**South Texas College News Center**

October 2020 – “Pharmacy Week” feature

***Filling Demand*: ‘National Pharmacy Week’ Highlights High-Tech Pathway**

There’s a lot of precision involved in a prescription. And while most customers never think about how their pills were packaged, it’s the meticulous work of pharmacy technicians that ensures a safe and convenient dosage every time.

With demand surging in this oft-overlooked and ever-changing industry, South Texas College’s Pharmacy Technology program is preparing grads for certification as workforce-ready technicians. And just in time for National Pharmacy Week, beginning October 18, the lab has acquired a shiny, new toy.

The Parata ATP 2-128 is a programmable packaging machine standard to high-volume pharmacies. The high-tech device’s “smart canister” system lets pharmacy technicians quickly exchange medications while producing custom orders on an uninterrupted basis — each properly measured, sealed and labeled. Now, thanks to recent approval by the STC Board of Trustees, the ATP 2 is headed to the classroom for the first time.

“The STC Pharmacy Technology program is the first educational facility in the country to acquire this machine,” says Dr. Theresa Garza, Pharmacy Technology Instructor at South Texas College. “Students will be well prepared for jobs in mail order pharmacies, as well as the traditional settings of community pharmacies and hospital pharmacies.”

“We’re pretty excited about it — nobody else has that to offer,” adds Roger Rodriguez, 10-year veteran pharmacy tech and instructor at STC. “Our students are going to become more marketable because they’ve received that type of training.”

The ATP 2 is used in hospitals, pharmacies, and warehouses across the globe, with Amazon’s mail-order pharmacy, *PillPak*, among the notable early adopters. As an educational tool, the machine provides students a unique opportunity to work with the very same hardware and software used by the biggest employers in pharmacy. That’s important, Dr. Garza says, because “today's graduates need to be ready to work in any pharmacy setting.”

“Training with the latest tools can give any pharmacy professional an edge," says Brian Cristobal, Consulting Services Manager at Parata.

Packaging medication in high volume is a high-stakes enterprise, requiring a layered understanding of the technology and regulations involved. It’s a fitting microcosm of the profession itself, which entails an incredible attention to detail and, more than ever, tech savvy.

“The field of pharmacy is rapidly changing to improve medication regimen compliance and medication safety,” says Dr. Garza.

Accredited by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) and the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE), South Texas College provides a two-year pathway to an associate degree in Pharmacy Technology. Students learn entry-level and advanced skills, from customer service to behind-the-scenes tech work, leading to immediate employment in the evolving industry.

“I’m a big advocate of hands-on learning,” says Rodriguez, who knows the value of tech savvy from a decade spent in the industry. “The learning curve is going to be a lot smaller for [our students].”

With pharmacies on the front lines of the health crisis, program grads are hitting the workforce at an opportune time. And with the most recent STC cohort posting a 100-percent pass rate on the Pharmacy Technician Certification Exam, South Texas employers know they’re getting grads they can depend on.

“When students graduate from the South Texas College Pharmacy Technology program, they can confidently work in any pharmacy setting due to the thorough training in all these skills,” Dr. Garza assures.

The newly minted ATP 2 pouch packager becomes the centerpiece for an already well-appointed department. In addition to the usual classrooms and lab space, South Texas College boasts three distinct labs, including a fully functional simulation hospital pharmacy, complete with integrated management software and a sterile compounding room for preparation of medications.

Over the summer, the program upgraded again, this time bolstering its community pharmacy software and equipment. By offering students new access to training on key topics like third-party payment processing, automated packaging, point-of-sale processes and profile management, STC redoubled its commitment to staying ahead of the multi-faceted industry.

“With this technology, the students simulate roles as a hospital pharmacy technician while interacting with other healthcare students,” says Dr. Garza.

The authentic facilities allow for Pharmacy Technology students to develop skills in a variety of real-world roles, from prescriptions and packaging to handling hazardous materials and high-strung customers.

“We don’t have a room that we convert with different settings,” says Rodriguez. “We have three dedicated labs to train students in a variety of [facets].”

The program is filling more than just prescriptions in South Texas — it’s addressing an urgent need for entry-level pharmacy employees in a high-stakes field that encompasses equal parts math, science, reading comprehension, awareness, and customer service.

Pharmacy technician is a Bright Outlook Occupation, according to O-Net Online, with national employment opportunities outpacing other industries by three to six percent annually. In Texas, the future looks even brighter, with jobs for pharmacy technicians projected to leap a staggering *21 percent*\* by 2026.

The element that sets STC apart, according to Dr. Garza, is that “we prepare our graduates to work well in many different types of pharmacies.” By keeping pace with industry-standard equipment and anticipating the future needs of industry behemoths like Amazon, the Pharmacy Technology program helps students develop versatile skills to stay on the cutting edge of industry opportunity.

And while the ATP 2 is an impressive piece of technology, it’s not just the toys that make the technician. Anchored by more than 30 years of combined industry expertise between Dr. Garza, Rodriguez, and instructor Crystal Zuniga, South Texas College employs an ambidextrous, experience-informed philosophy that emphasizes workforce success.

"The diversity of faculty — that’s big,” says Rodriguez. “Together, we cover the whole spectrum.”

For Dr. Garza, at the end of the day, it’s all about student outcomes.

“I am proud that our program enables our students to excel … so employers are eager to offer them jobs.”

*National Pharmacy Week, recognizing the critical work of pharmacists and technicians, begins Oct. 18. Learn more about South Texas College’s Pharmacy Technology program, and apply for admission @* [*https://nah.southtexascollege.edu/pharm/*](https://nah.southtexascollege.edu/pharm/)

**Employment Outlook, Pharmacy Technicians**

Avg. Wage in Texas: $35,110\*

Projected Growth (Texas): ***21%\****

(approx. *seven times* the national average for all jobs)

*\*Source: O-Net Online*