

Ellwood City Area

Chamber of Commerce

"Small Town, BIG Living"

BC3 No. 1 again in PA! College led by EC native "making tremendous impact" in region

**By William V. Foley
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BUTLER — Butler County Community College's back-to-back rankings as the No. 1 community college in Pennsylvania in consecutive Schools.com surveys are a testament to BC3's consistency in excellence and its importance to higher education in eight counties, BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer said.

"This also speaks to the commitment from the entire BC3 team to provide affordable, accessible and above all, quality education to the students we serve," said Neupauer, an Ellwood City native and a 1985 graduate of Lincoln High School.

Schools.com on Oct. 24 published the results of its second survey since late 2015. BC3 — a member of the Ellwood City Area Chamber of Commerce, as is Neupauer — was ranked No. 1 again compared with 13 other institutions in the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges.

"We are so happy to have that No. 1 ranking again in the community college space," said Neupauer, whose 10-year presidency at a single institution exceeds that of any current leader among Pennsylvania's community colleges, its 14 State System of Higher Education institutions and its four state-related schools — Lincoln, Penn State and Temple universities, and the University of Pittsburgh.

BC3's continued recognition by Schools.com "really validates the fact that we are making such a tremendous impact on our main campus and in each of our off-campus locations," Neupauer said. "With our regional approach to higher education, not only are we excelling on our main campus in Butler Township, but also at our off-campus locations and in the counties we serve."

Nearly 34 percent of BC3's credit students this fall are studying at its five off-campus locations, which include BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle and BC3 @ Cranberry in Cranberry Township.

Lawrence Crossing director: BC3 great asset to region

BC3 is a great asset to the region, said Sean Carroll, director of BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle, "whether it is for the student who takes classes then goes right into the work force, the student who transfers on to receive his or her bachelor's degree or someone taking advantage of the many Lifelong Learning classes that are offered.

"I truly believe that BC3 has earned the designation of No. 1 community college in the state by both its affordable and accessible education that it provides at its main campus in Butler, its off-campus sites and through online learning."

Three-hundred BC3 students this fall are taking only distance education courses and are included in the 863 enrolled in at least one online class, according to Sharla Anke, assistant dean of institutional research.

BC3 offers 102 Internet classes, a 100 percent-online associate of applied science degree in business management, and four certificates, said Ann McCandless, BC3's dean of educational technology.

Lincoln grad expects to graduate debt-free

Current annual tuition and fees for Butler County students pursuing 30 credits is \$4,800, according to Julianne Louttit, director of financial aid. Forty-four percent of BC3 students

received a Pell grant in the 2016-17 academic year, according to Becky Smith, BC3's assistant director of financial aid, and 75 percent of BC3 students graduate debt-free.

That may include Janelle Fox, a sophomore early childhood education and special education major at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing.

"A lot of my friends now are \$30,000 in debt," said Fox, a Lincoln High graduate who said she expects to graduate from BC3 debt-free. "I could not imagine trying to start my career with all of that debt in front of me."

Fox also said she "loves" that BC3 students don't have to pay for what she calls "major fluff fees."

"Like parking," she said. "Parking is free. At other schools it is not like that. At other schools you pay \$25 to \$100 just for a parking spot."

Tuition at BC3 is the lowest among 24 colleges and universities in Western Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh Business Times reported in January. Additionally, the BC3 Education Foundation will award more than \$200,000 in scholarships this year.

"Students feel that they are getting a good first experience at college at BC3 and the low cost of tuition makes it possible for them to explore their options without feeling they are wasting time and money," said Lauren Buchanan, director of BC3 @ Cranberry. "In our area we are competing with a number of prestigious and expensive schools. They feel the tuition rate is very reasonable and many are able to attend and leave without putting themselves in debt."

Riverside grad: Students recognizing BC3's affordability

Justin Baust, 19, a 2017 Riverside High graduate, is attending BC3's main campus in Butler Township this fall, then may continue his general studies at BC3 @ Cranberry in the spring. "I'll finish there," he said in August. "It's closer to home."

Baust said he followed his sister, Jordan, in attending BC3.

"And I am saving money, not going to another school and spending like \$30,000," Baust said. "I'm spending like \$3,000. I think more students are thinking that way. My friends had scholarships or half-scholarships to go elsewhere and they all went to community colleges to save money because they don't think it's worth it anymore."

Schools.com also cited "comfortable classes" at BC3, where the student-to-faculty ratio fluctuates between 18:1 and 17:1, Anke said.

"I think our students do appreciate the smaller class sizes," Carroll said, "especially those who have gone on to other schools with larger class sizes."

Small class sizes appealing

Her largest class at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing has 15 students, Fox said.

"I really like the smaller class sizes," the Lincoln High graduate said. "They allow you to make a closer connection with your teacher and with your peers. If you went to a larger school, you wouldn't have that connection. And the friends I have talked to from larger schools say that they don't have that connection."

That connection, she said, benefits her and her classmates.

"I think it is a lot better academically because you have that closer rapport," Fox said. "And you can have a closer bond with the students in your field. I have a group of education majors and we all get together and help each other with our homework or any questions we have. It is also easier to talk to your teachers about your questions."