



Butler County Community College has been named a Military Friendly institution for the fifth consecutive year by Victory Media. From left, Alyssa Vestal, of Greenville, who served in the Marines, attended BC3 @ LindenPointe in Hermitage and earned two associate degrees as part of the Class of 2017; Ben Knight, of Butler, a former Army sergeant who is pursuing an associate degree on BC3's main campus; Dennis Christie, president, Butler County American Legion Riders; Al Worsley, commander, American Legion Post 778, Lyndora; and Jim Dittmer, first vice commander, American Legion Post 117, Butler.

BC3 earns Military Friendly designation for fifth year in row

“We communicate with our veterans. At some other schools, they are just another number,” coordinator says

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Stella Smith is Butler County Community College's associate director of financial aid, veterans coordinator and adviser to the school's Student Veterans Association.

(Butler, PA) For the fifth consecutive year, Butler County Community College has been designated a Military Friendly institution by Victory Media, a success BC3's veterans coordinator attributes to the school's consistent outreach to servicemen and women pursuing higher education and one applauded by area veterans organizations.

Continued recognition by Victory Media, the Moon Township publisher of G.I. Jobs magazine and one that connects the military community with companies and schools, acknowledges BC3's diligence on behalf of its student-veterans, Stella Smith said.

“We have continued, and we haven't slacked,” said Smith, BC3's associate director of financial aid and who as veterans coordinator staffs a position at the school dedicated to military students. “We have gotten only more military friendly since the first designation.”

BC3 created a veterans-only lounge in 2013, the year before its first Military Friendly designation. In the years since, BC3 reconstituted its Student Veterans Association, and implemented early class registration and a separate orientation for veterans. BC3 also created a Green Zone of 24 administrators trained to address the unique circumstances a student-veteran may face; offered movie nights on Fridays and reserved a separate study room for student-veterans during finals week.

A Military Friendly designation considers “everything from orientation programs just for veterans and their families to veterans affairs officials who concentrate on processing GI Bill benefits, to veterans centers on campus to all the different things institutions do in bending over backwards to accommodate the military population,” said Dan Fazio, managing editor, Victory Media. “That’s what makes these institutions military friendly, and not just being content to rest on their laurels, but making an effort to improve these programs year after year.” BC3’s 2016 showing of “Project 22” on campus was enlightening for the student body, Smith said.

The April 2015 documentary chronicled two former combat soldiers raising awareness of veteran suicides. Three BC3 classes viewed a showing of the film, as did BC3’s student-veterans. Two student-veterans sought counseling at VA Butler Healthcare after viewing the movie, Smith said. The documentary will be shown again Sept. 22 on campus. BC3 will show a similar documentary, on females who endured sexual trauma in the military, once it has been released, Smith said.

“It’s a very diverse population”

Nearly 160 student-veterans attended BC3 in the spring 2017 semester, according to Smith, including 90 on main campus in Butler Township; nine at BC3 @ Armstrong in Ford City; four at BC3 @ Cranberry in Cranberry Township; 14 at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle; and 12 at BC3 @ LindenPointe in Hermitage.

Nearly 55 percent of BC3’s student-veterans are age 30 or older. About 75 percent are male. “It’s a very diverse population that has a lot of intricacies and depth, and things a lot of people don’t think of as far as family and different deployments,” said Ben Knight, 32, of Butler, is president of BC3’s Student Veterans Association. Knight served seven years in the Army, and was deployed three times to Iraq.

Knight is a former sergeant who is pursuing an associate of applied science degree in massage therapy management option.

“The military is the melting pot of the country,” Knight said. “It’s a good thing to be honored as a military friendly institution. It requires a lot of work and a lot more one-on-one than with the typical student because of age, and readjusting to civilian life along with going to school. You have the extra aspect with financial aid and the GI Bill and a lot of back-and-forth with staff. This (recognition) confirms from an outside perspective what I already know about BC3.”

Like Knight, roughly 50 percent of BC3's student-veterans attend college full-time.

The fifth consecutive Military Friendly designation "means that BC3 is doing something right for the veterans in our community," said Dennis Christie, president of the Butler County American Legion Riders, whose 100-mile July motorcycle event supports the group's mission of reaching a \$10,000 endowment level with the BC3 Education Foundation Inc. and make its Veterans Incentive Scholarship perpetual.

"It's a brotherhood"

BC3 is also the only college or university whose student-veterans have access to emergency funds from endowed accounts created by American Legion Post 778, Lyndora, and by American Legion Post 117, Butler.

"It's a brotherhood," Smith said. "They didn't get a lot of help when they returned, and they went through the same things. They are more aware of it, so they want to help their fellow veterans come through it as best they can. They know that there is a transition, that it's tough to come back to civilian life."

BC3, said Jim Dittmer, first vice commander of American Legion Post 117, Butler, "is treating veterans with the respect due and helping them in any way that it can. It can be a rough life once you get out of active duty, to come back home and between your family and your job and all of your other responsibilities, go back to school. BC3 is doing a lot for them and making their lives a little easier so that they can get ahead in life."

For a military organization such as his, Al Worsley said, BC3's fifth Military Friendly designation "means everything."

"That is our mission, to help our veterans with everything we can," the commander of American Legion Post 778 said. "BC3 is sending a consistent message, and to me it shows that BC3's plan is to continue to that effort."

Those organizations share in BC3's Military Friendly designation, Smith said.

"Without their funding and their support," she said, "we would not be able to do some of the things that we do."

Coordinator: Student-veterans not "just another number" at BC3

Twenty-six student-veterans graduated in BC3's Class of 2017, the most in three years, according to Amy Pignatore, director of records and registration. Among them, Alyssa Vestal, 26, of Greenville, who served four years in the Marines, attended BC3 @ LindenPointe in Hermitage and earned associate degrees in business administration and general studies.

Vestal lauds Smith's work in helping her application for GI Bill benefits.

"She pretty much did it all," Vestal said of Smith. "I filled out one paper and she set it all up for me. That just made it so much easier. That made for less things that I had to worry about, like actually calling the VA and dealing with it myself. She made it so much easier."

Smith said she has spoken with every student-veteran who is receiving GI Bill benefits at BC3.

"That makes BC3 unique," she said. "I have had other veterans who have gone off to other schools and they don't know the process there. There is not communication. We communicate with our veterans. At some other schools, they are just another number. 'Give me your paperwork. Fill out a card.' Whereas at BC3, they are people. They are human."

Christie said he too feels a sense of pride in BC3's accomplishment.

"BC3 is doing an excellent job," he said. "And I think that is great."