

BC3's smallest site shows biggest spike in enrollment

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(Ford City, PA) It's nearly noon on the last day of summer, and Karen Zapp stands on tiptoes to glance through her open window at a quartet of Butler County Community College freshmen practicing for a cornhole tournament being thrown by upperclassmen.

Sounds of those red and blue bags softly smacking inclined wooden targets on the front lawn and tires stirring the gravel-sprinkled parking lot off Armstrong Street cut the still, otherwise quiet air.

Beyond Zapp's outer office - where students will congregate between any of six to seven daytime classes, where they munch on snacks or are reminded to continue reading their David Sedaris novel - are three classrooms at Lenape Tech's NexTier Adult Learning Center that represent BC3's newest and fastest-growing site.



"I enjoy being around the students, and I want them to succeed," says Zapp, Student Services/Technology Support Specialist at BC3 @ Armstrong in Ford City. "They will come in and ask, 'Karen, are you busy? Can you proof my paper?' They come first. I try to make them come first."

Last fall, when BC3 @ Armstrong opened, there were 24 students enrolled in five courses. Only a year later, any one of 81 students in 18 classes may poke his head in Zapp's office door.

As does freshman Coby Toy, who plans to major in business.

"Hey Karen, can I snag a bottle of water?"

The 18-year-old from Kittanning says he was accepted at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, where he planned to play ice hockey and went so far as to attend orientation during his junior year in the Armstrong School District.

Then he learned about BC3's new site in Ford City.

“That,” he says, “made the decision for me.”

He sticks around NexTier on Tuesdays and Thursdays, long after his BC3 @ Armstrong classes have ended, to meet with friends “in Karen’s office. It’s the hangout spot.”

The small-scale atmosphere so appealing to many of its students belies the hub of activity at the youngest of BC3’s five satellites, housed in a single-story building owned by Lenape Tech, an adjacent high school that offers career and technical training.

Drive to reduce travel a success

BC3 recognized the number of Armstrong County students attending BC3’s main campus in Butler was dwindling, says Bill O’Brien, Vice President for Continuing Education/Off-Campus Sites.

“And after a little research,” O’Brien says, “we found that students were becoming less and less interested in driving the distance to attend college.”

Creating the Armstrong County location in Ford City saved students 27.5 miles and 41 driving minutes to BC3’s main campus in Butler.

“It’s right here,” says Shayla Lloyd, 18, a pre-nursing freshman from Kittanning. “I live five minutes from here. Since I don’t have a driver’s license yet, it is easier for my mother to bring me here and drop me off and come back later in the day to pick me up. It’s not as much money for gas if we had to drive to Butler.”

Proximity and transportation savings also resonate with Courtney Bishop, who works 20 hours a week at a convenience store and doesn’t care to spend more than she must while pursuing her pre-nursing curriculum.

“I don’t have a lot of money for gas,” says Bishop, a freshman from Vandergrift. “It’s easier for me to drive six miles instead of 30.”

It was the vision of Dawn Kocher-Taylor, says O’Brien, that culminated in BC3 using Lenape Tech’s NexTier building, where BC3 holds six daytime courses on Mondays and Wednesdays, and seven on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Daytime classes that include courses such as Economics, English, General Psychology and College, Prep and Intermediate Algebra, run 85 minutes. Five evening classes – including Managerial Accounting, Anatomy and Physiology I and Research Writing – last three hours and 10 minutes.

“She was the catalyst in helping us get started,” O’Brien says of Kocher-Taylor, the former Executive Director of Lenape Tech.

Since then, he credits “great marketing and advertisement, great support from Lenape Tech, convenience of the location and a great staff that makes students feel welcome and confident.”

More courses possible next semester

Zapp says BC3 may increase the number of courses to 24 or 25 in the spring at the Armstrong County site, where, O’Brien says, students can earn Associate Degrees in General Studies, Business Administration and Psychology.

“Each semester we intend to expand our offerings and possibly programs,” O’Brien says. “We hope to attract enough students at our current site that would force us to look at opening up our own building like we have done in Cranberry, Brockway, New Castle and Hermitage. Numbers would dictate that move. Right now, our site and partnership with Lenape Tech has been outstanding and a fantastic start to making higher education accessible and affordable to the residents of Armstrong County.”

While BC3’s fast-growing site, Armstrong remains the smallest with 81 students. It joins BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle, Lawrence County, which has 391 students; BC3 @ Cranberry in Cranberry Township, Butler County, which has 317; BC3 @ LindenPointe, in Hermitage, Mercer County, which has 249; and BC3 @ Brockway, in Jefferson County, which has 88. The Brockway site also serves Elk, Clarion and Clearfield counties.

Outreach includes high school students

BC3’s commitment in Ford City extends to the Armstrong School District, where 20 students this fall are enrolled in a College Within the High School program and taking a college-level psychology course that meets in the high school library for three hours each Thursday.

Owen Zablocki, a senior at Armstrong Junior-Senior High who plans to become a medical technician, is earning college credits before stepping foot on campus.

“I have enjoyed it,” the Ford City resident says. “It’s a long period of time (to meet), but it is definitely worth it. BC3 is preparing me very well because they are offering this so we can see what we would be looking forward to after graduation.”

BC3, says Jim Rummel, Principal at Armstrong Junior-Senior High, is a “wonderful option for a lot of our students. It’s great that we have it here, and great that there is a growth. It keeps kids close to home for a year or two, and because of its affordability. Kids get courses they need.”

And often, a well-deserved break.

An hour after she finishes practice outside Zapp’s office window for the 10-team, double-elimination cornhole tournament, Katie Hill echoes O’Brien: The Freeport resident says she feels welcome and confident at BC3 @ Armstrong.

“You feel like you know everyone,” the biological sciences major says. “It makes you comfortable to walk up to someone and ask for help if you need it. Large schools have giant lecture halls and you don’t know a lot of people. You might be afraid to ask someone for help.”

Photo Caption:

Sam Biesinger, a freshman from Ford City who is studying electronics at BC3 @ Armstrong, throws a cornhole bag Wednesday, September 21, 2016, outside the NexTier Adult Learning Center that serves as Butler County Community College's latest satellite.