

Merritt College Title III Program External Review

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Merritt College, a fully accredited comprehensive community college, is one of the four institutions of the Peralta Community College District. The college is located in Oakland, California and serves a highly diverse population of over 7,000 students. A large number of these students come from disadvantaged backgrounds or are first generation college students. The college offers an array programs to these students including Associate in Arts degrees in twenty three areas, Associate in Science degrees in sixteen areas, and certificates of achievement or completion in forty seven areas.

Merritt College received a Title III Grant in October of 2008 for the purposes of improving student retention and graduation. In support of these purposes, the college proposed to implement new strategies that would revise the curriculum and improve instruction, promote faculty and staff development, and enhance support services for students. The Title III proposal called for an external evaluation of its activities at the end of the first year of grant implementation together with recommendations for improving program activities. The concept behind this evaluation requirement is that early evaluation provides the sort of formative feedback that will enable a program to avoid "false starts" and concentrate its resources on effective practices.

This evaluation was conducted during a site visit on April 9 and 10, 2009 by Dr. Hunter R. Boylan, Director of the National Center for Developmental

Education at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. During this evaluation, Dr. Boylan met with college administrators, the Title III leadership team, and a variety of faculty and staff members. He also reviewed documents including:

- the Merritt College Self Study,
- the Merritt College Catalog,
- the Title III Proposal Narrative,
- the "Equity for All" Scorecard,
- course and lab schedules,
- the Basic Skills report,
- the Tutorial Handbook and accompanying materials,
- the Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC) 2008 document, and
- a variety of other documents provided by the Learning Center and the Office of Research and Planning.

In addition, discussions were held before and after the site visit with Dr. Audrey Trotter, the Title III Coordinator. The observations, comments, and recommendations that follow are based on these interviews, documents, and discussions. Consequently, any errors of fact in this report are the responsibility of the consultant.

The report is divided into five sections. The first provides a general description of the evaluation, its purposes, and organization. The second section, entitled "Observations and Comments," presents the consultant's

general observations based upon his experiences and interactions with faculty and staff while visiting Merritt College as well as a review of documents provided by the Title III Coordinator. The third section, entitled "The State of the Art in Basic Skills" represents the consultant's view of policies, practices, and procedures at Merritt College for various programs and services related to the Title III Program. The fourth section, entitled "Recommendations" presents the author's recommendations for program improvement. The section entitled "Conclusion" ties the report together through closing comments and final observations.

The method used in this evaluation was a form of discrepancy analysis in which the consultant compared existing practices at Merritt College with those recommended by the research and literature in the field of developmental education and learning assistance. Discrepancy analysis is commonly used to review programs in the formative stages of their development to provide guidance for future program refinement and revision. In essence, this process compares the ideal (what is recommended in the research and literature) with the real (what is actually present at Merritt College).

Few, if any, programs are ideal so it is neither surprising nor noteworthy that many activities and programs at Merritt College fall short when measured against the most promising practices in the field. What is important, however, is that these shortfalls be addressed in order to bring the program into line with the best possible practices designed to improve student retention and

graduation. This, of course, is the purpose of the Title III Program in general and this evaluation in particular.

Observations and Comments

*In a time of turbulence and change
it is more true than ever that knowledge is power.*

John F. Kennedy

It was refreshing to visit a campus where many faculty and administrators are still committed to the notions of social justice and educational opportunity that prevailed on college campuses during the 1960s and 1970s. Many of those faculty and administrators are veterans of the struggle for social justice and educational opportunity in the U.S. Many of them see their work with Merritt College students as a logical extension of that struggle. Through their professional roles they are preparing some of California's most disadvantaged and disempowered students to take advantage of the hard-won opportunities available to them. These professionals are to be commended and respected for these efforts. They are among the last of the original revolutionaries in U.S. higher education.

As a result of their ongoing efforts, Merritt College continues to be an extremely diverse institution. This diversity is reflected in its students as well as its faculty and staff. According to data from the Merritt College Educational Master Plan, 2009-2015, 35% of the college's students are African-American, 21% are white, 16% are Latino, 3% are Filipino, 1% are Native American Indian,

and 2% are “other.”¹ Similar diversity is found in the age of Merritt College students. The age range of these students is 16 to over 65 with the two largest age cohorts being 19 to 24 and 35 to 54 (Merritt College Educational Master Plan, 2009-2015).

The college’s effort to provide educational opportunity for diverse students has not always resulted in the desired levels of student success. Institutional data as well as data from the California Community College Chancellor’s Office indicates that an excessively high number of students do not complete basic skills courses. Basic skills completion rates from 2004-2007 were below 60% (California Community College System Office, 2008). This figure is between 10% and 20% (depending upon the course) below the national average for community colleges (Gerlaugh, K., Thompson, L., Boylan, H., and Davis, H., 2007).

In addition, institutional data and comments from faculty indicate that many students do not engage successfully with the curriculum and fail to complete any program of study with the result that they leave the college without meaningful credentials. Worse yet, many of the students who leave the college without meaningful credentials do so having exhausted financial aid or having incurred educational debts. For these students the promise of educational opportunity remains unfulfilled in spite of the commitment of the college’s faculty and staff.

¹ The ethnicity of an additional 7% of the Merritt College student body is unknown.

Fortunately, a recent Title III Grant has provided the college with funding to expand support services and promote instructional innovation. Furthermore, the college is seeking additional external funding that may be used to bolster these efforts and, hopefully, upscale the most promising innovations throughout the institution. Also fortunately, there appears to be considerable support among faculty and administrators for Title III activities that have the potential to make educational opportunity more meaningful for Merritt College students.

The Title III grant writing team is to be commended for putting together a successful grant proposal. Title III funds are becoming harder and harder to obtain as federal funding for higher education programs has tended to stabilize during the last eight years while the competition for Title III money has increased. The college leadership is also to be commended for its support of the Title III grant writing effort as well as for its support of the Title III Program now that it has been funded.

The administrators interviewed during the site visit were consistent in their support for the Title III program and its purposes. There was general agreement that improving student retention and graduation was a major institutional priority. The Title III grant was viewed by administrators as an important opportunity for Merritt College to experiment with a variety of strategies that might contribute to improving student retention and graduation. The college's administrative leadership expressed strong support for the Title III Coordinator as well as for the goals and objectives of the program. The

level of administrative support for the Title III Program was among the strongest in the consultant's experience. The college's president, vice presidents, and deans appeared to be unanimous in their desire to support Title III and insure that it accomplished its intended purposes. This is important because research has consistently demonstrated that high level administrative support is essential to the success of community college basic skills programs (Boylan and Saxon, 2006; McCabe, R., 2000; Roueche and Roueche, 1999)

The faculty members interviewed are equally committed to the goals and objectives of the Title III Program. Most of the faculty interviewed are involved directly or indirectly in one or more Title III activities. Faculty members involved with the project are well aware of what the Title III Program was designed to accomplish and eager to make a contribution to its success. There is a strong and consistent desire among the faculty and staff interviewed to improve the quality of the educational experience for Merritt College students generally and particularly for those taking basic skills courses.

The faculty and staff interviewed are also very student oriented and highly committed to doing what is necessary to promote student success. These individuals provide a solid cadre of well trained, caring, and committed professionals. They have the potential to make a very substantial difference for those students served by the Title III Program. There may be some minor differences of opinion among those participating in the project over the best way to accomplish the program's goals and objectives, but there is consistency of support for these goals and objectives.

The only cautionary note that might be offered is that the Title III administrative team should, to the extent possible, avoid being viewed by department chairs or individual faculty simply as a source of funds for special departmental or faculty projects. Because the Title III Grant is new, there are still many faculty and staff members who do not fully understand its purpose. To some, the grant might simply be considered as a “cash cow” to be milked in the service of special interests not connected directly to the goals of the Title III Program.

On the other hand, it is often necessary for the administrators of a Title III Program to distribute funding in a manner that encourages “buy in” by faculty and staff. This is a more or less common practice among Title III Programs and there is nothing wrong with doing so. However, this distribution of funding needs to be carefully calibrated to insure that activities supported in an attempt to create the necessary “buy in” are also the activities necessary to further the goals and objectives of the Title III Program.

The Current State of the Art in Merritt College Basic Skills

I refuse to accept the idea that the “isness” of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the “oughtness” that forever confronts him.

Martin Luther King

Assessment

A strong assessment program is considered by experts to be one of the foundations of successful programs for underprepared students (McCabe, 2000; Morante, 1986; Center for Student Success, 2007). Merritt College currently uses the COMPASS, a computer-adaptive ACT product, to assess incoming

students. The COMPASS is one of the two best instruments on the market today for community college student assessment. This does not mean, however, that it is completely consistent with the curriculum of Merritt College or the skills needed for students to be successful in that curriculum. The COMPASS and its major competitor the Accuplacer (a computer-adaptive ETS product) are both norm-referenced tests. They report the scores of individual students compared to all other students in the group on which the test was normed. These scores are expressed as percentiles so that a student placing at the 90th percentile would have scores higher than 89% of the students who took the test.

A criterion referenced college assessment test, on the other hand, tests students on the basis of what would be necessary for success in a college or university. Instead of scores being reported based on how students performed against each other, scores would be reported based on how well students performed against a specific set of criteria - the college curriculum, for instance. At present, the only criterion referenced assessment instrument on the market is the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA). The THEA (published by National Evaluation Systems) is referenced to the Texas college and university curriculum which, in theory at least, is consistent with college and university curricula in other states.

Computer-adaptive norm referenced tests as well as criterion referenced tests are widely used in U.S. colleges and universities and represent a valid means of gathering information about student skills in order to make advising

and placement decisions. These instruments can be particularly valuable for assessing student skills in mathematics and reading. In the consultant's experience, faculty from these subject areas in community colleges across the country tend to be reasonably satisfied with the accuracy of assessment results from COMPASS or Accuplacer.²

There are many composition instructors, however, who argue that the only valid test of writing skills is a writing sample. A position paper prepared by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (2006) states that standardized tests (such as the COMPASS or the Accuplacer) focus only on the most basic aspects of language usage such as grammar correctness.

Furthermore, these instruments tend to measure what students do wrong, not what they do right. The conference, therefore, recommends that "The methods and criteria that readers use to assess writing should be locally developed, deriving from the particular context and purpose for the writing being assessed (page 2)."

A major complaint expressed by some of the English faculty interviewed was that the COMPASS does not do an adequate job of assessing students' writing skills. Given the above discussion, this complaint is certainly not surprising and it is quite likely to be valid. The information Merritt College obtains from its current assessment battery probably provides an accurate measure of students' mathematics skill, a reasonable measure of students'

² The consultant has been involved in program evaluations at more than 100 community colleges in the U.S. and Puerto Rico including six colleges in California.

reading skill, and only a marginal measure of students' writing skill. Some other assessment, therefore, may be necessary for writing.

It should also be noted that the college apparently gathers only cognitive information (such as measured by the COMPASS) on incoming students. The best assessment programs use a combination of cognitive and affective information for advising and placement purposes (Saxon, Levine, and Boylan, 2008).

Advising

Students entering Merritt College are assessed and receive advising based on assessment data. The academic advisers interviewed appeared committed to doing the best possible job of helping students select courses and programs of study. They had strong credentials and were knowledgeable of the advising process as well as the course and program options available to students entering Merritt College. However, there do not appear to be a sufficient number of academic advisers to insure that each entering student has access to quality advising. Furthermore, because of the limited number of academic advisers available it is likely that many of the weakest entering students to not obtain the sort of aggressive developmental academic advising that many experts argue contributes to student success (Casazza and Silverman, 1996; Crookston, 1972; Schwartz and Jenkins, 2007).

Furthermore, institutional data suggests that not all students actually take the basic skills courses into which they place. This is consistent with findings from recent research indicating that 60 to 70% of those who place into

basic skills courses never take them or, if they do take basic skills courses at one level do not follow up and take the next level basic skill course (Bailey, Jeong, and Cho, 2009). This typically results in large numbers of students entering college level classes without the prerequisite skills to be successful in these classes. It also results in students' failure to complete the first college level course following basic skills instruction in that course. Research suggests that, as a consequence, the skills learned in basic skills courses atrophy before students have the chance to apply them in college level courses (Boylan and Saxon, 2006; Bailey, Jeong, and Cho, 2009).

Basic Skills Courses

The current procedure at Merritt College is to place students in basic skills courses following assessment and some advisement.³ In fact, preliminary institutional data suggests that somewhat more than half of Merritt College's entering students test at the basic skills level. Although there appears to be considerable slippage between advisement and enrollment a large number of Merritt College's entering students nevertheless do end up in one or more of the following basic skills courses.

English	Mathematics	Reading
English 250	Math 250	English 268A
English 250D	Math 253	English 268B
English 251	Math 270	
English 252A	Math 271	
English 252B		
English 270 (Writing Center)		
English 280 (Communication Skills Workshop)		

³ Because of legal issues unique to California, most of the state's community colleges do not mandate participation in basic skills courses based on assessment results.

English 295

Unfortunately, the student success rate in many of these courses is lower than should be desired and, as noted earlier, lower than national averages for underprepared students (Gerlaugh, Thompson, Boylan, and Davis, 2007).

There is also a variety of courses offered in English as a Second Language (ESL). Because Merritt College serves a large number of immigrants and non-native English speakers, the ESL program meets a definite need. Although there are six levels of ESL courses, most students are exempted from the earliest levels. Data describing student success rates in ESL courses was not provided at the time of the consultant's visit. Discussions with ESL and other faculty suggested that the ESL Program may not be adequately integrated into the institutional mainstream.

The consultant had the opportunity to meet with many of the full-time instructors who taught basic skills and ESL courses. All of them were well qualified by virtue of their academic preparation, degrees, and knowledge of their subject matter. Because few part-time adjunct instructors were interviewed, it was not possible to make a judgment regarding their credentials, preparation, or involvement in Title III activities.

Although the mathematics instructors interviewed were concerned with student success, they did not appear to have any particular plans in place for improving student success in basic skills mathematics courses. They were, however, eager to work with the Title III Program to promote effective teaching practices and to expand the support services available to mathematics

students. The English instructors interviewed were also excited about the possibilities of working with the Title III Program to improve student success in basic skills English courses. In fact, some English instructors were already attending conferences and reviewing the literature to gather information in support of new course syllabi, activities, and teaching techniques.

The general impression created by the faculty members interviewed was that they were all student oriented to at least some degree. In addition, they all appeared to believe in their students' capacity for success. For many, the key concern was how to unlock that capacity within their students. This is an important positive point. Unless faculty truly believe that their students can be successful, they are unlikely to be willing or able to learn and apply the teaching methods and techniques necessary to promote that success (Lowman, 1986; McKeachie, 2001; Wlodkowski, 2008).

Another problem with basic skills courses at Merritt College is that there appear to be few alternatives for completing basic skills requirements. For those who take and fail these courses, the only available option is to retake the course. This is problematic because, for students who fail a traditional course, this is often a signal that they are unable to succeed given traditional course organization and instruction. Simply having them repeat the course has a very low probability of enabling them to be successful. Furthermore, retaking basic skills courses uses up financial aid that students could more profitably apply to college level courses.

The consultant also noted that those who taught basic skills courses were more likely to identify themselves as part of their academic departments than as basic skills instructors. Most basic skills instructors tended to see themselves as English or mathematics instructors who happened to teach basic skills courses. Many did not see themselves as basic skills professionals, they did not identify with basic skills, and did not perceive themselves as having a primary commitment to basic skills. As a consequence, although there were many faculty who supported the Title III initiative, there was no cadre of instructors who attended basic skills conferences, read the basic skills literature, or saw themselves as part of the larger basic skills or developmental education profession. This was exemplified by the fact that although there are many English and mathematics instructors teaching basic skills at Merritt College, few attended any of the consultant's sessions or attended activities sponsored by the Title III Program.

Language

Kagan and Lahey (2001), argue that the language we use in describing activities and programs influences our views not only of those activities and programs but also of those individuals associated with them. Based on a study of successful adult and developmental education programs, Boylan, Bonham, Drewes, Clark-Keefe, and Saxon (2005) found that careful monitoring and use of language characterized these programs.

For instance, when, faculty, staff, or students describe the remedial writing courses as "bonehead English" or the remedial mathematics course as

“math for dummies,” they denigrate the students who take these courses and the instructors who teach them. When instructors say “You should have learned this in high school” or “If you’d studied harder you would have passed this test,” they are making negative judgments that discourage students and erode their motivation.

The most successful developmental programs go to considerable effort to make sure that negative language, either verbal or written, used to describe developmental courses, students, and programs is eliminated. They do this by reviewing course syllabi, college catalog descriptions, and other college publications describing basic skills activities. They also train faculty teaching underprepared students to avoid judgmental and other potentially negative comments in their instructional activities and their dealings with students.

There is no apparent concerted effort at Merritt College to review the language used to describe developmental education activities or students in college publications. Neither the college nor the Title III Program appears to make any systematic efforts to discourage faculty from using judgmental or derogatory language toward developmental students. It should be noted that the vast majority of the faculty members interviewed appear disinclined to use negative language in their dealings with students. However, it should also be noted that most of the faculty members interviewed are full-time rather than adjunct instructors. Consequently, the consultant was unable to ascertain the extent to which adjunct faculty may or may not use negative language in their dealings with students.

Comprehensive Support Services

The literature in the field is consistent in its finding that comprehensive academic support services are essential to the success of underprepared college students (Kulik, Kulik, and Schwalb, 1983; Casazza and Silverman, 1996; Center for Student Success, 2007). These support services typically include academic advising, assessment, tutoring, and individualized instruction and all of these services are present at Merritt College. Also present are academic support programs for the disabled, veterans and the educationally disadvantaged. Student success and orientation courses are also taught by the college's counselors.

One of the goals of the Title III Program is to expand the services available to Merritt College students, particularly those who may be at risk of dropping out. Thus far, the program has made good progress in enhancing support services by expanding facilities and increasing staff.

When working with non-traditional students, however, it is also necessary to insure that those who most need academic support services actually participate in them. Melchur-Karp, O'Gara, and Hughes (2008), for instance, suggest that non-traditional, first generation, and ethnic minority students are among those least likely to actually use the support services available to them. This has at least two negative impacts:

- Those most in need of the support services the Title III grant was designed to provide are unlikely to obtain these services unless special efforts are made to encourage their use, and

- Underprepared students who fail to use support services may blame themselves for failure because they realize these services were available to all students and they did not use them. Preliminary evidence suggests that this may reinforce their perceptions that they are not really capable of success in college (Melchur-Karp, O’Gara, and Hughes, 2008).

Although the appropriate academic support services exist at Merritt College, the ways in which students are encouraged or not encouraged to use these services has an impact on their participation in them.

It should also be noted that only slightly more than half of the students who participated in the “Student Needs Survey (2007), declared themselves to be either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with counseling and learning center services. This suggests that even those students who access these services are often dissatisfied with them.

What is even worse, however, is that only 34% of Merritt College students indicated any sort of satisfaction with the financial aid process (Toussant-Jackson and Adwere-Boamah, 2007). Interviews with faculty and staff revealed that many students were unable to obtain the financial assistance in a timely manner because of technology and data base problems in the system office. This is a major problem and one that must be addressed.

Coordination of Basic Skills

Boylan (2002), McCabe (2000), and Roueche and Roueche (1999) argue that basic skills courses and programs must be highly coordinated if they are to be effective. Either a centralized or a decentralized course or program

structure can be effective as long as the activities included in this structure are well coordinated. Strong coordination has several components. For example, in a highly coordinated program:

- There is a written statement of philosophy that guides all teaching, learning, and support service activities for underprepared students,
- There is a written statement of goals and objectives that clarifies the purpose of basic skills activities and provides guidelines on how they should be carried out,
- ALL those who work with basic skills students meet on a regular and basis to collaborate in identifying problems working with students and to find and implement solutions to these problems,
- There is campus wide understanding and support for the purposes, goals, and procedures of the basic skills effort,
- There is a single administrator responsible for campus wide basic skills development activities,
- This administrator has direct access to the highest levels of institutional administration,
- The needs of basic skills are taken into account whenever resources are allocated, and
- There is a long term plan for the acquisition of material, equipment, and personnel required to accomplish the goals and objectives of basic skills programs.

Unfortunately, only a few of these characteristics appeared to be present at Merritt College.

On the positive side, the Title III Program has brought together on a more regular basis the faculty and staff who work with underprepared students. The goals and the objectives of the Title III Program have helped to clarify the purposes of basic skills at Merritt College. The Title III coordinator does have access to the highest levels of institutional administration. It also appears that the Title III Coordinator is, to some extent, responsible for the campus wide basic skills effort.

However, there does not appear to be a statement of philosophy to guide courses and services for underprepared students. Although the Title III Director appears to be serving as the coordinator for campus wide basic skill development efforts, it is unclear if this role will continue or who will fill it once the Title III funding expires. Because the Title III Program is new, there is still a lack of understanding of the program's purposes, goals, and procedures among many faculty and staff. There does not appear to be a long range plan in existence to insure that the campus wide basic skills development effort has the fiscal, material, and personnel resources to accomplish its objectives.

Presentation of Basic Skills Courses

Some faculty comments indicated that students do not understand why they were placed in basic skills courses. Students often express surprise, anger and frustration at being placed in basic skills courses, particularly since these

courses carry no academic credit. However, given the way basic skills courses are presented, students' reactions may be justified.

There is no mention of basic skills courses in the college catalog except to list these courses. The college catalog's only reference to placement in basic skills courses is on page 22 where it states that "Assessment is required for all students planning to enroll in certain courses" (Merritt College, 2007). Even under the category of "Assessment and Testing," there is no mention that this testing might lead to placement in basic skills courses nor is there any explanation of what basic skills courses are or why they might be important to students. There is also no statement of philosophy or goals and objectives for basic skills that students and instructors may consult to contribute to their understanding of these courses.

Incoming students are likely to have limited, if any, understanding of how they are placed into basic skills courses or what these courses are designed to accomplish. The purpose of basic skills courses might be addressed in orientation and advising. However, the consultant is unaware of the extent to which basic skills courses are addressed in orientation and advising or what percentage of incoming students actually participate in these activities.

This lack of presentation of basic skills courses in the college catalog is surprising given the fact that over half of Merritt College's incoming students place into one or more basic skills courses. The fact that there is so little discussion of basic skills courses in the college's public documents contributes

to students' impressions that these courses have no value. It also contributes to student negativity toward placement in these courses.

Community Support

Merritt College appears to enjoy a very favorable image in its community. Many faculty and administrators commented on the fact that the college is highly regarded by those in its service area for its contributions to community support, development, and educational opportunity. Merritt College has established a variety of formal and informal relationships with community partners. Most of these relationships, however, have been established in the service of academic as well as career and technical programs.

There does not appear to be very many efforts made to establish linkage and collaboration with community agencies that might provide necessary services to basic skills students. This is unfortunate because Merritt College does not have the resources necessary to address the many and complex needs of its basic skills students. These students are often poor, first generation college students, immigrants,⁴ single parents, or non-native speakers of English. They regularly encounter problems with day care, transportation, personal abuse, legal issues, and debt. The college simply does not have the available personnel or programs to respond to all these needs and deal with all of these problems.

⁴ According to data from the Merritt College Institutional Self Study of Spring, 2009 about one out of seven Merritt College students do not hold U.S. citizenship.

One way of responding to this is to identify social service agencies that provide the sorts of support that might be valuable to Merritt College students and establish partnerships with these community social services agencies. For instance, a brief internet search identified nearly 100 different social services agencies in the Oakland, California area. These agencies provided services ranging from mental health to legal assistance to AIDS counseling. Some of these agencies might provide valuable services to students attending Merritt College if there was some systematic way of linking students with appropriate agencies.

Professional Development

Professional development for faculty and staff working with underprepared students has long been known to contribute to the success of these students. Maxwell (1997) and Silverman and Casazza (2000) have argued that professional development for all those working in basic skills is essential to student success. The Center for Student Success (2007) found that faculty development and tutor training was associated with higher grades and higher rates of retention for underprepared college students. Boylan and Saxon (2006) found that community college developmental education programs with the highest rates of student success also had strong professional development programs. Simply stated, faculty and staff who have been trained to work with underprepared students do a better job of it than those who have not been trained.

Unfortunately, relatively little professional development activity appears to have taken place in recent years at Merritt College for those working with basic skills students. In fact, the lack of professional development opportunities for Merritt College faculty and staff, generally, was cited as a major weakness in the Title III narrative. Responses in the institutional self-study document were also noticeably vague in the area of faculty development. This shortcoming is noteworthy given the fact that the Peralta Community College District Value Statement claims that "All employees are supported in developing their capacities to support student and community success whatever their position within the Peralta family" (Merritt College Catalog, 2007-2009, p. 13).

The Title III Program, however, has established training of faculty and staff as one of its priorities. The program intends to do some training for faculty to enable them to improve their instructional practices and for staff to enable them to better serve students. Currently some materials are being developed to augment the existing tutorial handbook prepared in 2007. Copies of sections from "The Tutor's Guide" (published in 1987 by the University of California Regents office) are apparently used in tutor training.

Additional tutor training material may be needed because the current handbook focuses on procedures and does not offer any guidance to tutors on the actual process of tutoring. Although some actual guidance on the tutoring process is provided in the "Tutor's Guide," the guide is somewhat dated. It is interesting to note that the tutoring program does not use the tutor training materials developed by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)

and does not participate in the CRLA Tutor Certification Program even though the association was founded in California and the majority of its members are from the west coast.⁵

Recommendations

A man's greatness consists in his ability to do and the proper application of his powers to things needed to be done.

Frederick Douglas

Recommendation # 1 - *Regardless of the problems or the cost or the inconvenience...fix the problems with financial aid.*

Admittedly, addressing financial aid is not part of the consultant's charge. But the problems related to financial aid in the Peralta Community College District have a significant impact on everything that is done in the service of basic skills students. The financial aid situation is probably one of those cases where finding a solution is easier said than done. Nevertheless, if the college wants to recruit and retain students in must help them find the financial resources to attend college. In addition, the possible elimination of the Cal Grant Program will make it even more important to tap federal and other sources of financial assistance for Merritt College students.

In the consultant's experience, most data base problems in community colleges result from either a poor fit between the data base program's capacities and the colleges' needs, a lack of training on the part of those who use the data base, or both. The system must make whatever adjustments need to be made to the program and/or provide whatever training is necessary to its

⁵ See College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) web site: <http://www.crla.net/>

operators to make the financial aid process work in a timely manner for students.

Recommendation # 2 - *Review the available assessment instruments realistically.*

Even the most modern computer-adaptive assessment instruments have limitations. The key to using these instruments effectively is recognizing their limitations as well as their strengths. It is recommended that a faculty committee of basic skills mathematics, English, and reading instructors as well as academic advisers be appointed to review the technical information from the major community college assessment instruments: the COMPASS, the Accuplacer, and the Texas Higher Education Assessment. The committee members should also take each of the instruments and analyze the questions asked to determine which are most consistent with the Merritt College curriculum. Once this is done, they should make their findings known to the college community and recommend appropriate assessment instrumentation.

Recommendation # 3 - *Explore the use of affective assessment and background information to advise and place students.*

At present, Merritt College uses only a single cognitive instrument to measure the skills of incoming students. It does not use any affective instruments such as learning styles inventories, personality inventories, or study strategies inventories to measure student skills. This is a weakness in the assessment, advising, and placement process that should be addressed by collecting affective information on incoming students through the use of any of the following instruments.

Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI)*

Authors: Weinstein, C. E., Schulte, A. C., & Palmer, D. R.

Publisher: H & H Publishing

1231 Kapp Drive, Clearwater, FL 33765

Telephone: 800-366-4079

www.hhpublishing.com/_assessments/LASSI/

Price: \$3.50 per unit. Quantity discounts are available.

The LASSI is a 10 scale, 80 item study skills assessment designed to diagnose relative student strengths and weaknesses. It provides standardized scores and national norms for scales falling under the descriptions of skill, will, and self regulation of strategic learning. It may be used to identify student educational intervention areas, counseling needs, or as a pre-post achievement measure following student participation in a particular intervention. It is available in paper and pencil or in a web administered format.

**This instrument measures a combination of student cognitive and noncognitive characteristics.*

Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)*

Authors: Pintrich, P., Smith, D., Garcia, T., & McKeachie, W.

Publisher: The University of Michigan

610 East University Avenue, Room 1323, Ann Arbor MI 48109-1259.

Telephone: 734-647-0626

Price: \$20.00 for one copy which can be reproduced to meet specific needs.

The MSLQ is a 15 scale, 81 item Likert-scaled instrument designed to assess the application of learning strategies and the motivation of college students. It was normed with a sample of 380 students in 14 subjects and 5 disciplines mainly at public 4-year higher education institutions in the Midwest. The scales are intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, task evaluation, control of learning beliefs, self-efficacy, test anxiety, rehearsal strategies, elaboration strategies, organization strategies, critical thinking, metacognitive self-regulation, time and study environment, effort regulation, peer learning, and help seeking. Research has suggested that the motivational factors are the items that best correlate with student success (GPAs). The MSLQ shows reasonable predictive validity to the course performance of students. It is designed to be administered in 20 to 30 minutes.

** This instrument was field tested on university students rather than community college students.*

Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ)

Authors: Sedlacek, W., & Tracey, T.

Publisher: Jossey-Bass

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-171

Telephone: 415-433-1740

www.josseybass.com

Price: Published in *Beyond the Big Test: Noncognitive Assessment in Higher Education*, \$45.00.

The NCQ measures 8 noncognitive variables found to be related to college success, particularly for minority students. The instrument consists of 18 Likert-scaled items and three open-ended questions. The measured variables are positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, successful handling of the system (formerly identified as "understands and deals with racism"), preference for long-term over short-term goals, availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experience, demonstrated community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field. Research results showed reliability and construct validity for the NCQ. For whites, the dimensions of self-concept, preference for long-term over short-term goals, and realistic self-appraisal were the most strongly related to GPA. The NCQ was shown to significantly enhance the prediction of grades for whites. For blacks, the variables related to GPA were self-concept and realistic self-appraisal and the instrument was shown to enhance the predictability of both grades and enrollment status. The results from the NCQ may be useful as admissions entry standards, anticipating successful GPA, persistence, and graduation results, and for advising and counseling intervention.

Perceptions, Expectations, Emotions, and Knowledge about College (PEEK)

Authors: Weinstein, C., Palmer, D., & Hanson, G.

Publisher: H&H Publishing Company

1231 Kapp Drive, Clearwater, FL 33765-2116

Telephone: 800-366-4079

www.hhpublishing.com/

Price: \$1.75 per test with quantity discounts available.

The PEEK is a 30 item Likert-scaled instrument which assesses student's expectations about college. It is designed to measure 3 dimensions. Personal items measure expectations about emotional reactions to college. These include the extent of preparedness for college-level work, the degree to which college fits their future goals, and the extent to which the student takes personal responsibility for their learning. Social items measure expectations about college social pressures, instructor interaction, the make-up of college populations, and relationships between family, peers, and friends. Academic items measure the expectations about course difficulty, the nature of learning, instructor roles and responsibilities, and the nature of college instruction. Proposed uses of the PEEK are to increase student awareness of college expectations, to assist with advising and counseling intervention, and to assist with the development of college acclimation courses.

Study Behavior Inventory v.2.0 (SBI)

Authors: Kerstiens, G., Bliss, L., & Marvin, R.

Publisher: Andragogy Associates

3434 West 227th Place,

Torrance, CA 90505

Telephone: 310-326-5819

www.sbi4windows.com/

Price: 32.50 for pencil and paper. Institutional site licenses are available for a computerized version.

The SBI is a 46 item self-report survey designed to assess the study behaviors of college students in 3 areas. Short term study behavior is defined as preparation for daily tasks such as completing readings and reviewing class notes. Long term study behaviors are defined as completing long range academic tasks such as projects, papers, and preparing for final exams. Academic confidence is defined as affective variables that influence self perception, self esteem, locus of control, and field dependence or independence. Reports highlight performance in the following areas: Time Management, Study Reading, General Study Habits, Listening and Note Taking, Writing, Test Anxiety, Test Taking, and Faculty Relations. The student is also offered referrals to appropriate campus services. Research on the instrument indicated high levels of internal consistency reliability for the instrument and scores on each of the 3 factors. It can be administered in 15 minutes via computer or is available in a paper and pencil format.

Recommendation # 4 - *Explore the use of a holistically scored writing sample for assessment.*

Most composition instructors would agree that taking an actual sample of student writing is the best way to assess student writing skills. Research conducted at Miami-Dade Community College (Rich, 1993) indicates that writing samples can be used effectively to place students in various levels of composition courses and that this placement is at least 85% accurate.

However, the logistics of using writing samples for college course placement are difficult.

To consider these issues a committee of English instructors, assessment officers, and academic advisers should meet and determine how a writing

sample might be included in the assessment battery for incoming students. As part of this consideration it is recommended that the committee consult the CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment for guidance.⁶

Perhaps the college could also experiment with the use of writing samples for a small sample of underprepared students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of using writing samples for assessment. Decisions on whether or not to implement the use of writing samples for could then be based on the results of this experimental or pilot project.

Recommendation # 5 - *Hire and train academic advisors to work specifically with the college's weakest and poorest students.*

The weakest students are most likely to need the highest quality academic advising. The case load of academic advisors at Merritt College, however, already appears to be just short of overwhelming. According to the National Academic Advising Association the recommended advisor case load for two year colleges is 1 advisor to 300 students (Habley, 2004). On average students should meet between two and three times per semester with their academic advisor.

It is recommended, therefore, that additional academic advisers be hired through the Title III Program to work specifically with the college's most at risk incoming students. It is also recommended that these advisers be assigned a case load of no more than 300 (and preferably fewer) students per advisor. Furthermore, these advisers should be carefully trained to insure that they can work effectively with special groups of students. The National

⁶ This may be found at <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment>).

Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) publication on advising special student populations (Huff and Jordan, 2007) is particularly recommended for this purpose as well as the association's 2003 publication on advisor training (NACADA, 2003).

Recommendation # 6 - *Use focus groups to identify specific problems with counseling and financial aid.*

About the only support service that a high percentage of students rated as satisfactory in a 2007 student need survey was registration. For this, the staff of the Registrar's Office probably deserves commendation. Counseling, the learning center, computer laboratories, health center services, student government, financial aid, the mathematics laboratory, and student programs all received satisfaction rating of less than 60% with some as low as 26%.

In some cases, the reasons for this dissatisfaction are known. For instance, the data management problems that caused some students not to get their financial aid in a timely manner are well known. Other problems resulting in low student satisfaction ratings may have to be discovered by questioning students in a systematic manner.

It is recommended that Merritt College counselors be charged with gathering information that may be helpful in identifying the sources of low student ratings of services. Counselors (who are presumably trained in interviewing skills) should conduct a series of focus groups to identify problem areas in the provision of support services. Once these have been identified, the Vice President of Student Services and the Dean of Student Support

Services should work with the Title III Program to resolve whatever problems are identified.

Recommendation # 7 - *Establish liaisons with community support services.*

It is recommended that Merritt College student support services personnel seek ways of getting more community social service support for students. This process should begin with identification of the social services that are most needed by Merritt College students. Once these have been identified, student support services staff should take inventory of both campus and community agencies that provide these services. Service providers in the community should be contacted to establish liaison and let them know that Merritt College would like to refer some of its students to these providers. Although these providers often have case loads they can barely handle, the college and the Title III Program may be able to provide incentives to encourage cooperation. Examples of such incentives might include:

- Donating outdated computer equipment to service agencies,
- Allowing service agencies utilize campus computer laboratories and other facilities,
- Teaching basic skills or ESL courses at service agency sites, or
- Providing training to service agency personnel.

Once liaisons are established, a referral process should then be agreed upon for both on and off campus services. A list of these services should then be developed along with appropriate contact information and distributed to the faculty and staff who work with the college's basic skills students. Perhaps this

list might be included in the syllabi of basic skills and student success courses. Faculty and staff should also be trained in how to identify students needing social services and how to make referrals as well as encouraged to refer students as appropriate.

Often, faculty and staff are the first people to become aware of student problems that might require the provision of social services. However, this does *not* mean that faculty and staff are expected to become social workers. It simply means that they should be able to identify students in need of social services and know how to make referrals to these services.

Recommendation # 8 - *Integrate ESL into the campus mainstream.*

There are thirty seven different courses listed under ESL in the Merritt College Catalog. There are forty six English courses listed in the catalog. Selecting from among all these options is, no doubt, a difficult process for incoming students, particularly those with limited English language proficiency. Students need support and encouragement to participate effectively in ESL courses and programs. However, ESL instructors point out the even though the institution has hired an additional ESL instructor Merritt College does not always support ESL in other important ways.

Their point is illustrated by the fact that although there are four and a half pages devoted to "Student Grievance Procedures" in the Merritt College Catalog, there is no mention of ESL or basic skills courses except to list them. Given the student population of Merritt College, ESL courses are essential to implementing the college's mission of providing educational opportunity to the

citizens of its service area. The opportunity for students to participate in ESL courses should be more prominently advertised in college publications. Efforts should be made to increase faculty and staff awareness of the purpose of ESL courses, the relationship between these courses and the rest of the college curriculum, and the value of ESL courses to the campus community.

Recommendation # 9 - *Expand and improve tutor training.*

The research and literature in the field is consistent in stating that tutor training is essential to an effective tutoring program (Boylan, 2002; Maxwell, 1997; McCabe, 2000). It appears, however, that minimal training is done for tutors at Merritt College and few resources are available to them to expand their knowledge of the tutoring process. Consequently, tutor training should be increased and professional development resources available to tutors should be expanded.

Tutoring programs at Merritt College should begin this process by consulting the guidelines for the College Reading and Learning Association's International Tutoring Program Certification available at the following web address: http://www.crla.net/itpc/certification_requirements.htm. The following books should also be purchased, made available to tutors, and used as resources in tutor training:

- Casazza, M., and Silverman, S. (1996). *Learning assistance and developmental education: A guide for effective practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Deese-Roberts, S. (2003). *Tutor training handbook* (Revised Edition). Hastings, NE: College Reading and Learning Association.
- MacDonald, R. (2001). *The master tutor: A guidebook for more effective tutoring*. Williamsville, NY: Cambridge Stratford.
- Maxwell, M. (1997). *Improving student learning skills*. Clearwater, FL: H & H Publishing Co.

Recommendation # 10 - *Establish a professional development library.*

It is recommended that the Title III Program establish a professional development library for its faculty and staff. This library should include books at periodicals that might be useful to those working with underprepared college students. It should be housed in the Learning Center and made available to all faculty and staff.

A list of recommended readings for developmental educators is included in Appendix I. The Title III Program should also consider subscribing to the following journals and making them available through the Learning Center.

Journal of Developmental Education

The Learning Assistance Review

Research and Teaching in Developmental Education

The Journal of College Reading and Learning

The Teaching Professor

Recommendation # 11 - *Support increased professional development targeted to the specific needs of those who work with basic skills students.*

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of professional development for those working with underprepared college students.

Fortunately, the Title III Grant provides funding to support such professional development. Because this funding is available for a limited period of time, it is essential that the Title III Program support professional development activities directly related to the program's goals and objectives.

Consequently, it is recommended that, at the beginning of each academic year, those working with the Title III Program identify specific areas and topics where training is most needed and can provide the greatest benefits. This list might include such topics as:

- Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo and Cross, 1991),
- Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995),
- Supplemental Instruction (Martin and Arendale, 1994),
- Helping skills for college students (Casazza and Silverman, 1996; Reynolds, 2009),
- Active learning techniques (Weimer, 2002),
- Teaching techniques (McKeachie, 2001),
- Effective instructional practices for underprepared students, (Silverman and Casazza, 2000) and/or

It should also be noted that professional development may be accomplished through a variety of methods. Attendance at conferences and institutes, participation in workshops delivered by on campus as well as external experts, enrollment in graduate courses, guided readings of books and articles,

discussion groups, or campus-based special interest groups can all contribute to professional development for faculty and staff.

Recommendation # 12 - *Enforce attendance policies.*

Merritt College has, what appears to be, an appropriate attendance policy clearly set forth in the college catalog. Nevertheless, many instructors complained about student's failure to attend classes. In discussions, it appeared that these attendance policies were inconsistently enforced by basic skills instructors. Inconsistent reinforcement of attendance policies is simply an invitation for students to miss class. Although enforcement of the attendance policy will initially result in many students being dropped from their classes, it is essential that the importance of attendance be underscored by the behavior of instructors. Those teaching basic skills courses should emphasize the importance of attendance on a regular basis and enforce that emphasis by applying the college's attendance policy for all students. Although exceptions to this will need to be made for extenuating circumstances, students must understand that class attendance is a basic expectation of college students and absenteeism is not to be accepted.

Recommendation # 13 - *Develop a cadre of instructors committed to basic skills.*

In order to provide consistency and leadership to basic skills initiatives it is recommended that a cadre of full-time English and mathematics instructors be developed at Merritt College. A few English and mathematics instructors who teach basic skills are already working with the Title III Program. This group of instructors should serve as the basis for this group. Although they may

still retain their departmental affiliation, they should also be accountable to the Title III Program while they are teaching basic skills courses. These instructors should participate in training activities, sent to conferences and institutes, and serve as the “core faculty” for basic skills initiatives. They might also be used to train other faculty members in techniques for teaching underprepared students as well as serving as liaisons for the basic skills program to the campus community.

Recommendation # 14 - *Develop a statement of philosophy for basic skills.*

At present, neither the Title III Program nor the basic skills courses have a statement of philosophy to guide decision making, course development, or instructional activities. Such a statement needs to be developed so that all students involved in Title III and basic skills activities will know what to expect from their participation in these activities and what is expected from the faculty and staff involved in these activities. Such a philosophy statement may also be widely disseminated and used to help the campus community understand how Title III and basic skills instruction will operate. A sample philosophy statement is included in Appendix II.

Recommendation # 15 - *Develop a statement of goals and objectives for basic skills.*

Just as a philosophy statement helps guide decision making and also contributes to the campus community’s understanding of the Title III Program so, too, does a statement of the program’s goals and objectives. Fortunately, such a statement is already present in the Title III Grant proposal. This statement should be widely disseminated to students participating in basic

skills courses and Title III Program activities. In addition, it should be made available to the entire campus community to help them understand what the Title III Program is attempting to do. The program might also wish to add other goals and objectives to the existing list. A sample of other possible goals and objectives is included in Appendix III.

Conclusion

*“There is a tide in the affairs of men that, taken at the flood,
leads on to fortune.”*

Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

The Title III Program at Merritt College is operating in an environment that is conducive to its success. College faculty and staff appear to be ready to move to the next level of excellence in student success and retention. The president of the college and his chief administrators are supportive of the Title III Program and the positive changes it may bring about. The Title III Program has assembled a talented and committed group of professionals to implement its activities and accomplish its goals. The Title III Program brings an infusion of funding to support program refinement and improvement. All of these factors suggest that the Merritt College Title III Program has many potential advantages.

The program faces two major challenges at this point in its development. The first is to actually implement the activities promised in the Title III proposal or create a solid case for modifying these activities. The Title III Coordinator and her colleagues have, thus far, done an excellent job in both of these areas. In fact, Merritt College has made greater progress toward

implementing its Title III goals and objectives than most first year Title III Programs in the consultant's experience.

The second, and perhaps more important challenge, is to insure that the Merritt College community accepts, supports, and is willing to integrate the goals and objectives of the Title III Program into the campus mainstream. This will require a great deal of communication and collaboration. It will be essential that academic departments and student support services programs "buy into" what the Title III Program is attempting to do. This can only be accomplished by:

- Insuring that the goals and objectives of the Title III Program are clearly explained to all segments of the campus community,
- Involving campus "opinion leaders" in providing guidance to the Title III Program,
- Making the philosophy of the Title III Program clear to students, faculty, and staff,
- Operating the Title III Program with the transparency that insures that everyone on campus knows and understands what the program is accomplishing,
- Communicating regularly and consistently with all stake holders who are affected by Title III activities,
- Collecting and reporting data that clearly explains how the Title III Program is helping Merritt College students succeed,

- Articulating how the successes of the program will be “upscaled” in a manner that benefits students, faculty, and staff.

If the Title III Program successfully engages in these activities it is quite likely to be successful in accomplishing its objectives.

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Appendix I - Recommended Readings

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Appendix II

Statement of Philosophy for Developmental Education

We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in postsecondary education in a way that enhances the quality of their lives. We believe that each student should be accepted without judgment at whatever skill level they initially demonstrate and provided with the opportunity to advance as far as possible in postsecondary education. We believe that unless quality instruction and support services are provided to each student, that opportunity is meaningless. Therefore, we have a responsibility to insure that all students have access to the instructional and support services necessary to be successful in college.

In keeping with these beliefs, students should expect quality instruction to include:

- Safe classroom environments for learning that enable students to feel comfortable asking questions, participating in class discussions, and relating to the instructor and to other students.
- Respectful interactions between the instructor and students as well as with other students.
- Clear explanations of assignments and how they will be graded.
- Clear explanations of the instructor's expectations of students.
- Timely grading and return of tests, papers, and other assignments.
- Honest but non-judgmental feedback on tests, papers, and assignments.
- Variety in the teaching and assessment methods used in class.
- Instructor expertise in the subject area of the class.
- Meaningful opportunities to evaluate their instructors.

Students should expect quality support services to include:

- Accurate assessment of students' academic skills and abilities.
- Timely and non-judgmental feedback on the results of assessment.

- Appropriate advising in selecting courses and developing a program of study.
- Appropriate orientation to institutional rules, policies, procedures, history, traditions, and expectations of students.
- Timely access to tutoring when students are having difficulty in classes.
- Timely access to courses, workshops, or individual tutoring in study skills and strategies.
- Clear explanations of procedures for obtaining financial aid and assistance, where necessary, in securing financial aid.
- Appropriate referrals to campus and community services to assist students in resolving personal issues and problems that may have an impact on their success in postsecondary education.
- Meaningful opportunities to evaluate the support services in which they participate.

Appendix III

Statement of Goals and Objectives for Developmental Education

According to the National Association for Developmental Education, "developmental education is designed to help underprepared students prepare, prepared students to advance, and advanced students to excel." Consequently, the goals of developmental education are to provide each student with the opportunity to develop the academic skills, habits of mind, and personal behaviors necessary to succeed in postsecondary education.

In keeping with these goals, the objectives of developmental education are to:

- Assess the academic skills of each entering student to determine appropriate course placement.
- Assess the affective characteristics of each entering student to identify strengths and weakness that may be addressed by courses and support services.
- Provide academic advising to each entering student to insure that they are appropriately place in classes based on assessment information.
- Offer an appropriate schedule of courses designed to develop college level skills in English, mathematics, reading, study strategies, and other appropriate subjects.
- Provide an adequate range of levels of developmental courses to enable each student to be placed according to their skill level.
- Deliver quality instruction in all developmental courses.
- Provide the training and professional development activities necessary for all instructors and support services personnel to continually enhance the quality of their courses and services.
- Offer a comprehensive range of quality services to provide academic and personal development opportunities to all students,

- Insure that each student is advised of the academic and personal development opportunities available and encouraged to participate in them as needed.
- Coordinate all developmental education courses and services to insure they are operating in a manner consistent with the campus philosophy of developmental education.
- Evaluate regularly and consistently all developmental courses and services to determine the extent to which they are accomplishing the goals of developmental education.
- Provide formative evaluation information to all instructors and support services personnel that will enable them to develop and improve their courses and services.