

BC3 students, trustee make pitch at capitol for increased community college funding

“The return on this investment will be difficult to match,” Butler attorney tells hundreds

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(Harrisburg, PA) Five students and a trustee from Butler County Community College on Tuesday advocated at the Capitol for increased operating and capital funds in the wake of Gov. Tom Wolf’s 2017-18 budget proposal for community colleges.

BC3 students Ashlyn Bennett, Kacie Brandenburg, Lucas Carroll, Lauren Denny and James Manning stood in unity with scores of students packing the marble steps of the Rotunda staircase as a show of support for community colleges – collectively, the largest provider of public higher education and workforce training in Pennsylvania.

Wolf in February announced a budget plan that keeps spending for Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges at the current \$232.1 million. June 30 is the deadline for the state Legislature and Wolf to pass a spending plan.

Prior to the rally, BC3 students stressed the affordability, accessibility and quality of education at community colleges to regional lawmakers such as state Reps. Brian Ellis, R-11, of Butler; Aaron Bernstine, R-10, of New Galilee; Chris Sainato, D-9, of New Castle; Jim Marshall, R-14, of Beaver Falls; and to state Sen. Scott Hutchinson, R-21, of Oil City.

“I really liked the fact that there are so many different people in so many different positions attending community college and it is helping them tremendously,” Brandenburg, who transferred to BC3 from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, said of her observations of students who attended the meeting.

“You are getting the same education as you would anywhere else for an affordable price with great teachers.”



BC3 students are shown during Lobby Day on Tuesday, April 4, 2017, at the Capitol in Harrisburg, where they stressed to lawmakers the affordability, accessibility and quality of education at PA community colleges. Left to Right: Lauren Denny, of Butler; Kacie Brandenburg, of Slippery Rock; Ashlyn Bennett, of Harrisville; Lucas Carroll, of Beaver; and James Manning, of Slippery Rock.

State rep: “You in this room are making the wise choice”

Students, Sainato said, are starting to “get it.”

“You are getting the same education for a third of the cost,” he told the BC3 students, adding that student loans are able to be garnished.

“That means you have to pay it back,” said Sainato, whose legislative district includes BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing. “They can take it out of your Social Security. You in this room are making the wise choice. When I hear about student debt reaching \$100,000 – that’s a house. You cannot walk away from it.”

Hutchinson, whose senatorial district includes BC3’s main campus and BC3 @ Cranberry, told BC3 students it was important “for us to make our case in support of you in the budget, how people are affected by (the budget), so we can do the best job we can advocating for community colleges.”

The audience of lawmakers in the library of the Ryan Legislative Office Building at the Capitol complex were focused on students’ concerns, Denny said.

That audience also included state Reps. Tedd Nesbit, R-8, of Grove City; Daryl Metcalfe, R-12, of Butler; Mark Longietti, D-7, of Hermitage; Robert Matzie, D-16, of Ambridge, and aides from the offices of state Sens. Elder Vogel, R-47, of New Sewickley Township, Beaver County; and Camera Bartolotta, R-46, of Monongahela.

“It was great that they took the time to meet with us,” Denny said. “They want to make sure our voices are heard.”

Pennsylvania’s community colleges choice of 327,000

The commonwealth’s community colleges – which served nearly 327,000 students from all 67 counties in the state last year --are currently funded below 2008-09 levels, even before accounting for inflation.

Among the featured speakers at the Rotunda were Tom Leary, president of Luzerne County Community College and board chair for the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges; state Rep. James R. Roebuck, D-188, Philadelphia, who serves as the Democratic chairman of the House Education Committee; and Butler attorney Joseph E. Kubit, a 1984 BC3 graduate and current trustee.

“Without increased investment in community colleges, expansion to underserved areas and implementing new programs to meet community needs will be very difficult,” Kubit, a Cabot resident, said in his address to hundreds.

In 2015-16, community colleges provided a foundation for more than 34,000 students who sought transfer to four-year institutions, 81 percent of those who remained in the state. Through WEDNetPA, the community colleges provided more than \$10 million in customized training for employers, and trained more than 18,000 workers. In the same school year, the colleges conferred more than 17,000 awards statewide – an 18 percent increase over the awards conferred in 2008-09.

“Increased state funding is crucial to maintaining the training and educational opportunities provided by Pennsylvania’s community colleges, ensuring that we can equip students with the educational and vocational skills necessary to meet the commonwealth’s needs in the future,” Kubit said.

“I urge Gov. Wolf’s administration, and the General Assembly, to increase state funding for community colleges. As history has borne out, the return on this investment will be difficult to match.”

The Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges contributed to this report.