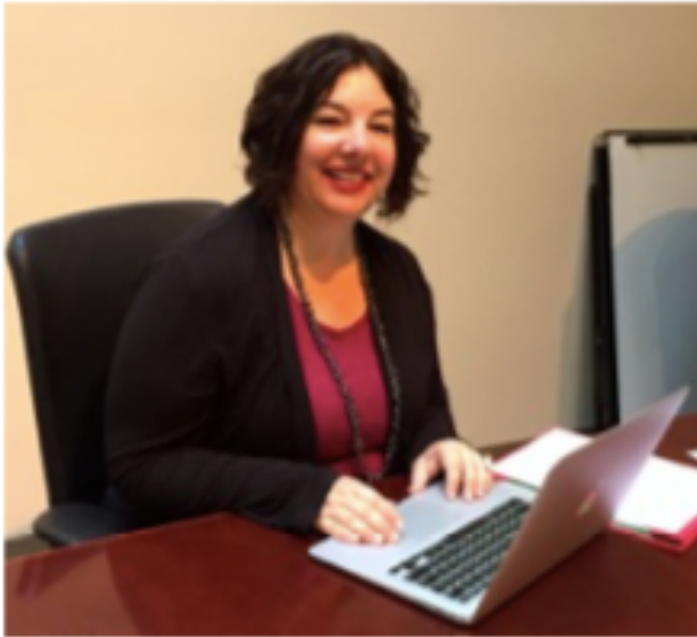


DR. TINA VASCONCELLOS - April 2015

Instructional Dean Brings Passion for Equality to Merritt College

Sitting at her desk recently as Merritt College's new Instructional Dean Dr. Tina Vasconcellos received her usual after-school text from her 15-year-old son Zachary, a sophomore at Berkeley High School.



“Guess where I am?” she read, assuming he was at home doing his homework. “I’m at BCC registering for French in the Concurrent Enrollment Program.”

For any other 15-year-old, this may be unusual. But not for Zachary who grew up at community colleges following his mother’s career in the Peralta District and learning about the value of the community college system that has become his mother’s career and passion since he was an infant.

Spanning both the instructional and student services sides over her 14 years so far in the system, Dr. Vasconcellos

has created innovative programs and pioneered new avenues to make the system a better and more equitable place for all students. “Community college is where the access is and where we can have the most impact from an educational perspective,” she says. “I don’t feel the four-year colleges have the same ability to impact the community.”

Dr. Vasconcellos’ own educational journey was neither traditional nor easy. Growing up in San Leandro, she was a first-generation college student with little support from a family where higher education had little value.

“Having a strong work ethic was important in my family,” she says. “They thought I was successful enough just to have a good job. My grandfather always said, ‘You work hard and that is how you get ahead.’ The importance of continuing education was antithetical to his belief system and history of migrant farm workers.”

But she had higher aspirations. So just before graduating from Moreau High School, she drove herself to Southern California to look at colleges. But when she got there, she soon realized she was out of her element both financially and culturally and turned around and came home. She soon gravitated toward the community college system and began her studies in psychology at Chabot College, transferring to Cal State Hayward, and continuing on to get her master’s in Counseling Psychology at John F. Kennedy University.

She worked full-time throughout all her studies. She began working in the Hayward Unified School District as a special education vocational evaluator, then to the Regional Occupational Program serving adults seeking vocational training, then to Chabot College as an EOPS and CalWORKs counselor, and then to her own private counseling practice.

But it was the subsequent counseling experience at Vista College (now BCC) that inspired her to get a Ph.D. in community college leadership at Colorado State University. Upon completion, she returned to the system and became Dean of Matriculation at Laney in 2008.

“My whole career has focused around engaging and supporting the community,” says Dr. Vasconcellos, who has volunteered in community organizations throughout her career. “The degrees and certificates I have created are all about how we can better serve those in the community and empower them to move forward. I can identify with students who don’t have family support and are struggling to navigate the system.”

The diversity is one of the main reasons she has enjoyed her work in the Peralta system and currently at Merritt, she says. “I value differences in culture, background, and thought. I feel it is in differences that we can find connections and commonality we may not have been aware of.”

“It’s very important to me to be able to understand other individuals and other cultures,” says Dr. Vasconcellos, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the life stories of African American females and the messages they got about themselves in the educational system. “I grew up in a judgmental system where being ‘other’ was not okay. I’ve taught Zachary that it’s important to expand his world and not think that his is the norm. Through his experience with me, including sitting in classes and meetings, he has developed a strong sense of social justice, and I’m very proud of him for being able to recognize and speak out against inequality.”

Dr. Vasconcellos embraces the diversity and opportunities she now has at Merritt College. “I’m excited about being back in instruction and the chance I have to meet the needs of the students and the community and make a difference. I am very committed to my work at Merritt.”

—*Susan May*