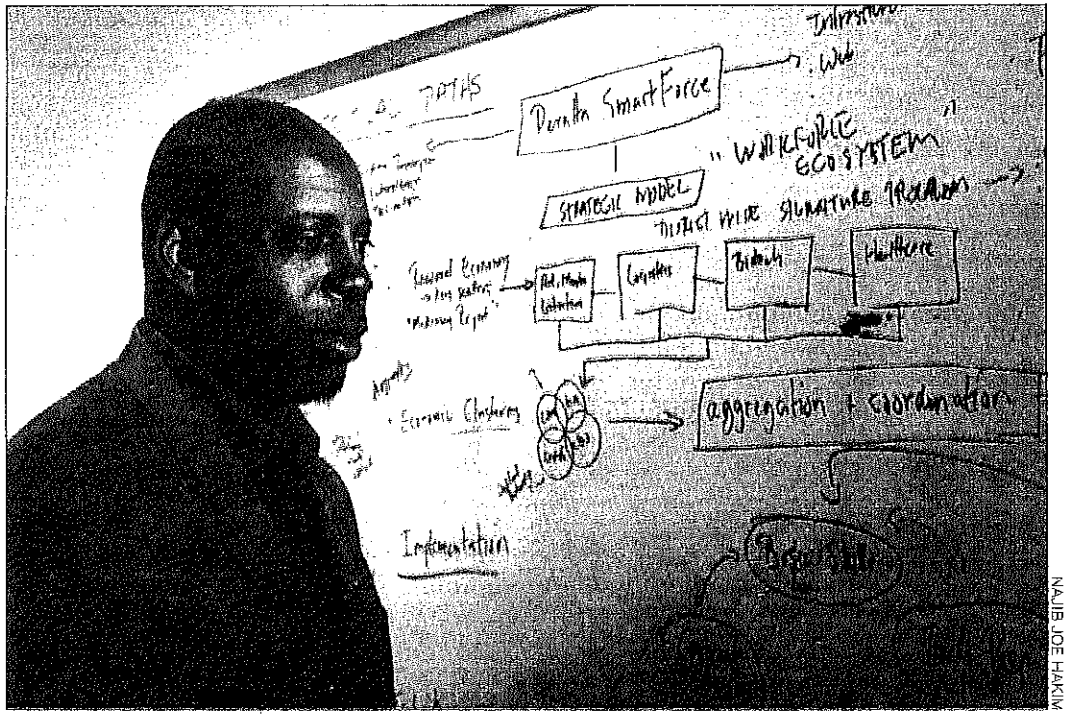
Oakland college to offer biotech certification

Laney program developed by Novartis, Bayer

BY RYAN TATE
San Francisco Business Times

An Oakland community college will begin training biotech workers this fall under a program developed with life sciences giants Bayer and Novartis.

Program graduates will receive a biomanufacturing certificate and a strong shot at working as lab technicians. The Peralta Community College District is launching the program at Laney College in downtown Oakland in conjuction with the Oakland Chamber of Commerce.



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NAJIB JOE HAKIM

The biomanufacturing program is designed to help Bay Area biotech and pharmaceutical companies find workers while providing new jobs for Oakland, where crime has surged and poverty reduction has become a leading cause of Mayor Ron Dellums.

Laney College expects to easily fill the 35 initial classroom seats allocated for the program, which is the spearhead of a broader effort to work more closely with businesses to update its curriculum. The program's appeal is a welcome change after several years of flat enrollment in the district, which in recent decades has grown by providing training for blue-collar workers like electricians and machinists.

"There is a new practice emerging here around workforce and economic development, saying 'we need to work with partners,'" said Ahmad Mansur, who became the district's director for workforce development about a year ago. "We are looking to be more demand-driven."

The chamber is positioning the certificate program as a potential cornerstone on which to build future alliances between local government and the corporate world.

"What this shows is if we bring all the players together, we can make something happen," said Scott Peterson, the chamber's director of public policy.

Life sciences was an early focus of the chamber because it was considered "low-hanging fruit," Peterson said. Other community colleges in the Bay Area, including Ohlone College in Fremont, had developed similar certificate programs for training lab techs.

Bayer and Novartis both lent formal letters of support and provided the minimum requirements for training lab technicians early in the certificate program's development. They also agreed to open up their labs for the program and provide ongoing advice.

A report commissioned by the chamber and written by consultants at McKinsey & Co. earlier this year concluded that Oakland lagged neighbors like Emeryville and Berkeley in attracting life sciences businesses and called for partnership between industry and local colleges.

The report, released in April, also called on the city to help rope off land for the biotech labs and offices.

Peterson said there may also be room for local educators to work with businesses to train workers in sectors like health care, trade and logistics and green technology.

Mansur said Peralta is enthusiastic about those sectors and would also like to spread biotech to other campuses based on their strengths, for example with a microscopy program at Merritt College, a bioinformatics program at the College of Alameda and a biotech-related university transfer program at Berkeley City College.

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