

# BC3 gets thumbs-up to offer online courses nationwide

One of state's top schools for distance education offers 89 Internet classes, degree program

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(Butler, PA) Butler County Community College, ranked No. 13 among 117 Pennsylvania schools in distance education by OnlineColleges.com, can now showcase and offer its online courses coast-to-coast.

Ann McCandless, BC3's dean of educational technology, announced Friday BC3's application approval with Pennsylvania's State Authorization Portal Agency and Department of Education, as well as BC3's newly established membership with the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA).

The approvals and membership also enable BC3 to advertise its online courses in NC-SARA's 47 member states and Washington, D.C., allow instructors to teach BC3 online courses from outside Pennsylvania and ease out-of-state field experiences for BC3 students.

Only California, Florida and Massachusetts are not currently included in NC-SARA. California and Florida may join SARA in the near future.

"This means that students can apply to BC3 and we can give them distance education courses, without question, if they are in any of those other NC-SARA states," McCandless said. "Our faculty can teach from their home in a different state. We can do internships, practicums, clinical experiences in other states for our students as long as we stay within the requirements as outlined in the NC-SARA membership policy."

BC3 in September rated higher than 103 Pennsylvania schools in distance education, according to OnlineColleges.com's inaugural national survey, scoring and ranking of 117 accredited colleges and universities in the commonwealth.

OnlineColleges.com, a Foster City, Calif., firm that helps students find affordable, high-quality online colleges that meet their specific needs, also reported that BC3's in-state 2014 tuition was lower than 113 of those schools, and its out-of-state tuition lower than 112.

BC3 offers 89 online courses in subjects such as business mathematics, criminal law, college writing and 20th century world history, and four online programs, one of which includes all classes leading to an Associate in Applied Science degree in business management.

BC3 also unveiled last fall its five-week Fast Tracks, three sessions held consecutively throughout the semester.

## Courses: From art to psychology to statistics

All five courses in the spring semester's Fast Track 1 are online-only and include classes such as introduction to art and preparatory algebra.

All four Fast Track 2 courses are also online-only and cover subjects such as health science and general psychology. Fast Track 2 begins Feb. 20.

Three Fast Track 3 courses are online-only and cover subjects such as principles of sociology and elementary statistics. Fast Track 3 begins April 3.

BC3 also offers 18 hybrid courses that combine online instruction and traditional lectures.

This spring, 858 BC3 students are taking at least one online course, according to Sharla Anke, BC3's coordinator of institutional research. Of those, 282 are taking only online courses, she said.

Prior to its authorization last week, for BC3 to have offered online courses to students outside of Pennsylvania, the school had to apply for permission from each individual state, McCandless said. Application fees in some states reached \$10,000, and some had to be renewed annually, she said.

Other states had no fees associated with the authorization application, McCandless said. BC3's authorization will also benefit students – including student-veterans – who began studies at BC3, moved or were transferred out of Pennsylvania and sought online courses, McCandless said.

“We couldn't give them their classes” before, she said.

## “Excellent academic programs”

The federal Higher Ed Opportunity Act allows states to govern education within their borders. While the initial intent of the legislation applied to brick-and-mortar locations, the quality of education began to waver with the rise of for-profit online schools, McCandless said, forcing states to make their authorization applicable also to distance education.

The solution, according to [nc-sara.org](http://nc-sara.org), was to “establish a state-level reciprocity process that will support the nation in its efforts to increase the educational attainment of its people by making state authorization more efficient, effective, and uniform; more effective in dealing with quality and integrity issues that have arisen in some online-distance education offerings; and less costly for states and institutions and, thereby, the students they serve.”

After becoming affiliated with the Southern Regional Educational Board, Pennsylvania became part of SARA. The state approved BC3's application Dec. 19, which enabled BC3 to become a member institution with NC-SARA.

NC-SARA welcomed BC3 to its membership on Thursday.

“We are honored to be Butler County’s community college as well as the commonwealth’s, but our quality extends beyond state borders,” said Dr. Nick Neupauer, BC3 president. “This agreement allows students from across the country to access our excellent academic programs.”

The process, McCandless said, was years in the making.

“Pennsylvania was one of the last states to get on board with SARA because it was not affiliated with any of the regional compacts,” McCandless said. “So it had to go through the system, the governing systems in Pennsylvania to get the state into the Southern Regional Education Board as an affiliate and then become a SARA-approved institution.”