

International academic honor society selects BC3 president for top award

Neupauer “one of the most supportive college presidents that I know,” official says

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Dr. Nick Neupauer, president of Butler County Community College, has been selected to receive the highest honor bestowed by an international academic honor society that has 3.2 million members. Neupauer, shown in BC3’s Heaton Family Learning Commons, will receive Phi Theta Kappa’s Shirley B. Gordon Award of Distinction on April 20 in Kansas City.

(Jackson, Miss.) An organization with 3.2 million members in 10 countries has selected Dr. Nick Neupauer, president of Butler County Community College, to receive its highest honor, one that recognizes his commitment to BC3’s academic honor society and resolve to foster student success and empowerment, a Phi Theta Kappa regional coordinator said.

Neupauer on April 20 in Kansas City will receive the Shirley B. Gordon Award of Distinction at the centennial celebration of Phi Theta Kappa, whose Rho Phi chapter at BC3 in 2017 reached



Chris Slay, 36, of Butler, is shown Jan. 29 in an abnormal psychology class at Butler County Community College. Slay, a sophomore studying social work at BC3, is president of the college's Phi Theta Kappa chapter, Rho Phi.

major. "You might tend to think of college presidents as being unapproachable. And he is about as approachable as you can get."

President "a huge part of our success"

Phi Theta Kappa – with 1,300 chapters in American Samoa, Canada, the Federated States of Micronesia, Germany, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the United Arab Emirates and the United States – has headquarters in Jackson, Miss. Its members must have at least a 3.5 grade-point average.

Rho Phi has 172 members across BC3's main campus; at its additional locations in Brockway, Cranberry Township, Ford City, Hermitage and New Castle; and within its online-only student body and its College Within the High School/College Pathways program.

Tarah Schmidt was vice president of Rho Phi in 2017, when it reached a five-star status after being designated as a zero-star chapter in 2011.

"Dr. Neupauer has been a huge part of our success," said Schmidt, 23, of Parker, who in earning associate degrees in social work and psychology was among the 109 Rho Phi members in BC3's Class of 2017.

the elite and ultimate five-star status, and in 2016 produced BC3's first Pennsylvania New Century Scholar in Maizee Zaccone, of Butler.

"Dr. Neupauer is one of the most supportive college presidents that I know," said Pattie Van Atter, coordinator of a Middle States Region that includes Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., and to which Rho Phi belongs. "It's a distinction."

His candidacy for the award – named in honor of Phi Theta Kappa's longest-serving board chair and longtime president of Highline Community College in Des Moines, Wash. – began with Rho Phi's nomination, "which," Van Atter said, "was judged on the international level."

Neupauer's dedication to Phi Theta Kappa is evident in his collaboration with Rho Phi, which "wasn't anything that I expected from a college president," said Chris Slay, 36, a resident of Butler, the president of BC3's chapter and a social work



Tarah Schmidt, 23, of Parker, is shown during commencement exercises at Butler County Community College on May 17. Schmidt, who earned associate degrees in social work and psychology at BC3, served as vice president of the college's Phi Theta Kappa chapter, Rho Phi.

“Quite frankly, I don’t think we could have gotten to a five-star status without him, because he was a big part of our Honors in Action project.”

“Now we are lockstep,” Neupauer says of work with Rho Phi

Rho Phi’s Honors in Action projects have progressed from developing a stress-busters week before finals in 2016, to raising awareness about mental health issues in 2017 to this spring – and in concert with BC3’s 2017-2022 strategic plan – creating a video addressing the opioid epidemic in western Pennsylvania.

The award that lauds the successful and productive relationship between a college president and the academic honor society represents the realization of a goal born in 2008, when Neupauer and Rho Phi officers attended Phi Theta Kappa’s national conference in Philadelphia and witnessed the citation being conferred.

“I recall thinking that it would be wonderful if the college would receive such recognition,” said Neupauer, whose 11-year presidency at a single institution exceeds that of any current leader among Pennsylvania’s 14 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.

“At that point I understood how closely linked an excellent Phi Theta Kappa chapter is with the vision and working relationship with the respective college president. It was something that always stuck with me, not about getting the award as much as it was about working closely with the Rho Phi chapter.

“Earlier in my presidency, that link was not as clear. Maybe we were doing things separately. I wasn’t working as closely with Phi Theta Kappa. That had nothing to do with Phi Theta Kappa. That had to do with me being a new president. Now we are lockstep.”

Neupauer goes “over and beyond” what Phi Theta Kappa has asked of him, said Van Atter, a sentiment to which Morgan Rizzardi agrees.

“He wants to build them up”



Maizee Zaccone, 22, of Butler, is a 2016 graduate of Butler County Community College. As member of the college's Phi Theta Kappa chapter, Rho Phi, Zaccone was selected as BC3's first Pennsylvania New Century Scholar, and is shown addressing a crowd in the state Capitol Rotunda in April 2016.

In addition to his commitment to Rho Phi, Rizzardi said, Neupauer has developed partnerships that allow students to pursue a bachelor's degree from BC3's main campus; directed BC3's 2017-2022 strategic plan that, in part, focuses on initiatives that enable diverse students to explore, clarify and achieve educational goals through innovative academic programming; and created additional locations in underserved areas of Pennsylvania.

"Everything Dr. Neupauer does, his mind set is student success, student empowerment, leadership, academic excellence, college completion," said Rizzardi, Rho Phi's co-adviser since 2011, its current primary adviser and BC3's associate director of admissions. "With everything that he does, he has those goals in mind. He sees people where they are at and wants to build them up."

Rizzardi also praised Neupauer for BC3 being selected as the No. 1 community college in Pennsylvania in back-to-back rankings by Schools.com.

"This is a direct reflection of the leadership Dr. Neupauer provides to the college by providing affordable education," she said.

The Pittsburgh Business Times on Jan. 9 reported BC3 as having the highest ratio of graduate earnings 10 years after commencement when compared with what a student paid to attend, besting ratios of 41 other colleges and universities in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. BC3 also has the lowest annual net cost among those schools, the publication reported after analyzing Department of Education College Scorecard data.

"Above and beyond any of our expectations"

Rho Phi's nomination also cited Neupauer's engagement in a Western Leadership Conference held for Phi Theta Kappa's Middle States Region; and by providing financial support for Rho Phi's officers to attend a regional conference in Long Branch, N.J., and a national conference in Washington, D.C.

"He cares about what the students are doing," said Schmidt, a senior studying social work, philosophy and animal-assisted interventions at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania. "He does care about how his college is being impacted, and about community issues as well."

Said Slay: “(Neupauer) has gone above and beyond any of our expectations as far as what we would expect from a college president.”

The international award, following Rho Phi reaching the pinnacle of Phi Theta Kappa and Zaccone’s selection “validates just how special of an institution we are,” Neupauer said, “and how special our students are.”

Zaccone, who in achieving the state’s highest score in the All-USA Community College Academic Team competition became Pennsylvania’s 2016 New Century Scholar, touted the importance of community colleges in her address to a state Capitol Rotunda crowd in April 2016.

She also touts the importance of Neupauer to Rho Phi.

“He was very genuine with all the students he came into contact with,” said Zaccone, 22, who earned an associate degree in English from BC3 in 2016 and plans to graduate from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania in May with a bachelor’s degree in English language and literature.

“He makes you feel like he cares about you specifically, about your education. I always felt like he was proud of me specifically, which was really encouraging as a student, to feel like the president of the school is proud of you being there, and for you taking the next step in your education.

“I can definitely see why he would be receiving an award like this because he recognizes Phi Theta Kappa for all of the benefits it brings to the students and to the community.”