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Research, Planning & Professional Development
for California Community Colleges



Merritt College

Student Focus Groups

Student Perspectives on
Educational Plans, Course Selection, and
Challenges to Educational Progress

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In spring 2022, Merritt College's (Merritt) guided pathways team called on The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) to support an investigation of factors affecting student progress and completion. College data and team members' experiences indicated that students have been (1) taking longer than expected and earning more units than needed to complete their educational goals as well as (2) delaying enrollment in transfer-level math and English courses. In response to these observations, the college contracted with The RP Group to conduct a series of focus groups to learn more about students' experiences with educational plans, course selection, and challenges to their educational progress, paying particular attention to groups identified as experiencing disproportionate impact at the college.

Methodology

The RP Group designed this student focus group project in partnership with Merritt's guided pathways team to provide faculty, staff, and administrators with actionable insights on the experiences of key student groups specifically around four central questions:

- (1) how students engage with an educational (ed) plan,
- (2) how students select courses each term,
- (3) why they might delay taking math and English courses, and
- (4) what challenges affect their educational progress.

Based on institutional reform priorities as well as the Merritt Student Equity Plan, participants in the focus groups represented the following student populations:

- (1) Focus Group 1: Latino and African American/Black males
- (2) Focus Group 2: Students who have accumulated more units than required for their educational goal (60 for an associate degree or 16 for a certificate) and have not yet completed
- (3) Focus Group 3: Transfer-oriented students who have yet to complete a transfer-level math or English course
- (4) Focus Group 4: Students who are making progress (earned 9 units) in a career education program

The RP Group conducted a set of four 60-minute student focus groups via Zoom on Friday, October 14, 2022, with a total of 31 student participants.

Key Findings

The key findings resulting from this research are organized around the four central questions.

How do students engage with educational plans?

- Students value educational plans
- Students tap counselors and online resources to create these plans
- Students struggle to access counseling services for initial educational plan development

How do students select their courses each semester?

- Students with educational plans that match their current goal follow them
- Students without educational plans choose courses based on availability or interest
- Access to counseling services impacts students' course selection

Why do students delay enrollment in transfer-level math or English?

- Students are uncertain which math and English courses to take

What additional challenges affect students' educational progress?

- Students struggle to access campus resources
- Students struggle to meet basic needs
- Students must balance college, work, and caregiving responsibilities

What key issues emerged by focus group?

Focus Group 1: Latino and African American/Black males

- Students in this group experienced sustained challenges in finding and accessing academic and non-academic resources. Notably, men of color who participated in special programs (e.g., Puente, Umoja) praised their program-specific counselors, specifically for directing them to relevant resources and providing personalized support.

Focus Group 2: Students who have accumulated more units than required for their educational goal (60 for an associate degree or 16 for a certificate) and have not yet completed

- Given how long they had been attending Merritt, the majority of students in this focus group had clear educational goals—many had informed educational plans as well—and

knew which remaining courses they needed to take in order to complete those goals. Their primary challenges include accessing timely counseling to confirm the specific courses they need to take each upcoming semester and ensuring that the timing of the courses align with their life responsibilities.

Focus Group 3: Transfer-oriented students who have yet to complete a transfer-level math or English course

- Students in this group were primarily in their first or second semester at Merritt. They shared a desire to engage in onboarding activities (e.g., developing an educational goal, meeting with a counselor, attending an orientation) as well as their frustrations for how challenging it had been to understand next steps and access those experiences.

Focus Group 4: Students who are making progress (earned 9 units) in a career education program

- Students in this group expressed feeling isolated, disconnected, and having a limited connection with the college, within their classes, and with other students and educators.

Recommendations

Given these findings, we offer the following recommendations for how Merritt can ensure students have clear educational goals, know what courses they need to take in which order to complete them in a timely manner, and secure assistance to address challenges to their educational progress.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that each student develops a comprehensive ed plan within their first semester or year, inclusive of math and English requirements.

Recommendation 2: Increase counseling capacity to respond to students' academic planning needs.

Recommendation 3: Improve incoming *and* continuing students' access to relevant supports when and how they need them throughout their college journeys.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen communication with first-year students.

Recommendation 5: Foster student connection to each other and to the campus.

Recommendation 6: Examine ways to increase unit load and full-time enrollment.

Recommendation 7: Continue to engage and elevate the student voice.

We applaud Merritt for elevating students' experiences as part of the guided pathways planning and redesign process. These focus groups contribute to Merritt's ongoing effort to make student perspectives more visible at the college. They also provide important insights that Merritt's guided pathways team can leverage to continue building a sense of urgency and direction for the college's guided pathways efforts.

Introduction

In spring 2022, Merritt College's (Merritt) guided pathways team called on The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) to facilitate student focus groups intended to better understand factors affecting student progress and completion. College data and team members' experiences indicated that students are taking longer than expected and more units than needed to complete their educational goals as well as delaying enrollment in transfer-level math and English courses. While these data provided the "what" about the student experience, student focus groups could help reveal the "why" behind these trends.

To support Merritt's investigation, The RP Group conducted virtual focus groups with students in fall 2022. These focus groups sought to better understand four central questions:

- (1) how students engage with an educational (ed) plan,
- (2) how students select courses each term,
- (3) why they might delay taking math and English courses, and
- (4) what challenges affect their educational progress.

Based on institutional reform priorities as well as the Merritt Student Equity Plan, the college team prioritized four key groups to engage in this effort:

- (1) men of color,
- (2) students who have accumulated excess units beyond those required for their educational goal,
- (3) transfer-oriented students who had not yet completed math or English requirements, and
- (4) students involved in a career education program.

Merritt can use student focus group results to inform institutional redesign work, including and beyond guided pathways, to support and ensure equitable student progress and attainment. Examples of application can include informing strategies to increase students' utilization of services, changing key aspects of students' experiences (e.g., onboarding), and planning upcoming professional development opportunities (e.g., Flex Day).

Reader's Guide

The RP Group offers Merritt's guided pathways team the following high-level summary of the student perspectives and experiences collected through this effort. It begins with a description of our approach to conducting the focus groups followed by key findings, with the four areas of inquiry serving as the organizing framework. For each question, readers will find (1) themes that were both consistent across and unique to each student group, and (2) representative

quotes to express how those themes showed up in student experiences. Following the findings, the report includes recommendations for the college's consideration. The report concludes with guidance on how Merritt can move forward from the findings to action.

The RP Group conducted a set of four 60-minute student focus groups via Zoom on Friday, October 14, 2022, with a total of 31 student participants.

The RP Group worked with Merritt to recruit participants, with Merritt's guided pathways team taking the lead on outreach to and coordination of participants. Participants represented the following groups:

- Focus Group 1: Latino and African American/Black males [Men of Color]¹
- Focus Group 2: Students who have accumulated more units than required for their educational goal² (≥ 60 for an associate degree or ≥ 16 for a certificate) and have not yet completed [High number of completed units]
- Focus Group 3: Transfer-oriented students who have yet to complete a transfer-level math or English course [No transfer-level math or English]
- Focus Group 4: Students who are making progress (earned ≥ 9 units) in a career education program [Career Education]

We used the same protocol for each focus group (see Appendix A). Towards the end of each session, we dedicated approximately 10 minutes for student participants to complete a 17-question supplemental survey asking more specific questions about their educational plan(s), course selection, and challenges to their educational progress. Merritt's Office of Research and Planning will separately share a summary of findings from the survey. Reviewing the responses to these survey questions in concert with the findings from the focus groups will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of student experiences.

Students received a \$100 Visa gift card for their participation. It is worth noting that within two days of the college mailing the invitation to those students who met each group's eligibility criteria, over 500 students expressed interest in participating. Whether students were motivated by the cash incentive and/or an internal desire to contribute to the college's improvement efforts, this response is encouraging. We hope college leaders acknowledge this interest and continue to create opportunities to engage, center, and amplify student voices.

¹ Each student quote featured in the *Key Findings* section ends with an identification of the focus group in which that student participated. The focus group is identified by the shortened phrase found in the brackets.

² Students' educational goals could either be informed and uniformed; these goals came from what students identified on their application as well as goals that had been updated (e.g., following a meeting with a counselor and developing an ed plan).

Interpreting Findings

These focus groups provide Merritt with direct feedback from students regarding their educational and personal experiences at the college. Listening to students is critical to understanding their interactions at the college and improving their outcomes. At the same time, it is important not to inflate these findings to a full and conclusive generalization about any particular group of students or to the student population as a whole. The sample size is small compared to the college's total population. Additionally, while we structured all focus groups around a consistent protocol with the same set of questions, discussions organically took different directions or went to different depths based on the students who participated. Lastly, students who choose to provide input tend to be the most motivated, active, and/or able to give feedback. While their perspectives are valuable, we also acknowledge the hidden voices and experiences of students who either could not or chose not to participate.

In short, we recommend reading through these findings attentively while remembering that they offer one set of student experiences at Merritt. We also advocate for continuing to regularly engage student voices; the overwhelming student interest in participating in these focus groups is highly promising. Further, we encourage the college to connect these findings to other inquiry efforts to continue building a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of diverse student experiences, and in turn, to redesign institutional responses accordingly.

Key Findings

How Do Students Engage with Educational Plans?

We started by asking participants to share their experiences with educational plans (ed plans), including whether they had one, who helped them develop the plan, and if they were following it. Overall, about half indicated that they had an ed plan.

While some students reported developing their ed plans at another Peralta district institution with a counselor or via a college success course, we asked them to focus their responses on their Merritt experiences. In addition, almost all students from the third focus group (transfer-oriented students who had yet to take a transfer-level math or English) indicated that they did not have an ed plan. For reference, most of these participants shared that they are in their first or second semester at Merritt; in addition to not having an ed plan, they also had not yet met with a counselor and had not attended orientation.

Students Value Ed Plans

Students who said they had an ed plan overwhelmingly affirmed their appreciation for this resource. These plans helped them stay focused on achieving their educational goal by clarifying the courses they need to take, the progress they are making, the courses that remain, as well as what courses to take in the next term. Two students described the value of these plans:

When I was part time at Merritt, I thought I figured out my classes and was just going with it, until I spoke to a counselor. Luckily, she talked about the educational plan. My God, it was a lifesaver knowing the fact that everything was step by step...these are the classes you need to take, these are the classes you don't need to take. Everything was drawn to get me closer to my degree versus just taking random classes and wasting my time. When I'm done with a class, I let her know, and she knocks it off and sends me an updated list of all the classes I need. I think I needed that from the beginning. But, in the beginning, I thought I needed to do it all by myself. [High number of completed units]³

I had so many credits built up and then kind of got back into college last semester. Most of those classes were online on Zoom, and so I met with a counselor at the end of the year.... I wanted to see what credits I have...where I can put these credits to get an AA and then go from there.... She laid out this brilliant plan that would take me to a university and eventually get a master's [degree]. Then throughout summer, I was kind of overwhelmed by that plan. So, this semester, I met with another counselor who was like, "Okay, that's a macro plan. Can we micro-size this and go with a plan to look at an AA for now?" And then, I'll go from there. [Men of color]

It is notable that not all students who had ed plans developed those plans during their onboarding experience. Some students shared that they did not think they needed an ed plan at the outset, since they were not initially planning to earn a degree or transfer to a university. Once they identified a goal – no matter what it was – they realized that having a related plan was important and useful in achieving that aspiration. One student explained:

I initially started taking the real estate classes just to meet the state requirement to get my license. I took a couple extra classes that I just wanted to just take like Spanish, and I wanted to relearn my high school math. After [1.5 semesters], I was like, "I want to go for the AA and take even more classes." That's when I really started working with my counselor to make my student education plan. It was to kind of narrow down all the general education requirements. I knew what I needed for real estate, but I needed help with figuring out what I needed to get to that AA. [Career Education]

Students Tap Counselors and Online Resources to Create These Plans

As indicated above, students typically built their ed plans with a counselor's guidance. Some sought out counselors on their own, while others mentioned that meeting with a counselor and developing a plan were conditions of participation in a college program (e.g., Puente).

Students across the focus groups who participated in cohort-based comprehensive support programs (e.g., Puente, Umoja, EOPS, Veterans Services) and services (e.g., Student Accessibility Services) expressed deep gratitude for the program-specific counselors. These students shared how easy it was to meet with their program counselors both because of the

³ Note that each student quote ends with a brief phrase in parentheses indicating the student focus group from which the quote emerged. See page 5 for a full list of focus groups.

counselors' availability and their familiarity (i.e., students did not have to re-explain their situation with a counselor they had already met). Two students described their experiences:

I was able to see the Veterans counselor. There aren't a lot of veterans here, so I had pretty frequent access...to her because she wasn't servicing hundreds of students. That was actually when I was hearing about what other students were going through. I had been through that too with counselors prior to having access to Veterans Services. I noticed a huge difference in just being able to walk into her office. She has the same access as the other counselors and just has more time and a lot more patience ... to sit with you and help you work out your goal. [High number of completed units]

It actually took a while for me to get my plan because I started off seeing a [general] counselor pretty late. I couldn't see a counselor. It was August, and I had to wait [until] after when classes started. When I actually met with [her], she referred me to [Puente]. And then, I had to wait again, but I already had an idea of the classes I had to take. I just wanted to know what I needed to take next semester...to work up to my major. So, when I did that, I was satisfied that I already had my classes for this semester, so I didn't have to worry about trying to figure it out. So, me and [the Puente counselor] got together, and we talked about what classes I had to take next year in order for me to transfer as well how many credits I need. [Men of color]

Of the students who did not develop an ed plan with the help of a Merritt counselor, many still had clarity about their academic goals, course requirements, and progress. These students shared their reliance on online resources to figure out what they needed to do to achieve their educational goals. Some students used these online resources exclusively without seeing anyone at Merritt, while others corroborated the online information with college counselors.

The most popular online resource was ASSIST.org,⁴ praised for its clarity, ease, and intuitiveness about which courses students need to complete based on their major and transfer destination. Students who knew their desired transfer destination tended to use ASSIST.org. Other online resources used by students included the college websites within the Peralta district, course catalogs, program webpages, and the district's student portal. Three students described their interactions with these resources:

My primary goal is to get into a UC, so I'm just relying on ASSIST.org for now. And also, I actually see two counselors. So, when one is not available or when I get a slow reply from one, I reach out to another. [Career Education]

I just did [ed planning] on my own because I knew what I needed. I went through all the different course catalogs and did it that way.... But I think that's just because I've been

⁴ This web-based platform is the "official transfer and articulation system for California's public colleges and universities," allowing students to identify specific transfer pathways and requirements between their community college(s) and the UC and CSU. For more information, visit <https://assist.org/>.

going to college for so long. So, I've done [ed planning] with multiple counselors, and I kind of got the hang of it now. [High number of completed units]

I just use the student portal. It switches through different Peralta colleges, and I just use that to go through classes. Also, on all of the school websites, it shows the requirement classes. So, when I stopped seeing my counselor, I just started choosing from those requirement classes. Basically, just finding everything online. [Career Education]

Students Struggle to Access Counseling Services for Initial Ed Plan Development

While many students shared positive experiences developing their ed plans, some students – primarily those who had yet to take a transfer-level math or English – described challenges with accessing counseling services. Notably, they were hopeful and excited about creating an ed plan and knew from information provided by the college that it was a next step in their onboarding journey. However, scheduling challenges and communication issues made it difficult to receive the necessary counseling services. Four students described their challenges accessing the college’s counseling function:

I tried emailing them, calling them, going through the online setup of things, and it just never really worked out. I honestly understand that they must be busy with a bunch of other students... but if it's easier for them to communicate over email, they should communicate over email. They shouldn't sit here and try to make us go in when they know they don't have enough time. They can just honestly shoot us an educational plan with some notes on it. Maybe students would appreciate that a lot more than having to go in, wait an hour or two, and then they're just like, "Here's your educational plan" in under five minutes. [No transfer-level math or English]

I scheduled to meet with a counselor so I could take classes in the fall semester, but there were no available appointments until after the date to sign up for classes, which is why I ended up with a half-semester class. I would've wanted to take a full semester, but because I couldn't get an appointment very quickly, I had to wait, and I wasn't able to meet that deadline. [Men of color]

I wanted to go full-time this year but getting with the counselor was so difficult that I decided to just kind of put it off. I emailed the counselor and what they told me was just go off the curriculum, take that first class, and we'll figure it out next year.... I'm just kind of hoping to hear back from the counselor to get everything set up for next year. [No transfer-level math or English]

I haven't really had time to meet with a counselor because I do work a full-time job and I'm an office manager, so I'm kind of needed here at all times. I've tried to email several times, but it just kind of seems like the counselors never really get back to you.... Even calling the counseling office doesn't work.... So, at this point I've just done my own thing

and looked at the little programs and the little curriculums, how they're set up online, and just go off of that. [No transfer-level math or English]

How Do Students Select Their Courses Each Term?

Students with Current Ed Plans Follow Them

We asked students specifically if their ed plan informed their course selection each term and/or what other sources they consulted. Some participants with “current” ed plans – plans that aligned to their present educational goal – that they developed with the help of a Merritt counselor reported relying on those plans to determine which courses they would take next. If they had a “proxy” ed plan – a plan they developed on their own using ASSIST.org and/or other resources – they also continued referring to it to make enrollment decisions. Some students met with counselors to confirm their courses. Some students did a combination of all three. One student explained:

I met with a counselor when I first got into the program and then followed up with them along the way because it was...about a two-year, four-semester program total. [High number of completed units]

Students without Ed Plans Choose Courses Based on Availability or Interest

For students who did not have ed plans or whose plans were outdated because they no longer matched students’ current educational goals, their course selection process varied widely. Some students selected courses – and even the modality (e.g., in-person, online, hybrid) – that aligned with their availability (e.g., work schedule, caregiving responsibilities). Others selected courses they simply found interesting, especially if they were not planning to earn a degree or transfer. Four students explained:

Usually, I'd just pick whatever class seems least boring. Whatever class is difficult, I'd just push it to the last semester, and if it seems boring, I'd just push it to the last semester. But since I started listening to the counselor a few weeks ago, she's going to pick out what's best for me for next semester, which is going to be a mixture of classes. [High number of completed units]

I have an ed plan, but it needs to be updated. [I developed it in] spring 2020, right before COVID, and then, I changed my major. So, that ed plan doesn't really correspond with the courses that I'm taking right now. So how did I choose my classes? Well, I use ASSIST. [Men of color]

The value for me right now is flexibility around my work schedule. So, I mainly just focus on taking classes that are online and fully asynchronous. That sort of limits my options, which is actually helpful in absence of really good counseling because I only have a couple options to sort from. That's pretty much it. I don't have a super clear idea of what

I want to do with the classes that I'm taking right now. So, I'm just taking stuff that interests me. [No transfer-level math or English]

So far, what I've done is just look at all the classes and pick what's interesting to me.... I'm not pursuing a degree, so I think I would have a hard time if I was. [No transfer-level math or English]

Access to Counseling Services Impacts Students' Course Selection

Some students, especially those in their first and second semesters, wanted to meet with a counselor to confirm their courses for the next term. They clearly valued the specific guidance a counselor can offer, sharing that they would repeatedly visit the website to schedule an appointment or were willing to wait hours in person to meet with someone. However, the challenges accessing counseling services for the purposes of educational planning described above also affected students' ability to identify or confirm the courses they should take to make meaningful progress towards their goals.

In addition to scheduling issues, students also found the time they could spend with a counselor too short, with many needing to arrange follow-up appointments. Students acknowledged that counselors are working with large numbers of students and have limited time during appointments, but also wished they could get meetings to help make time-sensitive decisions. Two students described the impact of limited counseling capacity on their course selection:

If I have an urgent question, sometimes I cannot get an appointment until a week later. If I sign up and I do have an appointment, I know that I have to plan ahead now. I won't get a full answer because each counselor only has a certain amount of time, and they stand by that, and I respect that. [Career Education]

Sometimes, there is a long wait time. I go to classes at night, and I work during the day, so it's not easy to plan, "Okay, will I be available at this time?" And, when you have to reschedule, it's even longer. I had also some experience where the counselor is supposed to send you a document that you worked with and they never do, so you have to make another appointment. [High number of completed units]

Why Do Students Delay Enrollment in Transfer-Level Math or English?

All participants in the third focus group had yet to take a transfer-level math or English course; however, we also asked students in the other three focus groups if they took transfer-level math or English in their first year, and if not, why not. For the other three focus groups, students' completion of one or more of these courses varied widely.

Students Are Uncertain Which Math and English Courses to Take

Many students shared that the reason they had not enrolled in transfer-level math and English courses was because they did not know which ones to take. These same students also reported they had not yet developed an ed plan. Others indicated that they had not been able to meet with a counselor to determine the appropriate selection, so they also delayed taking these courses. One student explained:

It was just so difficult to even know what English class I needed to take or what math class. What, do I just sign up for a random math class and hope that I'm ready for it? I looked at the prereqs, and I'd be like, "Did I take this before?" And, then I'd go check on my academic progress, and then the page would just be blank and I'm like, "Oh my God, this is so confusing at this point." I would've liked to take English and math this semester along with my major classes, but I didn't know what to sign up for. [No transfer-level math or English]

Without knowing which math or English courses to take, another student described putting off taking those courses and focusing on major requirements:

At this point, I'm going off of what the curriculum is online for my cybersecurity degree. I'm not really focused on the general ed aspect of things such as English, math, and art at the moment. Because it's been kind of difficult getting into a meeting with the counselor. So, I'm just going off of the curriculum, just doing all my major classes, and then I could focus on the general ed after. [No transfer-level math or English]

Conversely, students who *had* completed transfer-level math and English stated that they either met with a counselor or consulted with online resources (e.g., ASSIST.org, publicly posted college curricula) to figure out the exact courses to take. Some students explicitly mentioned that developing their ed plan helped them figure out the appropriate selection, facilitating subsequent enrollment into those courses.

What Additional Challenges Affect Students' Educational Progress?

We also asked participants what challenges – academic and nonacademic, on and off campus – affected their educational progress. Themes centered on having awareness of and access to college resources, feeling a lack of connection, having unmet basic needs, and juggling multiple responsibilities beyond college.

Students Struggle to Access Campus Resources

Students expressed gratitude for the resources they were able to access to support their journeys at Merritt. Examples of these resources included counseling services, accessibility services, access to dedicated counselors, the food pantry, and the student portal. Students sourced information about these resources from college personnel (e.g., general counselor,

dedicated program counselor), physical places (e.g., bulletin boards, food pantry), or virtual places (e.g., website, student portal). Some students emphasized the specific role their counselor played in facilitating connection to a range of supports; as one student said:

Something that has been extremely helpful for me personally is finding resources through counselors. I just got awarded a scholarship, and I would've never even guessed to have looked into that if it weren't for counselor. I'm very grateful for that. [Men of color]

At the same time, students across all focus groups lamented that college structures, systems, processes, and practices make it difficult to learn about additional resources and easily connect with other services and assistance for which they might qualify. They described the “luck” required to discover resources; to many of these students, resources are only findable if one knows where to go or who to ask. Some resources are also only available in-person, limiting which students can access those supports. Students reported relying on the website as a go-to hub, however they shared that they had encountered broken links, missing pages, and/or complex and opaque navigation. Five students articulated their challenges:

A struggle of being in college right now is finding resources. If you go in with a social network at Merritt or have some sort of counselor that you rely on is a really big factor in your success in college. [Men of color]

I've been in other focus groups and that's how I've figured out some of the resources I have. Again, it's like resources that come from other students, not from a specific thing. A lot of these resources should have come from a counselor or an orientation, or at least be easy to find on the website. [No transfer-level math or English]

I'm subscribed to the school newsletter and look at the bulletin board all the time, but there's certain programs that I'm just never going to find out about because they're just so hidden, and you have to ask around to just find out in general. That is the sort of information I wish was communicated much better. [Men of color]

I use bulletin boards and posters. That's very helpful. But I will say that it's only helpful if you are there in person, if you're in the area, if you're actively looking. Something that I feel Merritt could work on with students to have them be more active on campus is having more events. [Men of color]

Things are hidden. The websites will say, “Oh yeah, you can get help with such and such, click here,” and I'll click there and then it gives you a runaround, like you're clicking here and then it's giving you a vague overview and it not really getting you to what you're trying to look for. And then I get frustrated and overwhelmed, and I don't really get what I need. For instance, last semester, my counselor put me into a program called SOAR that was supposed to pay for my books, but all my classes ended up needing no books anyways. And then this semester, I did need books, and I went through the website like crazy, and I can't find SOAR anywhere. I went through my emails, I can't find it anymore.

I'm like, "Oh well, I guess I'm paying for my books this year." A lot of things are available, but are they really available? [Men of color]

As they continue to “get the hang” of taking courses online, students discussed the value of connecting with the college generally, and particularly with their instructors and classmates. They indicated a desire for more campus-based interaction and involvement with the college community.

Students Struggle to Meet Basic Needs

While not an explicit part of the protocol, a few students across the focus groups mentioned challenges addressing their basic needs, particularly housing, food, technology, and the cost of textbooks. They shared how struggles to address these issues has material impact on their ability to enroll and stay enrolled in courses. Four students described their concerns:

I never use Zoom, as you can tell. Um, I don't know if this really counts, but I have had to drop a class, the same class each semester because I have a really old computer, and it wasn't running the software that the class needed. The teacher tried to help me once or twice, and then they just stopped responding, and I wasn't really sure what to do about it. They said I could I get a computer from school, but they probably aren't new enough. Yeah, not having the right tools and financial limitations mixed with that. [No transfer-level math or English]

There was another class that I had to drop because I couldn't afford the textbook, and I had gone into the information place, and they gave me like an email of someone in charge of helping with that. I emailed and left a voicemail and just never heard back. So, textbooks specifically is something that should be more accessible for sure. [Career Education]

[I struggle] with meals and housing. It's also an issue because it's so expensive in the Bay Area. [Men of color]

The only thing that keeps me going on campus is I access those resources of the food bank. [Career Education]

These student perspectives about financial stability issues likely represent the tip of the iceberg at Merritt, given research emerging both in the state and across the country about students’ significant struggles with addressing college costs and meeting their basic needs.⁵ A specific examination of students’ financial stability concerns may be in order given the direct impact on students’ ability to enter Merritt, stay in school, and complete their goals.

⁵ Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2022). *Mission critical: The role of community colleges in meeting students’ basic needs*. www.cccse.org/NR22

Students Must Balance College, Work, and Caregiving Responsibilities

Students across all four focus groups spoke about the delicate and precarious act of attending college while balancing other life responsibilities, primarily work. Work schedules, caregiving, and family needs and expectations all competed with their enrollment. Their busy lives indicated a deeper sense of urgency to find ways to make meaningful educational progress (e.g., take more classes, attend full-time if possible) as well have more efficient, streamlined help finding the answers and resources they needed to succeed. One student explained the challenge of matching their schedule to course availability from term to term:

Because I'm only taking two classes right now, it's not that difficult. But one of the classes is in the morning, and now I work in the morning. That's very difficult. But I think it'll get a little bit harder once this semester's over and I get my new classes. Next semester, I do want to take more classes, so I think that will be harder. [Career Education]

Another student described the challenge of getting timely access to counseling to know what course to take in the following semester in time to register:

It is kind of hard to be seen [by a counselor], especially with the fact that everybody has their own life, and sometimes our schedules don't necessarily fit with the timeframe that we have [to get into counseling before registering]. So, I would say it's easy if you're on campus, but if you are looking to schedule something ahead of time or even online, that's when it gets tricky and that's when things sort of fall out. [Men of color]

While time was precious, students still expressed hope that they would be able to advance toward their goals. One student acknowledged the benefit of attending full-time, both in terms of generating momentum and feeling the tangible impact on their goal attainment:

...being a first-generation college student [is a challenge], not really having the guidance and the support from a lot of my family because they didn't see the significance of going to college. The game changer was being able to go to school full-time and feeling good about the progress I was making versus going to school part-time. I really just felt like [going part-time] was discouraging because it's easy to just drop out a semester and then work full-time, continue to work extra hours, but then you get stuck in that. I will say being able to go full-time, it was key. It's already a challenging goal, so the quicker you can get through it has been less discouraging I would say. [High number of completed units]

What Key Issues Emerged by Focus Group?

While the key findings summarized above showed up in multiple or all four focus groups, some findings were unique to specific student populations.

Focus Group 1: Latino and African American/Black males

Students in this group experienced sustained challenges in finding and accessing academic and non-academic resources (see *Students Struggle to Access Campus Resources* on page 15). Notably, men of color who participated in special programs (e.g., Puente, Umoja) praised their program-specific counselors, specifically for directing them to relevant resources and providing personalized support (see *Students Tap Counselors and Online Resources to Create These Plans* on page 10).

Focus Group 2: Students who have accumulated more units than required for their educational goal (60 for an associate degree or 16 for a certificate) and have not yet completed

Given how long they had been attending Merritt, the majority of students in this focus group had clear educational goals—many had informed educational plans as well—and knew which remaining courses they needed to take in order to complete those goals (see *Students Value Ed Plans* on page 9 and *Students Tap Counselors and Online Resources to Create These Plans* on page 10). Their primary challenges include accessing timely counseling to confirm the specific courses they need to take each upcoming semester (see *Access to Counseling Services Impacts Students' Course Selection* on page 14) and ensuring that the timing of the courses align with their life responsibilities (see *Students Must Balance College, Work, and Caregiving Responsibilities* on page 18).

Focus Group 3: Transfer-oriented students who have yet to complete a transfer-level math or English course

The transfer-oriented students participating in the this focus group were primarily in their first or second semester at Merritt. These students had yet to complete a transfer-level math or English course, and almost none had attempted these requirements. Very few had developed an ed plan, met with a counselor, or attended orientation. For these participants, onboarding issues surfaced across all areas of inquiry during the focus group. Students both shared a desire to engage in onboarding activities as well as their frustrations for how challenging it had been to understand next steps and access those services. Four students explained:

You enroll and then you get an email that's basically like, "Sign up for classes, talk to a counselor, good luck." Yeah, I felt really lost. There was a weird gap in between enrolling and then getting any sort of meaningful communication from Merritt about next steps.

Once I enrolled, I got a series of emails saying that I needed to make an appointment with the counselor. Then, I had difficulty using the scheduling system. It wouldn't let me log in. So, I sent several help requests... I didn't get a response. So, I emailed the counseling people directly and said, "Hey, I'm not getting a response from it. Can we make an appointment outside of the scheduling system so that I can at least have a conversation with you before the semester starts?" And they were like, "Well, you really need to wait for IT to handle it." So, I just went ahead and picked my classes and did my own thing. And, I really haven't had contact with the counselors since then. So, it wasn't a super great situation. I work full-time, so I don't have time to chase down people on top of everything else that I'm doing. If I wasn't determined to get an education, this would be a major barrier.

It's already overwhelming being older and trying to go to college, and it's just very confusing. I felt rushed in my [counseling] appointment, and it was very difficult to even get the appointment. It was so far out from when I signed up for Merritt, and when I had the [ed] plan, it's still like, "How do I get books? How do I hop on Zoom the first day of class?" So, it definitely feels like a barrier.... I still feel very confused on the whole process. Like, how do I know if financial aid is working? It still feels just very confusing and I'm gonna show up to class Monday and try to just figure it out myself, but [I'd like] just a little bit more help, especially for first-time college students.

....at that point where you're just scrolling endlessly through all the...tabs that they have on their website, a bunch of them which are dead ends that lead you to nowhere, you're just like, "What am I looking at, at this point?" They send you to a link that's going to show you a 404 or a missing page [error message]... It's really hard for people who work full-time to actually go on campus. So, it's impossible to get a meeting with the counselor and actually get the process started.... Yeah, it's pretty difficult.

Focus Group 4: Students who are making progress (earned 9 units) in a career education program

Many focus group participants launched their educational journey at Merritt after the pandemic began, taking online courses. Students in this focus group expressed feeling isolated, disconnected, and have a limited connection with the college, within their classes, and with other students and educators. Some students shared that they went through entire online asynchronous courses with little or no interaction from any faculty member or with any classmates. Other students shared that when they visited the college to access resources or visit departments. Two students described the ways their experiences felt isolating:

The teachers have rarely been present [in online courses]. Obviously, you don't get that same human contact as you would in a classroom, but I've had several teachers that I've never actually spoke to. There's several classes set up ...where there is no discussion with other students. There's very little discussion with the instructor. That's been very disappointing, and that's been the hardest part for me.

Everything's online, and I get it because we're still in a pandemic, but it's just so empty, like it's a ghost town there. The only thing that keeps me going on campus is that I access those resources of the food bank....Just maybe not as much engagement to feel like you're in a school environment.

Recommendations

Given these findings, we offer the following recommendations for how Merritt can ensure students have clear educational goals, know what courses they need to take in which order to complete them in a timely manner, and address challenges to their educational progress. The findings that emerge from these student perspectives reinforce Merritt's pursuit of guided pathways. Ultimately, we offer these recommendations with an eye toward (1) key areas of opportunity for boosting retention and fostering persistence and completion as well as (2) steps towards advancing guided pathways design and development.

Recommendation 1: Ensure That Each Student Develops a Comprehensive Ed Plan in Their First Semester or Year, Inclusive of Math and English Requirements.

On one hand, these focus groups underscored the value that ed plans have for students' course selection and persistence. With a comprehensive map of courses aligned to their educational goals, students indicated they were able to make steady and efficient progress. On the other hand, this research indicated that too many students are going without this vital tool. In the absence of a clear and coherent plan connected to their current educational aspirations, students reported inefficient course selection practices, confusion about course requirements, and problematic delays to the completion of math and English requirements.

Given these findings, we recommend that Merritt focus on ensuring all entering students complete a full ed plan mapped to an informed educational (and career) goal by the end of their first year. We suggest that these students receive upfront advising about which math and English courses to take as appropriate to their goal. At the same time, returning and continuing students also need the same support; some may never have developed a full program ed plan while others may have revised goals (and therefore, outdated maps) after multiple terms at the college. One place to start might be auditing which of these students have not yet completed a comprehensive ed plan and proactively reaching out to them to help them solidify a comprehensive ed plan aligned to their current goals.

In addition, we suggest finding ways to make information about program requirements – including math and English – more accessible to students. Current program maps – publicly available, regularly updated by program faculty, and easily accessed on the college website – can empower students to establish initial ed plans and/or update existing ones in line with their present ed goals. Other tools, such as a flowchart, can show the different math and/or English required by various pathway types (e.g., STEM).

Recommendation 2: Increase Counseling Capacity to Respond to Students' Academic Planning Needs.

Students across all focus groups shared challenges accessing counseling services, including setting up appointments in time to make critical decisions as well as ensuring that all their questions were addressed during an appointment. While sympathetic to the intensive demands on counselors' time and limitations to the counseling function, students expressed frustration with the real impact these issues have had on their efficient progress toward attainment of their goals. Conversely, students who participated in special population programs (e.g., Puente, Umoja, Veterans Services) expressed gratitude for the easy-to-access, sustained, and personalized guidance they received from their program-specific counselors.

Counseling capacity is a challenge across most community colleges. While there may be an impulse to ask for more counselors in response to this concern, the reality is that most colleges will not have the resources to increase their counseling corps. In turn, we recommend the Merritt rethink the students' academic advising and consider opportunities for redesigning both students' experiences and institutional processes and practices. Reconsidering how the college deploys its human capital and what other resources can be developed to inform students may be in order.

For example, not all questions need to be addressed with individual meetings with counselors. Further, not every student needs the same type of support. Some students may be able to utilize "self-service" options if they can easily access accurate and complete information and tools. Other students may need to have more intensive guidance or advising from counselors or other college personnel. Consider other ways (e.g., cross-training of faculty and staff, "frequently asked questions" posted on the college website, program maps) to free up counselors' time to respond to students in need of more in-depth conversations and/or for proactive outreach to students experiencing barriers to educational success and progress.

Recommendation 3: Improve Incoming *and* Continuing Students' Access to Relevant Supports When and How They Need Them Throughout Their College Journeys.

Students shared a lack of both awareness of and access to resources at the college. Students particularly raised concerns about "nonacademic" issues impacting their ability to stay in school, including concerns about meeting their basic needs and addressing costs for attendance such as books. Given the presence of these concerns across the focus groups and the fact that exploration of students' nonacademic needs was limited in this current research, these issues are likely even more pronounced.

To start, we suggest ensuring students are informed about the availability of services and supports on campus by improving awareness among the college personnel they regularly encounter. Consider developing tools and resources that do not require faculty and staff to

remember large volumes of information. Examples include embedding a statement of support directly in the course syllabus, weaving and updating academic and nonacademic resources and points of contact via online learning platforms, and developing a student services syllabus (a document that offers all students semester-specific information about academic and nonacademic supports as well as important events and dates). Professional development for front-line staff and faculty can also reinforce the importance of knowing this information and that sharing it with students is a part of their role and responsibility at the college.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Communication with First-Year Students.

The perspectives shared by newly enrolled students – reinforced by those who had been at the college for multiple terms – indicate that Merritt can better inform students about which steps to take after they apply and how to take these steps. This absence of clear and coherent information posed barriers to course selection, registration, and access to necessary supports, especially to first-year students. This fundamental information is essential for students to practically make it to Day 1 of their Merritt journey and continue at the college term after term.

Again, determining ways to strengthen students' onboarding process across their first year offers a key opportunity to address communications concerns. To launch this redesign, consider what specific outcomes Merritt wants students to achieve through their onboarding experience. Then map how Merritt students currently engage in the onboarding process to identify how aligned the process is with ensuring those outcomes. Determine what the onboarding process includes, which experiences are optional, and who currently engages with those experiences (and who does not). Identify how students specifically receive communications about setting their educational goals, selecting a program of study, and establishing a related ed plan; meeting with a counselor; attending orientation; selecting the appropriate math and English courses; and connecting with resources and services for which they may be eligible.

Recommendation 5: Foster Student Connection to Each Other and to the Campus.

Career Education students shared feelings of isolation and disconnection with peers, faculty, and the college, particularly when attending online courses and visiting the campus. While students from other focus groups did not explicitly discuss their sense of connection within their courses or with the college, this sentiment may extend beyond Career Education students. Conduct additional inquiry to determine how pervasive this lack of connection may be among other student populations at the college.

Within their online courses, Career Education students expressed a desire for a stronger connection to each other and to their faculty. Consider relevant course activities (e.g., group work, discussions, collaborative writing, peer review, study groups) that can foster their sense of connection and engagement with faculty and fellow classmates as well as with the course. In

addition, for the increasing numbers of students returning to in-person instruction and/or visiting the campus to access resources, identify opportunities that support students in developing a sense of place and a feel of college life (e.g., peer networks, spirit days). Ensure that Merritt faculty, staff, and administrators, are adequately encouraged, supported, and expected to take a more active role in building student connection both within the classroom and across Merritt as a whole.

Recommendation 6: Examine Ways to Increase Unit Load and Full-Time Enrollment.

Students indicated that when their course loads are low, it negatively affects their momentum. Many students shared a desire to take additional units, including adding to their semester load or moving from part-time to full-time enrollment. A higher course load can offer many academic benefits and financial savings to students as well as economic gains (e.g., tuition revenue) to the college. Consider further exploration of institutional barriers (e.g., clarity on which courses to take next, when and how courses are scheduled) and non-institutional barriers (e.g., basic needs) that are impeding students from enrolling in additional courses or pursuing full-time enrollment. Then, determine ways in which the college can actively alleviate some of these obstacles.

Recommendation 7: Expand and Sustain Efforts to Engage and Elevate the Student Voice.

Centering the real and diverse experiences of students—particularly from historically marginalized groups—is critical in making the case for change as well as informing which practices, processes, and policies Merritt can redesign in service of student progress and success. Students’ positive and high response to participate in this focus group opportunity is encouraging, signaling that the college may benefit from continuing this line of student engagement. Continue conducting student focus groups and surveys and consider town halls to collectively make student experiences more visible. Given that other college efforts (e.g., student equity) may also be engaging or have recently engaged student voices through surveys and focus groups, connect with colleagues from those efforts to identify opportunities to leverage, cross-pollinate, and apply those findings towards guided pathways efforts.

Conclusion

Looking at the college through the lens of student experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—can dramatically change one’s understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. These focus groups contribute to Merritt’s ongoing effort to make student perspectives more visible at the college. We applaud Merritt for elevating students’ experiences as part of the guided pathways planning and redesign process. Although the topics raised may not necessarily reflect the key issues and concerns of all students, the views expressed during the focus groups nevertheless point to the fact that, overall, students are motivated to maximize their educational experiences at Merritt. They are seeking more help with educational planning throughout their college journey. They want increased access to information and strengthened connection with others to facilitate educational decision-making, engagement, and necessary supports.

These focus groups also offer useful findings and recommendations the college can immediately apply. They also provide important insights that Merritt’s guided pathways team can leverage to continue building a sense of urgency and direction for the college’s guided pathways efforts. Given that some focus groups particularly explored barriers for key equity groups, these findings also provide direction on opportunities to address equitable access, engagement, and support for priority student groups. Still further, they offer pointers for where to go next with gathering additional students’ perspectives on how to restructure their experiences for increased access, success, and goal attainment.

Relevant Resources from The RP Group’s Student Support (Re)defined Study

Given its resonance with many of the findings and implications that emerged from Merritt’s own focus groups as well as its alignment with guided pathways development, The RP Group’s Student Support (Re)defined study may be of value to Merritt’s guided pathways team.

The study (1) identified *six student success factors* that affect student achievement and (2) asked nearly 900 California community college students what they need to succeed in the community college environment, with a focus on underrepresented groups—providing a useful compass for student-centered, equity-focused planning, inside and outside the classroom.

Resources that can advance Merritt’s application of the findings from the focus groups include:

1. On building a sense of community and belonging in the classroom: [*Using Student Support \(Re\)defined's Success Factors to Ensure Student Learning \(Guided Pathways Pillar Four\)*](#)
2. On examining and redesigning student onboarding: [*Grounding Onboarding in the Student Experience*](#)
3. On the relationship to guided pathways: [*Student Experience Crosswalk: Where Student Support \(Re\)defined and Guided Pathways Meet*](#)

To learn more about the study and access the full suite of resources, visit <https://rpgroup.org/student-support>.

Moving from Data to Action

When reading the recommendations together, we offer a considerable amount of information and number of considerations. It is critical to corroborate the student experiences shared in the focus groups with the responses in the supplemental survey, as well as with other current sources of information at the college (e.g., surveys, focus groups, institutional data, revised Student Equity Plan, committee conversations, practitioner perspectives). Considered collectively, these data will help inform how to prioritize the next steps, knowing that we do not expect Merritt to act on all the recommendations shared in this report. Combining qualitative and quantitative data can be powerful in clarifying and informing the conditions necessary for practitioners and administrators to create meaningful changes to institutional practices and policies that are getting in the way of supporting the success of each Merritt student.

To assist the college in acting on the recommendations provided in this report, we offer the following suggestions:

- **Determine how you plan to use these findings.** Which ongoing college priorities and conversations do these findings affirm? What additional insights were revealed in this report that need to be explicitly shared?
- **Identify which existing workgroups, committees, and taskforces may also benefit** from learning about these findings to weave them into their current work efforts. For example, there are highly salient findings for redesign groups focused on onboarding and student progress and success.
- **Prioritize recommendations** to reduce people’s sense of overwhelm. We recognize that colleges have had to respond to numerous initiatives over the last 10 years (e.g., guided pathways, Student Equity Plan), and more recently, the pandemic. Consider what is most urgent and where the college may experience some quick wins while planning for longer-term transformation.
- **Identify the challenges and opportunities that might hinder or support the college moving forward with an action plan based findings from the focus groups.** Include how these challenges can be addressed, and opportunities realized.
- **Know your campus culture when preparing to share these focus group findings.** Share the information in such a way that invites the campus community to take ownership of the issues and be part of identifying and implementing solutions to address the results.
- **Determine what resources and supports (e.g., human, professional development, space, data, technology) are needed to advance this work.** Consider how these resources and supports align with the college’s strategic initiatives and priorities.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, The RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

Project Team

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Learn more:

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Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol

WELCOME AND OVERVIEW (5 min)

Provide an overview of the purpose, format, and use of focus group conversation.

PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTION (10 min)

Ask participants to briefly introduce themselves (First name, # semesters/years they've been at Merritt College, their educational goal and major (if they have one), and any special programs/clubs in which they participate)

QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS (30 min)

Facilitate discussion around two topic areas:

1. Educational Plan / Course Selection (15 minutes)
 - a. Which of you have an educational plan that shows your college goal and specifically maps out what courses to take each semester in order to achieve that goal (e.g., "your classes")?
 - i. Who helped you develop that educational plan (e.g., counselor)?
 - ii. Are you following your educational plan? If so, how closely; if not, why?
 - b. If you don't have an ed plan, how do you know which courses to take (and when) to make progress towards completing your degree / certificate?
 - c. Has the college supported you in identifying which courses to take? How so?
 - d. Did you take English and/or math in your first year? If not, what would have made it more likely (e.g., tutoring, stronger foundation) to take English and/or math in your first year?
2. Challenges to Educational Progress (15 minutes)
 - a. What academic or personal factors are affecting your ability to complete your program in a timely manner (within 1 to 2 years)? What may prevent you from completing? Sample prompts:
 - i. Matriculation issues: applying to the college, financial aid, attending orientation, assessment, registering for classes, picking a course of study, developing an educational plan.
 - ii. Financial/personal issues: cost of textbooks, family obligations, having/choosing to work, stress, health, meeting basic needs, childcare

- iii. Student support issues: not knowing what resources are available on campus, unproductive counseling sessions
 - iv. Academic issues: access to faculty, access and availability of academic supports
 - v. Institutional issues: unhelpful interactions on campus? faculty, staff or students, feeling unsafe
- b. Who or what at the college has helped you the most in progressing in your program?
 - c. How can faculty, staff, and leadership help you progress and complete your program in a timely manner?
 - d. What resources or assistance would support your progress and completion?

SUPPLEMENTAL SURVEY (10 min)

Ask participants to complete a supplemental survey expanding on the focus group questions. The survey is located at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LGHJVL>.

FINAL QUESTIONS (5 min)

Field any final questions from participants.