

IUP bachelor's degree program on BC3 main campus "a perfect option"

"You're going to save a lot of money," coordinator says

February 13, 2017

(Butler, PA) Jaimie Fulmer sang along with 17 first-graders to their teacher's lead on "Old MacDonald" during her first day as a Buffalo Elementary School observer on Wednesday.

To illustrate her language arts lesson on long vowel sounds, the Freeport Area School District teacher whom Fulmer was observing instructed her students to sing the chorus as "AEIOU."

Fulmer, a Butler County Community College sophomore and early childhood education major, will be singing about fewer IOUs herself next fall, when she takes advantage of her alma mater's partnership with Indiana University of Pennsylvania and pursues her bachelor's degree from BC3's main campus.



Dr. Dan Wissinger, an assistant professor in IUP's Department of Professional Studies, meets with Jaimie Fulmer, a BC3 early childhood education major in the lobby of the Humanities and Education building on BC3's main campus. Fulmer will graduate with an associate degree in May, and pursue an IUP bachelor's degree in early childhood education on BC3's main campus.

She'll avoid room and board fees and "soft costs" associated with living on IUP's campus, says Dr. Dan Wissinger, an assistant professor in IUP's Department of Professional Studies and a coordinator of what he calls a "traditional 2 plus 2" program that has a nontraditional advantage: Five IUP courses leading to a bachelor's degree in early childhood education with special education certification offered on BC3's main campus next fall, including four in a classroom setting and one online.

"Economically it really makes sense," said Wissinger, who later Wednesday morning met with Fulmer and others to promote the partnership that began between the schools last fall.

"Our greatest level of marketability has come with the economic appeal," Wissinger said. "On average it costs between \$10,000 and \$12,000 in Western Pennsylvania per year, and I think that is a pretty conservative estimate, for room and board – in addition to tuition. And that doesn't account for some of the additional costs that are part of college. You live there, you eat there, you have travel. You have parking. You have all those soft costs. If you look at it over a period of two years, and you save \$12,000 a year over two years, you're going to save a lot of money."

“I get to stay here on campus”

That resonates with Fulmer, a 24-year-old from Saxonburg, Girl Scout leader and mother of a 4-year-old boy.

“I get to stay here on campus,” she said in the lobby of BC3’s Humanities and Education building, where Wissinger was promoting the partnership. “It works around our schedule. I can drop (my son) off and then be here on campus. I don’t have to drive a 45-minute commute. I get to save on gas. IUP was always one of my schools to possibly go on to. When (BC3) got the IUP program and I can stay here on campus, a 10-minute drive from my house, it is basically a perfect option for me.”

The partnership, Susan Gillis said, is “an amazing opportunity.”

“I don’t think a lot of the awareness is there yet for the students that this is an option,” said Gillis, who teaches courses in education and special education at BC3. “There are a lot of nontraditional students as well and they are working. I’ve even talked to some students who weren’t sure how they were going to go about getting their bachelor’s but knew they wanted it so this is now an option for them, for the nontraditional students. They don’t have to travel. They can stay here.”

“Smaller classes with students they know”

Students can attend classes at BC3 for two years and get an Associate in Arts degree in early childhood education, develop a familiarity and comfort zone with BC3’s campus, and then remain in their environment and own home as they take IUP courses, said Bill Miller, BC3’s interim associate vice president for academic affairs and dean of humanities and social sciences.

“They are going to get to save themselves a lot of money,” Miller said. “And they will be in smaller classes with students they know.”

As of Jan. 30, 82 students were enrolled in BC3’s early childhood education program, according to Sharla Anke, BC3’s coordinator of institutional research.

Two graduates of BC3’s early childhood education program were the first to enroll in the program that was announced in March and began last fall. Wissinger expects more this fall – and more students to enter the field of education after a decline since 2010.

The state Department of Education reported in 2016 that the number of instructional certificates issued in Pennsylvania has fallen from 21,294 in 2010-11 to 8,615 in 2014-15 – a decrease of 60 percent.

Wissinger said he sees that changing.

“Absolutely,” he said. “And I think the type of students we are getting into our program, people who at one time would have gone into law, or engineering if they have a mathematics background, see the benefits of going into teaching. Pennsylvania is a good state to teach in. There is strong union support, and it has really manifested into a good working environment for teachers. So that’s the real draw. And the security and pay and benefits have all added to the increase in the quality of the students getting into teacher education right now.”

Students earning an Associate in Arts degree in early childhood education (Pre K-4) from BC3 can transfer all 63 credits to IUP in pursuit of a Bachelor of Science degree in early childhood (Pre K-4) education with a certification for special education (Pre K-8).

“This has that special-needs combination, so that works out,” said Fulmer, whose goal is to teach first or second grade and work with children with special needs.

Those on the cusp of earning an associate degree may also be considered for the IUP program, Miller said.

Hugs from two students

Judging from her first day observing language arts at Buffalo Elementary, Fulmer is excited to start engaging the pupils next week.

“The teacher was very welcoming and the students were very responsive to me being there,” she said. “I actually had two students give me hugs and one came over to me and gave me a piece of gum. So they are very responsive to me.”

They may even join her in another round of that AEIOU chorus, which would work just as well with the math lesson coming up.

Wissinger plans up to eight more visits to BC3 to promote the partnership. His next will be from 12:35 p.m. to 2 p.m. Feb. 27 at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle. For more information, email dwissinger@iup.edu or call (717) 658-4490; or william.miller@bc3.edu or call (724) 287-8711 Ext. 8336.