

Students tout advantages to BC3's distance education courses

Sept. 9, 2020



Chloe Fox, a student in Butler County Community College's physical therapist assistant program, is shown Sept. 4, 2020, at her home in Ellwood City and while taking a human anatomy and physiology II course delivered through remote instruction by BC3 faculty member Timothy McNulty.

(Butler, PA) Taking a course this fall through remote instruction at Butler County Community College is convenient for Chloe Fox, in addition to its format affording social distancing as part of BC3's first semester-long instructional plan developed in the wake of COVID-19's arrival in the United States.

"It saves me another drive to Butler," said Fox, 19, a first-year BC3 physical therapist assistant student from Ellwood City.

Fox's 13-credit schedule includes the human anatomy and physiology II course delivered in the remote instruction format and one she attends with workbooks, textbooks, notebooks and a laptop computer spread across her dining room table. She also takes three courses delivered in face-to-face class formats for which she travels nearly 30 miles to BC3's main campus four days a week.



Travis Domhoff, 19, of Freeport, is shown Sept. 9, 2020, on Butler County Community College's main campus in Butler Township. The first-year general studies student is taking a blended course this fall offered at BC3 @ Armstrong in Ford City, Armstrong County.

While Fox prefers face-to-face instruction – “physically being with my teachers and being able to ask questions right away” – her first remote-format class also has additional benefits, she said.

“Lectures are recorded, so I can re-launch one if I want to gain more knowledge” or if, she added, she thinks she missed an important point in class.

“That is an advantage,” said Ann McCandless, BC3's dean of educational technology. “If they've missed a class or need to review what an instructor said, they're able to go back and watch it.”

BC3 offers four formats this fall

BC3 limited the number of courses delivered in face-to-face formats to less than 50 percent of all 697 class sections as of mid-August as part of its health and safety plan for fall 2020.

The college's educators could indicate their preferred teaching format, and are instructing 38 percent of classes in face-to-face formats, 28 percent in remote, 20 percent in blended and 14 percent online for courses in BC3's 56 associate degree or 21 certificate or workplace certificate programs.

Among the differences that define remote, blended and online formats is the technology an instructor uses to deliver the course.

Remote formats use live or recorded lectures and require regular and substantive communication with students, as do blended formats, which add regularly scheduled onsite, face-to-face meetings. Remote and blended formats also allow for live web meetings with students or groups of students.

BC3's educational technology division provided all faculty with frequent training opportunities and support in various instructional technologies in March, when the college announced it would transition all face-to-face courses to remote instruction, McCandless said.

"Our educational technology division is phenomenal," said Dr. Belinda Richardson, BC3's vice president for academic affairs. "They are phenomenal in making sure our students, faculty and staff have what they need."



Sonny Ott, 18, of Saxonburg, a first-year general studies student at Butler County Community College, is shown Monday, Sept. 21, 2020, in a general psychology course delivered in a blended format this fall by BC3.

Prof: Remote format can benefit students

The remote-format opportunities he added to his face-to-face classes this fall can benefit students' learning, said Michael Dittman, an associate professor of humanities and social science at BC3.

"They can go back and watch it at any time," he said. "And from a faculty standpoint, it's nice when a student says, 'I don't understand X, and I know we went over it repeatedly in class.' And I can say, 'Did you check out minute four of the lecture? Because we talked about it there.' And after they go back and look at it, we can address what they don't understand in a more valuable and concise manner."

Social distancing measures are enforced to maintain a safe environment at all BC3 facilities. Additionally, face coverings, such as a face mask or face shield, must be worn in shared spaces inside BC3 facilities and must cover the nose and mouth. Face masks are preferred, but face shields are acceptable.

Like Fox, first-year student Sonny Ott said she too prefers face-to-face classes, but finds her remote-format courses allow her to "watch each lecture about three times."

"It's really helpful," said Ott, 18, of Saxonburg, a BC3 general studies student whose 13-credit schedule includes four remote-format courses, and psychology in a blended format. "Even if I did get everything, hearing the instructor say it again helps to retain it better."

Travis Domhoff, 19, of Freeport, is a first-year BC3 general studies student who is taking human anatomy and physiology I in a blended course offered at BC3 @ Armstrong in Ford City, Armstrong County.

“I still have the opportunity to go in person,” he said, “and I get a feel for the classroom and the teaching style.”

BC3’s five-week Fast Track 3 session begins Nov. 2. Courses will be held in an online class format.

BC3’s face-to-face and blended courses will transition to remote instruction Nov. 23 and for the following two weeks. Finals week begins Dec. 7. Examinations for face-to-face, blended and remote courses will be administered through the remote format. Finals in online classes will be held online.