

## Clafin, OCtech partner to train biotech workforce

By [LEE HENDREN](#), T&D Staff Writer

Curing cancer. Solving a crime. Improving plant genetics.

It's all about DNA, says Dr. Omar Bagasra, director of the South Carolina Center for Biotechnology and professor of biology at Clafin University in Orangeburg.

Biotechnology touches "every aspect of our lives," Bagasra said. "It is a huge field."

How huge? Well, globally, it's a \$40 billion industry. Nationally, biotech employment has increased by more than 90 percent in the past 10 years.

And locally, employment in the region's biotech industry — including pharmaceuticals, medical devices and equipment — is projected to increase 20 percent in the next five years.

But until now there has been only one two-year biotechnology entry-level program in the state, and it's not in the area.

As employment opportunities expand, Clafin is culminating a years-long effort to position itself in the forefront of "this emerging discipline," said Dr. Henry N. Tisdale, Clafin's president.

Those efforts are paying off, as Clafin has started attracting some of the best and brightest faculty and students from around the world to its biotech program. It offers bachelors and masters degrees in biotechnology.

Also keenly interested in biotechnology, Tisdale said, is "our neighbor down the street": Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College. "We're always working together to expand opportunities for our citizens."

"Our mission is economic development," said OCtech President Dr. Anne Crook. "That means teaching the "competencies that are needed" by employers.

Along with those two institutions, other members of the Orangeburg-Calhoun Area Biotechnology Consortium include local industries, the hospital, the solicitor's office and local school districts and others.

Consortium representatives gathered for a program and buffet lunch Wednesday at Clafin.

The consortium was one of nearly 300 entities that applied this year to the U.S. Department of Labor for High Growth Job Training Initiative grants for biotechnology, health care or cross-training.

Only 12 grants were awarded, including \$750,000 toward the consortium's two-year, \$1.1 million program to train a work force in the targeted industries of agriculture, criminal justice/forensics, health/life sciences, engineering and instrumentation technology.

Clafin is contributing \$100,000 and OCtech, \$87,500. Other partners are contributing the rest in cash, resources and services.



Martha Stephenson with the South Carolina Employment Security Commission, right, congratulates Orangeburg-Calhoun Tech President Anne Crook and Clafin University President Henry Tisdale as combined recipients of funding for an Area Biotechnology Consortium Wednesday afternoon at Clafin. VAN HOPE/T&D

One goal is for all area high schools to incorporate biotechnology modules into their health science curriculum.

That could whet students' appetites to become biotechnology lab technicians or pursue careers in forensics, manufacturing, radiography, agriculture, computer tomography and magnetic resonance imaging.

Each program — or "career ladder," as Crook put it — is designed with input from partnering industries. Each student will gain real-world experience by completing a "capstone" research project.

Also targeted for admission are nontraditional students, including women and low-income individuals.

OCtech's certificate and two-year associate degree programs will give an estimated 100 students a year a good foundation in the field of biotechnology — enough to qualify for two-thirds of the available jobs in the local biotechnology industry.

For those students who want to pursue a bachelor's or master's degree, the biotechnology certificates and associate degrees they earn at OCtech will fully transfer to Claflin.

There, some students will study under Bagasra, a virologist and research scientist who is gaining attention from the World Health Organization and other prominent entities for his research into "mad cow" disease, HIV/AIDS and prostate cancer.

But, no, there won't be any research into cloning humans or animals.

- T&D Staff Writer [Lee Hendren](#) can be reached by e-mail at [lhendren@timesanddemocrat.com](mailto:lhendren@timesanddemocrat.com) or by phone at 803-533-5552.