



TOGETHER WE CONNECT

TRAINING DEVELOPMENT AND TALENT ACQUISITION

Our state continues to need scientific, engineering, and technical talent to support rapid industry growth. High-technology sectors continue to add jobs that pay above national averages. From 2020 through 2022 the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) announced nearly 15,000 new jobs totaling a \$19.3B economic impact. The biopharma sector alone needs nearly 5,000 jobs in the next 3-5 years. Now is the best time to transition or advance in your career, but how does one get to make this dream a reality? BioNetwork, the life science training initiative of the NCCCS, works with colleges, companies, and students to connect talent development and talent acquisition needs of the life science industry. BioWork is a great place to start.

Sarah Cote shows us that a career path can have many chapters. After working in several distinct professions, Cote landed a career in the biopharma industry that brought together all of her skill sets. She is a graduate of the single-semester BioWork course which is designed to give students the foundational skills for a career in biopharma manufacturing.

COMMON THREAD

On a “whim,” she decided to sign up for classes at Central Carolina Community College and found that she loved the work. Cote got an associate degree in machining technology and worked at a local manufacturing company. “I started as a machine operator, and four months later, I was promoted into the machine shop, becoming the only female who had ever worked in that department,” she says. “My grandfather was a master tool-and-die maker, but I didn’t know that until after I was already in the industry. Learning that was neat – sometimes you don’t know where your interests stem from.”

Eventually she went back to school and got a second associates degree, this time in respiratory therapy.

“I really loved that work,” Cote says. “When you’re caring for people, you are paying it forward in a way. One day, you or somebody in your family might be in that same situation, and you want them to receive the best care possible. So, when you become a medical professional, you strive every day to do that.”

After working as a respiratory therapist for five years, it was time for a change. Cote explored the biopharmaceutical industry.

LEARNING THE ROPES

Cote first heard about the BioWork course through connections on LinkedIn.

“I communicated via LinkedIn with people who worked at Pfizer and other companies,” she recalls. “They said, ‘The BioWork class is only one semester, and it will give you a good baseline to see if you’ll like pharma.’ So I took the class with Dr. Lisa Smelser at Central Carolina Community College and realized that pharma was exactly where I wanted to be and what I’d been missing this whole time.”

While BioWork sets out to provide students with science education, that is not the only goal of the course, Smelser says.

“We do focus on hands-on technical skills to give students confidence, especially if they are making a transition like Sarah’s from a different field,” she says. “But we also spend a lot of time making sure that students understand things like shift work and contract positions. That career development piece is a permanent and important part of the experience. We want to make sure that we’re setting them up for success so they can articulate their transferable skills, walk out the door with a very strong resume, and be confident when talking with potential employers.”

LANDING THE JOB

Cote’s early work experience in pharma brought great opportunities and tough choices.

“After I finished in August 2020, Dr. Smelser would hook us up with these virtual career fairs through BioNetwork,” she says.



“I work on the CDA/Fill Team,” says Cote, who is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in biology on the side. “We weigh out raw material to the entire site. We are the start and finish to everything – the process starts with the raw materials being distributed and finishes with the fills being completed.”

“Pfizer is a great place to start out and grow your career over time, and I enjoy being a part of a growing industry with a main focus of patient care.”

Cote believes her earlier work experiences helped prepare her for her new career.

“If you take the machines and the medical background and the people work, that’s everything that a pharmaceutical job is,” she says. “I’d love to be an inspiration for young girls who really don’t know what direction to take. Pharma is a great career path with a lot of good benefits, so if they take a chance, try it out, and they end up making a career out of it, that would be great to see.”

Learn more online at ncbionetwork.org/biowork

