

BC3 president: Finish your degree

Jan. 9-10, 2017

(Harrisburg, PA) Butler County Community College will join Pennsylvania's other community colleges in examining strategies for degree completion among students, BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer said following a meeting with state Department of Education Secretary Pedro Rivera and Deputy Secretary Dr. Wil Del Pilar.

"Completion," Neupauer said of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges' Council of Presidents meeting, "was a big agenda item, as well as the transfer of credits and how community colleges work well with the other public institutions, the 14 (State System of Higher Education institutions) and the four state-related institutions."

Of BC3's 55 associate degree programs, 19 are considered to be transfer programs, which enroll 70 percent of BC3 students. BC3's 324 outgoing transfer agreements with Pennsylvania institutions are the second-most among the state's 14 community colleges, trailing only Harrisburg Area Community College with its 339.

"Most of the community colleges in the state have completion as part of the strategic plan," Neupauer said. "We haven't."

Increased completion rates for students in associate degree programs became part of the objectives in BC3's 2017-2022 "A Clear Path Forward" strategic plan.

Students completing a degree or credential at a community college will receive \$4.80 in future income for every \$1 he or she spends on education, according to the Community College Completion Corps.

Only 39.1 percent of first-time college students who enroll in a community college earn a credential from a two- or four-year institution within six years, according to the Community College Completion Corps. Students who complete an associate degree or certificate can expect to earn about \$500,000 more in a lifetime than those who hold only a high school diploma, the Community College Completion Corps reports.

"There has been a national initiative that goes back to the Obama administration, to set a completion goal by 2020," Neupauer said.

In his address to a joint session of Congress in February 2009, then-President Barack Obama said: "By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. ... So tonight I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. ... Every American will need to get more than a high school diploma."

The Obama administration “really focused on community colleges because Jill Biden was a community college faculty member,” Neupauer said of former Vice President Joe Biden’s wife. “What has happened since then is the number of states have moved toward completion goals.”

Among them is Tennessee, with its Tennessee Promise, which offered two years of tuition-free community or technical college to Tennessee high school graduates beginning with the Class of 2015.

According to its website, Tennessee Promise “is both a scholarship and mentoring program focused on increasing the number of students that attend college in our state. It provides students a last-dollar scholarship, meaning the scholarship will cover tuition and fees not covered by the Pell grant, the HOPE scholarship, or state student assistance funds. Students may use the scholarship at any of the state’s 13 community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology, or other eligible institution offering an associate degree program.”

“Their goal is that 55 percent of Tennessee’s population will have an academic credential,” Neupauer said. “An academic credential could be a 12-credit certificate all the way up to an associate degree and beyond. There are other states that are doing this. And from what Secretary Rivera and Dr. Del Pilar said, the Wolf administration wants to move toward some kind of completion goal.

“They are still in the planning process for what that eventual benchmark will be. But the significance of our community colleges helping along those lines was stressed.”

Noe Ortega in October replaced Del Pilar as deputy secretary.