

# BC3's adult literacy program to graduate second-highest number with diplomas since 2010

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Ron Miller, left, of Butler Township, a volunteer with Butler County Community College's high school equivalency diploma program, works with a student at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center, Butler, on Tuesday, June 19, 2018. BC3 on Thursday night will graduate 49 students who in the previous year earned a high school equivalency diploma through the college's adult literacy program.

(Butler, PA) Alyssa Eckenrode thrusts fists into the air in excitement and glances skyward, her words cresting atop a wave of laughter.

"I am just so happy," she said.

Eckenrode, 28, of Butler, a new student in Butler County Community College's adult literacy program, had just passed a practice test in social studies in pursuit of a high school equivalency

diploma on her first attempt, and evidence of her newfound confidence swept through Rhiannon Baron's second-floor classroom at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center.

"I was really, honestly, afraid that I was going to fail," Eckenrode said. "Passing it with flying colors makes me so excited and happy."

Eckenrode is among the 185 students in Butler and Mercer counties enrolled in BC3's high school equivalency program, which Thursday night will graduate an eight-year high of 49 participants who in the 2017-18 fiscal year earned diplomas.

Commencement exercises for those receiving diplomas begin at 7 p.m. in Succop Theater on BC3's main campus and recognize the perseverance of 37 students from Butler County and 12 from Mercer County – where BC3 instructors also conduct year-round courses in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies to prepare participants to be tested.



Student Alyssa Eckenrode, 28, of Butler, reviews mathematics materials as part of Butler County Community College's high school equivalency diploma program at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center, Butler, on Tuesday, June 19, 2018. BC3 on Thursday night will graduate 49 students who in the previous year earned a high school equivalency diploma through the college's adult literacy program.

## "I am so satisfied"

BC3 high school equivalency program students such as Eckenrode can take practice tests at sites in which the college conducts courses. Official high school equivalency tests that, if passed, result in a diploma must be taken at certified sites, such as Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, where Liam Crowley on June 19 was successful in his final two examinations, in mathematics and in science.

"I am so satisfied," said Crowley, 20, of Butler. "I was very, very satisfied. But I was just thinking, 'Oh, my gosh. What if? What if? What if something bad happened and I have to go through another month?' I am really happy that it all worked out for me and I got my diploma now. It will just make it easier for me in the long run."

His success will also remove what Baron calls "wearing a red letter. A big red letter A on your shirt. Look at me. Everyone else around me has a high school equivalency diploma or a high school diploma.

"Students feel like they stick out in the world, because they feel that pressure, and as they get older, that pressure gets harder and harder to overcome because they know that they have never

completed that,” said Baron, who has been instructing high school equivalency courses at BC3 for two years.

“Society says that you need to get your high school diploma. I feel that from the students that I have had, they just constantly feel pressure that they never received that. When that pressure is lifted, they are like a totally different person. They just feel like, ‘Wow, this is amazing.’”



### 300 get diplomas through BC3 in 8 years

A graduation ceremony at BC3 for those receiving high school equivalency diplomas began in 2006, said Barb Gade, who as grant director of BC3’s adult literacy program is buoyed by the expressions of those students she sees crossing the stage in black gowns and mortarboards with golden tassels.

Student Liam Crowley, of Butler, is shown Tuesday, June 19, 2018, during his final Butler County Community College high school equivalency diploma program class at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center, Butler, on Tuesday, June 19, 2018. Crowley passed his final two examinations later in the day to earn his high school equivalency diploma. BC3 on Thursday night will graduate 49 students who in the previous year earned a high school equivalency diploma through the college’s adult literacy program.

“That sense of pride, and the opening of the vision of what they can do with their life,” Gade said, “that’s the coolest part. That is why I am here. I love seeing that open to students.”

Nearly 300 students, some as senior as 72 years of age, have received diplomas through BC3’s high school equivalency program since 2010, Gade said.

The reasons are many for those who did not complete a diploma while in high school, she said.

“Sometimes life just gets in your way,” Gade said. “Each person has his own story as to why it was not done, why it was not accomplished in the traditional manner.”

### Up to 20% go on to colleges or universities

Crowley, 20, arrived in December at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center, one of eight Butler County sites at which BC3 conducts high school equivalency courses. Crowley dropped out of high school as a sophomore, envisioned a career as a fire performer and planned to resume his education through a cyberschool.

“I didn’t have the determination or the care to actually follow through with my classes,” Crowley said. “I found out the repercussions as I got older. I could not get a realistic job to live off of without a diploma.”

Crowley, who since December had passed high school equivalency tests in language arts and in social studies, worked with Baron before taking examinations June 19 in mathematics and in science at Slippery Rock University, which with the Armstrong Center for Community Learning is a regional certified diploma testing center.

The next morning, Crowley received an email.

“I passed everything,” he said.

Crowley said he is now considering attending college to study professions in the healthcare or graphic design fields.

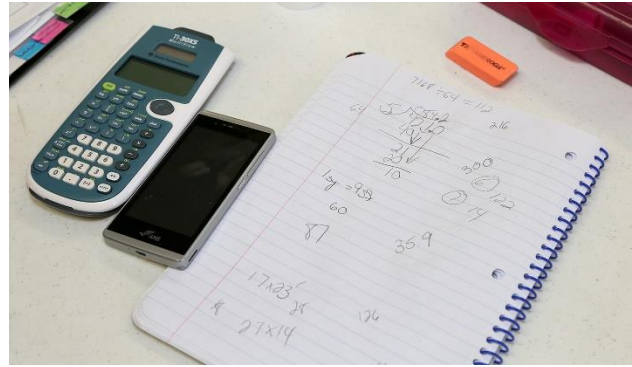
Up to 20 percent of students who receive diplomas resulting from attending BC3’s high school equivalency program pursue degrees at a college or university, Gade said.

“I am very proud of myself,” Crowley said. “I am the kind of person that whenever I accomplish my goals, they are not as satisfying as I want them to be. I always want more. I feel good about it, but I want more. It was something I should have been able to do years ago. I just needed to apply myself and get it done.”

## Bullying among factors for dropping out

Twelve percent of U.S. adults age 25 or older do not hold at least a high school diploma, according the U.S. Census Bureau, a statistic mirrored in Mercer County. BC3 this fall will offer adult literacy courses in Mercer County at BC3 @ LindenPointe, Hermitage; at the Grove City Education Center for Adults; at the Mercer County CareerLink, Sharon; at Prince of Peace Center, Farrell; at Hempfield Elementary School, Greenville; and at the Mercer County Jail, Mercer.

Eckenrode and Maria Diaz are currently among what the Census Bureau reports as 7 percent of Butler County residents age 25 or older who do not hold at least a high school diploma. The women enrolled in BC3’s high school equivalency program in May.



A student’s calculator and notebook are seen Tuesday, June 19, 2018, at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center, Butler, as part of Butler County Community College’s high school equivalency diploma program. BC3 on Thursday night will graduate 49 students who in the previous year earned a high school equivalency diploma through the college’s adult literacy program.

“I feel like I could have done more and I have wanted my diploma for years,” said Eckenrode, who cites bullying as a factor in her decision to halt her education in her senior year. “I should have stayed in high school. And now I feel like I am just that loser kid that everyone pushed around in high school. And I failed. And I dropped out.

“But I am here now.”

As is Diaz, 31, a mother of four who as a teenager completed her senior year coursework at Harmony High School in St. Cloud, Fla., but did not pass the state-mandated assessment test in reading necessary to receive a diploma.

“I would have had to retake the reading portion of it,” Diaz said. “I never did.”



Student Maria Diaz, 31, of Butler, smiles during Butler County Community College’s high school equivalency diploma program at the First United Methodist Church Ministry Center, Butler, on Tuesday, June 19, 2018. BC3 on Thursday night will graduate 49 students who in the previous year earned a high school equivalency diploma through the college’s adult literacy program.

## BC3 employees donate to fund tests

Each envisions brighter career prospects once they successfully take the official high school equivalency tests following instruction by Baron.

“No one will hire me,” Eckenrode said. “They say, ‘Come back when you get your diploma.’”

“You are stuck basically working dead-end jobs,” Diaz said. “Jobs you would take only because you had to, not because you would want to. No one wants to be flipping burgers the rest of their life. That is not your long-term goal. It wasn’t for me.”

Students who attain their high school equivalency diplomas following her coursework “usually get a better job,” Baron said. “There are pretty decent jobs out there that they can live off of if they were to spread themselves out a little bit more.”

The \$120 total cost of taking official high school equivalency tests in language arts, mathematics, science and social science – “essentially three years’ worth of knowledge,” Gade said – is funded by BC3 employees through their financial gifts to the BC3 Education Foundation Inc. and designated to benefit the college’s adult literacy program.

“It is really, really helpful,” Eckenrode said, “because I don’t have a job. I take care of my mom. I take care of my fiancé.”

More and more students have benefited in not only receiving a “great education at BC3,” said Lynn Ismail, a staff accountant with the BC3 Education Foundation, “but also in having access to foundation funds by way of the high school equivalency application test fee.”

Carla Schoentag, student facilitator in BC3’s KEYS program, said she donates to adult literacy to help students afford the official high school equivalency examinations.

“Many students who do not have their diploma are working jobs for minimum wage and really struggle with paying their bills,” Schoentag said. “The diploma test price can be a burden for them.”

## “I can do this now”

BC3 offers adult literacy courses in Butler County on its main campus and at Deshon Place at the VA Medical Complex, both in Butler Township; at BC3 @ Cranberry in Cranberry Township; at the Mars Area Public Library; and at the First United Methodist Ministry Center, the Pennsylvania CareerLink, the Blind Association of Butler and at the Butler County Prison, all in Butler.

BC3 this fall will offer adult literacy courses in Lawrence County at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing, the Lawrence County CareerLink and the Lawrence County Literacy Center, all in New Castle; and at Lincoln High School, Ellwood City.

Dr. Case Willoughby, BC3’s vice president for student affairs and enrollment management, will welcome graduates, students and guests Thursday night. Other scheduled speakers are Meg Ashenden, education coordinator and instructor in BC3’s adult literacy program; Arthur Stewart, an instructor at Summit Academy, Herman; and Rachel Zizzo, Quentin Thompson, August Mannas and Crowley, all of whom recently earned high school equivalency diplomas. Dr. Belinda Richardson, BC3’s vice president for academic affairs, will deliver the keynote address.

Graduates on Thursday night will have their photograph taken, and receive a certificate of achievement from state Rep. Brian Ellis, R-11, of Lyndora, which recognizes the students for “hard work and dedication in achieving an exceptional goal.”

The 49 students to graduate in 2018 with diplomas as a result of BC3’s high school equivalency courses are second only to the 59 who did so in 2014, Gade said, adding that the college’s program changes the outlook on life of its participants.

“You can see it as the students near the end of taking their last test,” she said. “At one point, a lot of times when they come to us, we will ask what their goals are. They say, ‘I want to get my diploma.’ That is their goal. And we try to bring them beyond that. As they near the end of the process, as they near that last test, they start to see doors opening for them. It is really neat to see that.

“They say, ‘I can go on and I can do this now. And I never thought I could.’”