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PBSC program gives biotech students head start toward success

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Dr. Libby Handel, Director of Biotechnology and Director of the Banner Center for Life Sciences at Palm Beach State College (center) with former student Camilo Rojas (left) a 2010 graduate of PBSC and now a lab assistant for Dr. Rumbaugh's lab in the department of neuroscience at Scripps Florida, and current PBSC student Michael Butts (right) who is pursuing an internship this summer.

By KEVIN D. THOMPSON

Palm Beach Post Staff Write

Updated: 3:41 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 23, 2011 Posted: 10:05 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 23, 2011

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PALM BEACH GARDENS — One day, Michael Butts hopes, he can contribute to finding a cure for such infectious diseases as HIV and malaria

"HIV is close to me," said Butts, 29. "I know several people who have it, and there are so many people who are suffering."

But helping find a cure starts with an education.

Butts, of Lake Worth, is in the second year of Palm Beach State College's biotechnology program. The two-year program is designed to prepare students for employment as lab technicians at biotech companies or such research institutions as Scripps Florida in Jupiter.

When the program started in 2006 on the school's Palm Beach Gardens campus, only five students signed up, said Program Director Libby Handel. That number swelled to 65 this year.

Handel attributes the increase to PBSC beefing up its marketing efforts .

The program focuses on students who are employed in the biotech field and those who have a bachelor's degree and are seeking more experience in the field.

Students who plan to transfer to a four-year university can earn an associate in arts degree. Those preparing for employment in the biotech industry can enroll in the associate in science program.

PBSC said it has partnered with more than 25 biotech firms for internships, including Jupiter Environmental Labs, Horizon Pharmaceuticals in West Palm Beach, and Bio Tools in Jupiter.

Camilo Rojas, who graduated from the program last year, works at Scripps as a technician in the neuroscience department performing Alzheimer's research on mice.

"The skills we learned in the program are applicable to any lab setting," said Rojas, 25, of West Palm Beach.

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Since the program started, 14 PBSC students have interned at Scripps, Handel said. Seven were hired.

To give students in the program more time in the lab, PBSC in 2008 began offering lectures online.

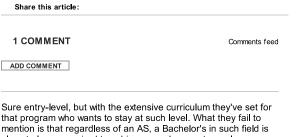
The program got a big boost in January when the school was chosen to create an Employ Florida Banner Center for Life Sciences, a statewide resource for workforce education and training in the life sciences.

"That really validated our program." Handel said.

In the past 10 years, state and local taxpayers have paid more than \$1 billion to entice such biotech companies as Scripps, Max Planck and Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies in Port St. Lucie to come to Florida.

Those companies will need to hire entry-level workers, Handel said.

"We know from examples of other successful life science hubs that having a constant stream of entry-level people is vital," Handel said.



that program who wants to stay at such level. What they fail to mention is that regardless of an AS, a Bachelor's in such field is almost always required to achieve any chance at a real career.

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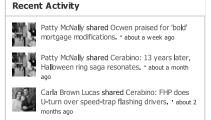
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