Merritt College Title III Grant Project
Year 5 Mid-Year Formative Evaluation Report
(May 2013)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction:

Merritt College is now in the fifth and final year of its U.S. Department of Education Title III Comprehensive Development Grant, awarded in 2008. This is a crucial moment for the college. With six months left in the grant period, the Title III team must decide how to steer the project to a successful close.

Three key decisions face the team at this juncture: 1) how to maximize the impact of the grant during the time remaining; 2) how to institutionalize successful features of the grant; and 3) how to measure the impact of the grant on student success over the last five years and the level of institutional transformation it achieved.

There is no doubt that the grant has resulted in many positive changes in a range of areas across the college. The Title III grant has provided the opportunity—and the funding—for the faculty and staff to introduce innovations and new systems that might not otherwise be possible in a time of major state budget cuts. At the same time, there have been certain areas of the project in which the team has faced challenges, both internal and external, in implementing the original vision. There are also many questions that have arisen and remain to be explored about how to understand and interpret the student success data generated by the project and how best to use this data to benefit the institution. A summary of the project's successes and challenges is provided below:

Merritt College Title III Project: Summary of Successes and Challenges to Date			
Goal	**What's Working**	**What's in Progress**	**What Needs Further Attention**
Goal 1	▪ Project met or exceeded yearly targets for targeted academic performance indicators ▪ Annual reporting of student success data in three of the targeted categories ▪ Collection of some pieces of student success data for the Title III interventions ▪ Initial discussions of data by key campus stakeholders (faculty, staff, administration)	▪ Expanded faculty discussion of student success data at venues such as the upcoming college retreat	▪ Transfer readiness data not being collected and analyzed ▪ Transfer destination data not being collected and analyzed ▪ Disaggregated data not being collected and analyzed ▪ No cross analysis of Title III data with other college data
Goal 2	▪ Basic skills and gateway courses aligned ▪ Strengthened delivery of basic skills education in both math and English ▪ Learning Communities successfully piloted ▪ Professional development for LC faculty ▪ Summer Bridge launched (see Goal 4) ▪ Integrative Learning assignments launched ▪ Embedded tutoring offered in all LCs	▪ Expansion of Integrative Learning component ▪ Planning for 2013 Summer Bridge	▪ Ongoing registration issues ▪ Resistance on part of some faculty and department heads ▪ New model for implementing an Early Alert system needed ▪ LC disaggregated data needed ▪ Plan needed for continuing embedded tutoring component
Goal 3	▪ Teaching and Learning Center created ▪ Professional development workshops with leading experts in Learning Communities, Developmental Education, and SLOs ▪ Faculty Brown Bags on teaching strategies ▪ SLOs created at course level college-wide ▪ Mini-grants offered for faculty/staff projects	▪ Mini-grant selection for spring 2013	▪ Hiring of a coordinator for the Teaching and Learning Center ▪ Reinstitution of PD schedule ▪ Program –level SLOs ▪ Review of mini-grant guidelines and contribution
Goal 4	▪ Live orientation and Summer Bridge piloted ▪ First Year Experience program piloted ▪ Mandatory Student Educational Plan (SEP) campaign scheduled to be launched ▪ Matriculation services more integrated	▪ Online orientation being implemented on District level ▪ Plans for launch of mandatory SEP	▪ Transfer readiness data ▪ Transfer destination data ▪ Expansion of assessment ▪ FYE disaggregated data ▪ Further integration of services
Project Admin.	▪ Project commended by U.S. Dept. of Education for content and compliance	▪ Monitoring final budget expenditures	▪ Maintaining compliance in final stages of the project

PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING PROJECT OBJECTIVES:
FINDINGS FROM THE APRIL 2013 SITE VISITS

   The purpose of Merritt College's Title III Comprehensive Development Grant was "to strengthen academic pathways, systems, and services across the institution to maximize student success." The grant was divided into four goals, with a set of objectives outlined for each goal. The chart below provides an overview of the goals and objectives reviewed as part of the Title III Year V Mid-Year Formative External Evaluation Site Visit, along with an update on the status of each objective (as of the report date):

Year V Mid-Year Formative External Evaluation Report for the Merritt College Title III Grant Project: Measurable Project Objectives for the Title III Project for the Designated Report Period (October 1, 2012—March 31, 2013)	
GOAL 1: Strengthen the institution's core academic performance indicators in four key areas: retention, drop rate, course completion, and transfer.	
Related Objectives to be Measured for Report Period:	**Status of Objective:**
Objective 1.1: By September 2013, Merritt College will improve its core academic performance indicators in four key areas: retention, drop rate, course completion, and transfer.	▪ In progress
Objective 1.2: By September 2009, Merritt's Office of Research and Planning will disseminate an annual report of student outcomes for the college's core academic performance indicators in all four key areas to measure institutional effectiveness.	▪ Objective achieved ▪ Related annual activities on track
GOAL 2: Strengthen the curriculum for basic skills and gateway courses.	
Related Objectives to be Measured for Report Period:	**Status of Objective:**
Objective 2.2: By September 2010, based on the external evaluator's written recommendations, the college will create a new Developmental Education Program (DEP) organizational structure.	▪ Objective achieved ▪ Implementation and refinement ongoing
Objective 2.4: By September 2011, the Title III Learning Communities (LCs) Team will enroll students in the basic skills and gateway Learning communities, using control and treatment groups and serving 120 students annually.	▪ Objective achieved ▪ Ongoing LC program refinement
GOAL 3: Expand faculty and staff professional development to improve instruction and support services.	
Related Objectives to be Measured for Report Period:	**Status of Objective:**
Objective 3.1: By September 2009, a campus-based Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), staffed by a .50 FTE coordinator position, will offer an annual schedule of flexible, varied, and responsive professional development activities for faculty and staff.	▪ Objective partially achieved
Objective 3.3: By September 2013, 100% of Merritt's faculty will be trained in and have written plans for Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) Assessment at the course and program level.	▪ In progress
Objective 3.4: By September 2013, Merritt will have awarded 24 Campus Innovation Mini Grants to increase faculty and staff engagement and student success.	▪ In progress
GOAL 4: Improve delivery and integration of academic and non-academic support services for students to enhance student success.	
Related Objectives to be Measured for Report Period:	**Status of Objective:**
Objective 4.2: By September 2011, the Title III First Year Experience (FYE) Team will enroll students in a year-long, transfer-oriented First Year Experience Program, using control and treatment groups and serving a total of 60 students annually.	▪ Objective achieved ▪ Ongoing FYE program refinement
Objective 4.3: By September 2012, based on the external evaluator's written recommendations, the college will strengthen institutional systems for the delivery of support services for students (i.e., assessment, orientation, counseling and advising, financial aid, transfer, tutorial services).	▪ Partially achieved
Objective 4.4: By September 2013, student participation in key matriculation procedures (i.e., assessment, orientation, counseling, advising) will increase and tutorial services expand.	▪ In progress

Overview of Mid-Year Formative Evaluation Process:

   This May 2013 Mid-Year Formative Evaluation Report covers the first six months of Year V of the Merritt College Title III grant project, focusing on project-related activities, trends, and developments during the period from October 1, 2012 through March 31, 2013. The report describes the college's progress to date on each of four project goals and the objectives related to each goal during the reporting period.
   The Mid-Year Formative Evaluation Report is based on individual and group interviews conducted by Jennifer Lough Kennedy, the Title III External Evaluator, during the April 2013 Title III External Evaluation Site Visit, which took place on the Merritt College campus over three days this spring (April 8, April 9, and April 23). During the first two days of the site visit, the Title III External Evaluator conducted ten 30-minute to 60-minute sessions with Title III project staff and the various teams of faculty and staff working on activities related to each of the four main goal areas of the grant. On the third day, she met individually with one of the deans and also met with Merritt's administrative leadership team, including the new President, the Interim Vice President of Instruction, the Vice President of Student Services, the Business Officer, and the two deans. In addition, she conducted follow-up inquiries by phone and e-mail, as needed. This report summarizes the conversations conducted with the various Merritt administrators, faculty, and staff during site visit and highlights some the main issues facing the project team as they move into the final six months of the grant.

Discussion of Progress toward Project Goals and Objectives:

   The following sections discuss the institution's progress on the project during the period covered by the report. An update is presented for each of the four goals of the project, and, within each of those goals, for the various objectives relevant to this particular phase of the grant project. A final section also looks at issues related to grants administration and fiscal management.

GOAL 1: Discussion of Findings

> **Objective 1.1:** By September 2013, Merritt College will improve its core academic performance indicators in four key areas: retention, drop rate, course completion, and transfer.

Overview of Progress on Objective 1.1:
   Goal 1 is the crux of Merritt College's Title III project. The grant was originally developed in response to student equity data from an earlier project that showed disparities in educational outcomes among certain categories of students and at different points along the academic path. According to the grant team, the assumption was that by introducing interventions at specific points in the educational pathway (e.g., in basic skills and gateway classes, orientation and assessment, first year of college), student success would gradually increase and all students, including those most at-risk for academic failure, would ultimately benefit.
   As the Title III project draws to a close, it is important to revisit the initial assumptions that shaped the original project design and see whether or not the facts show that the project was effective in making the changes it proposed. Data-driven decision-making is especially important in a time of limited resources and budgetary constraints in order to ensure wise allocation of institutional resources. It is also essential in order to make an informed decision about which aspects of the Title III project to institutionalize (i.e., "invest" in) for the future.
   Unfortunately, at this point in the project's development the data picture remains incomplete due to ongoing problems with not having an experienced researcher dedicated to the continuous collection and analysis of data for the college as a whole and for the Title III project in particular. The result is that, while the Title III project has generated a wealth of data on student performance, the data is incomplete, inconsistent, incorrect, and not properly collected or fully analyzed, and not as widely used by the institution as might be possible. Across the project, members of the Title III team have, to their credit, made concerted efforts to collect data for their particular area, but collection is only partial, sporadic, and not centralized and the members admit that they themselves do not have the expertise to know how to design valid evaluation systems or produce a meaningful in-depth analysis of the data. While certain data might be available from the District upon request, there is no plan to request that data or follow up on data questions that arise from the project's annual report.
   What is clear is that during the project the proposed interventions have had a limited but positive impact on student academic indicators in each of the four areas measured: retention, drop rate, successful course completion, and transfer. In this respect, with regard to Objective 1.1., the Title III project can point to some improvement

and can report to the Department of Education that it has made measurable progress in improving academic indicators. The *Year 4 Annual Report of Student Outcomes*, released in January 2013, and the related *Summary of Findings—Years 1-4*, also produced by Learning Partnerships, reveal that despite certain successes year-to-year, overall college retention has actually declined during the five-year grant period. Most disturbingly, student performance indicators for African American students, Merritt's largest student sub-group, have also declined. These findings throw into question the project's original assumption that the proposed Title III interventions would have the combined effect of significantly improving indicators in the four target areas.

Summary of Title III Student Outcomes Data from Annual Report: Positive Trends and Challenges
Positive Trends:
Overall College Rates:
▪ Some progress was made in each of the four areas measured
▪ Overall college retention was slightly better in Year 4 as compared to the previous year.
▪ The college has met or exceeded its target for decreasing the course drop rate.
▪ The successful course completion rate has been incrementally improving since the start of the grant; Year 4 marked the first year that this indicator exceeded the baseline, indicating a trend in a positive direction.
▪ During Year 1 and Year 2 of the grant, the college achieved its target for increasing the percentage of students who transfer (note: it did not, however, achieve the targeted numbers set).
Basic Skills Rates:
▪ Basic skills indicators have consistently exceeded the 5-year target for 3 indicators (retention, drop rate, and SSC).
▪ The Basic Skills student retention rate is now on par with the overall college retention rate.
▪ The course drop rate for Basic Skills students in both English and mathematics has been nearly cut in half (from 57% to 30%) and is nearing the rate of the overall college (25% in Year 4).
▪ The successful course completion rate for basic skills students has improved significantly from the baseline and, in Year 4, was just five percentage points lower than the overall college rate.
Challenges and Concerns:
Overall College Rates:
▪ While the overall college retention rate increased slightly in Year 4, from 51% in Year III to 54% in Year 4, it still remains: a) below the original baseline of 56%; and b) at the same level as Year I of the grant (Year 1 = 54%). This means that <u>during the Title III project overall college retention at Merritt actually got worse than it was prior to the grant</u> and, despite various ups and downs, has basically remained static—there appears to be no measurable improvement since Year I.
▪ While the college has exceeded its goal for reducing the course drop rate, which is great, a closer, <u>year-to-year analysis shows that for the last two years the overall drop rate has steadily increased</u>, indicating a negative trend that threatens to erase initial achievements in this area.
▪ While the successful course completion rate continues to improve incrementally, the <u>college is not on track in terms of meeting its target</u> for the five year project (Year 4=35%; Target=31%).
▪ No system has been put in place to track transfer of Merritt students to the UC or CSU systems or to private colleges since the elimination of the state tracking function two years ago.
▪ No data was collected during Year 3 and Year 4 of the project on how many Merritt students are transfer-ready. There is no way to know, therefore, whether the college is actually achieving its mission-central goal of preparing students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities.
Basic Skills Rates:
▪ <u>Basic Skills retention is at exactly the same level</u> in Year 4 as in Year 1 of the grant.
▪ For Basic Skills English students, the <u>drop rate increased</u> by 5 points from Year 3 to Year 4.
▪ For Basic Skills mathematics students, the <u>drop rate increased</u> by 3 points from Year 3 to Year 4.
Equity Data:
▪ African American students (35% of Merritt pop.), are significantly less successful than other student sub-groups.
▪ African American student success indicators (retention, drop rate, course completion) have actually <u>grown worse</u> during the 5-year grant period, for both gateway and basic skills students.
▪ Hispanic/Latino students are the second largest group; their success indicators are on par with the college average but have <u>also declined or remained level</u> over the last five years.
▪ The lack of transfer readiness data and transfer location data makes it impossible to measure equity issues related to transfer, such as how many students from a particular sub-group actually transfer to a 4-year school or university.

During the External Evaluation Site Visit, the faculty, staff and administrators interviewed were well aware of the data issues and expressed their frustration. As one faculty member put it: "We are creating a lot of data but we need to be more skillful in looking at it." Another team member said, "We just have to corral our data." The new president agreed, stating that the college needs someone to do a deeper analysis. The other members of the Administrative Leadership Team concurred, pointing out their concern about the drop in indicators for African American students in particular, the need for more detailed assessment data to inform teaching, and also the need to "use data to inform practice," given the push on the part of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to demand greater accountability with the implementation of the Student Success Act.

Possible solutions posed included: hiring an external facilitator to lead the dialogue on student performance indicators; looking at indicators by discipline, course, and level; funding adjuncts to spearhead data-driven interventions; using basic skills initiative funds to create a math jam summer bridge program; providing faculty with assessment results at the beginning of the term so that they can adjust instruction accordingly; and investigating successful models from other colleges, such as the STEPS program at Long Beach City College. As of the date of this report, however, there was no firm plan or timeline to move forward with any of these ideas.

Recommendations:
- Act now to develop an interim plan to address the college's most immediate campus-based research needs and conduct a deeper analysis of and dialogue about the data generated by the Title III project.
- Request and review disaggregated data for all Title III interventions and for core courses and programs.
- Analyze data trends over time, not just by year, for all Title III interventions and four target indicators.
- Conduct a comparative analysis of Title III student success rates with college-wide rates and rates produced by other campus initiatives to identify high-impact interventions for institutionalization.
- Integrate Title III data into institutional planning at both the micro and macro level.

> **Objective 1.2:** By September 2009, Merritt's Office of Research and Planning will disseminate an annual report of student outcomes for the college's core academic performance indicators in all four key areas to measure institutional effectiveness.

Overview of Progress on Objective 1.2:
Merritt College has already achieved the original requirement of this objective, which was to disseminate an annual report of student outcomes by the end of the first grant year (September 2009). Objective 1.2 is included here because of the charge to create an "annual" report, which makes it relevant to all of the grant years.

Merritt has continued to collect data on all four academic performance indicators selected for the grant.   The *Year 4 Annual Report of Student Outcomes* was published in January 2013. Merritt will continue to contract with the same firm to work on the final report for Year 5. A schedule is already in place to complete the *Year 5 Annual Report of Student Outcomes* by November 2013 and present the findings at the January 2014 faculty day.

This year the report findings were not only made available to the college community in a written format, as they have been in the past, but they were presented to and discussed by the Title III team and the college's administrative leadership team. In addition, this year, for the first time, the report findings were presented to the College Council, a new strategy aimed at circumventing the resistance to the report exhibited by certain department chairs when the findings were presented to the departments last year.

According to the President, the findings from the report will be discussed at the Merritt College faculty and staff retreat, planned for the end of May 2013. At this time, however, there is no plan in place to continue to track student performance data for the four indicators once the grant is finished next September. There is also no formal follow-up strategy for continuing the discussion of academic performance indicator data, particularly as it relates to individual courses, programs, and academic pathways. As discussed in the interview with the Administrative Leadership Team, given the resistance to change on the part of certain faculty members and department chairs and the requirements of the union, such discussions may require an outside facilitator and careful planning. For this reason, this facilitated discussion, if implemented, would probably not take place

Key Achievements:
- *Year 4 Annual Report of Student Outcomes* published in January 2013.
- Report findings presented to and discussed by campus leadership team and other key stakeholders.

Key Challenges:
- The *Year 4 Annual Report of Student Outcomes* raised some important questions about negative trends in student outcomes data and discrepancies in some of the baseline data that need to be addressed.
- There is no plan in place to conduct further investigation into emerging data trends and analyze and interpret data collected to date for the student outcomes report and through other vehicles.
- There is no formal assessment of the student outcomes data in relation to other project data.

Recommendations:
- Put plan in place to conduct deeper analysis of student performance data and other project data.
- Review student academic performance data in the context of other project assessments conducted.
- Address discrepancies in baseline data identified in the *Year 4 Annual Report of Student Outcomes*.
- Consider developing a plan to continue to collect data for the four target areas after the grant's end.

GOAL 2: Discussion of Findings

> **Objective 2.2:** By September 2010, based on the external evaluator's written recommendations, the college will create a new Developmental Education Program (DEP) organizational structure.

Overview of Progress on Objective 2.2:

Objective 2.2, which called for the creation of a new Developmental Education Program (DEP) organizational structure based on the external evaluator's written recommendations, has essentially been achieved. In Year III of the grant, the Title III team developed a blueprint for the delivery of Developmental Education for the campus, which it titled Foundation for College Success (FOCUS).   The new model called for an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to addressing basic skills education across the curriculum.

This approach was a direct outgrowth of the participation of several Title III team members in the Kellogg Summer Institute on best practices in developmental education. It also was a response to the observations and recommendations of developmental education expert Hunter Boylan, who, as part of the Title III grant, visited Merritt in the early stages of the grant and made a formal assessment of the college's developmental education delivery system and specific suggestions for its improvement.

Objective 2.2 continues to be reviewed as part of the External Evaluation Site Visit in order to document the college's progress in implementing this objective over time. The FOCUS model calls for widespread institutional change in how the needs of educationally underprepared students are addressed at Merritt. Not surprisingly, the full implementation of the model will take time and require ongoing dialogue and efforts to raise the awareness of faculty and administrators, to help them adjust to a new paradigm for integrated developmental education.

To date, the emphasis has been on integrating basic skills across the curriculum. At the annual Title III retreat held last fall, the team discussed the possibility of recommending the creation of a separate Developmental Education Department at Merritt, in part as strategy to overcome institutional resistance to change on the part of certain faculty and department chairs. From the April 2013 site visit interviews, it is clear that this idea of creating a separate department is still on the minds of certain faculty and team members, however, given the organizational culture, this would need to be a long-term goal and is unlikely to happen during the grant period.

Instead, the team is focused on continuing to support individual teachers who want to work on strengthening their instructional practice, continuing to educate department chairs on the importance of integrating basic skills across the curriculum and aligning basic skills and gateway classes, and, where possible, introducing accelerated developmental education classes to help students move more quickly into transfer/career track classes. The team is also focused on promoting awareness about specific interventions introduced through the Title III project (i.e., embedded tutors, integrative learning assignments, Learning Communities) which could benefit learning and instruction. The FOCUS team's recent progress in several key areas is outlined below:

Use of Data to Improve Instruction and Learning in Basic Skills and Gateway Courses:

Both the math and the English department have started to use the annual student outcomes data collected by the Title III project to evaluate and strengthen their courses, in spite of ongoing resistance on the part of some faculty within each of these departments. Individual instructors for the basic skill English classes, for example, report using the annual TIII student outcomes report as a yardstick by which to measure the success of students in their class. As one faculty member pointed out, she aims to keep her basic skills class retention level on par with the overall college retention rate (prior to the grant basic skills English retention rates were much lower).

The math department has also seen a shift in awareness and practice due to the emerging body of data gathered through the Title III project. Over the past year, due to the Title III data, the math department has had to confront the fact that student success rates in basic skills math classes are very low. This has caused the math department to have a dialogue about content and teaching approaches for the first time in over a decade. Since reviewing the Title III data, the math department has introduced the following intervention.

- Hiring a new full-time tenure track math position for fall 2013, to replace recently retired instructors
- Requesting a decrease in class size for basic skills course, asking that classes be capped at 45 students
- Requesting that students who cannot afford to buy the required text use copies of the text in the library or the Learning Center (provided by Title III)
- Utilizing Smart-room technology in some courses
- Engaging in dialogues among the math department regarding the content of basic skills courses
- Discussing adopting a combined text for math 201/2013 and, possibly, Math 250/253
- Discussing developing a tutor training manual to help address tutor deficiencies in basic math skills

Strategies for Strengthening Instruction and Learning:

Curriculum Alignment and Enrichment: The Title III team continues to focus on aligning and strengthening the curriculum. One of the ongoing issues is the gap between basic skills and gateway transfer/career classes. According to project faculty, more communication is needed about academic pathways, as well as more support in helping students progress along those pathways. In response, the English Department, is exploring offering a basic writing class in formats connected to popular student majors, such as Allied Health. Other ideas under discussion include introducing personal development curriculum aligned with academic curriculum (i.e., *Powerful Learner* and/or *Habits of Mind*), which deal with the effects of trauma on learning and focus on the affective domain of learning and becoming a successful student. This is particularly important as many students come to Merritt with special needs (i.e., learning gaps, language issues), having had their education interrupted and having experienced violence and/or trauma in their family and/or community—all factors that impact learning.

FOCUS Summer Bridge Program: The FOCUS team is currently working with the Student Services Division to plan the second annual FOCUS Summer Bridge Program, to introduce local high schools students to Merritt. Last year, the Summer Bridge program set a goal to recruit 50 students but ended up enrolling only 28 students; 26 finished and 23 enrolled in classes in the fall 2012 semester. Of the 23 that enrolled, 12 entered a Learning Community offered through either through the Title III project, the Basic Skills Initiative, or the Puente program.

This year the team plans to increase its target from 50 to 100 students by expanding its outreach efforts. To this end, it has formed a recruitment group, HAWK (High Achievement, Wisdom, and Knowledge), to gather together all of the different groups that do outreach at Merritt and recruit as one coordinated team. The team has also partnered with the college's Basic Skills Initiative, which will cover the cost of the instructors and books.

The target population for the 2013 Summer Bridge program is newly graduated high school students from five feeder schools in Oakland and two high schools in the neighboring cities of Emeryville and Berkeley. Participating high school students will apply to Merritt College online and then attend orientation as part of the Summer Bridge program, which is scheduled to start in June. The seven-day program will serve as a refresher for core subjects such as English and math and prepare students for the assessment required for college enrollment.

This year, based on an evaluation of last year's program, the team has added the following features:
1) New Assessment Preparation Booklet (with sample tests)
2) Technology Workshop (how to enroll online, how to use assisted learning software, etc.)
3) Financial Opportunity Workshop (working with the college's grant-funded Financial Opportunity Center)
4) Employment Opportunity Workshop (showing students that they can both go to school and work)
5) Parent Orientation Workshop (to be held at end of program, will include financial aid info and campus tour).

The team is also talking about how to better track the progression of Summer Bridge students as they move through the system at Merritt, in order to help evaluate the long-term impact of this intervention. Currently, the college has data on how many Summer Bridge students enrolled in classes in the following fall but there is no information compiled on how many were retained and how well they did in their classes. Further student performance data could be useful in helping the team fine-tune the summer program in the future.

Learning Communities: The Title III project has allowed the college to pilot and test several different kinds of Learning Communities and so far this intervention has been largely successful (see details under Objective 2.4).

Embedded Tutoring: The FOCUS team has also been instrumental in pushing for greater support for students in basic skills classes. One strategy that has been working well is assigning embedded tutors to the Title III Learning Communities and to key basic skills math and English classes. As of this report, there are a total of seven embedded tutors working in these target classes.

Several of the faculty interviewed during the site visit praised the embedded tutoring component as a successful intervention, pointing out its positive impact on student learning and calling for this aspect of the Title III project to be institutionalized and expanded. As an English department instructor observed, "The impact I have seen on my own classes is significant, so we need to scale it up."

A basic skills math instructor agreed, explaining its impact on the math department as follows: "The aspect of the FOCUS program which many instructors in the math department utilized was the embedded tutor. The instructors I have talked to have all spoken highly of the tutor and how this gave students more venues to learn the material and prepare for quizzes and exams. Although the success rates in basic skills courses are very low, the few sections involving embedded tutors (i.e., pre-algebra, elementary algebra, and intermediate algebra) in which I was involved had higher retention rates." Unfortunately, he points out, there is only limited funding from the Title III grant to provide such services and this funding is slated to disappear once the grant ends: "The embedded tutor idea has not been institutionalized, so we can only use them for a limited number of courses."

Integrative Learning Assignments: Another intervention that has shown great promise in terms of generating participation and enthusiasm among faculty and students alike is the new Integrative Learning Assignment. Merritt was introduced to this idea last spring by presenters from Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington, who had used integrative assignments as a means of extending the impact of the more labor and cost-intensive Learning Community model. Integrative learning is also being promoted by other educational associations nationwide, such as the National (*Insert name of conference that Title III sent Stacey to…).*

During the report period, the Title III project introduced a college-wide focus for the Integrative Learning Assignment: Food and Nutrition. A total of 17 classes participated, across nine disciplines. According to one of the deans, instructors embraced this as a less threatening and complicated way to get involved in collaborative teaching than being involved with Learning Communities. A Twitter and Facebook account was set up for the integrative assignment and, in April, students from participating classes showed the results of their projects in a campus-wide forum attended by more than 250 students and faculty. One instructor had students in his Elementary Algebra class use monitor their fast food intake and calculate the calories, applying their math skills to developing a personalized healthy eating plan. He reported he had never seen students so excited about a math homework assignment before. Next semester Merritt plans to continue the Integrated Learning Assignment with a new topic selected by faculty and students.

Faculty Training: The FOCUS team is also committed to supporting professional development in basic skills and Learning Communities (LCs). Ultimately, the goal is to create an expanding cadre of instructors who are trained in the latest developmental education techniques and could teach basic skills and gateway classes, creating greater alignment between these course levels and developing accelerated pathways and LCs where possible.

To this end, in October 2012, the FOCUS team began offering monthly faculty inquiry groups. During these brown bag sessions, faculty members were invited to reflect on their teaching practice and share lessons learned. This has proved to be an effective and no-cost way to bring together faculty from different disciplines to enrich and refresh their teaching practice and improve classroom learning at Merritt.

During the report period, Title III Learning Communities (LC) Coordinator also continued to hold the popular monthly faculty discussion meetings specifically devoted to examining Learning Communities practices and strategies. At each meeting, one campus Learning Community team gives a short presentation on how their Learning Community is going, including "lessons learned" and challenges. Faculty members then discuss teaching techniques, classroom management, and logistical issues related to teaching in a Learning Community.

The LC Coordinator also provides individualized support to those interested in teaching in a Title III LC. Once Title III LC faculty have been identified/self-identified, they meet with the Coordinator to develop a theme and linked (integrative) assignments and review the Title III LC requirements (SEP, Evergreen Survey, standardized syllabus). The Coordinator meets with them several times during the semester to monitor progress.

Key Achievements:
- Title III team is continuing to work with faculty to strengthen basic skills instruction.
- Accelerated pathways in English are now being created for basic skills students at Merritt.
- A range of student supports are now being implemented for basic skills students, including a FOCUS Summer Bridge program, math coaching and writing labs, and embedded tutors in all FOCUS classes.
- Data generated by the Title III project is being used to inform program review and improve basic skills.
- Ongoing training provided to expand faculty awareness of and skills in developmental education.

Key Challenges:
- Cultivating faculty "buy-in" for basic skills and gateway course alignment and instructional innovations.
- Making the institutional shift to data-driven decision-making.
- Fostering a culture of faculty inquiry.

Recommendations:
- Continue to work with department chairs and college leadership to review student success data and build support for the innovations developed through the Title III FOCUS component.
- Continue to reach a wider faculty through FOCUS-led faculty inquiry groups and LC training.
- Continue to document the impact of specific outreach and support efforts, such as the FOCUS Summer Bridge program and the embedded tutors in basic skills classes.

Objective 2.4: By September 2011, the Title III Learning Communities (LCs) Team will enroll students in the basic skills and gateway Learning Communities, using control and treatment groups and serving 120 students annually.

Overview of Progress on Objective 2.4:

Objective 2.4 has been achieved: the Title III basic skills and gateway Learning Communities were officially launched in September 2011 and enroll 100-120 students/year. This objective continues to be monitored during the External Evaluation Site Visit in order to record successes and challenges in implementing this component.

During the report period, the Title III team completed its third semester (in Fall 2012) and entered its fourth semester (in Spring 2013) of offering Learning Communities. The project is continuing to test three kinds of year-long Learning Communities: Basic Skills (FOCUS), Gateway, and First Year Experience (FYE). The project has also developed and launched a FOCUS Summer Bridge Program to help recruit and prepare new high school graduates to enter the Title III Learning Communities (LCs) and other Merritt classes in the fall.

For the spring 2013 semester, there were two gateway transfer course communities offered: 1) English 5-Critial Thinking and SOC-Introduction to Sociology; and 2) English 1B-Composition and Writing and MLAT-Survey of Latin American Film. Together, these two LCs served a total of 59 students (46 linked; 13 unlinked).

The academic performance data for the students in these various Title III Learning Communities is being tracked, both by the District Institutional Research Office and by the Title III academic faculty and counselors. In addition, feedback from students participating in the LCs is being collected through the Evergreen State College Survey, which is administered every semester and then used to refine instructional strategies for the next semester. By the end of the spring 2013 semester, the college will have two full years of academic performance data and student feedback data for the LCs and can begin to identify common responses and trends over time.

[NOTE: Data collected consists only of general student success data for the LC and FYE participants; due to lack of support for campus-based research, there is no comparative analysis being conducted or disaggregated data being collected and analyzed at this time. As a result, the data presented only provides limited information on the effectiveness of this particular intervention and does not help the institution understand if this intervention strategy is actually reaching and/or truly serving those student sub-populations who, statistically, are most at risk.]

To date, feedback from both student and faculty has been largely positive. Student responses from the Evergreen Survey, which is administered at the end of each semester, indicate that students generally had a good experience in the LC, although some have expressed the desire for the LC courses to be more linked. The LC faculty and counselors also expressed frustration with the ongoing registration issues that have allowed some students to register for only one of the linked classes in the LC. In the words of one LC instructor: "It is not really a true learning community."

Nonetheless, all faculty members interviewed during the site visit felt that those students who attended both linked classes (i.e., participated in the "true" Learning Community experience) benefited from the individualized attention and extra support. As one LC instructor observed: "(LC) students persist and are more engaged."

Another instructor spoke of a positive experience pairing Intermediate Algebra with AFRAM 19 in a Learning Community entitled Graphs, Race, and Social Inequities: "Even though the two courses may seem unnaturally paired, the regular meetings among the instructors had a positive effect on student retention. Groups formed naturally among the students who were taking both courses and the success rate in the Math 203 course was higher than in other Math 203 sections."

As the Title III project draws to a close, it is likely that the LCs will be recommended as an intervention to consider for institutionalization. However, two factors—cost and registration issues—may limit the number and variety of LCs offered. According to the LC Coordinator, once the Title III grant ends, there will be no funding for faculty to teach in LCs, which are, by definition, very labor intensive and require extra planning hours on the part of the faculty involved: "It is just not scalable." There will also be no funds to support the LCs with enrichment activities and materials, such as money for fieldtrips or copies of textbooks to be placed in the library for use by students who cannot afford to buy the often expensive textbooks required for class.

Regarding the registration issue, the college cannot at this point control the registration process, which allows additional students to enroll in only one of the linked LC classes. To date, only one Title III LC (English 5-Critical Thinking and Introduction to Sociology, offered in the Spring 2013 semester) has been successful in maintaining a fully linked enrollment and this was due to the fact that additional sections of these classes were offered at the same time, giving non-linked students another option for taking courses required for their degree. While Merritt belongs to a District-wide task force that is assigned to look at this issue across all four Peralta colleges, at this time no progress has been made in reaching a solution to this common issue.

Finally, the LC and related FYE-LC data seems to suggest that student choice is also playing a factor in LC enrollment patterns. While LC and FYE students may appreciate the additional support in the first semester of college, by the second semester they are often more comfortable and ready to move into regular classes. In addition, due to economic factors and work and family demands, students are eager to move on with completing the required courses for their desired degree or certificate and do not see the benefit of taking the additional course that might be offered as part of a linked Learning Community if it is not directly degree applicable. Consequently, there is a trend toward lower LC enrollment in the spring semester.

All of these issues warrant further investigation and discussion by the Title III team and college administration. At this point, however, it appears that if the college decided to institutionalize the Title III LCs it will be on a limited basis and registration and enrollment issues will need to be revisited and resolved.

Key Achievements:
- Three kinds of Title III Learning Communities continue to be offered and tested over time.
- All Learning Communities now have the following features: standardized syllabi, integrative (linked) assignments, embedded tutors, and a Student Educational Plan (SEP) requirement for all students.
- Professional development workshops and discussion sessions on the topic of Learning Communities and Integrative Learning have been well received and well attended by faculty and are resulting in new approaches to instruction on campus.

Key Challenges:
- Registration issues persist related to counselors at other Peralta colleges overriding LC co-requisites and registering students in only one of the two linked courses that form a LC.
- Students are eager to complete degree requirements and may not see the benefits of the LC experience.

Recommendations:
- Continue to support faculty in adopting the Learning Communities model and integrated instruction.
- Explore scheduling options to eliminate certain registration issues and build the LC model at Merritt.
- Consider modifying the format of the LC component to
- Promote the benefits of LCs in the Summer Bridge Program and campus Orientation sessions.
- Analyze which types of LCs and which aspects of the LC component have been most successful.
- Identify future funding sources for those aspects of the LC component recommended for institutionalization.

GOAL 3: Discussion of Findings

> **Objective 3.1:** By September 2009, a campus-based Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), staffed by a .50 FTE coordinator position, will offer an annual schedule of flexible, varied, and responsive professional development activities for faculty and staff.

Overview of Progress on Objective 3.1:

The status of Objective 3.1 has been changed from "Achieved," as it was marked in the May 2012 report, to "Partially Achieved." The reason for this is a change in the fulfillment of the staffing function. Shortly after the March 2012 site visit, Dr. Arja McCray, the Merritt faculty member who had been newly assigned to serve as the Coordinator for the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), resigned due to other professional commitments. As of the date of the September site visit, this position had remained unfilled, severely limiting the number of hours that the center is open to faculty, although it is still used periodically for various faculty meetings and trainings.

During the September 2012 site visit, the Title III team indicated that it expected to fill the position that fall and had actually identified a qualified adjunct faculty member for the job. This plan fell through, however, and so, for the last six months there has been no coordinator for the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC).

As a result, the center is no longer open on a regular schedule for faculty use, although it is still used for faculty meetings. There is also no formal schedule of professional development activities being offered through the Center at this time. The professional development function of the grant is still being addressed partially through the FOCUS faculty inquiry groups and the monthly Learning Communities discussion sessions. Title III also helped co-sponsor a January 2013 workshop on institutional learning outcomes, as well as smaller workshops on SLOs, which were held in the college's Learning Center, given the Teaching and Learning Center's closure.

The resolution of this issue remains a concern in that the TLC Coordinator position was one of the key positions recommended in the original grant for institutionalization. Without this position in place, the TLC remains a shell and cannot maximize its full potential to help transform teaching at Merritt through providing ongoing opportunities for faculty dialogue and learning. An important opportunity to maximize the wide-spread and long-term impact of the grant is thus jeopardized.

Achievements:
- Campus-based faculty development workshops and sessions offered until recently and well-received.
- Professional development continuing on a reduced but regular basis through monthly "brown bags."
- Teaching and Learning Center fully equipped and open on a limited basis, depending on staffing.

Challenges:
- Finding a way to institutionalize the Teaching and Learning Center Coordinator position.
- Expanding the hours of the Teaching and Learning Center.
- Reinstituting a full schedule of professional development activities.

Recommendations:
- Identify strategy for institutionalizing the Teaching and Learning Center Coordinator position.
- Identify ways to continue to offer training in priority areas identified by faculty and staff.

> **Objective 3.3:** By September 2013, 100% of Merritt's faculty will be trained in and have written plans for Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) Assessment at the course and program level.

Overview of Progress on Objective 3.3:

One of the priorities of the Title III project has been to provide trainings on Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), with the goal of having 100% of Merritt's faculty trained in SLOs in order to meet 2013 state accreditation requirements. To date, the Title III team has developed a standardized syllabi format to help Merritt faculty members integrate SLOs into their courses. The Teaching and Learning Center has also held trainings to show faculty how to enter their SLO assessments into the required Task Stream application.

According to the college's SLO Coordinator, who is part of the Title III team and also heads the college's SLO committee, the college is on track with this objective. The Title III project has helped to accelerate this

process by providing the funding for a resource consultant to work with the SLO committee and provide assistance on this task to any faculty or departments that required it.

To date, almost all (95%) of Merritt courses now have written outcomes (SLOs) stating intentions for student learning. Nearly three-fourths (70%) of the programs at Merritt have undergone assessment. Assessment is an ongoing and time-consuming process, as faculty and administrators take the time to review what students are actually learning in each course and program and measure the individual course or program's effectiveness. At the time of the site visit in early April, however, the campus SLO committee had a deadline to complete program assessments by the end of the month for instructional programs that want to be listed in the fall 2013 college catalog. This final push should help ensure that the college is able to accomplish Objective 3.3 well in advance of the target date of next September 2013.

Key Achievements:
  ▪ Individualized training in course and program assessment offered to faculty and departments.
  ▪ Ongoing workshops in institutional assessment and course and program SLOs offered at Flex Day and through the college's Learning Center.

Key Challenges:
  ▪ SLOs still need to be fully integrated at the course, program, and institutional levels.

Recommendations:
  ▪ Continue to provide SLO training for instructors and departments still needing support in this area.

Objective 3.4: By September 2013, Merritt will have awarded 24 Campus Innovation Mini Grants to increase faculty and staff engagement and student success.

Overview of Progress on Objective 3.4:

To date, the Title III project has distributed 14 mini grants and is on track toward its goal of awarding 24 grants by the end of Year V (September 2013). During the report period, an additional mini grant competition was held in March 2013, which generated 11 applications. Depending on how many are selected for funding, the Title III project may hold an additional round in September, in order to meet the grant objective.

The Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) Coordinator is technically responsible for coordinating the mini grant component but, as this position remains unfilled, this responsibility was assigned to the campus librarian, a former mini-grant recipient. This round the Title III team tried to get more applications from classified staff, resulting in two staff applications. Application topics have covered areas of instruction from child development to history, chemistry, and English and many have featured innovative uses of social media and new technologies.

During the site visit, the coordinator observed: "In a time of cuts in resources, Title III has provided funding for faculty development." He also pointed out that in several cases this led not only to innovative solutions but also to cost-saving measures for different departments. His own mini grant, for example, presented a proposal that would enable the computers in the Merritt library to share a single server. Through the mini grant he added one Thin Client and four extra computer stations with one hour times, thus expanding the availability of this important educational resource tool for Merritt students.

Key Achievements:
  ▪ A total of 14 grants have been funded during the first four years of the grant and 11 applications are currently pending.

Key Challenges:
  ▪ Encouraging both faculty and staff participation in the Campus Innovation Mini Grant competition.
  ▪ Establishing effective guidelines and operating procedures for the mini grant process.

Recommendations:
  ▪ Consider the mini grant component for institutionalization.
  ▪ Increase awareness about the contributions to date of the Campus Innovation Mini Grant competition.

GOAL 4: Discussion of Findings

> **Objective 4.2:** By September 2011, the Title III First Year Experience (FYE) Team will enroll students in a year-long, transfer-oriented First Year Experience Program, using control and treatment groups and serving a total of 60 students annually.

Overview of Progress on Objective 4.2:

   Technically, Objective 4.2 has already been achieved. The Title III projected launched the First Year Experience (FYE) program at the end of Year III of the project and the FYE program is now in its fourth full semester of operation and continues to go well, according to staff reports. The FYE program has also exceeded its goal, enrolling 196 students in FY 2011-2012 and 176 students in FY 2012-2013—approximately three times the original target of 60 students annually. (Note: Even accounting for the fact that about 10 percent of these students may be duplicates from the previous semester, the enrollment figures still exceed the original target.

   This high enrollment can be directly attributed to the combined outreach efforts of the FYE program staff who have promoted the FYE program through the college's Orientation and Summer Bridge initiatives. Most of the counseling faculty who were involved in the research and development of the FYE program at Merritt are still involved with the ongoing implementation and they maintain strongly dedicated to serving the students participating in the FYE Learning Communities. During the report period, two of the counselors taught in the FYE Learning Communities, working with the academic faculty to develop aligned assignments.

   The FYE team has also helped strengthen the program by establishing a career planning guest speaker series. Last spring the series focused on environmental jobs; this year it focused on food and nutrition, as part of the campus-wide effort to introduce Integrative Learning Assignments across the curriculum. One of the counselors is committed to taking Title III FYE LC students, who are mainly first generation college students, on a campus tour of a local 4-year university, to spur their interest in transfer and advanced study. The counseling faculty has also introduced a lunchtime club for FYE students, whose courses are scheduled back-to-back with a short lunch break, to build cohesiveness and help students with practical tasks such as filling out financial aid and scholarship applications. Short workshops are also offered on topics such as domestic violence, staying in school, etc.

   During the site interview, the members of the FYE team, like the other members of the larger Title III team, expressed concern about the lack of a researcher to design and conduct a multi-faceted evaluation for the Learning Communities and to track cohorts over time. A multi-faceted evaluation is important because of the complexity of the project and the different types of Learning Communities offered. Now that the college is in its fourth semester of offering Learning Communities (both FYE and basic skills/gateway), the faculty fears that the college may be losing a valuable opportunity to do an in-depth analysis of what is working and not working with the FYE and other Title III Learning Communities at Merritt.

   This is essential in order to understand the trends in enrollment, retention, and student performance. The FYE counseling staff has set up a system for collecting bask information on annual FYE enrollment figures and indicators for three of the project's target indicators: course completion, drop rate, and retention. This has proved valuable in providing an initial snapshot of the program. However, more is needed, in terms of both the analysis of data trends and the type of data collected. For example, the data shows that FYE enrollment dropped by 10 percent from FY 2011-2012 to FY 2012-2013. Enrollment is also much lower in the spring semester for both years and also the number of students who stay both linked courses (the "true" Learning Community) is gradually declining. Why?

   In addition, student performance data needs to be compared for those enrolled in one of the linked courses and in both of the linked courses in order to see if there is any difference in terms of success rates. Similarly, it might be helpful to compare the success rates of the students in the FYE LCs with those in the Title III basic skills and gateway communities, to see if there is any difference or notable patterns that emerge. Finally, there is no disaggregated data for either the FYE or basic skills/gateway LCs. While the FYE staff is looking at drop rate broken out by primary language (native English speakers vs. ESL speakers), there is no demographic data immediately available regarding the race, ethnicity, or gender of the participating students. There is no way to know, therefore, if the FYE intervention has truly been effective in improving educational outcomes for the college's most underprepared and underperforming students, which was the justification for the program in the first place. While much of this data is available through the District Office of Institutional Research, it is beyond the scope and expertise of the already overextended project staff to track and analyze data at this level. Consequently, Merritt is missing the opportunity to learn as much as it possibly can from the Title III project.

Another major concern for the FYE team is the ongoing issue of registration. While the initial technical issue of how to link classes has now been resolved, there is still the issue of counselors at other colleges overriding the co-requisite and enrolling students in one of the linked classes in order to meet graduation requirements. Due to these registration problems, each year approximately 60 to 65 percent of the students enrolled in the FYE are enrolled in only one of the linked FYE LC courses and therefore not participating in the "true" Learning Community experience. Furthermore, returning second year students have been allowed to enroll in the FYE LCs, which, technically, were for new students (first year college students) only.

As a result, the Title III Learning Communities, including the FYE LCs, follow the "olive" model, with a common pool of students enrolled in both classes, but individual students enrolled in each of the two classes who are not enrolled in the second class. This makes it difficult to fully implement the intervention as originally planned and makes it complicated to measure the impact and effectiveness of the intervention and may possibly be undermining student learning and retention.

Key Achievements:
- FYE Learning Communities successfully launched.
- Evergreen State College student survey introduced in FYE and other Title III Learning Communities.
- Integrated assignments introduced in FYE Learning Communities.
- Career speaker series and campus tours of 4-year universities introduced in FYE Learning Communities.
- FYE community created through lunchtime clubs and student workshops.

Key Challenges:
- District-wide admissions practices continue to present issues in registering students for linked classes.
- In-depth comparative research and evaluation is needed to more accurately assess program effectiveness.

Recommendations:
- Continue to work with the other Peralta colleges to resolve issues with registration for FYE cohorts.
- Develop a multi-faceted evaluation plan to access student success within FYE cohorts.
- Develop a plan to institutionalize successful aspects of the FYE program.

Objective 4.3: By September 2012, based on the external evaluator's written recommendations, the college will strengthen institutional systems for the delivery of support services for students (i.e., assessment, orientation, counseling and advising, financial aid, transfer, tutorial services).

Overview of Progress on Objective 4.3:

Objective 4.3 is marked as "partially achieved" because, while the Student Support Services Implementation (SSSI) team has made important progress in improving the delivery of student support service in several of the six areas identified for improvement, as of September 2012 there are certain areas that are still under development or are facing challenges due to district or state budget cuts or policies and practices. Progress during the report period is outlined below for each of the six areas targeted by the grant:

Orientation:

Orientation continues to be one of the most successful components of the Title III project. The college now has a regular schedule of orientations for new students. These orientation sessions are also now mandatory for all who are interested in matriculating at Merritt and students cannot sign up for assessment until they have attended orientation; exceptions must be authorized by the college.

In addition, the orientation is delivered in a centralized and standardized format; categorical students must now go through the general college orientation before attending any specialized orientations for their particular program. The emphasis across the board is on early enrollment and proper process. As the coordinator for the orientation component said, "We are excited about the fact that there is finally a systematic approach to orientation at Merritt."

During the report period, the college continued to plan and hold live orientation sessions on campus. The college now holds 20 to 25 sessions a semester, with an average of 60 students registered for each session. Participating students receive information on the matriculation process and on campus services. Representatives from the EOPS, DPS, Financial Aid, and the Library all participate, as well as counselors, when available.

As with the other areas of the project, data collection is a concern. According to the coordinator, while Merritt is tracking the attendance for the live orientation sessions, a system needs to be set up to track how many of the individuals who attend the orientation actually enroll and move through the system, from orientation to assessment to meeting with a counselor to set their educational goals to admissions and records. It would also be useful to track how many go into Learning Communities, as this is promoted through both the live orientation sessions and the Summer Bridge program. These things are not happening now due to lack of staffing.

Orientation participants already fill out an exit survey at the end of the orientation. However, there is no follow up to determine if, in retrospect, those that enrolled found the information provided through the orientation to be helpful as they navigated through the first semester of college. The first step is to redesign the exit survey form to include the attendee's phone number so that a Merritt Student Ambassador can follow up to see if the prospective student is following up with the matriculation process, answer questions, and funnel "undecided" students into the Counseling 24-College Skills course.

The coordinator is also exploring the possibility of conducting and focus group at the end of the first semester to see how those students who enrolled fared and determine whether or not the orientation was useful or could be improved in any way. The college is also looking at expanding the new student orientation from two to four hours and offering a half unit of credit to help undecided students begin to clarify their educational objectives.

While the live orientation component is thriving, the online orientation component, which was originally supposed to be developed and launched last summer, is on still under development and is proceeding in a different manner than originally planned. One of the challenges the team faced was not having the time or expertise to develop and maintain the website for the online orientation. The Vice President of Student Services, therefore, discussed Merritt's move toward mandatory orientation with the District Education Committee and District Academic Senate and it was decided that the online orientation piece would be developed by the district rather than at the college level. A sample online orientation format has been developed by the vendor hired by the District and is being piloted at Laney College first. Once the format has been revised and refined, the District will fund all of the Peralta campuses to implement the new online orientation model. Implementation is expected by fall 2014, so this piece will not be completed within the designated Title III grant period.

Finally, in addition to mandating orientation, Merritt is moving toward mandating other aspects of the matriculation process, as well, in accordance with the new guideline's from the state's Student Success Act. Now all first-time students must enroll in the Counseling 24-College Success course in their first semester and take the Counseling 57-Career Orientation course in their second semester. As part of this requirement, students will complete a Student Educational Plan (SEP) by the end of their second semester and declare a major. Over the last six months, the college has begun training the Student Ambassadors (student workers) to work with the college's counselors on following up with first-year students who are undecided about their course of study to make sure that they are enrolled in the counseling courses and have met with an academic advisor to identify and review the requirements for a major and create a Student Educational Plan (SEP).

Assessment:

Assessment is now required before a prospective student can enroll in classes. As a result, the number of students requiring assessment has increased. One of the Title III project's goals, therefore, is to increase the college's capacity to conduct assessment, making the enrollment process easier and reducing late enrollment.

Through the Title III grant, the SSSI team has worked steadily to ensure that the orientation, assessment, and counseling functions are better aligned. As a result, the college has greater control over advanced scheduling of assessments. However, it must also find ways to cope with the growing demand.

Over the last year, the assessment staff has added extra assessment sessions and added evening assessment hours for working adults in order to deal with the influx of prospective students being funneled in by the new live orientation component and Summer Bridge program. Until recently, there have been an average of 60 students going through each live orientation session and only an average of 12 students being assessed. It is imperative that the college find a way to increase its assessment capacity in order to avoid a bottleneck and boost enrollment.

To date, the primary obstacle to expanding the assessment function has been lack of available computers and lack of a designated space for assessment. During the report period, the staff came up with a plan to circumvent these obstacles to some degree by launching a campaign to encourage early enrollment in the summer months. The assessment staff now has first priority on the computer lab during non-instructional time (summer hours). There will still be a problem with processing a high volume of people in the fall but the assessment staff is hoping to be able to use the new Learning Center for this purpose. The Learning Center will have 109 computers.

Counseling and Advising:

During the report period, the two counselors hired by the Title III project continued to work with the First Year Experience (FYE) Learning Communities and the basic skills and gateway communities as assigned. During the course of the semester, the project counselors visited the LC classes to explain the Student Educational Plan (SEP) and met with students individually to help them clarify their educational goals and complete the SEP, as required of all Title III LC students. By the end of the spring 2013 semester, the counselors estimate that almost all of the LC students will have completed this requirement.

In requiring SEPs in its LCs, the Title III project is taking the lead in what will eventually become a state requirement for the overall college. Earlier this spring, in preparation for meeting the requirements of the state's new Student Success Act, Merritt's counseling department has prepared a SEP Project Proposal, which was presented to the Vice President of Student Services and the Title III Project Director on January 14, 2013. The proposal outlined what would be needed to "ramp up" the SEP component and institute a mandatory SEP requirement college-wide. The Vice President of Student Services had since taken this proposal and presented it to the District to be considered as part of the district-wide planning process for the implementation of the requirements of the state's Student Success Act.

The Merritt SEP Project Proposal identified potential obstacles to implementation. One was the ability to place a "SEP hold" to prevent a student from registering for classes if he or she had not yet completed a SEP. This issue has since been resolved on the district level.

The second issue had to do with the capacity of the counseling department to take on the extra work associated with compliance with the new SEP policy. As discussed in the previous site visit reports, the college's counseling staff is already stretched quite thin with existing responsibilities. As the college moves forward, it will need to examine how to address this issue and fold the new SEP requirement into existing Counseling Department and faculty assignments.

Financial Aid:

There were no significant developments under the area of Financial Aid during the report period. The campus Financial Aid staff members continue to be supervised by the District Office but work cooperatively with the Merritt SSI team. A Financial Aid representative now is part of the SSSI team, attending SSSI meetings and keeping the Merritt staff informed about Financial Aid deadlines and changes in Financial Aid policies. She also trains student workers to help process the increased number of Financial Aid applications that has been generated by the college's increased outreach and orientation efforts.

The college also continues to operate a Financial Opportunities Center, the purpose of which is to help students learn to manage their financial resources effectively. Financial Aid information is an integral part of the new live orientation sessions, with the goal of getting students registered early for both college and Financial Aid. The FYE Learning Community counselors also provide FYE LC students with Financial Aid information and assist students with scholarship applications during their lunchtime study club sessions.

Transfer:

The transfer component continues be a problematic for Title III project. There are two main areas of concern: 1) the lack of transfer readiness data; and 2) the lack of transfer destination data. In the first case, while transfer readiness data is available through the District Office, it has not been requested or analyzed for the duration of the Title III project due to ongoing staffing issues. Without this data, it is unclear how the Title III project or, in the future, the college can evaluate whether or not it is meeting its transfer mission as a publicly-funded institution of higher education. With regard to the transfer destination data, the college has been severely impeded in collecting full data in this area due to the elimination of the state program that tracked this information in the past. Data for transfer to the UC and CSU campuses, however, is available through the District Office. During the report period, some discussion of this data appeared to have happened internally, in response to questions posed by the Accreditation Commission. However, this data has not been provided for the annual Title III student outcomes report nor does it appear to be a topic that is scheduled to be discussed by the Title III team and administration.

To try to counteract this, the Transfer Coordinator is tracking attendance at Transfer Center events and trying, wherever possible, to do follow-up phone calls. She is also developing a survey of recent graduates to ascertain their transfer institution. In addition, she recently did a Survey Monkey assessment of students who used the Transfer Center, to get feedback on the center's services. The survey indicated that students seemed to be award of the center's resources but their primary issue was the availability of the Transfer Counselor. Student comments said that it was hard to get an appointment, and that they sometimes had to wait up to two weeks to be seen.

According to the Transfer Counselor, this lack of availability to take transfer-related appointments is primarily due to the fact that she is required to take general student counseling appointments as well, which limits the amount of time she is available to meet with students about transfer issues. While the college's other counselors can also handle transfer issues, if necessary, many students are referred to her by campus staff or by word of mouth. Her counseling load also makes it difficult for her to spend time coordinating Transfer Center functions. Fortunately, the Title III project was able to provide her with a part-time temporary assistant, but there is still more work associated with the transfer component than she is able to do in the limited time available.

One possible solution is to seek more assistance from student workers. This year, for the first time, the Transfer Center had a couple of students serve on the Transfer Center Advisory Committee. They helped to conduct an assessment of Transfer Center offerings and identify new strategies for reaching students. The Transfer Coordinator is currently working on several projects for next year, including a scholarship essay podcast, a transfer handbook to be distributed during orientation, and a new transfer workshop. She is also researching creating an online search mechanism to help students research colleges and university and decide which type of school they would be best suited to attend.

Tutorial Services:

The Merritt College Learning Center was responsible for overseeing the tutorial services component of the Title III grant. During the 2012-2013 academic year, the Learning Center recruited a total of 12 unduplicated embedded tutors to work with the basic skills and gateway Learning Communities and classes targeted by the grant. This included tutors for AFRAM (1), ASAME (6), English (8), ESL (1), Math (1), and MLAT (1). Overall, these tutors worked with a total of 6,088 students (note: figure may include duplication).

An ongoing issue for the tutoring component is finding and retaining qualified tutors. Currently, Merritt recruits tutors primarily from its upper-level students. The problem is that these students are the very ones who are getting ready to transfer. Once they are trained, they only work one or two semesters, then leave.

For certain subjects, such as math, it has been particularly hard to find qualified tutors. As one basic skills math instructor explains: "The Math Department continues to be challenged because of its small number of full-time faculty (3) and limited course offerings. With this limited number of courses, it is extremely hard to find tutors at Merritt College who know more than intermediate algebra and possibly elementary statistics. Because tutoring sources are limited, lots of students don't get the help the need to understand the concept. Usually these needy students get help 15 minutes at a time and are frustrated through the process…"

In addition, there is often an issue scheduling tutors, as they are juggling classes and homework themselves, either as upper-level community college students or as transfer students at a four-year university. Peralta recently passed a rule that all tutors who are students must be enrolled in six units, either at a community college or a four-year university. This course load requirement puts an extra constraint on students interested in tutoring.

There is also the issue of salary. Tutors are currently paid at the student worker level ($9.16/hour). The Tutoring Coordinator is planning to explore re-classifying them as Instructional Assistants, who make $14.19/hour, in order to provide more incentive to students to take the job. However, there are union issues and state policies that regulate Instructional Assistants, so re-classifying the tutorial job may not be feasible.

Another issue related to the tutorial component is figuring out a way to build in an early intervention mechanism into the tutor's role. Earlier in the Title III project, the Title III Team had explored creating a Moodle website to function as an Early Alert System. The idea was that the embedded tutors, who are working on the frontlines with students, would use Moodle to alert the instructors about students who were struggling academically. However, the project has not been successful in getting the tutors to use the Moodle system for a range of reasons (e.g., they are too busy, they do not use e-mail, they do not see this as part of the job, etc.). As of this report date, the Title III team had not identified an alternative to the now inactive Moodle Early Alert system.

Finally, the last issue with the tutorial services is the issue of data tracking. While the Title III project now has a mechanism in place to document the number of tutors recruited and the number of students served by these tutors, due to lack of staffing, it is currently not examine the performance data from the specific classes served by the embedded tutors to see if students enrolled in these classes have better educational outcomes.

Integration of Recommendations from External Evaluators:

The Student Services Division continues to work on integrating the recommendations from the site visits by Hunter Boylan and representatives from Noel-Levitz, conducted in the first half of the grant project. The Vice President of Student Services has created a multi-year matrix to track progress in implementing the recommendations from the external evaluator (Boylan, Noel-Levitz) site visits conducted in Year I of the grant.

Key Achievements:
- Live orientation session developed and launched; online orientation under development.
- Summer Bridge high school orientation session institutionalized.
- Assessment schedule expanded.
- Financial Aid information distributed more effectively to both staff and students.
- E-counseling component institutionalized.
- Campaign to get Title III LC students to develop Student Education Plans (SEPs) successfully launched.
- Tutors hired for college Learning Center and the Title III Learning Communities and basic skills classes.

Key Challenges:
- Online orientation still under development.
- Assessment capacity needs to increase to handle incoming students from expanded orientation effort.
- Elimination of state transfer-tracking system impedes collection of college transfer data.
- Lack of staff time to collect adequate data on student services interventions (orientation, transfer, SEPs).
- Student tutors resistant to using Moodle Early Alert system.

Recommendations:
- Continue to work to streamline and coordinate the various aspects of the matriculation process (orientation, assessment, counseling and advising, financial aid).
- Work with the District to implement the online orientation component as soon as possible.
- Establish a college-based system for tracking transfer readiness and transfer destination.
- Identify funding to maintain and expand the embedded tutoring and Learning Center tutoring component.

Objective 4.4: By September 2013, student participation in key matriculation procedures (i.e., assessment, orientation, counseling and advising) will increase and tutorial services will expand.

Overview of Progress on Objective 4.4:

The Title III team is currently in progress with Objective 4.4 and the Student Services Division staff has already done a preliminary baseline analysis of student usage of services. It now must set up a system to start comparing progress to date with baseline figures and targets in the original grant and to track student usage of key matriculation services.

It is anticipated that, by the end of Year 5, the efforts that are currently underway to improve and coordinate student services and tutoring will have a direct result in more students served and students being served more efficiently and effectively. The ultimate impact of these efforts will not be measurable until these interventions are farther along. Once again, this points to the need for support in campus-based research function. Expertise is needed to help staff design ways to track the changes in the levels of student participation in key matriculation procedures that occurred during the grant and in period following the grant, in order to show the actual impact of Title III in strengthening the delivery of key matriculation services at Merritt.

Recommendations:
- Set up system for tracking student usage of key matriculation services.
- Compare usage figures to the baseline and targets set in the original grant.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Budgeting and Compliance:

The Merritt College Title III project is on budget and has sufficient funding in place as it completes Year 5 to carry out all of the project goals and objectives. The primary task for the next six months will be to monitor the budget carefully to make sure that the remaining funds are used effectively to further the goals of the project.

Over the past four and a half years, the Title III staff has had to deal with a number of transitions in business staff, at both the district and college levels. However, these changes have not negatively impacted the grant in a major way. Earlier issues related to downloading the budget at the district level and drawing down grant funds have been resolved and the electronic budget transfers are working. The Title III staff has cultivated positive working relationships with college and district finance personnel.

In addition, the Title III staff has gained valuable experience in managing the grant budget. They now know how to time purchasing and reimbursements to address project needs ahead. They also track expenditures by categories, so that they know what the expenditures are in each category at any given moment. The challenges they have faced have also helped other District grants coordinators, in terms of grant budget management.

In terms of compliance, the Title III project continues to be a district leader in providing time and effort reports. Over the next six months, the project will have to adjust to the District's new time and effort report format, which, unfortunately, does not match the staffing categories used by the Title III project. The Project Director is currently working with the District Office to review sample forms and develop a viable alternative.

The Year 4 report was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in December 2012 and it has been approved, indicating that the project is deemed to be in compliance. In March, the Project Director also attended the Title III Project Directors Meeting in Washington, D.C., and met with the new Title III Program Officer, who commended the grant. Several weeks later, in mid-April, Merritt was selected for a site visit by the Title III Program Officer. He spent the afternoon on campus meeting project staff and also got to see the campus fair displaying the projects from the campus-wide Integrative Learning Assignment initiated by the Title III project.

Project Administration and Morale:

The Title III project continues to be regarded by both college and district administrators and by the majority of Merritt faculty, as a well-managed and successful project. It has also been commended by the Title III Program Officer as a model project and, in fact, the embedded tutoring component was used as an example as an innovative strategy at a presentation given by the U.S. Department of Education program staff at the recent Title III Project Directors Meeting in March 2013.

Despite this positive attention and the project's many achievements, at the time of the April 2013 site visit morale seemed low. While there were pockets of enthusiasm about specific areas of the project, the general tone was one of low energy and lack of excitement. People seemed to have lost their motivation and sense of mission about the project.

This is only natural considering that since the writing of the grant in 2007-2008, the college has gone through five changes in presidents, with the latest President coming on only in January 2013. Along with that, the college has experienced several turnovers in other administrative positions, such as the Vice Presidents and Deans. Each change requires recalibrating, establishing new relationships and building trust, and a revamping of programs and policies. In addition, this series of changes took place in the context of an economic environment of major cuts in funding for community colleges and other educational institutions, cuts nobody could have foreseen in 2008 when the grant was designed and submitted.

To its credit, the Title III team has hung in there and produced, in spite of the changing funding environment and college leadership. It has carried off a very complex and ambitious project and been largely successful. The question now is, will it lose momentum coming down the home stretch or will it rally in an effort to close victoriously and maximize the true potential of the grant?

Summary of Recommendations from the April 2013 Merritt College Title III, Year 4 Mid-Year Formative Evaluation Site Visit
For Objective 1.1:   - Act now to develop an interim plan to address the college's most immediate campus-based research needs and conduct a deeper analysis of, and dialogue about, the data generated by the Title III project.   - Request and review disaggregated data for all Title III interventions and for core courses and programs.   - Analyze data trends over time, not just by year, for all Title III interventions and four target indicators.   - Conduct a comparative analysis of Title III student success rates with college-wide rates and rates produced by other campus initiatives to identify high-impact interventions for institutionalization.
For Objective 1.2:   - Put plan in place to conduct deeper analysis of student performance data and other project data.   - Review student academic performance data in the context of other project assessments conducted.   - Address discrepancies in baseline data identified in the *Year 4 Annual Report of Student Outcomes.*   - Consider developing a plan to continue to collect data for the four target areas after the grant's end.
For Objective 2.2:   - Continue to work with department chairs and college leadership to review student success data and build support for the innovations developed through the Title III FOCUS component.   - Continue to reach a wider faculty through FOCUS-led faculty inquiry groups and LC training.   - Continue to document the impact of specific outreach and support efforts, such as the FOCUS Summer Bridge program and the embedded tutors in basic skills classes.
For Objective 2.4:   - Continue to support faculty in adopting the Learning Communities model and integrated instruction.   - Explore scheduling options to eliminate certain registration issues and build the LC model at Merritt.   - Consider modifying the format of the LC component to   - Promote the benefits of LCs in the Summer Bridge Program and campus Orientation sessions.   - Analyze which types of LCs and which aspects of the LC component have been most successful.   - Identify future funding sources for those aspects of the LC component recommended for institutionalization.
For Objective 3.2:   - Identify strategy for institutionalizing the Teaching and Learning Center Coordinator position.   - Identify ways to continue to offer training in priority areas identified by faculty and staff.
For Objective 3.3:   Continue to provide SLO training for instructors and departments still needing support in this area.
For Objective 3.4:   - Consider the mini grant component for institutionalization.   - Increase awareness about the contributions to date of the Campus Innovation Mini Grant competition.
For Objective 4.2:   - Continue to work with the other Peralta colleges to resolve issues with registration for FYE cohorts.   - Develop a multi-faceted evaluation plan to access student success within FYE cohorts.   - Develop a plan to institutionalize successful aspects of the FYE program.
For Objective 4.3:   - Continue to work to streamline and coordinate the various aspects of the matriculation process (orientation, assessment, counseling and advising, financial aid).   - Work with the District to implement the online orientation component as soon as possible.   - Establish a college-based system for tracking transfer readiness and transfer destination.   - Identify funding to maintain and expand the embedded tutoring and Learning Center tutoring component.
For Objective 4.4:   - Set up system for tracking student usage of key matriculation services.   - Compare usage figures to the baseline and targets set in the original grant.
Project Management/Budgeting and Reporting: Continue to work with the college leadership team and District personnel to ensure timely processing of the annual grant budget and fiscal contracts, to ensure that the project is able to implement activities on schedule and use remaining funds effectively during the final stages of the grant.