

National Survey: BC3 among top Pennsylvania Schools in distance education

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(Butler, PA) Twenty-two-year-old Lindsey Sweetland is one of 850 Butler County Community College students taking online courses and can attest to why BC3 has been ranked No. 13 among 117 Keystone State schools in distance education.

If only the Volant resident could get a little distance from Sophie, Max, Sadie, Bella and Lucy - her family's five dogs, and Callie, the cat, when she opens her laptop, closes her bedroom door and signs on for class after finishing a 25-hour workweek in the food service industry.

In its inaugural national study, OnlineColleges.com surveyed, scored and ranked 117 accredited colleges and universities in Pennsylvania in 11 areas. Its findings, released last week, showed BC3 rated higher than 103 schools in distance education.

It is students such as Sweetland who benefit from BC3's commitment to online opportunities.

"I work a lot," said Sweetland, who this fall is taking two online courses - Leadership and Accounting for Managers - and two classroom courses - Microcomputing and Labor Relations.

Until she graduates in December with an Associate in Applied Science Degree in Business Management, she will reserve her Saturdays and Sundays for distance education.

"My room is the quietest place," she said. "I lock myself in alone. It works better if I can take classes online. I can work at own pace and get way ahead."

OnlineColleges.com used the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and considered only colleges and universities that were at least two years through four years or more, and that at least 1 percent of its students took at least some of their classes via distance education.

Just over 23 percent of BC3's students took distance education courses in 2014, according to OnlineColleges.com, a Foster City, Calif., firm that helps students find affordable, high-quality online colleges that meet their specific needs.

Of the 850 students enrolled in at least one online course this fall, 292 are taking online courses only, according to Sharla Anke, BC3's Coordinator of Institutional Research. The 292 sign on from as far away as Washington and Westmoreland counties in Pennsylvania's southwest, Centre County in the midstate, Erie and Crawford counties in the northwest and Elk and Potter counties in the northern tier.

Or as nearby as Sarver in Butler County.

That's where manufacturing manager and BC3 student Bill Norris, 40, lives. The husband of 20 years and father of two high school students took one online course only in his first and second semesters, and two this fall - Business Ethics and Intro to Business.

"The online offerings are most important," said Norris, who signs on late at night during his 50-hour workweek. "I've got a family, a home, a job. Taking online courses doesn't interfere with having a full-time job and a family. I can go online at midnight and study or take my test. I like BC3's flexibility. BC3 is very user-friendly to take college classes that don't disrupt my life."

To continue to meet student needs, BC3 recently expanded its online course options with the unveiling of fall Fast Track courses. Three five-week sessions, held consecutively, debuted during the fall semester and each offers six online-only courses. That brings to 84 the number of online-only credit courses and to 10 the hybrid credit courses BC3 offers among its 735 classes this fall.

"Our Fast-Track offerings are a great example of another component of our mission statement - being responsive to the needs of the communities we serve," Dr. Nick Neupauer, BC3 President. "A traditional fall and spring 15-week schedule frankly doesn't meet the needs of our 21st-century student body. The Fast Track not only provides greater flexibility in scheduling for our students, it does so without losing the quality of our education."

Business, English, psychology, general studies and computer information systems are among the courses most frequently offered online at BC3.

Enrollment is open for the 10-week Session 3, and for Fast Tracks 2 and 3. Thirteen online-only courses are offered in Session 3, from Sept. 26 to Dec. 17. Fast Track 2 will be held from Oct. 3 to Nov. 4; and Fast Track 3, from Nov. 7 to Dec. 9.

In 2015, 5.9 million students nationwide were enrolled in distance education, said Mark Burnham, General Manager of OnlineColleges.com.

"And more than 1 in 4 students overall took at least one distance education course," Burnham said. "It's clearly a helpful option for students who can't commit to a full-time campus routine. Fitting a college degree into a busy schedule can be difficult, and the flexibility that distance education affords students is invaluable."

OnlineColleges.com also reported that BC3's in-state tuition of \$5,760 was lower than 113 of those schools, and its out-of-state tuition lower than 112.

"Affordability is paramount at our institution," Neupauer said. "Despite all of the challenges that face today's institutions of higher education, affordability is taken very seriously in our student-centered environment."

OnlineColleges.com accorded 25 percent of its weight in scoring to number of programs offered via distance education; 17 percent to average in-state tuition for undergraduate or graduate students; 9.5 percent each to availability of academic/career counseling services and to

availability of job placement services for graduates; 7 percent each to percentage of students participating in distance education classes, to average out-of-state tuition for undergraduate or graduate students, and to total electronic library collections, including digital books, databases and media. It also accorded 4.5 percent each to offering dual credit, credit for life experience, advanced placement credit and credit for military training.

All schools were scored on a 10-point scale in those 11 areas. Individual data point scores were then multiplied by their respective weights, and the scores were added together, for a maximum possible score of 10 points. Tuition amounts are based on 2014-15 undergraduate and graduate data reported to the National Center for Education Statistics.