

BC3 students to advocate for spike in community college funds in state budget

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Butler County Community College students will advocate April 9 in Harrisburg for increased operational funding for Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges in the 2019-20 state budget. BC3 students scheduled to attend Lobby Day in the Capitol Rotunda are, from left, Josh Campbell and Victoria Lassinger, both of Butler; Noah Pollock, of Chicora; Matthew Reitler, of Cowansville, Armstrong County; and Claire Rodgers, of Saxonburg.

(Butler, PA) A community college is a “jewel” that provides a quality education to traditional-aged students and to those pursuing career changes, said Victoria Lassinger, one of five Butler County Community College students who Tuesday in Harrisburg will advocate for increased operational funding for the state’s 14 such jewels in Pennsylvania’s 2019-20 budget.

While Gov. Tom Wolf’s \$34 billion spending plan increases higher education funding by 1.1 percent to \$1.8 billion, it freezes operational disbursements at 2018-19 levels for the 14 Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges’ institutions at \$239 million.

“I have seen so many students benefit from community college, and an increase in funding would allow it to remain affordable for those straight out of high school and the older students who come back later in life,” said Lassinger, a BC3 registered nursing student. “It’s a jewel of the community and something that all people take pride in.”

Lassinger and Josh Campbell, both of Butler; Claire Rodgers, of Saxonburg; Noah Pollock, of Chicora; and Matthew Reitler, of Cowansville, Armstrong County; will be among hundreds of students statewide who will stress the importance of community colleges and advocate for additional funding during meetings with lawmakers and at a Lobby Day rally in the Capitol Rotunda.

Wolf’s 2018-19 budget proposal earmarked \$232 million in operational appropriations for community colleges. The final budget included an additional \$7 million resulting from discussions among parties that included lawmakers and administration officials, according to Jackie Hopp, executive assistant to the budget secretary.

As Pennsylvania's largest provider of postsecondary education and training, community colleges in 2017-18 enrolled in academic and workforce programs more than 300,000 students representing each of the state's 67 counties, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, which is seeking an additional \$18.5 million in operational funds in a spending plan due June 30.

That request includes \$10 million more to expand dual enrollment programs, which enable high school students to take college-level courses on community college campuses, online or within high schools; and \$8.5 million in additional operating costs. More than 17,000 high school students in Pennsylvania participated in those programs in 2017-18.

BC3's College Pathways and College Within the High School programs enrolled nearly 600 students in 2018-19, according to Erin Cioffi, BC3's assistant director of high school programming.

Community colleges "prepare us for our future"

"More students are going to community colleges because the price is fair," said Pollock, a business administration major, "and the quality is great."

Students could save up to \$20,000 on the cost of higher education by first enrolling in a community college, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges. BC3's tuition is the least expensive among 43 regional colleges and universities, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

"Community colleges are more affordable and provide a quality education," said Campbell, a general studies major. "The class sizes are smaller, so the teaching is more student-focused. It is a good transition from high school to college."

Smaller class sizes, Reitler, a business administration major, said of BC3's 18:1 student-to-faculty ratio, "lets you get to know your professors on a more personal level" and "makes learning more fun, and interesting."

Community colleges "do so much for those of us who attend them," added Rodgers, a history major. "They educate us, prepare us for our future, and give us valuable opportunities. If more funding were allocated to community colleges, the positive impact they have on the community would only increase."

BC3 receives funding from the state, Butler County and from tuition from students attending any of the college's six locations that serve eight counties.

BC3 president: Investment in community colleges pays dividends

State and Butler County taxpayers in 2016-17 paid \$17.6 million to support the operations of BC3, according to Emsi, an Idaho research company that has completed more than 1,800 impact studies for educational institutions since 2000. Taxpayers will gain in added tax revenue and public sector savings \$4.90 for every public dollar invested in BC3 over a student's worklife, according to the analysis.

"An investment into the commonwealth's community colleges is a wise investment," BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer said. "It helps keep tuition affordable, goes a long way in helping to ensure a quality education, and even applies toward assuring the highest quality in workforce development and public safety training. The return for Pennsylvania is immense."

As such, Lobby Day provides legislators an opportunity to appreciate the impact of community colleges, said Butler County Commissioner Kimberly D. Geyer, a 1984 BC3 graduate, BC3 trustee since 2011 and secretary of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges' board of directors.

"Lawmakers are able to have a better sense of the real-life journey of our students through face-to-face interaction," Geyer said. "Lobby Day creates a snapshot in time and allows others to see the significance of investing in our community colleges. Lawmakers get to see and hear first-hand the real return on their investment."

Lobby Day, Geyer added, "is a great opportunity for students to share their personal stories related to BC3 and how the accessible, affordable and quality education has made a difference in their lives, how it has prepared them for either higher education opportunities or immediate entrance into the workforce."

Community colleges offer high-quality education and workforce programs aligned with areas of critical workforce needs across the state, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges. The 14 institutions regularly consult with business partners – such as those representing the Shell chemical processing plant in Monaca – to develop programs to meet state and local workforce needs, while fueling Pennsylvania's economy. The colleges also educate firefighters, healthcare workers, welders and truck drivers, as well as offering much-needed training in other in-demand fields, according to the commission.

"Pennsylvania community colleges are ready to assist individuals who want to improve their lives by earning a certificate, enrolling in technical training or preparing for further education," said Elizabeth Bolden, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges. "The colleges are committed to increasing access to quality, affordable higher education in the commonwealth. We hope the General Assembly will support us in this mission by increasing funding for community colleges."

Rodgers and Reitler will be honored Monday in Harrisburg by the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges and Phi Theta Kappa, an international academic honor society, as selections to the 2019 All-Pennsylvania Academic Team. As selections, their continued studies will be funded by two-year full-tuition scholarships at any institution within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

