

DR. MARIE-ELAINE BURNS – September 2017

After Decades of Experience, Perseverance Pays Off for Merritt President



When Dr. Marie-Elaine Burns was a San Francisco State University sophomore majoring in broadcast communications, she took a part-time job as a peer counselor in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) to help pay her tuition. It was her first taste of helping students achieve their goals, and it would define her career and remain her passion for the next four decades when she would achieve her own goal and become Merritt College’s president.

The presidency of a major Bay Area community college was a far cry from her childhood dream of being a dancer. Nor was it anywhere close to her undergraduate ambition of becoming a TV news reporter, an aspiration that stemmed from the public-speaking skills that had earned her multiple trophies on the debate team at Lowell High School in San Francisco.

But unlike many of the students who Dr. Burns had helped inspire along the way, she was blessed to have parents who not only supported her educational dreams but insisted on them. “There was no option for me as far as that was concerned—I was going to college,” she says. “My mother believed in me and taught me I could be anything I wanted and to never let anyone tell me otherwise. And my father supported my mother in providing us with values and a good foundation for a productive life.”

Those were lessons that she would take to heart and then pass on as a mentor to hundreds of students throughout her career. At California State University, Long Beach, she did field work for her master’s degree in the then-internationally renowned Learning Assistance Center. She completed her doctoral dissertation by designing a Learning Assistance Center model for the California Community Colleges, where Dr. Burns decided that education, and not dancing or TV news, would become her career. She went on to earn a Master’s Degree in the School of Management & Administration and a Doctorate in Institutional Management, both from Pepperdine University.

Throughout her career, Dr. Burns has been responsible for all the major components that drive student success—from college access, student retention and support services, to transfer and graduation. Along the way, her reputation grew as she offered her expertise to a variety of colleges throughout California, including CSU Dominguez Hills, CSU Long Beach State, Hartnell, Skyline, and Foothill, where she served as dean of its 4,500-student Middlefield Campus.

During the last 10 years when she served as Vice President of Student Affairs at San Jose City College, Dr. Burns started envisioning herself as a college president and began applying for positions throughout the Bay Area. “I felt like after all my education and years of experience, I

had the qualifications to lead a college," she says. "But after several times of being a finalist and not getting the job, I got discouraged and began thinking instead of retiring."

It was just around that time that PCCD Chancellor Jowel Laguerre invited her to serve as interim president at Merritt, and, less than a year later, to become permanent president. She promptly put aside her retirement forms.

"Merritt College had been my first choice, so I was thrilled," she says. "I love Oakland, and I wanted to be at a place where I could really make a difference and help students be successful, working hand-in-hand with all Merritt's valuable faculty, staff, and administrators who are working toward the same outcome."

Dr. Burns knew her dream had come true when she presided over her first Commencement ceremony and was able to say, "With the powers vested in me..." as hundreds of cheering students achieved their own dreams.

"I really want to give a human feel to the presidency so students will know that I am one of them, and they are welcome to come in and talk to me," she says. "I want to be an example of perseverance. I came from Bayview-Hunter's Point, I was a first-generation college student, I'm a single mother, and it took me a long time to reach my goal. I want to let them know they can do it, too. Perseverance pays off!"

—*Susan May*