

“...THE EXPERIENCE YOU GET WITH THE TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT USUALLY ONLY GRADUATE OR PHD STUDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO. SO, IT'S GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEVEL...”

Going small...to make it big!



From his office across from Penn State University's nanoscience lab, it's hard for Zac Gray to believe that he once thought college wasn't for him.

Eight years after dropping out of his first attempt at college, Gray is now the lab coordinator for the capstone program, which is the final semester of RACC's nanoscience degree. The capstone program takes place at Penn State's main campus.

He recalled his initial effort at college after graduating from Garden Spot High School. "I was studying computer science, but I just wasn't into it. I thought I wasn't meant for college," he said.

After considering joining the military, Gray ended up with a job at Wal-Mart. It was then that he decided maybe he should give college a second try. This time, he didn't have to look far, figuring that RACC was his most economical option that would allow him to save the money from his job to pay his tuition.

"I took general credits my first semester just to put my foot in the water and see if I could handle it," he said. "The classes I took were really beneficial and I wanted to stick with it."

Gray's degree from RACC is in nanoscience, a booming field as more companies produce products using nanotechnology. He admits that the program sort of found him.

"I was sitting at RACC and I saw a booklet about nanoscience," he said. "It had some of the curriculum in it and it talked about the capstone semester at Penn State's main campus but at RACC tuition costs. My goal was to get to a bigger campus, so I thought it was a great opportunity."

Kathy Evans, who coordinates RACC's nanoscience program, said she had Gray as a student in biology and knew he had potential. "His attention to detail and desire to be absolutely correct was

evident even then. Gray asked serious, well formulated questions and kept me on my toes," she said.

Now, five years after graduating from RACC, he is still in State College, having recently accepted his position as lab coordinator with the capstone program in January. His role is to oversee all the teaching assistants and ensure that their nanotechnology lab activities run smoothly and cohesively.

In fact, Gray just hosted his former professor and a current RACC student for a tour of the Penn State lab. "I can't tell you how proud I am of Gray," Evans said. "What was so great about the tour was that Gray was proud of his accomplishments and wanted me to see how fantastic a scientist he is now. Gray is a RACC miracle."

Part of his new job also includes recruiting new students, and he hopes to soon return to RACC and convince students like himself to give the program a try.

"The job outlook in this field is fantastic," said Gray. "If they go through this program they can find work, with reasonable pay, almost guaranteed. In fact, the number of products incorporating nanotechnology is expected to increase two orders of magnitude over the next 20 years, meaning it will require 2 million workers with nanotechnology-related skills by 2020."

He also touted the benefits of the capstone semester at Penn State, including résumé building, job assistance and hands-on learning. "They design the capstone semester to help you get a job. They will help you put together a resume, and then there is a career day where you have a chance at an on-the-spot interview with a variety of companies who have already hired graduates of the capstone semester."

"Plus, the experience you get with the tools and equipment usually only graduate or PhD students have access to. So, it's graduate student experience at a community college level," he added.

Gray credits his new job to the time he spent as a teaching assistant while he was working toward his Bachelor's degree in Materials Science at Penn State. He again put himself through school, on a part-time schedule, while working a 9-5 job at a local company who hired him right out of the capstone program.

"I really give credit to RACC because if that first semester was not a good experience, I wouldn't have come back for a second, which eventually led to my degree," he said.

For more information on RACC's nanoscience program and the capstone semester, visit http://www.racc.edu/Academics/programs/nano_car.aspx.