

Merritt College
Fall Semester 2013
Qualitative Student Data Report

The purpose of this research study was to learn about student perceptions of their experiences at Merritt College and to identify issues of concern. The researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do students perceive programs and services offered at Merritt College?
2. How do students perceive the campus experience at Merritt College?

Research Design: A multiple case-study approach was employed as a means of exploring and describing the experiences of a volunteer sample of students attending Merritt College during Fall Semester of 2013.

Sample: The sample consisted of 180 students attending a total of 13 different classes including: Bio 20B (2 sections, day and evening), Business 70 (day), Career and Life Planning 57 (day), Chem 1A (day), Eng 5 (evening), Eng 252B (day), English 201A (day), Lanht 60 A-C (day), Nurs 1 (day), Nutrition 10 (2 sections, day and evening), and Radsci 5A (day).

Methods: The qualitative researcher and the Vice President of Instruction requested permission from faculty to collect data in their classrooms; data were collected from all classes in which instructors granted permission. Students were asked to write a short paper answering the simple open-ended question, "What would make Merritt better?" Thirteen classes were surveyed, including a mixture of day and evening, CTE, Transfer, Basic Skills, and Career Planning courses. Qualitative data in the form of the student papers were inductively analyzed for themes and categories. Frequency tables were created in order to prioritize issues of concern. Data were also disaggregated by class to compare Day/Evening courses, and to identify special needs of CTE students, Science students, and Basic Skills students.

Research Findings

Students overall were pleased with their experience at Merritt College, and expressed appreciation for being asked for their feedback. Many specifically mentioned administrators, faculty, and staff who had helped them in their educational endeavors. Their responses were mainly thoughtful and constructive, and they provided many suggestions for improving programs and services at the college.

Student Services

Sixty-seven responses related to Student Services. Students reported issues involving customer service (including lack of phones being answered during business hours), inadequate staffing of offices, long wait times, and offices not being open when convenient for students.

Financial Aid

The majority of Student Services-related responses (35) involved Financial Aid issues. Students reported long wait times and difficulties getting accurate information from staff about such things as how to fill out forms and time limitations on Financial Aid. Several students suggested customer service training for staff, as well as specific training in Financial Aid matters so as to better assist students. A major problem for many students was the significant delay in receiving financial aid checks. One student reported submitting the application one month before the start of a semester, and not receiving the check until the final month of the semester. One student suggested instituting payment plans in installments to help ease financial strain. Many students reported financial struggles as a major obstacle to completing their education. Improvements in Financial Aid could significantly increase our students' capacity for success.

Counseling

Seventeen responses related to Counseling Services. Students complained that the counseling office was inadequately staffed, they had difficulties getting timely appointments to see counselors, and that they did not always receive accurate information from counselors. Suggestions for improvement were to hire more counselors, have better training for counselors on Merritt's programs and services, and to have some Spanish and Chinese speaking counselors. Students also expressed a desire to schedule counseling appointments online.

Admissions and Records

Students expressed frustration with unanswered phones, long wait times, and customer service issues. They suggested increased staffing, customer service training, and expanded hours of operation to better accommodate evening and weekend students.

Bookstore

Students suggested expanded hours of operation for the bookstore (prior to 8:00 AM classes, evenings, and weekends), and less costly options for textbooks.

Library/Study Spaces

Forty-nine students commented on the lack of a full-service library. There were many requests for quiet places to study alone or collaboratively with others, both in the library and elsewhere on campus. Students also requested outdoor spaces with tables for eating and studying. A number of respondents requested that multiple copies of current course texts be available in the library for check-out, as they could not afford to buy them.

Learning Center

Many students were complimentary about the Learning Center, but requested expanded services including evening and weekend hours, and more tutors available to help students. In particular, students asked for Math and Science tutors, as well as more assistance with writing. Students also requested more computers, printers, and copiers for student use, along with technical support.

Course Offerings

Thirty-three students suggested that Merritt expand course offerings, of specific note were requests for more online courses, evening and weekend courses, expanded CTE programs, and GED prep courses.

Classrooms, Furniture, Equipment, Materials, and Supplies

Twenty-nine students commented on these items. Old, broken, uncomfortable furniture, inadequate materials and supplies for lab classes, and lack of basic facilities maintenance were expressed as concerns and barriers to learning.

Janitorial Services

Nineteen students commented on the deplorable state of bathrooms and lack of cleanliness of classrooms. The word most frequently used to describe the bathrooms was "disgusting." More frequent cleaning and stocking of soap and paper towels was requested. Students in two CTE programs reported cleaning their own classrooms.

Parking and Transportation

Thirty-two students made suggestions relating to parking and transportation. Many requested enlarging parking lots close to buildings, citing lack of parking spaces as a reason for being late to classes. They also commented on the cost of parking. Several students suggested an option for ordering parking passes online prior to the start of each semester, as long lines at the cashier were a problem. One student suggested reduced rates or a sliding scale for low-income students. Some students cited difficulties getting to campus as compared to other PCCD colleges due to Merritt's more remote location. Some requested more frequent bus service, particularly at night. Several students complained that it was not fair to have to pay for AC transit when they did not use the service.

Food

Twenty-one students commented on the quality and expense of food offerings on the campus. Many felt that food was too expensive, and that healthier options should be offered. One student suggested that food trucks might provide a wider variety of healthy, low cost meals and snacks.

Construction

Sixteen students commented on the disruption associated with construction on campus, primarily the noise and difficulty getting to classes.

Social Events

Fourteen students suggested having more social events and music on the quad and other places on campus to promote interaction and a more active “campus life.”

Evening Student Concerns

Evening students frequently requested increased lighting and a consistent security presence when walking to parking lots after classes. They also requested that food and coffee be made available in the evening as many students come straight from work to class and don’t have an opportunity to eat.

Basic Skills Student Concerns

Basic Skills students requested GED prep courses, more ESL courses offered in the evening, and more academic and emotional support. Students in these courses who were new to college expressed feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Several suggested support/study groups, and mentors for new students to help them better adjust to the college experience.

CTE Student Concerns

CTE Students expressed the desire for more hands-on experience with skill labs and simulation labs. They also requested updated materials and supplies, with increased funding for their areas to improve laboratory experiences.

Science Student Concerns

Science students frequently requested upgraded classroom computers, stating that they were often unable to complete laboratory activities because the computers were too old to run the software. They also expressed a desire for more math classes, and more tutors for math and science in the Learning Center. Anatomy and Physiology students requested more time working with cadavers.

Prioritized Recommendations

Through examination and analysis of data, the researcher makes the following recommendations for action to improve students’ experiences at Merritt College based on the urgency of concern and practicality of solutions:

1. Consider innovative solutions to improve customer service in Student Services areas such as Financial Aid and Counseling. A “grand theme” emerging from the data is that we do not respect our students’ time. Long wait times at the Financial Aid desk, Counseling Office, and Cashier’s office create inconveniences and barriers to our students’ success. Expanded online alternatives should be explored for students to retrieve information and forms, make counseling appointments, and order parking permits. In addition, reconfiguring staff duties at times of peak need will better assist our students in a timely manner. A systems analysis may help identify ways to shorten the time between submission of financial aid applications and disbursement of checks.

2. Increase frequency of janitorial services in student restrooms. Filthy bathrooms with inadequate supplies of soap and paper towels are a health hazard to our students. This problem should be addressed immediately.
3. Increase lighting and maintain a consistent security presence on campus in the evenings. Many evening students mentioned that they do not feel safe on the campus after dark. Current conditions represent a safety hazard and may deter students from enrolling in evening courses.

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Submitted February 3rd, 2014