

Merritt College Is Training the Next Generation of Naturalists

The Oakland community college has a new program for park rangers, interpretative guides, urban farmers, environmental consultants, park managers, and more, and seeks to attract people of color.

By Angela hill

1

Published: April 02, 2019



Students participate in Merritt College's Edible Landscaping class.

PHOTO BY SUSAN MAY

When you picture a career in the natural sciences, the image most likely involves years of academia, multiple degrees, and groundbreaking research at world-class universities.

That certainly may be the top-of-the-career-food-chain goal for many, but there's an entire ecosystem of jobs out there in the natural world — from park ranger and interpretative guide to urban farmer, environmental consultant, park manager, and more.

To get an entry-level foot in one of those doors, check out the new Natural History & Sustainability program at Merritt College (Merritt.edu/wp/nhs). The interdepartmental program, which kicked off with a soft launch of course work last fall, is a rarity at the community college level, said the program's director, Brad Balukjian. It aims to prepare students for the workforce through sound academics, but also by getting their hands dirty with field work in activities like rebuilding hiking trails or restoring wildlife habitats.

“With the green emphasis in today's world, a lot of government agencies are needing more people, whether its regional parks or state or national parks, not to mention nonprofits, environmental consulting firms — there are so many nonacademic jobs out there, but so few training programs for these kinds of jobs,” said Balukjian, who holds a doctorate in entomology and also started the Ph.D. program in environmental science, policy, and management at UC Berkeley more than a decade ago.

“While the research universities turn their backs on the traditional ‘ology’ classes like herpetology or ornithology, we have a unique opportunity to double down on them,” he wrote on the department's website. “It's nice to know signatures of population structure in the genome of the acorn woodpecker, but what good is it if you don't know what an acorn woodpecker is?”

The new program offers course work in three tracks — natural history/resources, conservation/resource management, and urban agroecology. Current courses will count toward certificates of achievement that are being developed for each track and should be in place by the spring 2020 semester.

The East Bay Regional Park District has partnered with Merritt to develop this practical approach to environmental education. “One of challenges we've had is not having a training program locally that would prepare youths to compete for

these kinds of jobs in the park district,” said Jim O’Connor, the district’s assistant general manager.

“I see this program as giving them the basics, the conservation history and background, but also things like park operations, interacting with customers, running campgrounds, resource management work, public safety,” O’Connor said. “Students will actually go out to the parks and do work, help build a trail, put up some fence lines, help staff a special public event. Then, when jobs come available, they’ll be coming in with some really valuable skills.”

Courses range from core topics like geology and marine biology to Indian Ecology of the Central Coast, Natural History of the Islands of California, and even art classes on botanical drawing.

Jenna Tidd of Walnut Creek started taking classes in the program last fall to “attempt a career change,” she said.

“I realized I wanted to pursue a career that allows me to immerse myself in nature because it’s where I’m truly happy,” she said. “I signed up for the Islands of California class and was immediately hooked. I firmly believe that to be motivated to protect and conserve something, you have to first understand and appreciate it.”

There are field trips to Mount Diablo, Point Reyes, and other Bay Area parklands to examine frogs, snakes, lizards. There are courses on urban farming and food production.

There’s even a segment on social justice.

Merritt College has a long tradition of environmental science and natural history dating back to the late 1950s and the seeds of the environmental movement, but the new program reboots it for the 21st century with a big focus on diversity, Balukjian said. Specific outreach is designed to appeal to people of color who have long been underrepresented in these fields and even in participation in nature-related activities.

“In the environmental sciences, there is definitely a lack of diversity of people of color and in terms of women,” said Analisa Brown, a marine biologist teaching Merritt’s first-ever Intro to Marine Biology course. She also serves as outreach coordinator, introducing the program to local high school students.

She herself is a woman of color who was drawn to the sciences as a child.

“Ever since I was a kid, I always knew I wanted to work with animals,” she said.

“When I stumbled upon the Discovery Channel, I absolutely fell in love with Shark Week. I didn’t know at the time what the careers were, what they were called. It was white men on a boat looking for sharks, and I knew I wanted to do what they did. And my passion stayed there.

“So I want to reach out to students who typically may not consider geology or sustainability or, yeah, marine biology as careers,” she said.

Even the program’s logo — a mottled tube lichen — was chosen with diversity in mind. It’s made up of two to three organisms living together (fungus, alga, and bacterium), which Balukjian said represents the interdisciplinary course work. And the lichen is considered an “underappreciated organism,” he said, “much like people who’ve been underrepresented in the field.”

“People of color make up the largest portion of students at Merritt at nearly 80 percent,” he said. “How do we get over his perception that [natural science] is a white person’s activity? I try to get across that nature really is for everybody, and people of all groups should be participating. With this new program we’re building, we wanted to address this specifically, not shy away from it.”

Program coordinators are hoping to attract youth, but also returning students who may want a career change.

“I tell students very honestly, you don’t go into this to get rich,” Balukjian said.

“But you can make a good living and, to me, the greatest benefit is you’re often working outside. People that do this work are just passionate about the work itself.”