



RCCC seeks state approval to offer biotech degrees

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SALISBURY - Rowan-Cabarrus Community College will seek approval from the North Carolina Community College System to offer associate degrees in biotechnology this spring.

The two proposed programs, biotechnology and agricultural biotechnology, would prepare students for entry-level research support positions at the North Carolina Research Campus, now under construction in Kannapolis.

The college will submit program applications to the NCCCS this week in hopes the state board will approve the request in October, said Ed Otto, RCCC's biotechnology director.

If approved this fall, classes could start as early as Jan. 9 in RCCC's existing facilities. More involved, second-year courses would be offered in RCCC's biotechnology research facility once it opens in January 2009 within the North Carolina Research Campus.

The college has also identified lab space in its Concord-based Cabarrus Business & Technology Center that could house limited course offerings if needed, Otto said.

Both degree programs would initially be open to 48 first-year and 48 second-year students.

"We'll be adjusting that as demand dictates," Otto said. "We don't want to turn out far more students than we have jobs."

Otto expects most of the research campus' initial employers to be universities, such as Duke University, N.C. A&T University, N.C. Central University, N.C. State University, UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC Greensboro.

An RCCC survey of potential employers showed between 42 and 74 jobs could be available for the first graduates of the biotechnology degree program. Another 22 to 29 jobs could emerge for graduates of the agricultural option.

The survey showed those entry-level jobs could pay between \$24,000 and \$32,000.

More jobs would become available as the research campus matures, Otto said.

College officials also surveyed 14 area high schools last spring to gauge interest in the programs. Surveys were given to sophomores and juniors who had completed at least one biology or chemistry course.

Nearly 20 percent, or 296, of the 1,520 students surveyed said they would enroll in RCCC's biotechnology program in 2009-2011. Nearly 15 percent, or 215, of the 1,497 students said they'd sign up for the agricultural biotechnology program.

Biotechnology has become more common in Cabarrus County classrooms since plans for the North Carolina Research Campus were unveiled in September 2005.

In past semesters, April Baucom has tried to incorporate a four- to five-day biotechnology unit into her honors and Advanced Placement courses at A.L. Brown High School. But with the North Carolina Research Campus under construction in the school's backyard, Baucom said she is seeking ways to integrate biotechnology into the classroom as much as possible.

RCCC began offering a collaborative associate degree program in biotechnology this fall, in which students could begin taking many of its courses at RCCC. But without biotech equipment, labs or courses, those

students would have to finish up their degree requirements at Gaston College or Forsyth Technical Community College.

RCCC recently hired someone to oversee its agricultural biotechnology program, as well as two faculty members who will serve as community liaisons to help educate the public on future biotechnology career opportunities.

Otto said he and his small staff will continue to develop courses for the proposed degree programs.

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