

Number of BC3 student-veterans to graduate highest in 3 years

Marine mom with 3-year-old daughter receives 2 degrees while expecting 2nd child

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(Hermitage, PA) While Alyssa Vestal was among the 26 Butler County Community College student-veterans who graduated on Wednesday night, none could claim doing so while also raising a 3-year-old daughter, being pregnant with her second child and leaving the school's 49th commencement exercises with two associate degrees.

"She has a lot of dedication and commitment, to getting everything done and being a mom at the same time," said Vestal's husband, Danial. "She inspired me to not be so lazy and pick up the pace."

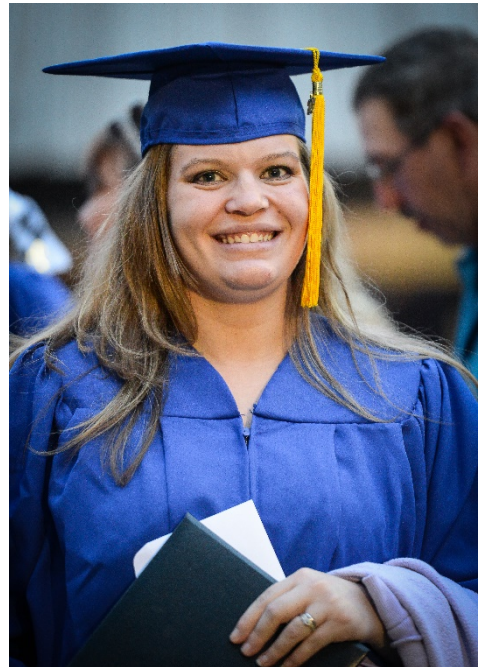
Vestal, 26, of Greenville, became a corporal during her four years of active duty in the Marines. The 2009 graduate of Greenville Junior-Senior High School attained an associate of science degree in business administration and an associate of arts degree in general studies earned through programs at BC3 @ LindenPointe in Hermitage.

"This was difficult," Vestal said with a laugh. "Very, very difficult. But my husband helped out so much. When he would come home from work I would say, 'Hey, can you sit with the baby?' so I could do some homework and study."

From there, she would try to seclude herself in a bedroom with her books, but her daughter "would barge in, start jumping on the bed and saying, 'Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!'"

"A can-do attitude"

It comes as no surprise to BC3 @ LindenPointe Director John Suesser that Vestal was able to handle the distractions and succeed – all while expecting the birth of another child in August.



Alyssa Vestal, 26, of Greenville, was one of 26 student-veterans in BC3's Class of 2017. Vestal, 26, who served four years in the Marines, is the mother a 3-year-old daughter and is expecting her second child in August. She was the only student-veteran in the Class of 2017 to earn two degrees. Vestal, who attended BC3 @ LindenPointe in Hermitage, is shown after BC3's 49th annual commencement on Wednesday night.

“Alyssa has been trained through the military to address multi-tasking, self-discipline and time-management,” Suesser said. “Those are skills that all carry over into civilian life. She has incorporated these attributes and handles the stress factors with a can-do attitude.”

The 26 student-veterans graduating from BC3 on Wednesday night were the most in three years, according to Amy Pignatore, BC3’s director of records and registration. Sixteen were graduated in May 2015 and 15 in May 2016, she said.

Vestal said she knew of at least 11 student-veterans at BC3 @ LindenPointe through her work with the off-campus site’s beautification and gardening club, which potted flowers for each on Veterans Day.

At BC3 @ LindenPointe, “Almost every instructor has noticed an increase in the number of student-veterans who are in their classrooms,” Suesser said.

BC3’s personal attention appealing

About 150 student-veterans were enrolled at BC3 during the spring semester, according to Stella Smith, BC3’s associate director of financial aid. Smith also serves as adviser of the college’s Student Veterans Association and as its veterans coordinator.

Vestal’s two maternal uncles, a maternal great uncle and a maternal great aunt served in the Navy; her maternal grandfather, in the Air Force. Her paternal grandfather served in the Army, as did her older brother.

“But I chose the Marines,” she said, “because none of them did. It seemed like more of a challenge.”

BC3 @ LindenPointe’s smaller class sizes and personal attention from instructors appealed to Vestal.

“It was easier to get one-on-one time with them to ask questions,” she said, “and really understand what they were teaching. They had more time to actually sit there and explain things to you instead of having hundreds of students in a classroom and feeling rushed.”

BC3 has a student-to-faculty ratio of 18:1. It has also been named a Military Friendly institution for four consecutive years by Victory Media, a veteran-owned business in Coraopolis.

The designation, said Dan Fazio, managing editor of Victory Media, means providing the best practices, services and programs to student-veterans.

“That might include having a full-time staff member devoted strictly to veterans affairs, helping incoming students figure out their G.I. benefits, what they are entitled to and how to jump through the hoops,” said Fazio, a 1991 graduate of BC3.

“It might also mean having a center on campus where student-veterans can hang out and network with each other or offering orientation just for student-veterans coming in.”

“Understanding personnel” in BC3 veterans office

BC3 in 2013 created a lounge for student-veterans and offers to them early registration. The college also conducts a new student-veteran briefing before the fall semester to foster networking, promote resources on campus and in the community.

“BC3’s student-veterans office is staffed with compassionate and understanding personnel” who assist those who are returning to college after military service or are “just beginning their educational journey,” Suesser said.

In June, BC3 created its Green Zone. The program makes BC3 an increasingly supportive environment for student-veterans and service members by educating faculty and staff on the military experience, challenges students attending BC3 face when transitioning from military service to civilian life and to college, and resources and basic resource referral techniques.

Nearly 55 percent of BC3’s student-veterans are age 30 or older. About 75 percent are male. Roughly 50 percent attend BC3 full-time.

On standby after Japanese tsunami

Vestal was an administrator and casualty extractor member of the Marines’ Chemical Biological Incident Response Force in Indian Head, Md.

“We would be the ones who would get into full chemical gear and go down range in contaminated areas and look for victims and bring them to the decontamination section to seek further medical attention,” Vestal said.

She was ready to be deployed to Japan in April 2011 after a tsunami damaged a nuclear reactor. “Just in case the reactors had a meltdown,” she said.

“Fortunately, they did not.”

Today she seeks a position as an assistant to a chief executive officer.

“I knew if I got a degree in business administration it would make me even more appealing to companies,” Vestal said. “Even though I have the military administration background and the administration experience, I just wanted to make my resume even more impressive.”

Her husband, Danial, himself a veteran of the Marines, said he could not be more proud of his wife.

“The fact that she was able to double-major and accomplish everything she did ... she just has a very strong spirit to her,” he said. “To me that just means everything in the world.”

BC3 @ LindenPointe’s credits in business administration, criminology, early childhood education, general studies, physical education-sports management option, psychology, secondary education and social work can be transferred toward bachelor’s degrees at public, private and online four-year colleges and universities.

Additionally, students who complete a BC3 @ LindenPointe degree in business administration, criminology, early childhood education, psychology and social work can transfer with junior standing to any Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education institution, such as Clarion, Edinboro, Slippery Rock and Edinboro universities of Pennsylvania.

Students can also take pre-nursing courses at BC3 @ LindenPointe and finish their degree at BC3’s main campus.

In addition to its main campus and BC3 @ LindenPointe, BC3’s other sites are located in Brockway, Cranberry Township, Ford City and New Castle.