



SciTech Lecture Series 2011-12

Ideas in ACTION

September 2011



“Catalyzing Regional Strengths to Support Bioscience Job Growth”

SciTech was back in full swing for the new academic year of 2011-2012 on Thursday, September 22, 2011. Kicking off the series was Nancy Johnston, Executive Director of the NC Biotechnology Center’s Piedmont Triad Regional Office. She focused her presentation on “Catalyzing Regional Strengths to Support Bioscience Job Growth”. This really unique look at the Piedmont Triad’s ever-growing life science community was not just centered on stories of growth, but it had the facts and statistics to back up these stories, not just in the area, but the entire sector. Indeed it further cemented the reasons why President Obama visited Forsyth Tech late last year and talked about training for highly skilled jobs and why enrollment had grown so rapidly.

Introducing Mrs. Johnston was Russ Read, Executive Director of the National Center for the Biotechnology Workforce of BioNetwork and Chair of the Advisory Committee for Biotechnology in the Piedmont Triad. A 36-year veteran of the BioPharma Industry, Mr. Read described Nancy as a “savvy communicator and great networker. She has worked diligently for the Piedmont Triad and its 12 counties since taking the position at the NC Biotechnology Center. She has recruited for opportunities to grow, develop and bring in companies and talent to the region.”

Mrs. Johnston explained the leadership role of the N.C. Biotechnology Center, its programs and its strategy to help grow biotechnology statewide through its regional offices. She noted the value of the Advisory Committee for Biotechnology in the Piedmont Triad and how two dozen community leaders are working towards a strategic work plan, known as Biolgnite®. The committee is focused on advocating and supporting growth in the region which is currently home to almost 100 companies employing 10,000. Johnston shared economic impact data from a current Battelle report showing North Carolina as a top 10 state for biotechnology with a 30% growth rate since 2001. Other indicators of growth in the biotechnology field in North Carolina attested to 2,307 bioscience patents issued from 2004 through 2009, ranking our state 14th among the 50 states in the year of 2009. With the Piedmont Triad noted as the second highest concentration of life sciences activity in the state, Johnston highlighted the diverse industry activity and anticipation of job growth, particularly in the areas of medical and diagnostic, research and development, and pharmaceutical and medical manufacturing. Mrs. Johnston emphasized the importance of training today’s workforce for these industries. She also shared about regional opportunities from high school to community colleges and

“Biotechnology is about hope”



university programs emphasizing the critical role Forsyth Tech has had and will continue to have in this training.

During the presentation, Johnston literally stepped aside from the podium for what she called an “open mic” session. The intention was to provide for ‘real time’ impromptu updates on innovative ideas in the area. Present in the audience were several prominent guests from the biotechnology and innovation community who stepped forward to share their experiences in the field of science and technology. Jim Crawford of KeraNetics, a spin-off company from the Wake Forest Institute of Regenerative Medicine, explained that after being down-sized several times, he decided to enroll in the Biotechnology Program at Forsyth Tech Community College. His successful journey that followed this decision left many in the audience with renewed hope for their own accomplishments. Russ Read from the National Center also discussed the national perspective in the field of biotechnology workforce training and the current developments on a statewide level.

Dr. Morris Clarke of Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), who is next month’s SciTech speaker, approached the podium to give an update on current happenings at WSSU and the benefits of transferring there after leaving Forsyth Tech. Another future SciTech presenter, Dr. Carol Strohecker, with the Center for Design Innovation, spoke briefly about the exciting things going on at her center in design technology.

As each guest spoke, Johnston looked on approvingly as she listened to the great advances and plans for the Piedmont Triad Region. To validate these plans Johnston concluded with this statement, “The North Carolina Biotechnology Center and its regional offices are fully committed to strengthen North Carolina’s academic and industrial biotechnology research capabilities, foster industrial development, support business, government and academia and inform North Carolinians about science, applications and the benefits of our industry.”

It was evident in her speech that Johnston is truly a very savvy communicator and collaborator who has a way of bringing science to the forefront in a unique and caring way. The audience was hushed as she said, “Biotech is about hope! Just the other day, my four-year-old daughter asked me the question, ‘What is polio?’ Now can you imagine, if in the future, my granddaughter asked the question, ‘What is cancer?’ We are making the connections and breakthroughs today that will make for a better world tomorrow.”

