

Biotech careers opening up for FVSU students

FORT VALLEY - University students with strong science skills no longer need to limit their career choices to the medical profession.

At Fort Valley State University, students in the College of Agriculture, Home Economics and Allied Programs are exploring the field of plant science and majoring in biotechnology.

While most of us may not have heard of this major, it's familiar to viewers of the television drama "CSI" – short for Crime Scene Investigators. In the series, the actors portraying scientists rely on biotechnology techniques to solve crimes.

According to FVSU faculty, plant science-biotechnology majors are being trained to be more than real-life researchers able to match DNA samples to criminals. They're also being prepared to take on other high-salary, high-demand jobs across the nation and around the world.

To support FVSU's plant science-biotechnology efforts, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recently awarded a Capacity Building Grant to expand the program.

According to Dr. Sarwan Dhir, an associate professor of biotechnology and the director of multiple educational programs, Fort Valley State's plant science- biotechnology program prepares its students for careers as researchers who analyze plants and animals to improve agricultural production, or as scientists who use technology for biomedical, bioengineering and pharmaceutical research activity.

When the \$197,791 grant goes into effect Sept. 1, Dr. Dhir, along with Dr. Hari Singh, Professor Seema Dhir, Dr. Melinda Davis, several other FVSU faculty members, and Mercer University's Dr. Linda Adkison will offer an interdisciplinary plant genomics course in the fall of 2008.

"We strongly support Dr. Sarwan Dhir and other participating colleagues in their continued efforts to grow biotechnology in the College of Agriculture, Home Economics and Allied Programs," said Dr. Mark Latimore Jr., interim dean of the college. "Most importantly, through the support of funding opportunities like this one, our dreams and visions of educating students will flourish.

"Dr. Dhir is very dedicated to training students in the area of biotechnology as [is] evident in his continued and successful track record of providing opportunities for students," Latimore continued. "Thank you, Dr. Dhir."

Dhir said that several FVSU graduates pursuing their masters and doctoral degrees in plant genomics at institutions including the University of Florida and Cornell University and others working at federal agencies suggested adding this course to the FVSU curriculum.

"It's something they said they felt would help prepare other students who are – or will be – graduating from this program to better prepare for graduate studies and jobs," Dhir said.

"Since 2001, we've been proud to have been the first 1890 land-grant institution to host an REU-Site in biotechnology program funded by the National Science Foundation," he continued. "This program has given 70 of the best and most talented undergraduates from throughout the United States an opportunity to work one-on-one with mentors in biotechnology. Thanks in part to its funding from the USDA, this program has provided Fort Valley State the foundation to expand, recruit and retain students by providing them outstanding hands-on-experience in this area.

“Biotechnology is the hottest topic right now,” he said. “Many job opportunities exist in this area, so adding this course to our plant science-biotechnology curriculum will help our students expand their career horizons even more.”

Dhir said FVSU’s plant science-biotechnology program is considered as a “model program” by federal agencies such as the NSF and the USDA.

Dhir has been invited to speak at the NSF, the USDA and at scientific meetings to provide minority student recruitment and retention strategies in the area of plant biotechnology that other historically black colleges and universities can implement.

This latest USDA grant will allow the plant science and biology department to collaborate to develop an interdisciplinary plant genomic course in, he said.

“It will also allow us to invite several speakers in this field, conduct workshops to introduce advanced training and provide stipends to students who want to major in the plant science-biotechnology discipline,” Dhir said.

The 1890 Capacity Building Grants Program is intended to strengthen teaching and research programs in the food and agricultural sciences. It supports projects that strengthen teaching programs in the food and agricultural sciences. CBG also funds projects that strengthen research programs.