth. Eighty-one percent of our 11th graders have already passed at least five college courses, and we're already expanding our program into middle schools. And it's all tuition-free, subsidized through a partnership between The Wonderful Company, generous state grants and the commitment of local school districts.

Technology is transforming our industry and the world. But when government and public services can't or won't drive the changes necessary to keep up, private industry and private individuals have an obligation to step up and create real solutions. Along the way, we discovered that our model has the power to change the future and to change lives.

All we had to do was go back to high school.

