

Butler Eagle

BC3 accommodates students with disabilities

Staff, officials make difference

Article published May 18, 2013

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BUTLER TWP — At Butler County Community College’s 45th commencement on Wednesday, student volunteers guided guests in wheelchairs to reserved seating and a sign-language interpreter flanked speakers on the stage.

The Distinguished Alumni Address was presented by 1996 BC3 graduate Robert Olszewski Jr., who has overcome cerebral palsy to become a motivational speaker and to serve the college as a student technical specialist.

Those observations served as reminders that at any given time 200 to 300 students with some disability attend BC3’s campuses,

Accommodating those students is the job of Greg Mason, who has been the disabilities coordinator at BC3 since 1999.

“My job is not to make things ‘easier’ for them but, instead, to provide them with reasonable accommodations that give them a chance to meet the same standards and qualifications as everyone else,” Mason said.

“My job is to make sure they have a fair opportunity to show us what they can do, and often that means I set up their accommodations — such as sign-language interpreting services — and then get out of the way and let the learning happen.

“It is the teachers and the students who are really doing all the heavy lifting. I am merely a facilitator and problem-solver.”

Mason is not the only person who works to ensure every BC3 student receives an equal opportunity, according to Justin Barnes of Butler, who graduated from BC3 on Wednesday.

Barnes, 23, who is deaf, credited school-provided sign-language interpreters, teachers, fellow students and other BC3 staff with helping him earn his associate degree in graphic design.

“When I needed to watch the interpreter and wasn’t able to take notes, other students would take notes for me or help me if I fell behind.

“The staff at the Cafe were great. At first, I would just point to the menu board, but then later I

would type a message on my phone and show them what I wanted. They were always smiling and very kind,” Barnes said via e-mail.

“There are many different staff members I met over the years. As I got to know a few of them, they would take time to talk when they saw me and I was able to read their lips. Or, the staff would wave as I walked past their offices. Some learned some sign language and would sign to me ‘How are you?’ or short phrases that they learned so they could sign to me when they saw me on campus.”

In addition to hiring interpreters for hearing-impaired students, BC3 works with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services, two state agencies that assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining employment.

Those agencies can provide services, software/hardware, transportation assistance, and other support for students with disabilities, Mason said.

The college also works with Learning Ally and with publishers to get audiobooks as downloadable computer files and alternate format textbooks.

While BC3 budgets for Americans With Disabilities Act-related costs, Mason said the price tag for sign-language interpreters, special software and personnel like academic aides for students with severe physical disabilities is rarely predictable.

For example, interpreters range from about \$45 per hour for a single interpreter to \$110 per hour, or higher, when a team of two interpreters is required for long or lecture-intensive classes or events, as well as meetings with academic advisers or financial aid staff.

The college receives no additional public funding to make accommodations for students with disabilities, but sometimes grants become available for items such as assistive hardware or software, Mason said.

Mason called rapid updates to assistive technology “the most dramatic and, at the same time, the most challenging to keep up with.” But the nature of the challenges encountered by the college, trying to adapt to students’ needs, also is ever-changing.

“When I first started working with students with disabilities, the focus was on those with visible disabilities: wheelchair-users, the deaf/hearing impaired, and the blind/visually-impaired. Students with learning disabilities and traumatic brain injuries were relatively uncommon, and Attention Deficit Disorder was also a fairly rarely diagnosed condition,” Mason said.

“Now, those once uncommon conditions are very common.

“Students with mental health disorders are also now more comfortable with disclosing their disabilities and with requesting supports than in the past. And individuals with autism spectrum disorders and Asperger’s syndrome are a growing population of students seeking accommodations.”

Mason said the toughest challenges to meet are those encountered by blind or visually-impaired students, especially in a world dominated by visual media.

“It is easy to forget that some people can’t ‘see’ what you mean on a website or a phone,” he said.

For information on the Americans With Disabilities Act, or the accommodations public entities must make to comply, visit www.ada.gov.