



# THE MERRITT CONNECTION

## President's Message



Welcome to 2016! As we start this year, we are making the choice to change or to introduce new ideas that will build a better team for student success at Merritt. We had a great keynote speaker at FLEX Day, Dr. Darrick Smith, who presented so many local facts that hit home for so many of us. He actively engaged and motivated many to examine their thinking and practice. This is a great beginning as we choose to make some changes at Merritt that will make a difference for our students. We have so much to offer our community with dedicated personnel who are willing to walk their students toward

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### ***The Merritt Connection***

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## FLEX Days “Bridging the Gap,” Draws Record Numbers to Join the Conversation

Kudos to the Professional Development Committee, chaired by Jason Holloway, for planning one of the most well-attended FLEX Days in recent history!

Chancellor Jowel Laguerre started off FLEX Days with a delightful welcome, claiming that Merritt was the only college who invited him to speak (and we



were honored to have him)! Then President Norma Ambriz-Galaviz, calling Merritt a “beacon of light,” introduced the presidents of the Academic Senate, Mario Rivas; the Classified Senate, Waaduda Karim; and ASMC president Marquita Price, who each gave their own warm welcome.



Dynamic keynote speaker Darrick Smith set the tone for the Spring FLEX Days theme “Bridging the Gap” with a powerful, engaging talk on the faculty’s

connection to the college, its students, and Oakland that had him standing up on a chair and the audience cheering in agreement

Thursday’s workshops in the beautiful new science building were highlighted by a group working together to to improve the college’s Educational Master Plan, the Tobacco-less Club’s lesson on the dangers of smoking (including e-cigarettes), information on student equity funding, an assessment workshop, and training on online tech tools, CurricUNET META, the SMART classroom, and an iPad.



Friday’s activities included a workshop on “See Say Do,” tools to use in response to students who may have experienced trauma, and an

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## President's Message

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academic/career achievement. Our priorities for this semester include the completion of our personnel evaluations, assessment of student/service outcomes, the Accreditation Response report, and updating of our Educational Master Plan. As I stated last week, these are major tasks that require something from each one of you. I ask at a minimum to please attend to the work required for outcomes assessment. Document your work and submit it. If you need some assistance, please ask your administrator for help.

As the beacon of light for our community, we are bridging the gap of achievement for those with the greatest need. Let's walk together on the road to ACCJC for affirmation.

Dr. Norma Ambriz-Galaviz  
President



### Like Us On Facebook!

Did you know that Merritt has an active Facebook that draws hundreds of people every day? If you have anything you would like to share, whether promoting a class or an event with a flyer, or you have a great Merritt photo you'd like to post, just send it to Susan May at [smay@peralta.edu](mailto:smay@peralta.edu). In the meantime, check us out at [www.facebook.com/merrittcollegeofficial](https://www.facebook.com/merrittcollegeofficial) and Like us

Accreditation follow-up, led by Audrey Trotter and Mia Kelley, with an encouraging amount of participation and interest.

It was a memorable two days, and Jason thanks everyone for their patience and participation, and ends with the message, "As we continue to bridge our gaps, we will become better equipped to help our students and each other."

*(Slide presentations of some of the workshops can be found on the PDC website. More photos will be posted on the Merritt website on Friday, 1/29.)*

### Alumni Profile

## Moving On and Making a Difference



While Tracey Christian was a student at Merritt, she seemed to be everywhere at once: learning in the Administrative Justice Program, training safety aides, carrying the flag proudly in the honor guard, leading the student government in making important changes for the student body.

But in reality, Tracey was bravely overcoming a personal trauma that happened several years earlier. Tragically, her teenage sons were murdered two years apart from each other in violent incidents in Oakland. But instead of hiding away in her sorrow, she did something to prevent violence. She spoke out

in the community, and she made a difference and led by example.

Today Tracey works at the Chevron Refinery in Richmond where she was hired as a supervisor and already has been promoted twice. She says her background at Merritt gave her the skills she needed to succeed.



"The promotions come from my background, from learning about helping the community, caring about what you do, going the extra mile," she says. "When I stand at attention, people know that I'm different, they can tell that I come from a different piece of cloth."

Her mentor, Margaret Dixon, head of the AJ Program, is not the least bit surprised at her former student's success. "When I first met Tracey, I was amazed at her outspokenness and her maturity," she says. "When I learned of her background and observed her leadership skills, I asked her to be the head safety aide, and she was in charge of three shifts on campus and taking aides off campus for other jobs. It was a big loss when Tracey left, but I'm so proud of her."

## Community Honors Twins Now in OPD



Since they were five years old, Oakland twins Isaac and Isaiah wanted to be police officers.

At age 18 they showed up at Merritt and told Margaret Dixon, head of Merritt's Administration of Justice Program, that they were ready to start their education that would lead to their goal.

In early January, Isaiah was pinned as an Oakland police officer a year after his brother was pinned, and now, they say, "our dream is complete."

On January 19, Oakland Councilmembers, friends, faculty, staff, and students all turned out to honor the brothers, who were invited back to Merritt to be honored at a reception for their new career.

After many speeches from the guests, Isaac and Isaiah Harris gave a heartwarming talk about their journey to get where they were today and how happy they were to be serving together. After the ceremony, a delicious cake was served with a photo of the twins on it and blue frosted lettering which read, "Congratulations Isaac and Isaiah Harris, Serving Our Community."

## Faculty Profile

## New Instructor Brings Awareness of World Music to Students

Monica Ambalal grew up in Stockton, California, surrounded by music from around the world. Her French-Italian mother sang opera and her Indian-Ugandan father was a classical guitarist. She played the piano at age 6 and cello at age 17. "Every family celebration was filled with music," she says. "My parents exposed me to everything from Mozart to Motown."



Her passion for music followed her to college where she fell in love with the music program at her local community college, San Joaquin Delta, then went on to study jazz history at the University of New Orleans, get a master's degree in musicology at Long Beach State, and begin working on her Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at UC Davis

Through her wide knowledge of music and her desire share it with others, she decided to pursue a teaching career at a community college. "I appreciate the fact that many community college students haven't made up their minds about what they want to do, and we are there to guide them and give them a springboard," she says. "And I can appreciate first-generation students because I was one of them, the only one in my family to be born in the U.S."

After adjunct teaching at several colleges, including Delta, she was convinced to apply to teach full-time at Merritt College when she read its mission statement online. "When I saw the word 'inclusion' in the mission statement, I knew that was where I wanted to teach," she says, "because it spoke to my educational concerns. Everyone is on the same page and every student should have the same chance to succeed."

Because many of the students are not musically aware, she makes sure to teach them all kinds of music, from blues and slave music to Elvis and Jimi Hendrix, and she passes out percussion instruments, so they can all create rhythms together. She also take them on them on field trips, like a recent one to the San Francisco Symphony.

"Many of these students have never been to a concert, and living so close to culture, I can give them those kinds of opportunities," she says. "While they are in my class, I want to make sure they are aware of all kinds of music."



## Congrats to Merritt's Cybersecurity Team

With only one year of classes behind them, a team of students from Merritt's Cybersecurity Program won second place out of 125 colleges in the 2015 Fall National Cyber League Postseason Games. During this competition, students validate their skills by performing in individual and team competitions.

Team leader Andy Bittner credited Merritt's excellent program taught by industry experts in preparing them for the tough competition.

On January 29, the team, which includes Andy Bittner, Anthony Le, Sho Harris, Jonathan Morant, Brandon Russell, Jose Medina, will be honored and photographed at a reception on campus.

"We are really proud of the team and congratulate them for their success," says Program Coordinator Anita M. Black, "Their accomplishment shows the strength of this new program in teaching them skills in only one year that had them surpassing so many other colleges across the country."

This two-year fully accredited program has been quickly taking off with students of all ages and backgrounds who want to get into this in-demand career.

The program has tracks in applications or infrastructure, and each includes a summer internship in a Bay Area security firm where students get hands-on experience.

### Student Profile

## Will Smith: Gives Back to Others After Merritt Helps Turn His Life Around



Despite a rough childhood which led to a foster homes and eventual homelessness, Will Smith always wanted to stand for something. He took his first step to reaching that goal when he walked through the doors of Merritt College.

"Being a troubled kid and a high school dropout, I never even thought of applying to college," says Smith. "I moved to Oakland from Sacramento because a friend said I could play basketball at Merritt. I came here with just a backpack. Most people didn't know that I was living at a homeless shelter."

When he came to Merritt, he was lucky to meet counselor Carlos McLean who took him under his wing and convinced him to combine his interest in basketball with academics and look toward his future—starting with getting his GED.

"Mr. McLean was my biggest supporter, and he still is," says Smith. "I took the map that he laid out and followed it. He helped me with my school and my personal life, and I finished my first semester with a 3.0, and I now have a place to live."

Today, Smith is a popular fixture around Merritt, where he is either surrounded by friends, rushing to his classes, working with the Sankofa program, or helping students get adjusted to college in his highly regarded role as Student Ambassador. "Now I'm helping other students to become successful, and they all appreciate it. It's a really good feeling."

In fact, Smith is planning to continue helping people even beyond Merritt. He plans to graduate in a year and transfer to a four-year university to study social work so he can offer guidance to those who may be a situation like he was.

And his own mentor won't be far away. McLean, now retired, keeps in touch with Smith and says he probably always will. "When Will came to Merritt, I could see he needed somebody, and that somebody turned out to be me," he says. "I am extremely proud of what he's accomplished, and I think that the sky is the limit for him. If he sets his mind to doing something, it will happen."

Smith himself is looking forward to his future and couldn't be more grateful for his Merritt experience. "Besides the million-dollar view, Merritt has the most welcoming students, staff, and students anywhere. Merritt really did change my life."