

New BC3 Scholars Program offers opportunities to top Butler County students

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(Butler, PA) It's October 1, 2024 and 27-year-old Darienne Yates, Ph.D., is about to finish her shift at Millcreek Community Hospital in Erie. It's been a long Tuesday for the Butler County Community College alumna - not as long as those autumn days in 2016, spent selling jeans or waiting tables up to 35 hours a week while carrying 18 credits - spent advising physicians and surgeons about possible side effects of medications for pre- and post-operative patients.



She's looking forward to swapping out that white smock for her black leather jacket and riding her aging Kawasaki Ninja 250 home to her husband, children, and Tessa - the beagle-border collie mix who's the "love of my life."

Rewind to October 1, 2016, when Yates is a single 19-year-old freshman at BC3 and member of its inaugural Scholars Program, stoking the dream of attaining a fast-track doctorate in pharmacology by 2021 from Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine, landing that hospital job, and satisfying the curiosity of educators and administrators about how these first-time Scholars Program members will fare.

"We were talking about how interesting it will be in eight years, 10 years, to find out what these students managed to accomplish and being there on the ground floor because of BC3," Michael Dittman says of his conversation with BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer about the first Scholars Program members.

Dittman, Assistant Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences, is the Adviser of the Scholars Program that includes Yates, Jen Kriess, and six other freshmen, whose majors span civil engineering, psychology, biology, and business administration.

They are recipients of the BC3 President's Scholarship, a full-tuition award presented annually to students in the top 10 percent of their graduating class at any of Butler County's eight public high schools - Butler, Freeport, Karns City, Knoch, Mars, Moniteau, Seneca Valley, or Slippery Rock - and who enroll at BC3 the following semester. A cyber school student counted in those public schools' graduating classes is also eligible.

While the President's Scholarships predate the 31-year-old BC3 Education Foundation, Inc. that awards them, according to Executive Director Ruth Purcell, recipients are now automatically enrolled in the pilot Scholars Program that replaces an optional Honors Program that lacked structure.

"In the Honors Program, a student could elect to work with a faculty member and do a little bit of extra work, an extra project, or an extra paper for a class, and then if they got so many of those honors classes put together they could graduate as an honors student," Dittman said. "We had it for several years and I think only one person actually did it."

That, Dittman said, was the problem with the Honors Program.

"We do a great job of helping students who are academically unprepared," he said. "But we also wanted to do a great job of helping those students who were academically prepared."

The Scholars Program organizes and formalizes BC3's commitment to those students.

"Now, by tying it to the President's Scholarship, we can give them something," Dittman said.

Unrestricted foundation funds reimburse BC3 tuition for seventeen credits for up to four semesters in the Scholars Program, Purcell said, as long as the student maintains a 3.5 grade point average.

That may not be a problem for Yates, who graduated from Slippery Rock High School with a 4.0 average, ranked No. 13 in a class of 152, wanted to start her college education close to home, and was thrilled to learn the scholarship would ease the financial burden on the family she loves so dearly.

"For a long time I have been that girl who wanted to be the best at what she would do," said Yates, a biology major from Harrisville. "I have studied and taken on a lot of extra-curricular activities and held jobs. My parents have always told me to do the best you can do and it will pay off in life. I was really hoping I could get a scholarship that would help me pay for college because it not only affects me, it affects my parents as well."

One of the biggest advantages of grouping Scholars Program students together, Purcell said, "is that they know who each other are. They have a group right away to identify with. That has never happened before. These are top students. When you are in the top 10 percent of the bigger (Butler County public) schools, you are pretty academically talented. To know there are other students like you at BC3, to know who they are and to study with them, is a prime benefit."

Kriess agrees. The 18-year-old Butler Senior High School graduate from Renfrew, who is carrying 15 credits and working 20 hours a week as a customer service associate, said she has also found time to forge friendships with her fellow Scholars Program cohorts: Seth Queen, Kyle Bintrim, and Kylie Sheppeck, graduates of Butler Senior High School; William Franklin, of Freeport High School; Alisha Callender, of Karns City High School; Kaitlyn Turney, of Moniteau High School; and Yates.

“It’s a small group, and we’re all kind of close knit,” said Kriess, who finished with a 4.24 grade-point average at Butler Senior High School and ranked No. 24 in a graduating class of 524. “It helps starting at BC3 because a lot of us didn’t know many people there. That helps us. We feel more comfortable around each other.”

The first wave of Scholars Program members will take four classes together over four semesters at BC3. Currently, it’s College Writing I. In the spring, College Writing II. Next fall, an orientation class to an independent project and finally, in the spring of 2018, the independent project. They also take classes with students who aren’t in the Scholars Program.

The material, the objectives, and the base assignments are exactly the same as they are in BC3’s other College Writing I courses, Dittman said. Like their contemporaries, Scholars Program students are reading “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” a 1941 nonfiction book about tenant farmers in the 1930s written by James Agee and illustrated by photographer Walker Evans.

“There are lots of photographs in it,” Dittman said. “With eight students in the Scholars Program class, we are able to explore such topics as, ‘Where else do we see things like this?’”

One place will be the Carnegie Museum of Art, where Scholars Program students plan to view photographs taken by Teenie Harris that document African-American life in Pittsburgh about 10 years after Agee’s book was published.

“Scholars get these enrichment activities so they can delve deeper into a subject,” Dittman said.

Dittman’s Scholars Program class just finished discussions on the book and an essay is due, Kriess said.

“One question is about Evans and his photographs and what we think is the correlation between the photographs and the text - if there is any - and how we think the photos relate and if they don’t,” Kriess said. “It pushes us to think and to realize there is really no right or wrong answer when interpreting text. It is all up to the reader’s perspective. That kind of relates to the real world.”

The third semester for the Scholars Program students is “where it gets interesting,” Dittman said.

They will take, as a group, a course designed to be an orientation for their Spring 2018 requirement, the independent study project.

“In their fourth semester, they have to complete a project with a mentor from faculty or industry on a topic of their choice and present it to the campus or community,” Dittman said. Students in the orientation class will learn how to write a proposal, give a presentation, find a mentor, and develop networking skills.

“Preparation,” Dittman said, “for the project.”

The Scholars Committee must approve both the student's proposal for the independent study project, and later, the faculty member or industry representative who will act as that student's mentor.

Unlike an internship, the independent study project is "self-directed," Dittman said. "It is up to the student to designate what they want their end result to be and how they are going to get there."

There, for Kriess, who chose BC3 over Robert Morris University and the University of Pittsburgh to pursue her business administration studies, will eventually be working as a manager.

"Without the financial crisis that many who choose bigger schools tend to see," she said.

While she is unsure where she would like to be that manager, or in what industry, she is assured – as is Yates, the future pharmacologist – that BC3 and its Scholars Program will help her to realize her dreams.

"It will open up a lot of opportunities," Kriess said.

Photo Caption: BC3 Assistant Professor Michael Dittman holds an open discussion with his Writing I class in the Humanities and Social Sciences Building on BC3's main campus.