



The Merritt Connection

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Dr. Norma Ambriz-Galaviz, President

Sankofa Brings Encouragement and Support to Merritt Students



When student Daron Austin joined Sankofa, a place for students to get encouragement and support toward academic success, he took the organization's meaning to heart. "Sankofa means 'to go back and get,' and I want to be the person that goes back and helps people in my community," says Daron, who is a peer advisor. "Along with helping students with registration and scheduling, I talk with them about their problems at home and about how to balance all of those things."

In fact, when recently talking to Sankofa's staff and students, who were in their comfortable space studying, being tutored, or socializing, the desire to help others was a common theme among everyone associated with the program.

Heading the program is Dr. Charity Clay, a sociology instructor with an extensive background in student services and programs for minority populations. "The program is geared toward students of African-American descent since Merritt has such a large population, but I have a vision of something bigger than just tutoring and counseling to serve more students," says Dr. Clay. "I want students to acknowledge and appreciate their history and also make them aware of the opportunities the college has to offer."

Sankofa offers a variety of services to meet its mission to help students succeed, including help with registration, tutoring, counseling, mentorship, workshops, events, courses, jobs, camaraderie and even an upcoming tour of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Sankofa is also fortunate to have a small but dedicated staff who works with Dr. Clay to fulfill the needs of the students.

An important component of the program is counseling, and the program is lucky to have Derrick Ross, whose experience directly relates to many of Merritt's students. "Along with providing supportive counseling, I can look at life issues beyond academics, from housing to emotional problems, that could impede students from reaching their academic goals," says Ross. "Coming back to Oakland where I grew up, I now have the opportunity to give back and let the student know that no matter what they have been through, education can change their life."



Staff Assistant Linda Brown, who retired from Lawrence Berkeley Labs, is thrilled to have the opportunity “to work with so many bright minds as they push forward to meet their goals,” and calls the experience, “really special.” Dr. Clay calls Linda “invaluable” to the program. “I teach four classes along with coordinating this program, but I have full confidence that everything is going to get done with Linda here. She has great people skills, interacts well with students, and is great at making suggestions that I may not have considered.”



Beyond her small staff, Dr. Clay includes as many others on campus as possible where their expertise may be needed. “We want to include faculty as much as possible, so we are in the process of collaborating with faculty who are willing to incorporate an African-centered curriculum and provide mentoring to students interested in their disciplines,” she says. “I also reach out to the campus community and collaborate with student services to seek out those who would like to facilitate workshops by sharing their knowledge in such areas as financial aid, transfer, interview skills, time management, and other important skills that our students need to develop to be successful.”

Overall, Dr Clay wants students to know that there is always a place for them to go to get the support they need to be successful. “We want this to be a refuge for students. We want them to feel comfortable knowing that they are not on this journey alone,” she says. “And we want them to know that when they come through those doors, they are going to get respect, compassion, and attention, not just from the staff, but from each other.”

Pictured: Dr. Charity Clay, Linda Thompson, and Derrick Ross; and students Caleb Jacks, Marquita Price, Eddie Barnett, and Daron Austin.

--Susan May

What Students Are Saying About Sankofa

Caleb Jacks: *Every time I come into this office, there is a guarantee that I will have my needs met. The goal is to empower us and make sure we know everything that needs to be done to make us more successful.”*

Marquita Price: *I appreciate all of the information that we get about scholarships and other updates and that we can go deeper with our counseling and get peer support and tutoring.*

Daron Austin, Peer Advisor: *I came to Sankofa so I could communicate effectively with other students. I wanted to uplift those in my community who need help with school or other problems.*

Eddie Barnett, Tutor: *I love working with Sankofa students and helping them succeed. It has made me stronger personally to be able to reach out to people and build relationships.*