

MARIO RIVAS – September 2015

New Academic Senate President's Diverse Upbringing Led to His Career



Growing up in a low-income North Oakland neighborhood, Mario Rivas would have probably been considered the least likely to succeed. He hung out in the streets, barely achieved a 1.5 GPA after 1-1/2 years at Laney, and was a self-described “light-weight thug.”

But the things he instinctively learned—about diversity and respect, tolerance and perseverance, his personal strengths and his worst fears—would end up not only shaping his life but contributing toward the self-esteem and success of thousands of students whose lives he would touch.

“My mother was a single parent who cleaned houses from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day so I could do something with my life to help poor people,” says Mario. “But it wasn’t until I flunked out of Laney and was in the Air Force that I knew she was right.”

After the service, Mario entered Cal State Hayward as an EOPS student and earned a B.A. in psychology, then received an M.A. in counseling at SF State and a Ph.D. in counseling psychology at the University of Minnesota. His dissertation was on an academic and psychological intervention for underprepared minority students, and his job in UM’s Martin Luther King advising office was serving as primary advisor for students of color.

Back in California his career began taking shape. He taught psychology at CSU Hayward, then at SF State was Director of Advising Services, started a learning center, then served as its Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies. He then left to become VP of Student Services at BCC for seven years.

Today at Merritt he is a much-loved psychology instructor where he is passionate about his work and his students. He also regularly speaks throughout the country on improving the achievement and learning success of students of color. His most prized achievement was his 5-year training at the Gestalt Institute in SF.

As the new Academic Senate President, Mario says he will continue to encourage and support Merritt’s dedicated faculty as they help students in this diverse institution achieve their goals in the classroom as well as develop the skills necessary to serve as leaders in making a difference throughout the community.

“Many of the kids at Merritt are from the inner city and grew up learning what I did on the streets, so I can identify with them,” says Mario. “My high school counselor told me I was never going to make it. I would never do that to students. They need guidance and support to be successful, and that’s what I love to do.”

—Susan May