

4 grads echo findings: It pays to choose BC3

Community colleges offer biggest bang for buck, analysis suggests

February 8, 2016

(Butler, PA) Julia Sudetic didn't need a student loan to attain an associate degree at Butler County Community College. Neither did Edward Matson, Tonya Jurik or Benjamin Wilson.

Those members of BC3's Class of 2006, none of whom hold a bachelor's degree, say they also earn more than \$31,175. That's the average salary of a Western Pennsylvania community college graduate a decade after commencement, according to the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard.

Their experiences bolster findings that suggest community colleges may offer today's students the biggest return on their tuition investment.



Julia Sudetic, a 2006 Butler County Community College graduate, works as a nurse in Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh Business Times analyzed data from the College Scorecard, which compiles information from Department of Education surveys, the national student loan database and earnings data from tax records and provides students with information on costs, degrees and outcomes. The weekly newspaper studied current salaries of Class of 2006 graduates of 24 regional four-year institutions and their alma mater's 2013-14 tuition and fees, according to research director Ethan Lott.

It did the same for graduates of Butler County Community College, the Community College of Beaver County, the Community College of Allegheny County and Westmoreland County Community College.

Alumni of the 24 four-year public or private institutions earned an average of \$42,829. The average cost to attend those schools was \$19,862 annually after financial aid.

Alumni of the four Western Pennsylvania community colleges earned an average of \$31,175. The average cost to attend those schools was \$5,778 annually after financial aid.

“They were still paying school debt 10 years later”

Community colleges, according to the Pittsburgh Business Times, offer the biggest bang for the buck in terms of future earnings compared with annual cost to attend.

“I’ve been saying that for years,” says Sudetic, 33, of Valencia, who earned a nursing degree at BC3 and is employed in the Pittsburgh area.

“I work side-by-side with other nurses who went to other colleges. We have the exact same roles. We were getting the exact same amount (of pay). They were still paying school debt 10 years later and I was working alongside them, getting the same raises, the same opportunities, without the debt.”

She and her fellow nurses, she says, “ended up in the same spot.”

Seventy-five percent of BC3 students graduate debt-free.

“I know I had my school debt paid off pretty much while I was in school, because I worked at the same time I was going to school,” says Sudetic, adding that her salary – “It’s pretty darned good” – exceeds the \$31,175 average of 2006 Western Pennsylvania community college graduates.

As does Wilson’s: “At least twice that.”

And Jurik’s: “Yes.”

And that of Matson, the 60-year-old Butler resident and engineer technician in Cranberry Township, who says “Life is very good.”

Nearly 70 percent of Class of 2015 graduates from four-year institutions carried student-loan debt and owe an average of \$30,100, according to the Institute for College Access and Success.

“I bought my first home at age 24”

“When I graduated I had virtually no debt at all, so when I got a job, that was all income,” says Wilson, 31, who attained an associate degree in measurement science-metrology technology from BC3.

He works as a supervisor at a Reading company that manufactures optoelectronics for microchips used in computers, smartphones and nanotechnology.

“I bought my first home at age 24,” Wilson says. “With no debt I could arrange to do so. Other students are getting out of school, maybe getting their first job, and they have to pay \$600 or so out of the bank. My mortgage is less than they are paying on their student loans.”



Benjamin Wilson, a 2006 Butler County Community College graduate, works as a supervisor at a Reading company that manufactures optoelectronics for microchips used in computers, smartphones and nanotechnology.



Tonya Jurik, a 2006 Butler County Community College graduate, works in Pittsburgh as a technical services engineer for a health insurer.

That first loan statement for some students will be “overwhelming,” says Jurik, who earned an associate degree in computer information science at BC3. “They are not going to be able to live the lifestyle that they think they are going to when they get that first bill.”

They might also have to live at home to make ends meet.

Kate Ashford writes in a May 2015 article published on Forbes.com that among the reasons 65 percent of parents expect to support their children for up to five years after their children graduate from college is student-loan debt.

“I work with a guy who wanted to move out, but he couldn’t because he had all those student loans,” says Jurik, who works in Pittsburgh as a technical services engineer for a health insurer.

Where you live after graduation, the clothes you wear, the car you drive – or whether you can afford its repairs – may have to wait until your college loan payment is made, Jurik says.

“I work with people right now who are still paying off their debt and they graduated about the same time as I did,” Jurik says. “Just hearing what they have to pay and what they go through to try to pay that, it’s really unfortunate. I love the fact that I did not have any student debt when I graduated from BC3. I’m just fortunate that I don’t have to be still paying on student loans like they are.”

“BC3 takes affordability seriously”

BC3’s tuition of \$4,522 in 2013-14 was lower than all 24 four-year schools and the second-least expensive among the Western PA community colleges, according to the College Scorecard.

“Oftentimes undergraduate students don’t understand the consequences of student debt while they are in college,” BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer says. “It is only after graduation that the benefits are understood. I hear from so many of our graduates who let me know how thankful they are about their experience at BC3 and the fact they left debt-free.”

The Pittsburgh Business Times’ report “speaks to what we do best as a community college sector: affordability and excellence,” Neupauer says. “BC3 takes affordability seriously. It has been in our mission for years and was included in our last strategic plan. The article validates our strategic approach.”

Says Matson, a measurement science-metrology technology graduate who coordinates a nonconformance system for a company that builds nuclear power plants: “Before I would take on

a large amount of debt for any degree I would look at one and determine how much value you get from the dollar being spent.

“I know so many people where I work and just in my own family who are deep, deep in debt from student loans,” Matson says. “I really don’t know why people are in such a hurry to get deep in student-loan debt when you could get the education and experience, then find a good company where you can get ahead and have them help you achieve.”

“Why not pay less?”

“I knew what I wanted to be when I went into college,” Sudetic says. “A lot of students don’t. So why pay the exorbitant amount when you are still trying to figure out who you are and what you want to do? If the classes transfer, why not pay less? You get the same education, sometimes even better.”

Seventy percent of BC3 students are enrolled in programs that transfer to a senior institution.

Graduates of Carnegie-Mellon University in 2006 earned on average \$76,200 annually, the highest salary cited in the report. CMU’s costs in 2013-14 were also highest among the 24 four-year schools at \$31,634 after financial aid.



Edward Matson, a 2006 Butler County Community College graduate, is an engineer technician in Cranberry Township.

The lowest earners 10 years after graduation were from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, whose salaries average \$30,800, according to the report. The Art Institute of Pittsburgh’s annual costs are \$26,637 after financial aid, the report states.

While Wilson enjoys the “freedom” at age 31 of not being saddled with student-loan debt – “it is like a load off your chest. You don’t have to worry about the future so much if you have that freedom” – Matson is thankful to BC3 for his second career.

His position at a print shop was phased out, he was nearing 50 years of age and decided to enroll in BC3’s measurement science-metrology technology program.

“I guarantee I would not be where I am today without my BC3 metrology degree,” he says. “There’s a lot of cache that goes with that. I wouldn’t have been able to make this move without BC3’s low tuition rate and the fact that there was financial assistance involved. I needed something that was local and affordable, and that’s why I selected that program.”

And like he says, life is good.

“Everything,” Matson reiterates, “worked out just fine.”