

BC3 program to graduate 11-year high of 60 with high school equivalency diplomas

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Shadalyn A. Bookhamer, 21, of Butler, left, laughs with Rhiannon Baron, an instructor in Butler County Community College's adult literacy program, while preparing to take a practice exam Thursday, June 6, 2019, at the First United Methodist Ministry Center, Butler, in preparation for her General Education Development test. Bookhamer, a student in BC3's adult literacy program, passed her four General Education Development tests and received her high school equivalency diploma in June.

(Butler, PA) Butler County Community College's free adult literacy program July 24 will graduate 60 students from Butler and Mercer counties with high school equivalency diplomas, the most since at least the 2007-2008 fiscal year, the director of the 33-year-old program said.

Forty students attending BC3 adult literacy classes in Butler County and 20 in Mercer County passed General Education Development tests that measure proficiency in language arts, which includes reading and writing; and in mathematics, science and social studies between July 1, 2018, and June 30, Barb Gade said.

BC3's 14th commencement exercises for students having earned their high school equivalency diploma through the college's courses in Butler and Mercer counties will be held from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Succop Theater on BC3's main campus in Butler Township.

BC3 is the primary provider of Pennsylvania Department of Education-funded high school equivalency courses in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties. The \$640,000 yearly grant is scheduled to be renewed in three years, Gade said.

Twenty students in Lawrence County's program, newly funded through BC3, will also receive a high school equivalency diploma at a graduation ceremony at 6:30 p.m. July 17 in the auditorium of the Ben Franklin Early Learning Center in New Castle, said Gillian Maule, executive director of Adult Literacy Lawrence County.



Jacob Whitfield, left, studies with Tom Kasunic, a volunteer with Butler County Community College's adult literacy program, on Thursday, June 6, 2019, at the First United Methodist Ministry Center, Butler. Whitfield is pursuing a high school equivalency diploma through BC3's adult literacy program.

“I want to better myself”

Nearly 400 students, some as senior at 72 years of age, have received diplomas through BC3's adult literacy program in Butler and Mercer counties in the past 11 years, Gade said.

Shadalyn A. Bookhamer, of Butler, is among them.

The 21-year-old left Slippery Rock Area High School during her junior year in 2016.

“I took a year of cyber school and I couldn't keep up with it, so I ended up repeating the grade,” Bookhamer said. “When I went back into public school I had a hard time readjusting and had to repeat the year again, and decided I would drop out and get my GED.”

Bookhamer enrolled in BC3's adult literacy program “because I want to better myself and my opportunities” and, having earned her high school equivalency diploma in June, said she will likely attend BC3 to study computer-aided drafting and design.

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.

“Everything is possible”

Bryan Langston, 41, a native of Houston, left high school in Strathmore, Calif., in 1998 to help in his family's beekeeping business.

Before attending BC3's adult literacy program, Langston worked as a dishwasher, prep cook, pantry chef, armed security guard, bouncer and deliveryman and was “absolutely not” satisfied with his pay.



Bryan Langston, 41, of Prospect, earned a high school equivalency diploma in August through Butler County Community College's adult literacy program. He is shown Thursday, July 11, 2019, in the personal computer management lab at BC3, where he is pursuing an associate degree in computer information systems-computer forensics and security.

The Prospect resident received his high school equivalency diploma through BC3's program in August, and is now a BC3 student majoring in computer information systems-computer forensics and security.

“I am so glad I finished to show my kids everything is possible if you want it bad enough,” said Langston, a father of three, “and are willing to work to get it.”

Nearly 14,800 students – or 1.83 percent of 805,000 enrolled in grades 7-12 – dropped out of Pennsylvania public schools in the 2017-18 academic year, according to the state Department of Education.

About 6 percent of Butler County residents age 25 and older did not hold at least a high school diploma, according to a 2013-2017 U.S. Census Bureau survey. That percentage was 10 in Lawrence and Mercer counties.

BC3 workers, Rotary fund students' tests

BC3 high school equivalency program students can take free 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 or the Armstrong Center for Community Learning. The state Department of Education issues the diploma.

The cost of each of the four \$30 tests – in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies – is paid by the student or by designated gifts to the BC3 Education Foundation by BC3 employees. The Butler Rotary Literacy Luncheon in January raised \$12,000 to support the program.

BC3's adult literacy courses in Butler County are held 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 and at the Butler County Prison, all in Butler.

BC3 offers adult literacy courses in Mercer County through the Grove City Education Center for adults, which holds classes at its own site, and at BC3 @ LindenPointe, Hermitage; at the Mercer County CareerLink, Sharon; at Prince of Peace Center, Farrell; at Hempfield Elementary School, Greenville; and at the Mercer County Jail, Mercer.

BC3 provides adult literacy courses in Lawrence County through Adult Literacy Lawrence County at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing and the Lawrence County CareerLink, both in New Castle; and at Lincoln High School, Ellwood City.

Associate degree adds \$500K to earnings

The median average weekly salary in 2017 for those who have not achieved a high school diploma was \$520, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics. For those with a high school diploma but no college credits, \$712. For those with an associate degree, \$836.

"Not only will their earnings increase with a diploma, but their confidence as well," Gade said. "By getting their high school diploma, they now see new possibilities for their lives, whether it is to go on to post-secondary education and training, or getting a job that has a future."

Students who obtain an associate degree earn about \$500,000 more over the course of their lives than those with only a high school diploma, the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges reported in 2015.

Langston's next goal is to earn that associate degree.

"And then," he said, "make BC3 proud by getting a job that puts my degree to use while working continue my education to achieve true personal happiness."

Students of Summit Academy, Herman, who earned a high school equivalency diploma in the past fiscal year are also invited to march in BC3's graduation ceremony.