

KEYS unlocks futures as participation spikes at BC3

Program reduces obstacles for students receiving public assistance

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(Butler, PA) Thirty-one-year-old Amber Self strolled under Butler County Community College's oak trees, swinging a blue BC3 tote stuffed with a yellow highlighter, black flash drive, dark blue and yellow folders, a blue three-ringed binder – and mechanical pencils and ball-point pens, with which the single mother of three is about to rewrite her life.

Self, of Butler, is the first incoming BC3 student to utilize a reverse-referral form distributed by the state Department of Human Services in July. The form follows the agency's Nov. 1 decision to expand eligibility in the Keystone Education Yields Success program by eliminating a provision that capped the percentage of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients who could participate, said Karen Jack, BC3's KEYS director.

KEYS, a program among Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges and the Department of Human Services, provides assistance and services to students receiving Temporary Aid for Needy Families benefits and-or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits.

Among the goals of KEYS is that its students attend and participate in school with the intent of graduating with a credit- or noncredit-bearing certificate or associate degree in career-specific programs.

The one-page reverse referral form, which Jack says expedites a decision on an applicant's eligibility, is available from the KEYS office at BC3. Applicants provide the completed form to their caseworker, who determines the applicant's eligibility for programs such as KEYS and alerts directors such as Jack and applicants such as Self, whose interest in BC3 piqued after she attended an April 12 open house.

"I keep driving to give my children what I never had," said Self, whose boys range in age from 9 years to 7 months.



Amber Self, 31, of Butler, a single mother of three boys ages 9 years to 7 months, will begin her pursuit of an associate of arts degree in social work at Butler County Community College on Aug. 28. Self is the first incoming BC3 student to utilize a reverse-referral form distributed by the state Department of Human Services that expedited a decision on her eligibility

Self, a 2004 Butler Senior High School graduate, will begin her pursuit of an associate of arts degree in social work when BC3's fall semester begins Aug. 28.

"I dream of one day using my degree to help others that have fallen into hard times, and give them the resources needed to get out of the pitfalls of poverty," she said. "I want my boys to see their mother succeed at school and I want them to know that we can do anything we put our minds to do.

"Everyone has struggled from time to time," she said, "but it's our choices that define us."

"I never quit"

Prior to November, the state Department of Human Services would allow only 20 percent of community college KEYS participants to receive SNAP benefits, while 80 percent could be TANF recipients, Jack said. Ninety-one percent of BC3's KEYS participants were SNAP recipients as of May, when the number of SNAP students climbed to 48 from five in October.

Nine KEYS participants graduated in the Class of 2017, the most since the program began at BC3 in 2005, Jack said.

Among them, Heather Morida, a 27-year-old from New Castle with a 6-year-old daughter.

"I was a single mother on welfare trying to make ends meet working a minimum-wage job," said Morida, a 2008 Mohawk High School graduate. "I wanted more in life and knew that I was not going to get anywhere if I stayed where I was. I may have struggled a lot, but I never quit."

KEYS graduates earned an average of \$14.77 per hour in 2010, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy, an anti-poverty organization based in Washington, D.C.

Program participants are eligible to borrow laptop computers and calculators, receive an extra hour of free tutoring beyond that afforded BC3 students in credit courses, child care, transportation reimbursements, car repair assistance and work-related clothing and uniforms, Jack said.



Heather Morida, 27, of New Castle, a single mother of a 6-year-old daughter, participated in BC3's Keystone Education Yields Success program and in May earned an associate of applied science degree in registered nursing. She passed her National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses and has accepted a nursing position near Pittsburgh.

“If it weren’t for KEYS, I may not have made it to classes due to my car,” Morida said. “They helped with gas cards, gas mileage and car repairs. I was doing a lot of traveling and needed a safe vehicle.”

Morida was named to BC3’s dean’s list and president’s list, and was inducted into Rho Phi, BC3’s chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, the prestigious academic honor society for community college students. In May she earned an associate of applied science degree in registered nursing, passed her National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses and has accepted a nursing position near Pittsburgh.

“KEYS helped keep me motivated, gave me the tools I needed to succeed and was a financial stepping stone to reach my goal,” Morida said.

“It would be folly to not use every advantage”

After Ethan Eberle, a 39-year-old married father of six, lost a job he held for 15 years in the rental car industry, he decided to further his education at BC3.

The 1996 graduate of Seneca Valley High School attended classes this summer from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on BC3’s main campus. He would then return to his home in Butler, see his family, and prepare for his full-time human services-related occupation. His work shift would end at 12:30 a.m.

“The biggest help so far,” said Eberle, whose children range in age from 13 years to 20 months, “is the laptop loan program. This allows me access to the appropriate programs so I am able to complete assignments when not at school.”

Eberle, one of 10 men in the KEYS program, will attend BC3 full time this fall in pursuit of an associate of arts degree in psychology. He plans to one day attain a doctorate degree in the field. “If the time and circumstances are correct, it would be folly to not use every advantage in one’s proverbial quiver, gender notwithstanding,” he said.

KEYS participants such as Morida, Eberle and Self must spend at least 12 hours per month pursuing a post-secondary education, performing community service, working or searching for a job, and are required to sign in when arriving on campus for class.

“Those,” Morida said, “are very simple and minimal requirements for all the benefits you receive.”

“I have a group of people behind me”

Students can receive a lifetime limit of \$1,000 for books and class fees; \$1,500 for car repairs and-or mileage annually; and incentives that begin with minimum semester grade-point averages of 2.5.

Students are also eligible for monthly incentive cards for successfully submitting weekly attendance sheets; and a \$50 incentive card for graduating or positively leaving the KEYS program because they no longer receive SNAP or TANF benefits.

“This just makes it so much easier for them to complete their education,” Jack said, “and to be able to thrive and to not have to worry about the necessities. That is huge. KEYS helps them with all of the little things that can go wrong or that can prevent them from possibly finishing school.”

Self said she “had a good feeling” July 26 as she strolled under BC3’s oak trees after visiting the Student Success Center, where the KEYS office is located.

“Like I have a group of people behind me,” she said.

It is stories like those of Amber Self, Heather Morida and Ethan Eberle that Jack calls “almost like a little miracle. All of a sudden, you are struggling with how am I going to do this? How am I going to do that? And then here comes a program that says, ‘Here you go. Just follow us. We will show you the way.’”

“I love to see their confidence just soar.”

Eventually, Self sees herself earning a bachelor’s degree in social work.

“I know from being a single mother that you need money to dream, to pay bills and eat,” she said. “These things make it very hard to take a leap of faith not knowing if you’re going to be able to afford school while still providing to your family.”

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