COPING WITH CORONAVIRUS

BioTechnical Institute of Md. sees demand grow for its graduates

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Q&A

Kathleen Weiss is the interim executive director of the BioTechnical Institute of Maryland, a nonprofit founded in 1998 to train and place entry-level biotechnicians in Maryland's biotech industry. Timothy Fawcett is the organization's scientific director.

How did the BioTechnical Institute of Maryland come about?

Weiss: Our founder [Dr. Margaret Penno] is a researcher and doctor at Johns Hopkins. She had an experience with one of the housekeepers there who would pass by Dr. Penno's lab all the time and was fascinated by what was going on. She asked Dr. Penno if there would ever be an opportunity for her to work in the lab without a college degree. At the time, Dr. Penno was having a lot of turnover... so she had this idea that there could be some training developed that was very specific to the basic duties that need to be done in the lab.

She partnered with the Empowerment Zone, being run at the time by Diane Bell-McKoy, and with a company that was called Chesapeake Biological Labs on South Paca Street. They put together a selection process that was based on academic level and motivation and need.

We partnered with a lot of the employers and lab managers at Johns Hopkins, and that was the launch of the organization. We now have slightly over 500 graduates, and you can find them in 40 or so different companies throughout Maryland. The program itself has a 73% graduation rate and a 78% placement rate, with an average starting salary in 2019 of $18 an hour.

Fawcett: We don't charge our students, so this is a tuition-free program thanks to the generous support of our funders.

How did the Covid-19 pandemic disrupt your operations?

Fawcett: Obviously it's very difficult to teach hands-on laboratory training when the governor has [announced] a stay-at-home order. We had started a program in January of 2020 that was supposed to last about 16 weeks. That program graduated in October – it was the longest program we've ever had.

About three weeks into the hands-on portion is when the stay-at-home order came. We couldn't just stop the program, so what we did was have virtual meetings with students five days a week just to maintain our connections. We kept that going 'til we were able to come back to BTI for the hands-on training. It was, I guess, called a stopgap method.

Because of their circumstances, many of our students don't have computers or good internet access, so we went out with a grant and purchased iPads, some that had cellular connections. And then once we were able to come back in with teaching, we changed the whole format of our instruction so that we could do all of the lectures and protocols online, so students didn't have to come in as much. And then, students would come in three days a week for three hours a day for the hands-on training.

A student at the BioTechnical Institute of Maryland learns how to use a micropipette to accurately measure liquid volumes as small as one millionth of a liter.

BIOTECHNICAL INSTITUTE OF MARYLAND

How have funders and companies reacted to help the institute over the last year?

Weiss: They have been more flexible, very supportive. I just had a meeting with one of our funders who offered not once, but several times to do whatever might be possible if we found that we needed to change some of the terms of the grant that we had, including by extending the timeframe. I think the employers that we work with, they have been very impressed that BTI has maintained, if not improved the quality of our graduates.

McCormick recently stepped up to provide funding for your organization. How does your organization plan to use that money?

Weiss: Just as background, one of our graduates is at McCormick and has been at McCormick for several years, and submitted BTI's name for a grant opportunity. Simultaneously with this award, a representative from McCormick came onto BTI's board.

We interpret that the grant really is just support for our students who are in the lab associates program. This is critical hands-on support. Truly, it is an expensive program because it involves a lot of lab supplies, a lot of disposables – they put on their garb as I call it, the gloves, labcoat, goggles and shields.

What do you foresee for the job market in life sciences, particularly in this region, moving forward?

Fawcett: Increasing. Maryland is now no. 4 in the country in biosciences, and Baltimore in particular, I think, is growing as a manufacturing and research center in the state. The Covid response has made a lot of people realize how important science is and how important research manufacturing is, and we see a lot of growth in our area.

Weiss: I think we've seen it already. To me, one of the indicators is that the salaries have increased for our graduates. It demonstrates a demand, and possibly even a [workforce] shortage.

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