

Climbing Higher: Aggies Elevated Students Complete Internships at the Aggie Chocolate Factory

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Aggies Elevated students Michele Gibson (left) and Keegan Anderson package chocolate at ACF.

Students in Aggies Elevated, a program at Utah State that provides postsecondary education opportunities for young adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities, are expanding their horizons with a new internship program at the Aggie Chocolate Factory with support from Daisy Brand.

Brandon Nelson, director of Innovation and Technical Services for Daisy Brand dairy, has many ties to Utah State. He regularly collaborates with USU faculty and students in the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences as part of the BUILD dairy, a network of professors, researchers, students, and dairy food industry companies that collaborate to further research initiatives and help students launch careers in dairy. His oldest daughter is a current student at Utah State, and several of his other family members are USU graduates. When Nelson's younger daughter Brooke began exploring postsecondary education opportunities, Utah State University was high on her list.

However, Brooke's education needs are a little different than those of a typical high schooler exploring college options. "Brooke has been in special education since the first grade," said Nelson. "Generally, one would not know her challenges, but they make some things more difficult for her and require that she find and use tools to help her."

It was during their search for the right opportunity for Brooke that Nelson first learned about Aggies Elevated at USU. Aggies Elevated was one of the first programs of its kind in Utah, and Nelson said it stood out from the programs they were researching across the nation in providing an excellent experience for students. Though the program offers some foundational skills classes, participants in Aggies Elevated are otherwise fully integrated with the USU student body. They attend classes across campus, live in the dorms, complete internships, and have a complete college experience with support from peer mentors and program advisors.

As Nelson and his family visited Aggies Elevated at both the Logan and Price campuses to learn more about the program's expectations and the opportunities it provides, he began to see how the program truly lives up to its motto of encouraging students to "climb higher."

Shortly afterward, Nelson and his family toured the Aggie Chocolate Factory (ACF), part of the Nutrition, Dietetics, and Food Sciences department, and learned about their mission of teaching and research. Having recently learned that Aggies Elevated students are required to complete two semesters of internship, Nelson saw the potential of a collaboration between Aggies Elevated and ACF.

"The Aggie Chocolate Factory has a one-of-a-kind employment opportunity for students," said Nelson. "They are able to provide a variety of job tasks, including working with chocolate and with customers. Aggies Elevated students are dependable, focused, kind, and infectious happy, and I thought this could give them a fun perspective on something they are familiar with while providing a new world of career opportunities."

Nelson got in touch with Michelle McKnight, the Executive Director of Aggies Elevated, to implement his idea. McKnight worked with Nelson and with ACF director Steve Bernet to set up the program, and three students from Aggies Elevated were employed as paid interns at ACF with support from Daisy Brand during the 2023 spring semester.



Michele Gibson (top left) stands with other Aggies Elevated students who graduated this spring.

Michele Gibson was one of these interns, and her position at ACF was also her first paid job. Over the course of the semester, Michele participated in multiple steps of ACF's bean-to-bar process, from making chocolate bars and cleaning dishes to filling orders and leading tours. "I've learned how the machines work and how long it takes for the chocolate to get to the right temperature to put it into the molds," Gibson said. "I've learned how to help with taste testing during tours and what words to say if I'm giving a tour all by myself. I've learned a lot of things so I can answer customers' questions."

Lindsay Thunell, director of the Aggies Elevated program in Logan, said that Gibson's internship at ACF provided many opportunities for her to meet her personal goals. "During her first couple years in Aggies Elevated, Michele demonstrated her motivation and capabilities over and over in so many situations and tasks," Thunell said. "When the opportunity for a job at Aggie Chocolate came up, she was really excited and we helped her advocate to her parents that she was ready and capable."

Independence and self-advocacy are two of the most important skills Gibson feels she's developed from her time at Aggies Elevated. She said that growing up, she often let others decide what her capabilities were. Aggies Elevated has helped her learn that she can push herself to do more and develop the skills needed to help others understand her goals. "Coming to college, I learned a lot more skills and insights on how to advocate for myself," she said. "And I've been trying my best to advocate for myself with my parents, my friends, and my other family members."

Gibson was one of four Aggies Elevated students to graduate this spring with her associate's degree in addition to the certificate of proficiency the program standardly issues. Eleven total Aggies Elevated students graduated with the USU class of 2023, and the total cohort during the spring semester was 19 students—the largest group and the highest number of graduates the program has ever seen. "Being at college and in the program has helped me gain more friends than I ever thought possible," said Gibson. "They respect me as an individual and as a person with disabilities."

Now that she's graduated, Gibson will continue working part-time at ACF for the summer while she decides what to do next. Thunell is thrilled with Gibson and the other students' successes this year and is eager to see what

the remaining cohort will accomplish as they continue the program this fall.

"When students grasp their own capabilities and potential, it's one of the coolest moments," she said. "For a lot of Aggies Elevated students, they grew up with messages that they don't need to reach high or dream big, that they need support and help in everything. And then the students come and realize that they can do the same things that everyone around them is doing. Students are passing their inclusive classes for credit and getting jobs. The self-confidence Aggies Elevated students develop while in the program is one of the coolest things to watch. Their eyes open and you just watch them run."

Learn more about [Aggies Elevated](#) and the [Aggie Chocolate Factory](#).