

South African scientists explore biotechnology techniques at FVSU

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Several scientists and researchers from South Africa representing governmental agencies and universities spent two weeks gaining hands-on experience and knowledge in biotechnology. During their visit at the Fort Valley State University Biotechnology Center, the visitors were introduced to new techniques used to breed Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO).

Genetically modified organisms involve taking one plants' DNA and sharing it with another plant in an effort to produce better quality crops.

Under the direction of FVSU faculty members - which included associate professor Dr. Sarwan Dhir, research professional Dr. Hari Singh, biology department chair Dr. Melinda Davis, and assistant professor Seema Dhir - a collaborative exchange program was developed between FVSU and the visiting scientists.

From Oct. 27 to Nov. 7, Eric Ndou, Sedibe Moosa, Mamabolo Meriam and Nangamso Cawe - scientists who work for governmental agencies and universities - spent more than 130 hours working in the FVSU Center for Biotechnology laboratory facilities.

“The information they picked up was the kind of knowledge that can be used by educators, researchers and federal agency representatives,” said Dhir, who directs multiple science programs at FVSU.

Dhir said Fort Valley State's internationally-known education and research biotechnology program attracted the scientists and researchers. Dhir said it is beneficial to Fort Valley State's land-grant university mission to provide a service by teaching research techniques.

Research professional Humbulani Ramukhsea, who works for the Quarantine Office in South Africa, said he looks forward to putting his new knowledge to work at home.

“It is essential for our country to have a new generation of high-yielding, disease-and-pest resistant crop varieties available if it is to remain self-sufficient in food production,” Ramukhsea said.

The visiting scholars were hosted by a collaborative project sponsored by the Cochran Fellowship –Biotechnology Risk Assessment Program which is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service.

The Cochran Fellowship's mission is to provide training opportunities for senior and mid-level specialists and administrators from public and private sectors to help developing nations improve their agricultural systems and strengthen trade links with the United States.

“The hands-on training in biotechnology techniques provided by Fort Valley State University under the tutorship of Dr. Sarwan Dhir, and other faculty members, is going to support our national drive in the areas of regulation, teaching, research and the application of biotechnology,” said Meriam, a senior agricultural food and quarantine officer at the Department of Agriculture in Limpopo, a province of South Africa.

Dhir said he looks forward to next year when he can bring more scientists to the university and expose them to modern biotechnology housed at Fort Valley State.

During their visit each scientist, along with Erica Johnston, a Cochran Fellowship international training specialist based in Washington, D.C., was able to discuss collaborative exchange opportunities with FVSU administrators, including FVSU President Dr. Larry E. Rivers and Dr. Daniel K. Wims, FVSU's executive vice president and vice president for academic affairs.

