

Future Ag Teacher Discovered Passion on the COS Farm

Gemma Fortunato, a College of the Sequoias (COS) graduate in Animal Science, originally intended to become an English teacher. After graduating from high school, Fortunato initially started her studies at Fresno City College. Intrigued by what her now-fiancé told her about the agricultural industry, she switched to COS and changed her major to Animal Science, despite facing over an hour commute each way.

At COS, Fortunato immersed herself in agricultural clubs and rose to leadership roles, gained hands-on experience working with livestock and utilized school resources at the student success center. Fortunato transferred to California State University, Fresno after graduating with an Associate Degree for Transfer in Animal Science from COS and is now on track to become a high school agriculture teacher.

It was a love of animals that drew Fortunato to Animal Science at COS. “My godmother worked at the zoo and cultivated my love and respect of animals,” said Fortunato. “Once I got to COS, everything fell into place so easily. Soon, I was volunteering with livestock at the barn on campus.”

Although Fortunato didn’t have farming or livestock experience, she indicated that COS made it so easy to explore agriculture. “The COS professors, especially Russell McKeith in Animal Science, understood that I didn’t grow up on a ranch or dairy,” said Fortunato. “The faculty offered equal opportunities to all students, whether or not they came from a ranching background, and welcomed us into the campus agricultural community.”

According to Russell McKeith, COS Animal Science instructor, students can earn a Certificate of Achievement, Associate of Science (AS) degree or an AS for Transfer in Animal Science. “The major is popular among students planning to transfer to university,” said McKeith. “Most of our students don’t come from an agriculture background but know that they like animals. At the COS farm and barn, they can participate in the hands-on application of what they are learning in class.”

The COS instructors really opened her eyes to animal behavior, explained Fortunato. “The professors are amazing,” said Fortunato. “They helped me understand animal science much more in depth and in a more meticulous manner than I expected. For example, we learned about behavior and nutrition, down to the molecular level – exactly how different feed affects the animals.”



Animal Science leads to a variety of careers, explained McKeith. “Through the school farm and coursework, students are exposed to many career pathways such as equine management, meat science and animal nutrition,” said McKeith. “In the Central Valley, there is a high demand for qualified employees in the food sector, offering graduates well paid jobs in the poultry, meat or dairy industries.”

Fortunato started as a volunteer in the COS livestock unit and soon was hired as a herdsman. “I was so blessed to get this hands-on experience working with cattle, pigs and sheep,” said Fortunato. “When a foal was born pre-maturely, I was able to help care for him. It was a fantastic experience to nurse this sweet baby horse to good health despite the long hours required to give him 24/7 care.”

On-campus clubs were another way for Fortunato to gain her footing in agriculture. “I joined several Ag clubs and in my second year at COS became president of both the Livestock and Ag Business clubs,” said Fortunato. “I was also highly involved in the Ag Council.”

She gained practical experience on the equestrian team. “I’d ridden a little bit, but at COS, I rode competitively for the first time,” said Fortunato. “The COS equestrian coach was fantastic and made all the students feel welcome. It was exciting when we became the second high point team in the state.”

According to Fortunato, COS also provides plenty of support to students exploring careers. “Professors really try every day to find opportunities that fit each student personally,” said Fortunato. “Attending COS is so much more than just taking classes. Professors study the industry and have employer connections to help students find employment that is right for them.”

After receiving support from the Career Technical Education (CTE) Career Services, Fortunato was selected for a summer internship with a dried fruit company. “Working in research and development gave me a perspective on how companies come up with new products,” said Fortunato. “This experience will help me expose my students to more career possibilities when I become a teacher.”

Fortunato also benefited from and worked at the COS Student Success Center. “I really appreciated the bi-weekly check-ins at the Student Success Center that made me accountable for keeping up with my studies,” said Fortunato. “I also enjoyed my job at the Success Center as a desk assistant, helping students and scheduling appointments. Scott Rogers, Student Success coordinator, was a huge help to me through the student success program. He really knew the Animal Science pathway and was instrumental in guiding me through the CSU application for transfer.”

Russell indicated that Gemma was a determined and dedicated student. “She was open to trying new things and wanted to learn as much as she could,” said Russell. “Not only was she a good student, Gemma immersed herself in clubs, attended networking events and volunteered with the livestock. When I see students putting themselves out there to learn and being open to taking advantage of campus resources, like Gemma did, I’ve found that they are more apt to be successful.”

Fortunato wished that she’d known more about community college and the opportunities they offer. “Don’t let fear hold you back,” said Fortunato. “If you are on the fence, definitely go to COS first. I was fully prepared and better set to continue on at Fresno State because my COS professors set expectations at a high level, welcomed me into the amazing campus community and offered so many connections. I highly recommend COS and especially the Animal Science program.”

Now in her second semester at Fresno State, Fortunato is majoring Agricultural Education with an emphasis in Ag Mechanics. “After I complete my bachelor’s degree, I’ll get a teaching credential and possibly a master’s degree,” said

Fortunato. "My goal is to teach agriculture at high school and later at community college. Like the COS instructors who did so much for me, I'd like to give similar opportunities to others."