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Biotech program measures up for students

GAIL SMITH-ARRANTS

At the front of her classroom, Gina Sloan grasped a long pipette in one hand and went slap, slap with the tip of the pipette into the palm of her other hand.

"Think `sterile.' Do *not* do this with your hands," she advised students in her Basic Lab Techniques class Monday night.

Tammy Espinoza, a 25-year-old single mom with three children, watched, listened and learned. With a pipette, she carefully collected and measured yellow-, blue-and green-colored water during the class offered by Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

"I love it," said Espinoza of lab class, which meets at RCCC's Cabarrus Business and Technology Center on U.S. 29 in Concord. "She's a really great teacher. ... I like doing the things we actually talk about."

Espinoza, a full-time student from Concord, is one of 28 enrolled in a new two-year associate degree program in biotechnology.

Last month, RCCC launched its two-year biotech degree programs. They were designed specifically to meet future needs of employers at David Murdock's North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, said Wendy Jin, RCCC's new dean of biotechnology programs.

A Kannapolis consultant projected more than 2,000 biotech jobs will come to the region by the end of this year, and thousands more later.

Some experts, however, have questioned the likelihood that the campus will develop into a major job magnet in a region that hasn't had a significant biotech presence.

Like many students in Sloan's lab class, Espinoza is optimistic and hoping to find plenty of job opportunities for lab workers.

"A complete career change," said Williams Saunders, 44, who was laid off as a machinist with Freightliner. He transferred from Gaston College to the closer RCCC degree program. Gaston and Forsyth Technical Community College collaborate with RCCC on the biotech programs.

RCCC also just started a two-year degree program in agricultural biotechnology. The two-year programs complement the existing BioWork continuing education course. BioWork introduces students to a broad view of biotechnology and prepares them for entry-level jobs.

Through outreach efforts, the college is targeting prospective students early. Sloan goes into area schools to give hands-on demonstrations.

At Forest Park Elementary in Kannapolis, she showed children how to extract DNA from pumpkins. At South Rowan High in China Grove, she helped students determine their own genotype from DNA.

Working in the biotech field may not be for everyone.

Keanna McKnight, 21, of Concord, used to work at Family Dollar.

"I want to do something besides lab tech," she said. "I'm still researching; if I don't want to be a lab tech, what do I do?"

Others in her class, like Espinoza and Jay Ross, are excited about giving biotech a whirl.

Ross, 51, of China Grove now works in maintenance for Rowan Regional Medical Center.

"I hope to get in on this thing Murdock's got going on," he said.

Learn more about biotech

Call Rowan-Cabarrus Community College's biotechnology department at 704-216-7200 or visit www.rowancabarrus.edu/biotechnology. For information about the BioWork course, call 704-216-7207.