

## **The Vocational Agriculture Educational Model in Today's Labor Markets**

Supervised Occupational Experiences in Vocational Agriculture Centers, June 2007

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### Farm Committees – Model of the Early 1900's

When the Vo Ag model of having young people experience “real world” employment developed, most of these students' work sites were on actual farms. A teacher of Agriculture would work with a group of farms to place their students in summer or after schoolwork. It was part of the total educational experience, and would be measured by performance measures developed by the teacher and employer (the farm).

Within the last 50 years, the employment aspect of Vo Ag education broadened to include the environment, natural resources management and ecological, sustainable agriculture. Traditional agriculture sciences (genetics, crop yield, pest control) specialized into distinct branches of employment, so now it's commonly associated with over 300 job or employment titles.

### Field Experiences to Laboratory Work- 1950's and 1960's

The type of work placements would also change reflecting the decline in neighborhood farms and the specialization of the industry itself. Perhaps nowhere is this change so apparent than in the greenhouse or container plant industries. Ornamental horticulture is a multi-billion dollar industry. A century ago, the emphasis was upon raising food. Few, I believe, could predict the enormous growth in the “ornamental aspect” of agriculture. A new industry dedicated to laboratory plant sciences would change how plants were grown and cultivated.

Time and changes in local agriculture would forever alter the relationship of working on a neighbor's farm to today's helping restore a natural resource, working in a laboratory and its uses in conducting lab practicals in genetics.

### Aquaculture and Marine Technology- 1980's

For our Vocational Agriculture Center, the changes would be more substantial, a relatively new program with a focus around the sea and water as it related to marine technology and marine foods. Although Vo Ag curriculum in Connecticut had changed, the regulations around the language of work and labor department did not. Today, we are being held to a strict definition of “Agriculture” which does not recognize many of the agriculture sciences of the last century. If it's not “touching fur or planting seeds, it's not agriculture.”

It is in this context that Vo Ag Centers in Connecticut are reexamining how we fulfill a large part of our educational model/mission. This is occurring with increasingly complex labor/employer relationships and a narrowing of what is allowed as student work in agriculture. The new paper work around employment placements is now many pages of complicated assurances, programs and compliance with work place regulations.

Teachers and employers are refusing to sign them. As of this spring, 2007, of the 3,100 Connecticut Vo Ag students, only one Department of Labor approved worksite had the formal paperwork completed.

### New Haven's Response - 2007

#### Directed Laboratories

The fact of the matter is we were changing how we fulfill our SOE hours anyway. The urban Vo Ag centers in the early 1990's had asked for and obtained a new type of work experience placement called a "directed laboratory." Connected to the daily scope and sequence, it was a curricular extension of the academic day school-based program and under the direction of the Vo Ag teacher. Boat building or boat repair after school is an example of a directed laboratory. Participation in them was a way to gain SOE hours for students at centers around which the "neighborhood farms had disappeared." We look now to increased participation in directed laboratories as a way for freshman and sophomores to fulfill SOE requirements. At this point, we have two basic types of SOE directed laboratories site-based and off-site. They can be summer or academic year programs. Trish Russell oversees the paper work on academic year programs, while Susan Weber runs the site-based summer program for us for several years.

#### Cooperative Placement

We plan now to expand a very old type of Vo Ag placement called "Cooperative placement." Cooperative placement is usually a school day/senior research project for which the agriculture teacher supervises and the students receive a grade. Questions have been asked if we can expand cooperative placement after the school day for students doing non-paid research and data collection and other special projects. It fits well into the upper classman scope and sequence of a special topic/research project as part of the senior coursework. We have grant programs and research projects that would fit the cooperative placement process. Teachers sign the forms and agree according to Vo Ag regulations to conduct "site visits."

#### Some questions

- Q. My daughter or son works now, do they need to quit their jobs?
  - A. Students can still work and we encourage employment related to our curriculum, but they are not considered school placements nor "countable" for SOE hours. Such work employment must follow all Labor Department rules.
  
- Q. Vo Ag was exempt from many of the age requirements for hazardous and high hazardous work. In other words, Vo Ag students who were 13, 14, 15 year olds could work in jobs normally reserved for 16 year olds; and 16 and 17 year olds could normally work in jobs reserved for 18. Will this continue?
  - A. No, student work now must conform to the regular labor department rules – the "Ag exemption no longer applies" – we have cancelled these exemptions as school placements.

- Q. Is it still possible to obtain labor department approval for hazardous work?
- A. Yes, but it requires the filing of a structured work-based learning plan that employers are reluctant to sign because of the special provisions and assurance's and teachers have expressed liability concerns. Paid work requires a LED-75. No hazardous work paid a LED – 33 (additional forms) or a waiver for non-paid employments.
- Q. If the employer and teacher agree to file the paperwork, will the Department of Labor approve it?
- A. Our situation is much different from the other agriculture centers because our focus is marine technology, marine trades and aquaculture science. Nearly all of the job titles we explore have been ruled non-agriculture, so even if the paperwork was completed, Department of Labor approval is slim as they don't meet the current definition or expectations of "agriculture" currently in place. Even many of the common agriculture job titles have also been eliminated.
- Q. How are students expected to fulfill the SOE requirements?
- A. We expect that as our program adjusts freshman and sophomore students will gain most of the SOE hours from directed labs with teachers after school. For Juniors and Seniors, the same will be true for cooperative placements after school, but they will be non-paid.
- Q. How can I find more about these charges?
- Trish Russell oversees all Career Services here, phone is 203 946 6873
  - Sue Weber organizes our site-based directed laboratory in the summer here, phone number is 203 946 6875.
  - Vocational Agriculture teachers have access to cooperative placement forms students need to ask Vo Ag advisors for them, but they can be printed off the school web site: [www.soundschool.com](http://www.soundschool.com) and from there, click on "career services," and click on "forms."
  - Specific questions can always be referred to Tim Visel, Vo Ag Center Coordinator at 203 946 7106.