

BC3 responds to student needs with fall Fast Track courses

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(Butler, PA) Four weeks into the fall semester, students at Butler County Community College can still start a course on time, maintain their full-time status to remain eligible for financial aid, and pursue their education off campus while addressing other responsibilities.

None of which were available to Bruce Russell and Bill Miller when they were freshmen.

As BC3 administrators, they are among those behind an innovative approach to the fall semester that follows a successful summer pilot program and reflects BC3's response to the dynamic needs of its student body.

For the first time, BC3 is offering fall Fast Track selections – three five-week, online-only sessions held consecutively within the semester.

BC3 now schedules four different course options within a semester: Session 1, spanning 14 weeks; Session 2, for 12 weeks; and Session 3, for 10 weeks; and the five-week Fast Tracks.

"I would think it is the way of the future," said Miller, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences. "Students are looking for convenience, and costs all the time. They are also thinking how can they manage a schedule with all the other things they have to do?"

Miller estimates that 75 percent of BC3's 5,300 credit students have a full- or part-time job.

"So many of these students are working 10 to however many hours a week," Miller said. "They are juggling family responsibilities, and possibly going to school with 15 credits. Time is valuable for them."

Enter the Fast Track online courses.

"The whole approach of society now is that things are on demand and when you need it," said Russell, BC3's Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs.

As a freshman at Slippery Rock State College, Russell worked two 20-hour part-time jobs while maintaining a full-time course load. Courses usually began the first Monday in September, and students who dropped a class in the weeks afterward had little chance to recoup those credits until the next semester, Russell said. If those students also fell below full-time status, they risked losing financial aid.

Education has changed since his first semester in 1968, Russell said.

“We had a need to adapt some of our models so we would be more receptive and open to current students’ lifestyles,” he said.

Traditional education required the student to work around a college's schedule, said Bob Morris, Dean of BC3 Admissions.

“These new options change that to some degree, as BC3 can now work more around a student's schedule,” Morris said.

Fast Track students will find the five-week workload to be concentrated and that the course may have the same requirements and expectations as those lasting 14 weeks.

“The quality of the course is still there, but if students can manage their time – that is the key – and make deadlines, it can work to their advantage,” Miller said. “We find those online courses have become popular. They are not easier. (Students) can take two to three face-to-face courses and an online course or two. Instead of coming to campus five days a week, they might come only two, and use those other days for work.”

Enrollment is currently open for Fast Track 2, held from Oct. 3 to Nov. 4; and for Fast Track 3, held from Nov. 7 to Dec. 9. Fast Track 1, which began Aug. 29, concludes Sept. 30.

“The options you have here as far as scheduling are good,” said Ben Knight, a first-year student from DuBois. “There’s a lot of scheduling flexibility here. I have some buddies who were thinking of going here, but they thought it was too late (in the semester to enroll). I will let them know that it is still an option.”

BC3 is taking into consideration “everyday life, like kids, working,” said Courtney Clark, a first-year student from Sarver. “(The scheduling is) very flexible. There are so many different accommodations here already. There were 20 different day and time options for College Writing 101, so many different options for classes. It’s an example of how BC3 cares about its students.”

A student who left the University of Pittsburgh visited Miller on Sept. 7 – 10 days after BC3’s 14-week fall semester began.

Between Session 2 classes that started Sept. 12 and Session 3 classes that start Sept. 26, “and Fast Track 2 or 3,” Miller said, “I was able to get her a full time schedule.”

Which is vastly different from when Miller stood in line to register for courses at BC3 in the 1970s, followed by La Roche College and Slippery Rock.

“Back in those days, you filled out a paper, took it to registration, they checked you off,” he said. “If you did not get there at the right time, you waited in line. Today you can apply online. You can register online.”

And, as of the fall semester, take Fast Track courses online.