

# Award Winning Welder Finds His Calling as an Ag Teacher

As a result of a College of the Sequoias Jump Start program, Raul Frias went from not planning to attend college to participating in the one semester Ag Irrigation Academy. It went so well that now he's working on his associate degree with plans to transfer and become a Career Technical Education (CTE) teacher. He hopes to give future students the same encouragement that he received from his teachers and as a member of Future Farmers of America (FFA).

Frias first took welding at Lindsay High school as a freshman. "I was terrified at first," said Frias. "You just have to give it a shot. Through welding, I got involved in Future Farmers of America. Soon, I purchased a welder and was building Santa Maria barbecue grills with lock-in grates and entering them in county fairs. I was selected as the Porterville Fair Ag Mechanics Grand Champion and Senior Champion in 2022."

In his senior year at high school, he connected with Chelsea Cushing from the COS Jump Start program, a several week summer internship. "The Jump Start industrial internship is very competitive and targeted at high school students considering hands-on careers in welding, irrigation, automation and industrial maintenance," said Cushing. "They complete 75 hours of training, learn about COS CTE programs, develop applied math skills, practice soft skills, make presentations to employers, and tour two or more manufacturers and industrial businesses each week. They earn scholarships and industry certifications; approximately 70% of the participants decide to enroll in college."

Frias participated in the Jump Start internship and afterwards, Cushing encouraged him to consider continuing at COS in the Ag Irrigation Academy. "Chelsea gave me insight on COS programs and local employment opportunities," said Frias. "Chelsea told me that I'd be a good fit for the one semester Ag Irrigation Academy. I got into the academy and my irrigation instructor, Mr. Abee, was amazing. He knows so much, has plenty of industry experience and can give connections to companies."

Students complete an irrigation internship as well as one semester of classes with a cohort of students to earn an Ag Irrigation Technician Skill Certificate, explained Frias. "I was only 17 years old and landed an irrigation internship with



Rick Mallory (left) and Raul Frias (right) at JG Boswell

J.G. Boswell Company,” said Frias. “As an irrigation specialist, I drove around checking the irrigation lines for the tomatoes. I looked at the drip tape, checked the tension, inspected lines for damage and tested pumps. It was a hugely rewarding experience to step onto the Boswell farms and learn how to do the work.”

Frias indicated that he’d definitely recommend that students get internships. “We were learning a lot in class but it is more meaningful when you see how it is used out in the field,” said Frias. “At Boswell, everyone was so welcoming and they were willing to give advice. An internship lets you know what is out there. It gets you thinking about your future and what you are going to do outside of school.”



At a COS sponsored event for students and industry partners, Frias connected with COS Provost Louann Waldner. “Ms. Waldner took the time to talk with me,” said Frias. “We discussed career options and the possibility of becoming a Career Technical Education teacher. She told me about financial aid and scholarships that could help pay for it. I felt very motivated when Ms. Waldner described what she looks for when hiring an instructor and I could see myself doing it.”

So after the Ag Irrigation Academy was completed, Frias continued at COS, taking an Agriculture Education course. “It was great because I had Mr. Abee for Ag Irrigation and then I had him again for Ag Education,” said Frias. “He showed me how I could become a teacher. In addition, he introduced me to people at universities offering agriculture education degrees and teaching certificates.”

It was a turning point for the welder who had not planned to even go to college and was now making plans to continue at COS and then transfer. “I was still in FFA in the year after high school,” said Frias. “I was a regional winner and went to the state conference in Ontario, where I was in the top three FFA Proficiency Award winners in Ag Mechanics, Design & Fabrication for California. At these events and the national FFA Convention, I met people who helped me see myself in a teaching career.”



Cushing helped Frias explore scholarships. “Raul didn’t hesitate to pick my brain,” said Cushing. “When he said that the materials he needed to compete for FFA scholarships were expensive, we talked about how he could find sponsors to subsidize the cost. We discussed which companies in Visalia and Tulare might sponsor him. He wrote a letter requesting support and asked me edit it. Then he went in person to meet with managers at local businesses. Not only did he find sponsors, he also gained confidence and learned about local industry. Raul has a great attitude; he’s willing to try anything.”

Those experiences enabled Frias to open his own welding business to support himself while going to school. “Being my own boss means that I can manage my own time so I have flexibility to work around

my classes,” said Frias. “When I strike an arc and put on the welding helmet, it feels right. I enjoy starting a project from the ground up and seeing it completed, like the fencing project I just finished.”

Frias described COS as an ideal learning environment. “COS is small enough that you don’t get lost in the crowd,” said Frias. “All the faculty and staff know your name. I felt like my professors really cared about me and encouraged me to go for it. COS is your best option if you don’t know what you want to do yet. And it saves you money while you figure out what you want to study.”



The COS Student Success Center has everything a student needs, according to Frias. “They made me aware of other options when I needed help,” said Frias. “The staff can help with laptops, pencils and snacks. I appreciated that they always know what is coming next and reminded me of due dates.”

With plans to become an agriculture education teacher, Frias mentioned that student clubs are a good way to learn. “I don’t come from a farm family,” said Frias. “So, I joined the livestock club to learn.”

Now, Frias is trying to decide between getting an associate degree in Animal or Plant Science. “I hope to graduate in fall 2024 and transfer to Fresno State to become a Career Technical Education teacher,” said Frias. “I want to inspire students, like my teachers did, and be involved in FFA as an advisor.”

Cushing predicts a bright future for Frias. “He has a calling to become a teacher,” said Cushing. “Students will respond to his kindness and natural leadership. I repeatedly saw him rallying his peers and encouraging their participation. He has a drive to give back to the community.”