

State selects BC3 professor, developer of “life-saving” programs, for outstanding service award

Calhoun “not only an asset for his county, but for the state and nation,” Fish and Boat Commission official says

Feb. 8, 2018



Chris Calhoun, 56, of Butler, right, a parks and recreation management professor at Butler County Community College and the lead among the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s 10 water-rescue instructor trainers, speaks to first-responders while conducting the agency’s ice rescue and emergency response course on BC3’s main campus Feb. 4. Calhoun in late January received the agency’s outstanding service award for his work in developing its water-rescue programs.

(Butler, PA) Sixteen first-responders, uniformly outfitted in \$2,000 worth of equipment, visually differentiated by bright-yellow or lime-green stickers inscribed with their name and a numeral and affixed to their helmets, and aurally distinguished by their response to unexpected roll calls, balance on the precipice of an 18-foot-deep pond on Butler County Community College’s main campus.

On this gray 31-degree Sunday morning, these Pennsylvania and Virginia firefighters, police officers and park rangers learn how to properly lob an orange rope bag containing a coiled 3/8-inch fluorescent polypropylene throw line to a colleague bobbing and clinging to the edge of a 3-inch-deep ice shelf.

They will practice pulling their colleague from the water through an opening within an inflatable rapid deployment craft. Execute a triangulated tether from the snow-covered bank to maneuver a buoy to him. Use ice awls to hoist themselves out of a 10-foot by 10-foot opening carved in the pond's frozen surface.

The ice rescue and emergency response techniques, which can save the lives of first-responders and victims alike, are among five curricula developed by BC3

professor Chris Calhoun, whose expertise in helping to author the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's water-rescue programs resulted in his receiving the agency's outstanding service award in late January.

Calhoun, 56, of Butler, a parks and recreation management professor at BC3 since 1984, serves as the lead among the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's 10 water-rescue instructor trainers. The agency's "train the trainers" program drew those 16 first-responders to the 16-hour ice rescue and emergency response course at BC3 on Feb. 3-4.

"Steps are followed in a very particular order to ensure everybody's safety"



Chris Calhoun, 56, of Butler, a parks and recreation management professor at Butler County Community College and the lead among the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's 10 water-rescue instructor trainers, instructs first-responders from atop a 3-inch ice shelf over an 18-foot-deep pond on BC3's main campus Feb. 4. Calhoun in late January received the commission's outstanding service award for his work in developing its water-rescue programs.

“(Calhoun’s) expertise and abilities in this role are without peer,” said Ryan C. Walt, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s boating and watercraft safety manager who nominated Calhoun for the award that recognizes high achievement or superior performance, outstanding supervisory or managerial leadership, and-or exceptional creativity of work. “He is a credit to this agency and has effectively compiled and created water-rescue curriculum which results in the saving of lives.”



Chris Calhoun, 56, of Butler, a parks and recreation management professor at Butler County Community College and the lead among the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s 10 water-rescue instructor trainers, instructs first-responders from atop a 3-inch ice shelf over an 18-foot-deep pond on BC3’s main campus Feb. 4. Calhoun in late January received the commission’s outstanding service award for his work in developing its water-rescue programs.

Pennsylvania’s is the nation’s only FEMA-approved water-rescue program.

Calhoun is “an experienced professional,” Walt said, “who has been very successful creating concise lesson plans that present critical information to emergency responders.”

Among the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s water-rescue curricula developed by Calhoun – who credits the teamwork of his instructor trainer colleagues for “reviewing and editing the subject matter to make sure that it is correct” – are the three-hour water rescue for the first responder; and 16-hour water rescue and emergency response, emergency boat operations and rescue, and advance line systems rescue.

And the ice rescue and emergency response curriculum, bound within a 90-page manual revised in November after two years of updates, Calhoun said, and one that – like those he has been developing since his first 16-page, typewritten guide in 1989 – now includes PowerPoint presentations and video lessons.

Calhoun rewrites the manuals. Creates new PowerPoint presentations. Films and edits videos. Then organizes the content, which is used to train first-responders across the commonwealth.

“This is what makes this program work in Pennsylvania,” Calhoun said. “It doesn’t matter if you are in Pittsburgh or Philadelphia. It doesn’t matter if you are in the southern part of the state, or the northern part of the state. Everyone is going through the same curriculum. Everybody speaks the same language.”

The state’s 172 water-rescue instructors train 5,000 first-responders each year, many of them volunteers, such as Jason Butterfield, of Zelienople.

“The curriculum is very thorough,” said Butterfield, a volunteer firefighter in Evans City who with Calhoun is a member of the Butler County Water Rescue Team 300. “Chris and the commission have put a lot of time and research into the curriculum to make sure that whether you are doing water rescues in Butler County or on Lake Erie, it’s standardized. Steps are followed in a very particular order to ensure everybody’s safety.”

Curriculum, training “unmatched,” Virginia first-responder says

Like Butterfield, Chris Eddy, of Prince William County, Va., was among the instructors being trained at BC3 – and who responded by voicing their number when Scott Grahn suddenly shouted “Gimme a PAR!” – a personal accountability report, or roll call.

“Why we call PAR is to determine who is getting cold, and who isn’t, by the way they answer,” said Grahn, of Somerset, who has known and worked with Calhoun for 29 years and is among Pennsylvania’s water-rescue instructor trainers. “If there is a delay on one person, we know he is starting to get cold. When you are dealing with ice and you are dealing with training with water, you have to learn that. If they delay, you know they are getting cold. If No. 11 isn’t answering, we need to keep an eye on No. 11.”

Eddy, a firefighter and paramedic, said the thoroughness of the curriculum and the training “is unmatched. You have the PowerPoints and the videos and the training. We come up here and get the instruction, then we go back down and we teach it to our guys.”

Pennsylvania’s program, which Walt calls the largest of its kind in the United States, has been modeled by organizations such as the National Association of Search and Rescue, and used by other states and countries.

“Chris is not only an asset for his county,” Walt said, “but for the state and nation.”

Colleague: People don’t realize the lives Calhoun has saved

Dave Abt, president of the 300-member International Association of Water Rescue Professionals since its founding in 2012 in Lusby, Md., considers Calhoun to be among the elite experts in the



Ryan C. Walt, above, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s boating and watercraft safety manager, nominated Chris Calhoun, a parks and recreation management professor at Butler County Community College and the lead among the agency’s 10 water-rescue instructor trainers, for the commission’s outstanding service award. “(Calhoun’s) expertise and abilities in this role are without peer,” Walt said of the five water-rescue curricula developed by Calhoun.

United States in a water-rescue field that is 400 percent more dangerous than any other aspect of rescue operations, he said.

“(Rescues are) a very low frequency event,” Abt said. “In a lot of rescue-type scenarios, for technical skills, you build up muscle memory. You just instinctively do it. You are not actually thinking about it. Because these events are so infrequent, unless you train all the time, you don’t build and maintain the muscle memory to execute the drill. So when these curriculums are developed, and presented, it is that same consistency that is presented over and over again, which helps retain the muscle memory.”



Scott Grahn, above, is among Pennsylvania’s 10 water-rescue instructor trainers and serves with Chris Calhoun, a parks and recreation management professor at Butler County Community College, on the Pennsylvania Helicopter Rescue Aquatic Rescue Team. Calhoun has received the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s outstanding service awards for developing the agency’s five water-rescue curricula. “People don’t realize the lives (Calhoun) has saved just by training them and with the instruction in those curriculums,” Grahn said.

Abt said he has also spent “hundreds and hundreds” of hours training in the water with Calhoun, and that the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission award acknowledges the extensiveness of the curricula.

“Pennsylvania (water-rescue members are) primarily made up of volunteers,” Abt said. “You don’t always have the same people responding to an incident. A volunteer fire department may have 30 people on a team. You’re not sure which five are able to show up for a callout. Having a consistent presentation and a consistent message and consistent interpretation of the skills is extremely critical for success and safety.”

Added Butterfield: “You don’t always work with the same people time and time again. It’s important when we show up to help others that we are doing the same things they are doing because they have all gone through the same curriculum.”

Grahn is also a strike team leader for the Pennsylvania Helicopter Rescue Aquatic Rescue Team, on which Calhoun serves as a rescue technician.

“People don’t realize the lives (Calhoun) has saved just by training them and with the instruction in those curriculums,” Grahn said.

First-responders also learn how to utilize small inflatable boats used in flash flooding – such as those deployed on Jan. 12 in Butler County, when the Butler County Water Rescue Team 300 rescued 12 residents, including one in “dire circumstances,” Calhoun said – after the Connoquenessing Creek rose 11 feet over 36 hours Jan 11-12.

“People may not be aware of how many lives that were saved even by his involvement in the community with his Butler County team,” Grahn said.

Calhoun in June will be what Abt calls a “premier speaker” for the fifth time at the International Association of Water Rescue Professionals conference in South Bend, Ind., which draws 200 each year, Abt said.

Like those who will attend the international conference, those taught by Calhoun in the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission’s “train the trainer” programs “leave with a part of him,” Abt said. “And a part of his knowledge that will carry on in the future.”