

BC3 grads-turned-lifesavers give job search scoop to students

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(Butler, PA) Each day these Butler County Community College alumni set off in sharply creased sand-brown shirts and olive-green slacks for office spaces encompassing nearly 20,000 acres. Steering four-wheel-drive vehicles through the hemlocks, oaks, and pines, they are ready for what is hiding behind that next blind curve.

Will today bring another 598-pound black bear? Another lone boater stranded above the murky depths or struggling in whitewater rapids? Another injured hiker clinging to the slick shelf under a vertical rock face? Another guy parading through the August crowd wearing his pet boa constrictor?

“No two days are ever the same,” Justin Flick says. “Some people have jobs where it’s mundane, doing the same thing day after day after day. With this, there is always something different, different scenarios. You have to be prepared for anything.”

Jake Weiland and Flick, who characterize BC3’s Parks and Recreation Management program as crucial in their path to employment with the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, held the rapt attention of 24 students Monday morning inside Room 185 of BC3’s Business and Health Professions building, where Professor Chris Calhoun cautions his Intro to Parks and Recreation class to check their goals at the door.

“Give me a chance to show you all the different opportunities that exist in this profession,” Calhoun tells his freshmen.

One way of showing them is through the chart posted at the rear of his classroom, listing the 26 civil service jobs held by 1,400 regular and 1,600 seasonal workers with DCNR’s Bureau of State Parks – “typically the top employer” of those who complete BC3’s program, Calhoun says.

Another way is inviting Weiland and Flick to address one of the 11 courses in the Parks and Recreation Management program, consistently selected as a major by an average of 40 students pursuing an associate in applied science degree.

“They are not done,” Calhoun tells his class upon introducing Weiland and Flick, his former students at BC3. “They are continuing in this career setting.”



Weiland's trajectory began at Sizerville State Park, neighboring one of the most remote forests in Pennsylvania, through the pebbly shores of Presque Isle State Park along Lake Erie, through Moraine State Park in Portersville and its man-made Lake Arthur, to Point State Park in Pittsburgh, where he is about to manage that 36-acre photogenic shard of green between silver and mirrored skyscrapers.

Those wishing to follow his managerial footsteps should pursue a bachelor's degree after attaining an associate's degree, says Weiland, a 2002 BC3 graduate who furthered his education at Slippery Rock University.

To become a ranger, he says, complete Act 120 training, the certification also required to become a police officer in Pennsylvania. Take the civil service exam, regardless of your specific interest, if only to familiarize yourself with its format and content.

How, a student asks, do you study for the civil service exam?

"There's no way to study for it," Weiland says. "But after you take it, make notes of where you need improvement."

Adds Calhoun: "Write down or rattle off into your phone what you saw on the test. Compile that information into a file so you will have it for the next time. If you don't, you won't remember what you saw on the test four years later when you are taking it again."

The practical advice resounds with 20-year-old Jessica French, a Parks and Recreation Management major from Prospect, who listened intently to the presentation that spanned the academic requirements and certifications necessary for an entry-level position with DCNR to what students should expect after completing the civil service exam.

"It simplified the routes you can take," says French, who has worked the past two summers as a seasonal DCNR maintenance employee at Presque Isle State Park. "They told us this is what you need, this is where to go, and this is how to do it."

"The placement with BC3 is much greater than most," Weiland says. "The students take more of an interest in how the process works and how to apply."

At Presque Isle State Park, two of four managers had attended BC3, Weiland says, as did the operations manager at Cooks Forest State Park, the assistant manager at Laurel Hill State Park, and seven of eight applicants for a manager position at Oil Creek State Park.

That, he says, "is great. There is just so much potential in the student body. There are a lot of sharp students that (Calhoun) is grooming."

Calhoun, a native of Clinton County, was drawn in 1979 to BC3's Parks and Recreation Management program because he knew the Kettle Creek State Park superintendent – himself a BC3 graduate. Calhoun later attained his bachelor's and master's degrees from Slippery Rock University.

After serving as a law enforcement ranger with the National Park Service, he developed boating and water safety programs in Western Pennsylvania for the state Fish and Boat Commission, became the lead water rescue instructor trainer for the commonwealth, and – moments before introducing Weiland and Flick -- was fielding calls from fellow life-savers with the Pennsylvania Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team, who had been deployed to South Carolina in response to the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew.

“He has amazing experience working in multiple different agencies,” French says. “And he can teach you from experience, and not just from a book, which I respect a lot. I think he is the best teacher I have ever had in all of my schooling.”

Calhoun is an extremely hands-on professor, says Flick, a 2011 BC3 graduate and ranger at Moraine State Park, where he worked for four years with Weiland. After taking a first-aid class taught by Calhoun as an elective, “I was hooked,” Flick says. “I knew this is what I want to do.”

That means patrolling the 16,725 acres at Moraine State Park or the 2,550 at its satellite, McConnells Mill State Park. Chatting with anglers about what’s biting as he checks their fishing licenses. Regaling them with the story of the 2015 Lake Arthur Regatta guest with the boa constrictor, or of Weiland being called to view that 598-pound black bear taken by a Moraine State Park hunter in 2014.

That means being ready to assist any of the 1 million Moraine State Park visitors each year. Making sure his duty bag is filled with rain gear, extra clothing, a life vest and gloves. Responding to calls to find that lost hiker, aid that stranded boater, or tend to that fallen rock-climber.

While a DCNR ranger is hired for visitor service, Weiland says, “At a moment’s notice, they need to be trained and able to respond to an emergency situation. They have to be at the ready.

“Hopefully we can get to the patron before it escalates into a life-threatening condition.”

Photo Caption:

Jake Weiland, a graduate of Butler Area High School, Butler County Community College and Slippery Rock University, addresses an Intro to Parks and Recreation class on Monday, Oct. 10, 2016, at BC3's main campus in Butler. Weiland is manager of Point State Park in Pittsburgh.