



## Tracking Biotechnology Graduates into the Future

Russ Read, Executive Director of the National Center for the Biotechnology Workforce of the NCCCS BioNetwork, along with a team of experts from state and local levels, met for an Advisory Board Meeting on March 13, 2009, to discuss the findings of a grant-supported study to develop a model to track biotechnology graduates. The study, ongoing since October 2008, was implemented to answer the ever perennial question: Where are our graduates in the biotech arena and how do we keep them engaged and connected to the college? The three objectives for this groundbreaking venture are as following:

- 1. To build/create a model which would promote follow-up with biotechnology graduates on a voluntary basis;*
- 2. To test and validate the model with one or two community Colleges that have large biotech programs;*
- 3. To write up the grant findings from the research study and turn over this information and test results from the finished model to BioNetwork for statewide consideration and implementation.*

There were several phases to the study which entailed interviewing, surveying, and scheduling forums and roundtable discussions to attract the graduates. Forsyth Technical and Alamance Community Colleges were selected as the two colleges with the largest biotechnology programs. However, with events scheduled at each college, the verbal response for attendance was good, but the actual attendance was despondently low, despite great efforts to telephone and email each program's graduates.

Bob Haack, a free-lance consultant, and Mica Welsh, a 2007 Biotech graduate, have assisted with the research and followed the study since its inception. They introduced their findings with the aid of surveys, graphs and time lines to explain how difficult it is to keep graduates interested and connected to their alma maters.

Listed below are some of the questions in the surveys presented to the graduates and current students:

<b>Questions:</b>	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>Are you interested in a reunion for development? Yes</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Are you interested in educational updates? Yes</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>76%</b>

What is your preferred way of keeping in contact?

<b>Email</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>Newsletter</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>61%</b>

Which type of events would interest you for updates?

<b>Networking with Triad Biotech Companies</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>88%</b>
<b>Touring Active Facilities</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>Information on Biotech Trends</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>71%</b>

The above responses are good indications of the kinds of information that would be required to develop a tracking model to connect the graduates with fellow alumni, biotech companies and opportunities for continuing education programs to advance their professional development or learn about new equipment that may not have been available to them when they were students.

As a follow-up to this data, [Matthew Meyer](#), Associate Vice President for Innovation and Biotechnology at the North Carolina Community College System, stated, "From the state level, it is very important for students to stay in touch with their college in the event that a new company relocates to North Carolina that needs a ready-made workforce. With a new tracking model in place, the state would have direct access to these students and a means to connect them to the new companies."

Representing the North Carolina Biotechnology Center, [Gwyn Riddick](#), Director of the Piedmont Triad Regional Office, agreed that a tracking system would keep the graduates connected to the real world and afford them the opportunity of networking, job-linking and skill building.

[Nick Meacham](#), BioNetwork Communications Specialist, offered many suggestions for involving and engaging the students while they are still on campus and before they become alumni.

Other guests included [Bill Schneider](#), Forsyth Tech's Director of Institutional Effectiveness, and [Michael Glontz](#), the College's Director of Development and Alumni Relations, who each introduced many forms of communication, such as social networking sites similar to Linked-In and Face book. Understanding the challenges at hand, they both agreed that an effective tracking vehicle would require coordination, but would also be a beneficial tool for all levels involved and for meeting the needs of the state, the labor markets and the graduates.

Also in attendance were three graduates from Forsyth Tech who were asked for their input on their experiences in the biotech field and the importance of a tracking system. Now employed with the Wake Forest Institute of Regenerative Medicine, [Jim Crawford](#) shared his experiences of being down-sized four times and how the biotechnology degree had launched his new career. He stressed that "even if a student has a biotech degree, the employer still searches for an applicant who has diverse intangible skills such as teamwork, time management and organizational skills." In his opinion, "Job skills can be taught after the job has been secured." He was adamant that going back to speak to future graduates and serving as a mentor was an excellent way of giving back to one's alma mater, community and society in general.

[Margie Parker](#), employed part-time with Forsyth Tech, explained that internships are one of the best sources for securing jobs in the biotech field; she added "it gives both parties an inside track." As a biotech graduate and a student at Salem College, [Mica Welsh](#) shared her experiences and interactions with community-college students whose diversity includes a wide range of age groups with ethnic and social economic differences. Many of these students are only interested in "getting a job and supporting their families, not staying networked to a tracking system." She, like Jim, believes it is important to give back by speaking to the prospective graduates to provide them with a window to someone who has successfully experienced the journey in finding employment in their chosen field.

The Advising Board unanimously agreed that creating a model to track biotech students is a win-win situation for all involved. It will provide graduates with tools to network with other alumni and biotech companies, to connect them to new biotech career lattices, to alert them of new trends and developments in biotechnology, and to inform them of continuing-education courses for professional development. Not only will it be beneficial to the graduates, but it will also yield a professional tracking device for sharing alumni information locally, statewide and nationally. Our next step is to assemble a prototype and test it.

***This meeting was sponsored by the North Carolina Biotechnology Center ([www.ncbiotech.org](http://www.ncbiotech.org)) and its Piedmont Triad Regional Office.***

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