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Utah launches program for life sciences training

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Ery Anguiano graduated from college before receiving his high school diploma last year.

His path is one that leading biotechnology companies in Utah and elsewhere hope more people will follow, and a \$5 million grant from the federal government may be the vehicle to get them there.

The money was granted as part of the Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) initiative and is designated to fund education and training in the life sciences in Utah. For more than a year, the Governor's Office of Economic Development, Salt Lake Community College, the Department of Workforce Services and others have been working on developing a program to create a pipeline of highly skilled talent for Utah's biotechnology and biomanufacturing industries.

The program they came up with was launched Thursday, and Emily Stover DeRocco, U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training assistant secretary, was in town to discuss its far-reaching possibilities.

"This should be the catalyst for connecting the dots on the life cycle," she said, adding that talent in business is necessary to keep things innovative and moving forward.

Utah's winning concept is centered in the biotechnology program at SLCC, which helped Utah gain recognition from the Depart-

ment of Labor as a WIRED region. The program, headed by Tamara Goetz, provides students with a real-world, hands-on educational opportunity that allows them to enter a well-compensated career sooner than other traditional options.

"It's a mechanism that funnels the talent appropriately and gets students and talent to the point that they are work-ready," Goetz said.

Anguiano, who is now pursuing an engineering degree from the University of Utah, said his education, obtained during high school years, is invaluable.

"As a junior and senior in high school, I had the opportunity to get involved in college-level course work," he said. He earned two degrees, one of them an associate's degree, before graduating from high school because of a curriculum of hard-core science at Itineris Early College High School, a Jordan District charter school.

The "on-ramp" or "bridge to biotechnology," as Goetz calls it, will prove invaluable for such students going into the work force. She said they often show productivity within six weeks, rather than the traditionally comparative average of 10 to 12 months.

Jeffery Nelson, president and CEO of Nelson Laboratories in West Valley City, said that in the growing industry of medical products testing, already-trained employees are necessary. His 62,000-square-foot facility employs 265 technicians, scientists and others, but there is significant room for expansion, he said.

"One of the things we are limited by is the available employees," Nelson said. DeRocco and others engaged in the biotechnology industry in Utah toured Nelson Labs Thursday to better understand its capacity. The company recently was involved in the governor's trade mission. They also hire many students who are trained in SLCC's program.

"We are able to add a much-needed hands-on component to the book work students often grow tired of," Nelson said. He recently met with a number of aspiring biotechnology students who were able "to walk me through many of the processes. I was thinking, 'That's just what we need.'"

DeRocco said she hopes the initiative pushes the creation of more programs to help students get involved and eventually create a more qualified and competitive work force.

"You are providing lifelong opportunities that will excite them," she said. "Use the WIRED initiative to move your models forward. Washington is listening."

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