

## Training for the future

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.

Espinoza, a full-time student from Concord, is one of 28 enrolled in a new two-year associate degree program in biotechnology that debuted last month. It was designed to help 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.

The \$1.5 billion campus, on the site of the former Pillowtex Corp. mill that once employed thousands of textile workers, is a collaboration among Murdock, the billionaire owner of Dole Foods, and several universities, including UNC Chapel Hill, UNC Charlotte and Duke University.

A Kannapolis consultant projected more than 2,000 biotech jobs will come to the region by the end of 2008, and thousands more later.

Some experts, however, have questioned whether the campus will develop into a major job magnet in a region that hasn't had a significant biotech presence. Most of the state's biotech jobs are in the Triangle area.

Like many students in Sloan's lab class, Espinoza hopes to find plenty of job options 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 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.

One student in Sloan's class, 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?"



Jay Ross looks for a reading as Virginia Barber draws fluid into a serological pipette to measure liquids during lab at the RCCC Cabarrus Business and Technology Center in Concord. (MARTY PRICE -- SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER)