

Report: BC3 No. 1 again with lowest tuition, highest salary-to-cost ratio

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Butler County Community College registered nursing students Ashley Bailey, left, Cranberry Township; Katie Speranza, Butler; and Marissa Marsh, Herman; are shown Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2019, in BC3's nursing skills lab. For a second consecutive year, BC3 has been recognized as offering the most affordable tuition and having the highest salary-to-cost ratio among more than 40 regional colleges and universities, according to U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard data analyzed and published by the Pittsburgh Business Times.

(Butler, PA) For the second consecutive year, Butler County Community College, with six locations in eight counties, has been recognized as offering the most affordable tuition and having the highest salary-to-cost ratio among more than 40 regional colleges and universities, according to U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard data analyzed and published by the Pittsburgh Business Times.

BC3's average net annual price of \$4,727 was the lowest among 43 public and private institutions in western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio and West Virginia, and was most closely followed by Westmoreland County Community College at \$7,993. The most affordable tuition among five regional Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities was \$14,612; and among 21 regional private institutions, \$18,117.

BC3's salary-to-cost ratio – a measurement of graduates' salaries 10 years after commencement for every dollar a student pays to attend the institution – was the highest at 7.45, and was most closely followed by West Virginia University at 4.79. The highest salary-to-cost ratio among five regional Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities was 2.61; and among the 21 private institutions, 2.81.

BC3 in 2017 topped 41 other institutions in average net annual price and salary-to-cost ratio.

The findings illustrate the importance of a student's return on investment, said Dr. Nick Neupauer, BC3's president.

“With the average debt load exceeding \$36,000, it is incredibly important for students and parents to consider what a degree costs, the starting wage in a particular field, and factor in debt load,” Neupauer said. “You also have to consider that for many jobs, the appropriate terminal degree isn't the master's or the bachelor's. It's the associate degree.”

Pennsylvania college students owe an average of \$36,193 in student-loan debt, the highest in the nation, LendEdu reported Aug. 8.

Seventy-five percent of BC3 graduates are debt-free. Additionally, the BC3 Education Foundation awards nearly \$200,000 in scholarships annually.

“There are an increasing number of students who utilize BC3 as part of a proactive plan tied to affordability, possibly graduating debt-free and the appropriate terminal degree,” Neupauer said. “We are seeing more and more of that.”



Josh Vargo, 21, of Cranberry Township, a student enrolled in Butler County Community College's engineering technology with CADD program, is shown Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2019, in BC3's manufacturing lab. “I believe in high school there should be some kind of reminder to students that the money you spend for college, you have to pay that back at some point,” Vargo said. “I realized it, and my dad helped me to realize it, but a lot of people don't have that guidance and they aren't able to see that community college is the way to go, especially with BC3, with its tuition and the great professors.”

BC3's Classes of 2017, with 585 graduates, and of 2018, with 578, have been its largest this century.

In addition to its main campus in Butler Township, BC3 has locations in Brockway, Cranberry Township, Ford City, Hermitage and New Castle.

“Community college is the way to go”

The average salary of a BC3 student 10 years after graduation is \$35,200 – an increase of \$1,500 from 2017 U.S. Department of Education data – and which Andrew Skero, who graduated debt-free from BC3 in 2017, said he already exceeds in his position as a drafting engineer.

“From my perspective, it is not a good financial decision to saddle myself with all this debt,” said Skero, 51, of Saxonburg, who earned an associate of applied science degree in engineering technology with CADD from BC3, where this spring he is taking an automation and robotics course.

“The return on investment is just not there in going to another college, where I may accumulate tens of thousands of dollars in debt.”

Drafters with an associate degree earned an average of \$54,170 in 2017, according to the most recent statistics available from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Josh Vargo, 21, of Cranberry Township, said he too will graduate debt-free from BC3 with an associate of applied science degree in engineering technology with CADD.

“I believe in high school there should be some kind of reminder to students that the money you spend for college, you have to pay that back at some point,” Vargo said. “I realized it, and my dad helped me to realize it, but a lot of people don't have that guidance and they aren't able to see that community college is the way to go, especially with BC3, with its tuition and the great professors.”

Marissa Marsh, 27, of Herman, is pursuing an associate of applied science degree in registered nursing from BC3. The profession, with an average salary of \$68,450, ranks No. 8 in the Top 20 paying positions for those with an associate degree, according to GetEducated.com.

“Anywhere you go to college, you want to get out of it what you pay for,” said Marsh, who owed \$26,000 in student-loan debt after earning a bachelor of science degree in an unrelated field in 2013 at a Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education institution before enrolling at BC3.

Marsh expects to graduate debt-free from BC3.

“If they are able to provide an awesome education, a quality education, and for an affordable cost, it is a win-win situation,” Marsh said. “You get the education and you can go out and work and not have that burden of thousands of dollars in loans when you are done.”

BC3, the No. 1 community college in Pennsylvania in back-to-back Schools.com rankings, offers 56 two-year career and transfer programs, and 21 certificate and workplace certificate programs in business, humanities and social science, health care and STEM. BC3's credits transfer to public, private and online four-year colleges and universities.