

## Overview and Methods

In a recent Taking the Pulse of Higher Education Expectations project survey, 970 prospective and current students responded, providing an 11% response rate (856 were currently enrolled). The survey was open for a span of thirteen days, from Nov. 18 to Nov. 30. The survey and focus group questions were initially developed by our colleagues in marketing and then refined by Traci Bjella, Allie Vatcher, and Sonya Joseph working with Laura Blasi. A set of questions were developed and added to this survey to inform the work of Student Affairs and their ongoing work towards reaffirmation of accreditation. Several questions were adapted from national surveys in order to provide comparative findings.

## Overall Observations

3% of students responding self-identified as needing accommodations (N=28). Some of these students made comments or provided responses suggesting they are facing difficulties, but others did not. Many more students made comments about their situations related to a disability, even though they did not identify as needing accommodations. The comments allow us to hear the voices of our students and to discuss the ways we support students, faculty, and staff in creating an inclusive environment, while we see the positive impact we already have on student lives.

Valencia is serving students who have 1) recognized disabilities and are formally registered with our Office for Students with Disabilities so their faculty members are notified by the college. We are also serving those who have 2) recognized disabilities, but are not formally registered with our Office for Students with Disabilities so their faculty members are not notified. Students may say something to the instructor, but it is not clear the identification is accurate and the faculty member may question the credibility. One student noted that there are: “Not enough Zoom class or teachers that help with asburgers disability, since everything has to be doctors proof.” We also have 3) students who have disabilities that are not formally diagnosed or recognized and therefore no one knows and they are struggling – some of them are blaming themselves. **As we look at the comments from these three types of students, we can ask what a faculty member should know and do to teach a course with all three of these kinds of students in the class.**

## Valencia College from the Student Perspective

Students were asked a few very broad questions, in part to help inform the new college campaign for student outreach in Central Florida. Themes emerged across the majority of responses (N=856) with specific comments of interest to disability services. Students were asked: “What do you hope to take away from your college experience? How would you describe ‘the college experience?’” and responded: “Not at all, it’s less traumatizing than high school and professors aren’t as strict as your teachers said they were. I am a disabled person and while there were some cool campus events, I do not get to have the average college experience.” Another characterized the college experience in this way: “TEACHERS THAT THINK ASBURGRS IS NOT A DISABILITY!”

When asked (open-ended) about most important services – eight specifically named the office, and one explained: “Disability services; I can’t do college without it.” Another explained: “Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) is most important because I am deaf in hearing college. Advisor helps me to work and check the information, and provide an interpreter for the class.” Another responded that he has had difficulties with the services provided, and when asked to explain, the student noted: “I’ve had a lot of difficulties getting in contact with my professors, and when I speak to advisors or deans, they tell me there is little to be done outside of sending an email. Furthermore, I have just been diagnosed as disabled, and it has been incredibly difficult keeping up with my classes with the trouble my condition comes with, and my professors have been difficult to get help from.”

## The Impact of Online Courses<sup>1</sup>

One noted regarding the move to online courses: “I do not prefer online classes, because they are more difficult to focus.” Another said: “It puts a lot more pressure on me, as there are some courses I’ve been forced to take online, which has felt almost as if I was teaching myself. I’ve had to drop out of courses because of falling behind for that reason. It’s harder for me with my disability to do online courses.” One offered this solution: “It is like I’m teaching myself the class. If the professor just gave us the textbook and PowerPoint, it puts more work on me. It would be easier if they at least recorded themselves doing lecture videos. After having an all online semester, I feel more drained and mentally exhausted than I would normally.” For other students being fully online has been helpful. “I am disabled and I live with people at risk for COVID-19., plus I do not like driving.” Another reported that safety was a concern and being online helped her: “I feel I am too old to be in a classroom with younger students. I get overwhelmed and with my disability, I do not want something to happen and no one will help me if needed.” After our observations and recommendations, the additional quotes which follow provide insights as well as questions to guide discussion.

## What We Know and What We are Learning

We see that while students with disabilities have lost their connections to place - and with it their routines - we are also now observing that some students, who have been taught skills to help them succeed and cope prior, now struggle to transfer those skills into the online environment. For example, those who have learned ways to advocate for themselves or explain in person what they need are now connected to the college frequently by E-mail alone. This becomes a new and challenging barrier for students conditioned to advocate for themselves in

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<sup>1</sup> A brief case study focused on the experience of a Valencia College student with Asperger’s is available online, drawn from this focus group series. It includes examples of the positive impact that faculty are having.

<https://valenciacollege.edu/academics/analytics-and-planning/institutional-evaluation/research-and-evaluation/documents/valencia-taking-the-pulse-overview-of-focus-group-results-lb-12-3-2020-1-4-2021.pdf>

person. They have to learn how to express themselves in written format, which can cause a separate group of challenges. Fortunately, faculty members can learn about and adopt *Universal Design*<sup>2</sup> teaching practices without waiting to be contacted by the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). While not a total solution to mitigate the challenges some students face, it may help some learn more, completing the class, and the instructor may experience less dissonance. Often *Universal Design* strategies benefit all students. Faculty can help students by providing structure and asking what kind of help is needed. Instructors are not alone in trying to address this challenge, and we are fortunate to have several people and offices that can help beyond OSD.

## What You Can Do, Who Can Help You

The Faculty Center for Teaching, Learning and Innovation is an excellent resource to assist with course design that supports as many students as possible. The college also provides various resources to help as well. If you have time to commit to a course, you can take INDV3158: Universal Design and Accessibility through the Valencia Edge. You can also ask about effective practices for teaching students online and consider whether other support might be needed (such as for international students, students for whom English is a Second Language, and for those without reading skills). Finally, the Office for Students with Disabilities is an excellent resource for advice about specific students or individual course concerns. Due to their working relationships with students, the OSD staff can provide detailed feedback on how to best support specific students in your courses. If a student tells you they are having a problem and you are not sure if they have a letter on file with OSD – or if OSD has not connected with you about this student yet – go ahead and contact OSD for help. Your OSD colleagues there are available to support you with your specific student needs (across all students– not just the ones with official documentation on file).

Finally, the largest population of registered students with disabilities at the college are those with psychological disabilities. Unfortunately, we were able to gather feedback from those students about how they are adjusting to college entirely online. It is not difficult to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic can exacerbate things for this population and all college students. In *More Than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of U.S. College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic*,<sup>3</sup> the authors outline how the pandemic has been uniquely affecting college students across the nation. You may not know if you have a student with a psychological disability or mental health barriers in your course, but here are three tips to support all students:

- **Consider space for flexibility** – though we have been living with COVID for almost a year, all of us still have times where things happen. Students may need flexibility with a deadline or assignment. Consider how you can offer flexibility when appropriate in your course.
- **Keep an eye on student behavior** – has a student stopped participating in class? Or have they changed their behavior during Zoom lectures? Reach out to them to see if you can refer them to the supports available through the school.
- **Remind students of your office hours and availability** – some students are struggling with connecting to people on campus. The ability to meet with you via Zoom or video conference may be a welcome way to communicate with you outside of class if they are struggling with the material.

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<sup>2</sup> More about Universal Design with examples: [http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/udl\\_landing](http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/udl_landing)

<sup>3</sup> More Than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of U.S. College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1090198120969372>

- **Call the OSD.** If you need feedback on a student situation or want input on how to best support your students, please call the OSD if the student is registered with us or you believe the student can use our service. Nikkia Gumbs, Assistant Director, Office for Students with Disabilities  
[ngumbs@valenciacollege.edu](mailto:ngumbs@valenciacollege.edu)

## Additional Comments from Our Students

- I am disabled, and feel like an inconvenience in regards to transportation and other situation.
- I find it hard to focus and create an efficient way to complete assignments and retain what I am taught.
- I have a learning disability, and I get distracted easily. Being at home is a huge distraction for me.
- I do not do well with online instruction. I need to be in a classroom. I have ADHD and OCD, and I have a hard time concentrating and getting my work done online. I have always been able to learn and do my work in a classroom setting.
- I am not interested because online school/classes for me make it 100x times harder for me to understand, as I do have learning disabilities and I need someone face-to-face interaction to help me learn and explain in detail, for my learning style, so I can be my best smart self. All of the teachers, in my small high school for students with disabilities, and students with other issues that affected their schooling, were VERY understanding of each child and were very flexible, with limits of course (it is still school so!) I found myself doing better there, even in my harder subjects like math than I have ever in my whole 15 years of schooling!
- I feel like I learn better in person than in online. As well, when it's online I feel like I'm teaching the subject myself than being taught by a professor. And after finishing an online class, I forget most of what I was taught.
- This pandemic hit me more than I thought, especially since the only option for taking classes is online. I wouldn't say I like online classes because I have to do all the learnings by myself, meaning reading, analyzing, figuring out things by myself; I'm more a face-to-face class person, and I only did online classes because I had no choice.
- I am a very hands-on learner and working online is incredibly difficult for me. I already have attention/focusing issues so trying to motivate myself to go online and take a class is much harder than physically going to a class and working. Obviously, this situation is no one's fault, but online is extremely overwhelming for me and a lot of my fellow students.
- I have ADHD so doing online school I am unable to focus or even motivate myself. I learn better when I am taught face-to-face, because then someone is right there to help because I struggle more often than other students to understand things.

- It is more difficult to teach yourself being at home and doing all the work online, while being face-to-face the professor is there to fully explain the lesson. Reading the notes and PowerPoint that are provided with an online course doesn't help unless the professor is there to break it down fully.
- I have ADHD, so online classes are the worst for me, and because there are no in-person classes, I am struggling a lot with school. I lost the one person I looked up to because of this COVID pandemic, and she passed away on October 5<sup>th</sup> and it set me back and I wasn't motivated for school. I didn't feel anything. I was thrown from my own family, and the women who took me in left this earth too soon and I miss her every day.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What are you personally experiencing as you listen to students and observe them?
2. How has the move online had an impact on your students regarding access and ability?
3. If you don't know, how can you ask?
4. Have you recently discussed universal design and accessibility issues with a designer and gotten feedback?
5. What is one change you would like to make to better support students in need?
6. What makes you hesitate or hold back from exploring this or making changes?

## Additional Resources

Office: (407) 582-1371

SVRS: (407) 992-8941

TTY: (407) 582-1222

[www.valenciacollege.edu/osd](http://www.valenciacollege.edu/osd)

### Faculty Resources

[Explanation of Accommodations](#)

[Online Accommodations](#)

[Faculty Toolbox](#)

### Student Resources

[Letter of Accommodation Request](#)

[OSD Registration Process](#)

[Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services](#)

[Alternate Format](#)