

How Community Colleges Are Addressing the Skills Gap

By Jean M. Bower, PhD

For a long time, medical device companies provided something of a puzzle to Salt Lake Community College: the employers wanted more trained workers, and had worked with the college on curriculum, but they weren't sending unskilled candidates for training. Conversations with employers and prospective students indicated that the slow pace of traditional academia was a deterrent. Students had to register at the College, wait for a semester to start, and then juggle their work schedules to be able to attend set class times, for at least two semesters, before any credential could be attained.

The US Department of Labor grant to the Community College Consortium for Biosciences Credentials allowed SLCC to try a new strategy. This time, the curriculum was developed in the School of Continuing Education as Medical Device

Manufacturing: Processes and Practices. The courses are non-credit, meet one evening a week for eight weeks, and new terms begin on a rolling basis all year

so that a Certificate can be obtained in just 16 weeks. This new format has been embraced by employers: one company offered all employees a 1% raise for each course completed, and another has opted to send all new hires in the quality department through.



The success of the Medical Device courses has inspired SLCC's Biotechnology program to convert to a more flexible and time-efficient format, in hopes of similarly attracting incumbent workers while still providing transferable academic credit. With support from the National Science Foundation, and starting in the fall of 2018, the Biotechnology Certificate and Associate's Degree program will be competency-based, so that a student with existing skills can accelerate through the program, saving both time and tuition. There will be no fixed class schedule; instead, lecture-type content will be delivered online, and students can attend an open lab with extended hours whenever it suits them for lab-based learning activities and assessments.

Jean M. Bower, PhD, is the Biotechnology Program Director at Salt Lake Community College in Utah. She outlines below how new medical device courses are feeding into the local economy.

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