

Senate Communications and Technology Committee Hearing, 10 a.m. Sept. 5, 2019
Penn State – Fayette Campus

Thank-you to Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill, Committee Chair. I appreciate this opportunity to testify.

Butler County Community College opened its doors with 431 students in September 1966 following the passage of The Community College Act of Pennsylvania (Act 484) on Aug. 24, 1963. Act 484 originally called for 28 community colleges across the commonwealth. Today, 14 community colleges serve more than 300,000 students annually and in all 67 Pennsylvania counties – not just students in our home counties. I'm proud to say that Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges comprise the largest sector of higher education in the commonwealth.

Please consider these data points from our 14 community colleges:

- In the 2017-2018 academic year, almost 30 percent, or 86,250 students, took at least one online course at a Pennsylvania community college. Each year the percentage of students taking online coursework grows, as evidenced by the 3 percent increase in online student enrollment at Pennsylvania community colleges within the past year.
- In the 2017-2018 academic year, approximately 28 percent of credits earned at Pennsylvania community colleges were through distance learning.
- Additionally, in the 2018-2019 academic year, Pennsylvania community colleges offered more than 150 programs that can be completed entirely online – without the student ever stepping foot on campus.
- Data from the American Community Survey prepared for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania suggests that individuals in too many Pennsylvania counties still lack access to reliable broadband. The survey estimated that 15 percent of Butler County households in 2017 did not have Internet access. That number was higher in some of BC3's service regions such as in Clearfield and Jefferson counties, where 27 percent and 26 percent of households, respectively, are estimated to not have broadband.

BC3 has expanded considerably since September 1966 – especially during my presidency, which dates to 2007. While proud to be Butler County's community college, we also understand our role as one of the commonwealth's institutions of higher education. We have answered the call to educate "underserved" areas in northwestern Pennsylvania. Today, BC3 provides various

educational offerings to 20,000 individuals not only at our locations in Armstrong, Butler, Jefferson, Lawrence and Mercer counties, but also in many other Pennsylvania counties as well.

While our three-time No. 1-ranked community college expands services throughout northwestern Pennsylvania, students in areas of Armstrong, Butler, Clarion, Clearfield, Jefferson, Elk and Mercer counties continue to struggle without broadband Internet access.

In order to compensate, our students do, however, have the ability to complete online coursework from computer labs at any of our locations and at local public libraries. This presents a challenge for adult students who, rather than being able to study online from home, must schedule time around their work schedules and family responsibilities to travel to our locations.

It is our opinion that this model – while achievable – prevents more students from taking online, hybrid or even traditional classes that utilize technology outside of the specific BC3 location. An interesting side note: Most classes use the Internet for at least research and supplemental resources, even if the courses are taught entirely within a classroom.

A good number of our online classes make use of audio, video and streaming multimedia through Blackboard, YouTube, Khan Academy and the textbook publisher's supplemental websites. In order to view these resources without interruption, a student must use a computer or device with high-speed, broadband Internet access such as cable, fiber-optic, DSL or 3G/4G cellular data. Dial-up just can't keep up anymore.

In addition, we utilize the Respondus LockDown Browser and the Respondus LockDown Browser with Monitor (video proctoring) for online testing. Students must have a steady, reliable, preferably hard-wired Internet connection when taking an online test or they risk being knocked offline and out of their exam before its completion. This happens quite often with students who depend solely on WiFi for their Internet connection.

Cellular data connections are now much more widely available. Some coursework is able to be completed on a mobile device. Students can also use modern smart devices as a hot-spot for high-speed (3G or 4G) Internet access for a computer or laptop. Cellular coverage may also vary in the rural and remote areas of our northernmost location.

In closing, I appreciate to speak to this esteemed committee as President of Butler County Community College – one of Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges.