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Rowan-Cabarrus Community College has earned state approval to offer two biotechnology associate degrees in 2009.

And despite construction delays, officials still hope to break ground this year on the college's new building at the N.C. Research Campus, which will hold its biotech programs.

Universities and private companies at the \$1.5 billion Research Campus are counting on the college to help meet their workforce demands. The college designed its new degree programs to prepare students for careers in Kannapolis.

"RCCC also will serve as a bridge to the Research Campus for local residents," President Dr. Carol Spalding said in a statement.

A study commissioned by the city of Kannapolis projects that the Research Campus will create more than 5,500 biotech jobs by 2013 and approximately 14,000 by 2032.

Campus founder and billionaire Dole Food Co. owner David Murdock has pledged to build a 60,000-square-foot facility for the college. Two buildings for the University of North Carolina System and Dole Food opened last month.

The stalled economy has delayed construction on the community college's building, but Lynne Scott Safrit, president of campus developer Castle & Cooke North Carolina, said she's not concerned.

"Several banks are looking at that deal, but they have been slow to respond," she said. "It's a different banking environment now than when we started. The steps are a little more tedious."

Safrit and Jeff Lowrance, college spokesman, said they still hope to break ground in 2008.

Another construction project in Kannapolis has been delayed as well. Castle & Cooke is still trying to finalize construction and financing agreements for the Medical Office Building, and Safrit has pushed the start date back to early 2009.

However, construction on the biorepository, a high-tech storage facility for biological samples, is ahead of schedule, she said.

While Rowan-Cabarrus prepares to enroll biotech students this fall, the college has lost the dean of that department.

Dr. Wendy Jin moved back to the Research Triangle Park area to be closer to her family, Lowrance said.

Jin served for about a year as both biotech dean and program head of the new agricultural biotechnology department.

The college has split her job into two positions and expanded the dean's duties, Lowrance said. Recruitment has begun for a dean of biotech, science and math, as well as an agricultural biotechnology program head.

The N.C. Community College System and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools approved the new degree programs. The college will offer two-year associate degrees in biotechnology and agricultural biotechnology.

Students who earn the biotech degree could work as lab technicians, research assistants and quality control associates. They will look for jobs with small testing labs, large manufacturers, government laboratories and research universities.

The agricultural biotech graduates will work as research assistants to biologists and chemists, lab and instrumentation technicians and quality control technicians.

These students will pursue jobs with industry, university and government employers, including work in research and development, manufacturing, sales, customer service and the production of bioengineered crops.

Rowan-Cabarrus also is working with Gaston College to develop a certificate program to quickly train people who already have a science or laboratory background for work as clinical research technicians or assistants.