

THE ST. LOUIS AMERICAN

Local News

Pathway to success in life sciences

Wednesday, October 5, 2005 6:48 PM CDT

Novel program celebrates first graduating class

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Of the St. Louis American

Thirteen graduates of the Career Pathway Life Science program are well on their way to success in the life sciences industry. The students were part of a pilot program designed to boost the local biotechnology industry by providing skills to young workers and pairing them with companies in need of filling entry-level positions.

Clad in white lab coats, the class celebrated the completion of the program with a graduation ceremony Friday, September 30 at the Metropolitan Education and Training Center (MET). The program consists of 10 to 12 weeks of training in math, science and laboratory procedures. At the end of the program, the goal is to place students in biotechnology positions at the area's leading life science companies.

"This is really making a difference in metropolitan St. Louis. We have productive citizens now that feel good about who they are and their life goals," St. Louis County Executive Charlie Dooley said.

"Education is a continuing effort in our society, and it needs to be. More importantly, the workforce needs to understand that."

The program is a unique partnership of several public, private and community organizations including MET, Centocor Biologic and the St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment. The program places graduates on the fast track to careers in biotechnology and provides them with non-traditional, focused and comprehensive job training.

"To be the only program (of this kind) in the nation looking out for the low-income and underemployed, we are very pleased about that," Carolyn Seward of the St. Louis Regional Jobs Institute said.

She said the program is specifically designed for "low-income individuals and high school graduates who don't quite know what they want to do but have an interest in the life sciences."

"What we're doing crosses pharmaceutical companies, beverage companies, food industry - you would just be surprised at the number of opportunities," Seward said.

"Graduates going into these entry-level positions can make anywhere from \$25,000 to \$30,000, and then we have a pathway to move them up within those companies with additional skills. That is just an opportunity of a lifetime."

Only a few days after completing the program, T'Lisa Muhammad began work in lab support at a local pharmaceutical company.

"I had never been a fan of math and science, but the program made science or biotechnology more user-friendly. It gave me the opportunity for a type of employment that I had never considered," Muhammad said.

"I encourage it for anyone that's looking to make a career change, who may be between jobs or has a dead-end job and are looking for a different type of career."

The other graduates of the pilot program are Keisha Barnes, Kelvin Dobyne, J'Erica Edwards, Michael Hardin, David Holmes, Victoria Johnson, Monica Lewis, Frank Melton, Daniell Neal, Jenise Rogers, Zachariah Rosen and Peter Thorpe.

Julian Alssid is the executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center in New York and oversees 14 similar programs across the nation.

"This is not just about jobs, it's about putting in place a new system to feed the economy," Alssid said.

"This is about young people. The future of St. Louis are these (graduates)," said William Danforth, chairman of the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center.

"They're the ones who are going to carry forward St. Louis and the things we're working for and believe in. They are the people who are going to make St. Louis a great place in the future where they will want to raise their own families and create something that's better than we created."

The initial success of the program has been widely credited to the partnership and collaboration of many local governmental and community agencies including MET, St. Louis Community College, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Better Family Life, Inc. and more.

"Everything worthwhile is a team effort and it's people working together," Danforth said. "As long as we work together, cooperate and try to accomplish good common goals, there's nothing that can stop us."

The program is free for St. Louis City, County and Metro East residents. Two members of the graduating class have already been placed in positions with leading biotechnology firms in the area. Seward hopes the success of the first class will lead to more opportunities for future graduates.

There is already a waiting list for the next class that begins in January, but Seward said there would be about four to five classes offered each year.

"Now that we've finished this pilot program, we are tweaking it to make it better," Seward said. "We know that we need to do some additional math, remedial and lab work. Once we do that, we feel like the employers are at the table with us. We have the funding in place, and we are ready to go."

For more information, call Ahmed Sheriff at (314) 746-0750.