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Community colleges eye biotech; industry returns the favor

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A new program to train workers in the skills required to work in the biotech sector offer a career opportunity to some but are still too few and far between.

In April, St. Louis Community College and the Metropolitan Education and Training (MET) Center of Wellston, Missouri will launch a biotech training program, modeled after one that began in the San Francisco Bay Area when airline workers were laid off after the September 2001 terrorist attacks. The new program marks a growing trend to align work training programs with the needs of the biotech industry.

The pilot program will take 15 to 20 students through a curriculum that will include skills for manufacturing drugs as well as basic math, reading remediation and biology. Though free to the students, the initial program will cost up to \$175,000, says MET Center director Carolyn Seward, with funding coming from the local and state governments and the Annie E. Casey Foundation of Baltimore, Maryland, a private charity. Like the Bay Area program, the St. Louis program will be shaped by local biotech and life science companies.

MET's Seward says she was impressed with how carefully the Bay Area program laid out career pathways. Rather than just getting people jobs, it showed how people could rise within a company. In addition, participants could be trained for a paid internship in as little as 12 weeks, an important factor for a workforce that lacks the resources to go through extended training.

Working with local companies was key to the Bay Area program's success, according to Fred Slone, manager at the Workforce Investment Board of San Mateo County. "We asked the employers what they needed," says Slone. With South San Francisco, California-based Genentech, the Skyline Community College of San Bruno, California, and other participants, the San Mateo Board created a three-month curriculum for the biotech jobs available in the region.

So far, about 120 students have been trained in the San Mateo program: the first class graduated in June of 2003, the sixth in February of this year. Slone calls the free training program the most successful the board has ever worked on, with over 80% of trainees getting placed as bioprocessing technicians, medium prep specialists or in similar positions. "We depend on community college graduates, particularly in our manufacturing processes, and have not been disappointed," says Paige Lloyd, senior staffing consultant at Genentech, who works with several local community colleges to help make sure the curriculum will match employer needs.

Such symbiotic relationships between community colleges and biotech companies are still all too rare, according to Julian Alssid, who is head of Workforce Strategy, a nonprofit consultancy in New York City that has worked on both the Bay Area and Saint Louis projects.

"The biggest challenge is that biotech does not look to community colleges as trainers of choice, and they don't have relationships with the publicly funded workforce system," says Alssid, who is also consulting on life science projects in New York, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey and Alabama. But the colleges offer huge assets, he says, such as the ability to get grants to create highly specific training programs. And community colleges are eager to place students in the kinds of jobs biotech offers. Regulatory requirements discourage outsourcing; salaries start above \$30,000; and companies, particularly large ones, often have clear paths for career advancement.

Some regions hope that biotech certification programs in local community colleges will 'sweeten the pot' for companies deciding where to build facilities, Alssid says. But missteps can happen when community colleges don't look to the specific biotech needs of their region. After all, smaller, younger biotech companies have fewer positions that can absorb workers without four-year degrees, and sometimes training centers will look at broad projections and guess what skills are necessary, rather than aligning training with the actual requirements of area companies.

The MET Center's Seward says the Center's work with local companies means the students who go through the program will have jobs waiting. "Clearly we are not talking about tens of thousands of jobs, but people who would not have gotten through the doors before will have that opportunity now."