

MERCED COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

3600 M Street, Merced, California 95348-2898

Telephone: 209/384-6000 • Fax: 209/384-6043



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August 11, 2010

Dear Colleagues:

Many of you are aware of the front page story published in Tuesday's Merced Sun-Star regarding the two recent working sessions/retreats attended by our senior administrators. One needs to look no further than the headline to discover the article's main intent, which is to suggest that the College is engaged in misuse of public funds. The inference is that college administrators spent \$15,000 drinking wine and gambling.

This is most unfortunate as the work accomplished by our vice presidents and deans will guide us toward some very important goals in the coming year. This is the "story" that is missing in this story.

But, I don't want to belabor the point. My purpose in communicating with you is to provide information so that you may be assured of our plans, which are continually directed toward accomplishing our mission—to educate and train students and to give them the tools necessary for their future success. This remains our mission, our very purpose for being here, and every employee of Merced College plays an important role in the success of our students.

The goals of our work sessions and the practical outcomes of our discussions were to focus and act on several very important initiatives: 1) launching a strategic planning process early this fall; 2) accreditation; 3) identifying goals and priorities in each of the vice presidents' areas for the year; and, 4) developing a framework for accomplishing these tasks. The overarching theme of the sessions was "creating a climate for student success", keeping in mind that our most important task is to create a positive environment for teaching and learning.

Wednesday morning, our managers were apprised of the outcomes of these administrative working retreats. The Management Team will be asked to shoulder greater responsibility for ensuring that our institutional goals will be accomplished. The senior administrators are ready to work toward these goals as well. I will be asking our faculty and staff in the coming months to join us. I take very seriously the requirements of shared governance. All of us at Merced College share a common stake in this institution. Each of you, from front-line managers and program directors to our classified staff, is a valued partner in this endeavor. There has never been a more important time for us to lean on each other and work together. The budget environment continues to present severe challenges to California, but due to our collective planning over the last three years Merced College is stable, though very lean. We will continue to do what we have always done which is to meet challenges and hardships as a college community. My desire is that we work cooperatively, with due respect for our differences and always in a cordial, collegial spirit.

Having said that let me address what may be your concerns about these so-called retreats. The very word is misleading and I hesitate to use it. A retreat suggests fun and relaxation. I can assure you this was not the case in either instance.

The question has been asked, "Why hold these working sessions out of the local area?" Simply, Ironstone Vineyards and Chuckchansi Resort offered the best location at the best prices. We determined that both venues were relatively close and affordable. As important, we needed to be away from the campus to avoid the usual interruptions and distractions that come with phone calls and routine office work. For the purposes of team building and the opportunity to engage in substantive discussions, being in a neutral environment is imperative. As a result, organizations like Merced College find it advantageous to take planning teams off-campus.

Another question posed in the article, and stated in the secondary headline, was whether the College should have spent these funds for this purpose during difficult budget times. I know that \$15,000 may be considered by some as an extravagance, but again, part of the story is missing. The travel expenses came from each participant's budget. This means that for myself, the vice presidents and deans, some other workshop or conference in the coming year will not be possible. Additionally, a facilitator for one of the work sessions was a large part of that event. The press chose not to print this fact. Further, you should know that the administrators donated their time to work on a Friday, a scheduled day off for the campus.

I want to assure all of you that I am guided by the principles of inclusion, transparency, and collective dialogue. These are not only my own values, but they represent the best interests of all of us. The proof is in the work we accomplish together. The media may tell a story about Merced College, but we should all recognize that our story, the very heart and soul of our work, is far more complex and much more compelling than a newspaper is willing to report. Numerous press releases and story suggestions from Merced College are routinely ignored in preference of more "sensational" stories, which include half the facts, and help sell newspapers.

I wish you all a successful start to the new academic year. We have many challenges ahead of us and I look forward to hearing your views as we move forward. I believe that by working together and by recognizing our common concerns, we can accomplish many good things. That remains my deepest wish for this great college.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

Benjamin T. Duran, Ed.D
Superintendent/President