



Brunswick Community College preps students for booming marine industry

By Cammie Bellamy StarNews Staff

Posted Feb 15, 2017 at 10:25 AM

Updated Feb 15, 2017 at 4:18 PM

School will graduate its first marine biotech students this spring.

BOLIVIA -- It's canned clams for lunch at Brunswick Community College's marine biotechnology lab.

A technician shakes them into the horseshoe crab tank for the arthropods to munch upon. A few minutes later, students Andrew Frontiero and Bobby Clemmons take water samples to ensure tank conditions are top-notch.

It's not just about pampering the spiny research subjects -- the college's marine biotech program is giving students the skills to enter one of the **fastest growing industries in North Carolina** and the nation.

This spring Frontiero and Clemmons will be the first students to graduate from the fledgling program.

"There's a huge demand for technician-level training in this industry," said program director Ashley Alvarez. "Our goal here is to get anyone interested remotely in biotechnology or marine biotechnology a foothold."

Biotechnology refers to using living organisms to make a product (throw "marine" in there and you're talking specifically about plants and animals from the sea). Fermenting beer and culturing cheese qualify as biotech practices, but the growing industries are things like pharmaceuticals, agriculture, bio-fuels -- even cosmetics.

Brunswick is one of the few community colleges with a degree specifically in marine biotech. The nearby University of North Carolina Wilmington is home to the Marine Biotechnology in North Carolina center (MARBIONC), and offers an MBA in the Business of Biotechnology, but not an undergraduate degree. Brunswick's program went live in 2015 and today there are 15 to 20 students studying either biotech or marine biotech.

Students at the Bolivia campus hone an ocean of skills: chemistry, aquaculture, lab techniques, cloning methods and more. The final project before graduation involves a “Shark Tank”-style pitch where students design a product and detail how they would develop, market and change the world with it.

“What’s really exciting about this field is we don’t know what we don’t know,” Alvarez said. “We know more about the surface of Mars than we do about the bottom of the ocean. ... The potential for what we can do with that is just mind-blowingly enormous.”

According to the N.C. Biotechnology Center, an industry group based in Research Triangle Park, the state added 31 percent more jobs in biotech between 2000 and 2012. Alvarez said companies like PPD and Alcami in Wilmington or Cygnus Technologies in Southport offer some jobs in the field, but industries are still learning to incorporate marine products.

“We’re kind of training technicians for jobs that may not be available yet, but where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she said. “I personally see nothing but growth in this area.”

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