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Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden



Get ready, world: Like an increasing number of college seniors, Albright College's Andrew J. Gibson of Pottstown is graduating this month instead of in the spring.

Cold-weather degree days

For December college graduates, it's by and large the same pomp, if somewhat different circumstances than for seniors each spring.

By Rebecca VanderMeulen

Reading Eagle

December is a time for snow, Christmas shopping and devising a New Year's resolution that *will* be kept this time.

It's not typically thought of as a season for college graduations.

That's reserved for late spring, when the traditional school year is winding down.

But in coming weeks, about 1,200 students from Berks County's five colleges will mix one of life's most memorable moments with the holiday hustle and bustle.

A few said the experience is a little strange.

"I'm going to be graduating, and then it's Christmas right away," said Christina J. Steffy, 22, of Leesport, who was chosen to speak at Kutztown University's commencement on Dec. 16.

She plans a party that night and expects to get presents, even though she told friends and family that graduation gifts weren't necessary so close to Christmas.

KU will have 635 graduates this month, compared with the 1,021 it had last spring.

President F. Javier Cevallos said the college makes sure not to deprive December graduates of a traditional ceremony just because there are fewer of them.

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"It's one of those ritual things that students enjoy," he said.

Students at all five Berks colleges will have traditional ceremonies with caps, gowns and speeches.

Kevin P. Burns, 22, of Falls Township, Wyoming County, said he doesn't find his Dec. 17 graduation from Alvernia College at all unusual. He will be one of 285 Alvernia graduates, just eight fewer than in May.

Students who finish their degrees in August also are allowed to take part in the December ceremonies, said Betsy G. Stiles, who is coordinating the Alvernia commencement.

There is only one difference between the winter and spring graduation, she said. In May, students traditionally walk across campus before the ceremony, but December is too cold for that.

"All of our students who graduate from the college we want their ceremony to be special," Stiles said.

Ricardo Rosario of Mohnton, who will graduate from Reading Area Community College on Monday, said that, while people around him are focused on Christmas, he's thinking about a post-graduation vacation in Disney World and starting an accelerated bachelor's program at Albright College.

He's just happy to be have finished his associate's degree while his wife stayed home with their two young daughters.

"For me, it doesn't matter when it is," said Rosario, 25, who began his studies in accounting in September 2004. "It's just my graduation something no one can take away."

There are plenty of reasons students extend their studies into December. For some, college involved just too many things to juggle.

Burns, for example, is completing majors in chemistry and forensic science at Alvernia. He worked as a resident assistant and did a summer internship with detectives in the Scranton Police Department.

"I could get out in four years," he said. "I didn't want to kill myself pushing 18, 19, 20 credits."

While a December graduation often means an extension of college, sometimes it's an early exit.

Albright College student Andrew J. Gibson took extra classes to graduate a semester early.

"When I started talking about it, people didn't take me seriously," said Gibson, a Pottstown resident. "Anyone can do what I'm doing if you work a little harder."

The 21-year-old, who is studying computer science and business administration, considered the quest to finish early as a personal challenge.

"You save a lot of money," he said. "And you can get into the job market (faster)."

But when it comes to finding a job, some local experts said it doesn't matter what time of the year college students graduate.

"Job creation comes at various times in the course of a company's fiscal year," said Patricia

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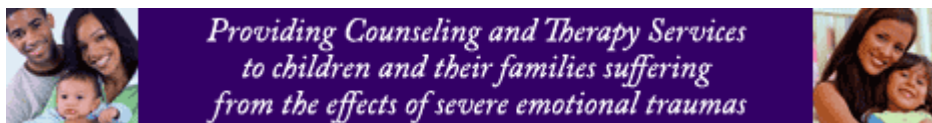
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J. Adamczyk, administrator of Berks County CareerLink, a county-run, state-related service that links applicants and employers. "Everybody understands that there are December graduates, there are August graduates."

Pamela S. Gockley, president and CEO of PennsylvaniaJobs.com, a private Internet job- and applicant-search service, said that, since many job-seekers take a holiday break, those who keep searching can have an advantage.

"Most companies love to hire in December," Gockley said. "They're not overwhelmed with applications."

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