

Project Overview and Focus Group Summary

Five focus groups were convened in November 2020 in order to understand the ways that people in our region are thinking about higher education as part of the “Taking the Pulse of Higher Education” project. The project was developed to document how participants perceive their opportunities and barriers related to college enrollment and future plans. The focus groups were conducted to support the college in strengthening services in ways aligned to the needs of participants and informed by the current conditions in Central Florida. The results were designed to be used for strategic planning and more specifically in Student Affairs planning, in addition to the creation of the college’s next outreach campaign. On Nov. 3rd the first two focus groups were held, first with current students and then with students in the Student Government Association (SGA). On Nov. 6 prospective students participated and on Nov. 23rd the final two focus groups were held with non-enrolled adults through Career Source and finally with parents. A total of 14 people participated¹. Additional details about methodology are included at the end of this report along with a table of participant pseudonyms and their demographics. The focus group results can be compared to the survey results (N=970) which are not reported here, but are available.²

Overall the prospective and current students report feeling more motivation and inspiration from pandemic conditions as they think about their educational future, whereas non-enrolled adults and parents are looking towards higher education to help them – or their children – survive. They all report using online resources to learn about their options and to make decisions about enrollment, but when asked to describe their processes there is no structure, method, or strategy. The influence of family members is evident to varying degrees; students with family members who have had successful higher education experiences are able to articulate more possibilities, further into the future. Some of the prospective and current students report they have preconceptions about college that come from friends and family who have not been to college, dreams that their experiences in college will be better than high school, and the movies. Prospective students enthusiastically

¹ **Many thanks to Amy Downs; Jessica Farnan; Nancy Mallison; Erica Reese; Melissa Shank; and Amaris Vasquez for facilitating and note-taking for these focus groups.**

² The survey of prospective and current students had an 11% response rate (N=970) with prospective (N=114) and enrolled college students (N=856). The survey was open for a span of thirteen days, from Nov.18 to Nov. 30. In December launched a separate survey for parents and another for non-enrolled adults. A related presentation of those survey results with participants’ written comments is available.

spoke the most often about wanting to learn about other cultures, grow personally, and interact with different types of people and this attitude was also evident in the project survey responses. All participants reported they plan to stay in the Central Florida region. This report offers eighteen key themes or ideas that emerged and might inform future planning related to outreach and related quotes are shared later in this report. The pages that follow include a sidebar about a student who withdrew and a brief case study of a currently enrolled student with autism, along with a more in-depth exploration of results.

18 Themes or ideas that emerged across the focus groups that may inform college outreach

1. Valencia is college that cares – highlight what we are doing to help our students.
2. An important milestone in the immigrant experience – higher education is the path to success
3. Through your determination you set an example for your family members as you enroll and complete
4. Valencia’s reputation keeps getting stronger as we try to be better, do better
5. An education is valued and valuable, but what does success look like? [completer view]
6. The pandemic revealed what it takes to be prepared and to thrive, Valencia is part of that
7. Not just a connection to UCF, Valencia offers small class sizes just like expensive colleges
8. A new environment calls for new skills and offers new opportunities, rise to the challenge with training
9. We are moving towards a place where life will be more manageable, this provides hope
10. We have been working to keep one another safe, this provides hope
11. Opportunities are emerging and doors will be reopening, this provides hope
12. While others just talk about the reputation of a college, build a reputation of your own by taking courses
13. We have faculty and staff who are very good at what they do, here to help you.

14. At Valencia you can enroll and access support services, opportunities to give back to the community, and internships to learn which field is the best fit for you.

15. There is value to open enrollment. When compared to more exclusive requirements at other colleges, it’s not a step down, there is a benefit.

16. Some kinds of courses work better online, schedules can be designed to meet needs – with online courses [i.e. for the full-time employed]

17. You can connect with new people, find your supportive community through student organizations – you can build yourself, you can build your resume.

18. College is within reach even as you are committed to your first priorities [– having food at the table or taking care of your children or your single mother, making sure that your kids are learning at school, doing everything you can to support your family.]

A Closer Look at the Results: Why They Want to Attend College

Current students say they want to attend college for expanded opportunities, and later they appreciate the long-term value of the degree. One of the students referred to “all of those studies out there. They show that the longer you stay in college, the bigger paycheck you earn in the long run” (Mary, Student). Another current student described the opportunities that college provides beyond career advancement, explaining that you can “participate in ... programs that either support you [or] give you more volunteer hours to give back to the community ... that's the reason I'm saying in college” (Tom, Student).

Career considerations take priority and are more defined for non-enrolled adults. One explained: “I already have my bachelor's in economics and ... I'm trying to get something to complement that, you know, being that it's you know it's tough situation right now with the job market, so I want to be able to have a little bit of an edge with that. So yes, I'll be going back to school. Hopefully over the next couple of weeks” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Another described his context: “I'm having \$13 per hour now [in] an administrative job in ... this ordering company. I arrived from Honduras, in the summer of 2019 ... like a permanent resident, but I've now been working ... here like eight months. So I need to have a little ... more income (Roberto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Another participant explained, since her work has moved online: “I would like to do like some online management courses pertaining to ... managing teams. I already have my bachelor's degree and my master's degree in public administration” (Renee, Non-Enrolled Adult).

Prospective students first pointed to very specific career goals, such as a desire to enter the field of dermatology, then later offered broader reasons, for example the idea that degrees are required and lead to better salaries. While academics are important they all emphasized the value of personal growth and social development. They were in agreement that college is necessary. All of them feel that they have family support, which is sometimes stronger than support from friends. Current students also pointed to the importance of family, one wanting to set the example for her cousins and other family members (Valerie, Student, SGA). Another explained: “Education is really valuable to my family and I'm an immigrant [and a] first generation student, and staying in college will lead me to pursue the career that I want to be” (Sally, Student, SGA). Building on that idea, another explained:

I've always been taught that education is very important ... and I know that I share these values with a lot of immigrants and a lot of specifically Hispanic immigrants. Well, we know that in order for us to make it in America, we need to not just be the best of the best, but have some sort of guarantee or some sort of sort of certificate that would open up some spaces for us. And I know that I'm pursuing higher education does stuff for us. And I will stay in education, personally, because those are the kind of values that I've always been taught, I was always taught college was the right path for success (Sandi, Student, SGA).

There are many reasons that all of the participating prospective students plan to enroll in college soon. “I think coming from high school is the transition from being in a learning environment to being in another learning environment would make the transition easier” (Lisa, Prospective Student). All current students who participated reported that they plan to keep moving forward. One said, enthusiastically, “I'm definitely not postponing I'm saying I want to thrive. I want to get done” (Colleen, Student). From the current student point-of-view, reasons for leaving college might include stress and financial issues. Prospective students believe that finances, time

management, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may pose obstacles to enrollment. Beyond money the support of parents is crucial, they noted. One explained:

I have my Mom here. My Dad isn't here. But if something were to happen to my Mom, I would have to step up and take care of my sister ... I would need time to figure it out how to juggle school and work and my sister and myself. And so, [I am] worrying about it (Maria, Prospective Student).

In a later focus group, one of the non-enrolled adults explained: “The only thing that would be against going to school at this point would be something like finance. I know that a lot of people have a struggle, you know, paying for school ... there's more pros and cons at this point” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Short training opportunities are important for many non-enrolled adults, as they can fit within schedules and current salaries do not support extended study.

How are students making their decisions about enrollment?

Current students are making their decisions based on current conditions (one described a smooth transition to online learning) and others are taking their long-term goals into account (one mentioned she is planning a start family). When asked if there are specific people or resources that they are using to learn about their options after Valencia College, they referred to the University of Central Florida (UCF) website and the Disney Aspire Website. Prospective students pointed to the Valencia College and the UCF Websites.

One of the prospective students mentioned she is not consulting anyone about her decision to enroll, but she is only using online resources and “going on the FAFSA Website researching online for different organizations that might offer scholarships” (Lisa, Prospective Student). “Basically, I do my own research” said another, and she also referred to the importance of Allah in her decisions along with her mentor (Flora, Prospective Student). She described her process: “I look at stuff online, check which college that might be the best fit for me, and what I'm gonna do. And also, I check the price, would I be able to pay for that college, and stuff like that.” Another prospective student described her priorities: “I'm not trying to get myself in ... something that will produce me money, but I don't like in the long run. ... I've been talking to my school counselors and some people have volunteered to talk about colleges” (Maria, Prospective Student). Another, as a first generation student, noted that she is learning from the experiences of those around her:

My parents – they went to college ... but never got to graduate. But they went in like two different areas ... My mom was about to be a lawyer, but then she didn't graduate and my dad was like a software engineer. And then he still didn't graduate, but I know from people that have actually graduated and have put their degree ... into use. They told me about the benefits ... I'm trying to look on more on the positive side then of college, then all the stuff ... involved like taking the classes and everything (Maria, Prospective Student).

Family members seem to have the most influence. One current student explained that his family members had transferred to UCF and were able to share details about resources to take advantage of – and why they matter:

[There are] ... different ... programs where you can [have an] internship ... where you go to different companies and ... you get to experience the real life of an engineer, so you get to, you know, you get to decide of what you know which way you would like to go after school (Tom, Student).

Another student also provided an example of the social capital³ gained when family members have experience, explaining:

Well, my Mom is a business owner. She's been in business for like 40 years. So I'm definitely been mentored by her. We do have a lot of business friends that I can reach out to, to get information from as far as ... apprenticeships. And then, you know, I'm already kind of ... inspired about what I want to do and you know where my business is going. And I've already branded myself (Colleen, Student).

High school peers influence perceptions about the college, as one current student who is also first-generation-in-college reflected on her experience: “I felt my only choice was Valencia. It was my little beacon of hope and ... when I told my peers that I was going to Valencia, they kind of said ... ‘Oh’ – like Valencia was a bad thing. And honestly, that made me think that it was a negative thing ... that made me feel like I was less than. ... I got that feeling from my peers that it was a disappointment. And I started with that” (Sally, Student, SGA).

When asked about resources they draw on or about people informing decisions, one non-enrolled adult mentioned that family and friends are important, but “ultimately, it's my decision as to what I want to do” (Renee, Non-Enrolled Adult). Another said he is motivated by his family because he has a wife. Another commented: “I don't get any influence from nobody but myself” he joked, “I'm a trendsetter. So I'm only get influenced by myself” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). He explained that he is conducting his own research because “there's so many programs out there and I'm trying to focus, which one is best for me ... I actually have an appointment ... with the head counselor. So yeah, I should hopefully that should give me a lot, of guidance I looked at the programs I wanted. So then I thought to myself, I think a good place to start is with IT. So I went [to] a computer science/IT counselor. And yeah, I did the research on my own” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Another explained he is learning from Valencia's Website and the Internet, he noted it wasn't through college communication (Roberto, Non-Enrolled Adult). “I've just gone online doing searches to see management courses in order to get maybe like a certificate on them like that and [become more] ... efficient about managing teams” said another. In the new environment “it is difficult to manage teams” (Renee, Non-Enrolled Adult).

Support Needed for Success

Prospective students were asked about the support structure needed to be successful online, they mentioned online tutoring, for example a writing center and a math center or just one place to turn to when they have questions. They asked for people to help when needed – and one also asked for someone to motivate her. Beyond online, students asked for professors who are available to answer questions and those who are organized and “give information ahead of time. And I guess teachers that didn't give information too late ... before the due

³ Social capital has been shown to impact outcomes, for example “the presence of two parents at home, a lower number of siblings, higher parental educational expectations, and intergenerational closure lead to lower incidence of dropping out of school.” Acar, E. (2011). Effects of social capital on academic success: A narrative synthesis. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 6(6), 456–461. Accessed online: <https://academicjournals.org/journal/ERR/article-full-text-pdf/8BD71B95320#>

date” (Lisa, Prospective Student). They hope to have professors who do not pressure new students, “because we're still getting used to that new environment that we live in right now ... if there is not too much ... we will be able to get stuff done” (Flora, Prospective Student). Another explained:

I've seen college in movies and stuff like that. And I see either the teachers are really nice or they just really don't care ... you were supposed to be an adult now and this is what you're supposed to be doing. This is what you're supposed to take care of. I don't like them. I'm concerned [attentive] ... but I still have things that I don't get as an adult, I guess. And I think it's more though actually ... that we are not fully adults here. We might be taking this step, and we know what it entails, but we still need a little bit of guidance through it, I guess (Maria, Prospective Student).

Student organizations and activities can provide support, but not all students are aware of this possibility. One of the SGA leaders noted that, while they value this kind of engagement, “for a lot of students [this] isn't the case. We don't learn about the benefits of being in a club ... it's not told to us in high school [but] the benefits are humongous. The first thing that I can think of is that you have a community already there” (Sally, Student, SGA). Students may need more than student organizations to feel supported, as another SGA leader commented:

I know that for me ... extracurricular programs like clubs do help students, but sometimes you do need someone ... in the academic sphere to really ... be there by your side to help you and that can help them on their academic journey because I know that for me I didn't truly feel connected to the college when I was in SGA, but I truly did feel ... connected to Valencia when I started having like people in academics in the field that I am in ... actually ... talking about my grades, not just stuff about SGA (Valerie, Student, SGA).

When current students were asked: “If you could change anything to make your experience at Valencia better, what would it be?” One student asked for better communication with some of some of the professors in the online environment, as she described:

There are certain instances where just I haven't been responded to unless I've reached out to the person above them. It's like very hard to get a response. And I don't know if it's because those professors are just not used to doing the online thing. Like if they've ever taught online before so I'm just getting the feeling that they don't understand [that] if you're not really ... in constant communication with someone online that it kind of makes the student feel like a little insecure, whereas I have a younger professor who ... [is of] that younger generation growing up on computers – he seems to grasp that more so he's always in communication (Mary, Student).

Non-enrolled adults asked for flexibility for example in scheduling “something to work around my job, mostly ... I know people have kids at home ... and they need to take care of that” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). They expect the resources that prospective students of traditional age also described, for example staff to answer questions. One explained he would like to work with “someone who knows what they're talking about, like when you go to them” without transferring you multiple times. “[You can say] ‘Wow, this person is knowledgeable,’ you know this and you feel comfortable and you're not going to be like, ‘Oh man this person don't know what the hell they're doing now I will be [stuck] here’ you know... [I need] someone that can point me to the right direction

(Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Another explained “I would like ... extended office hours, not just the eight-to-five office hours. I want someone to be available because we do studies various times throughout the day, and particularly me because I work. So someone that could be available or I can type them if I had any questions, say if I was doing assignments late at night that I could just reach out to them. If I had a question about something that I was stuck on. So that kind of support will be helpful for me” (Renee, Non-Enrolled Adult).

The Impact of COVID-19 and Feelings of Optimism

Prospective students were asked if the COVID-19 pandemic changed their interest related to college attendance. One noted: “I feel like [it had] a good impact – because I feel like the more education, you can get, you should be able to just go for it ... There's a lot of people that didn't have a job ... [and were] not able to take care of themselves [and their] families, [but] ... there's some people even on the epidemic ... they're still able to get a job and take care of themselves” (Flora, Prospective Student). Another participant commented that her overall interest has not changed, but her concern for her own safety and the safety of other people definitely influences her decisions – online classes are important [related to that] (Lisa, Prospective Student). “I'm worried that just because of this pandemic, I'm not gonna get the same stuff. So, I'm like, well, should I hold on to everything [until it] becomes a little bit more cleared ... more safe to do everything that ... we want to do” (Maria, Prospective Student).

All current students said that they were impressed by the college response to the pandemic, they miss face-to-face interactions, and they have found a new source of motivation in the new environment. They are open to continuing online classes, when appropriate for the type of course. One explained that “the lower level courses” seem to be better to take online. She added: “The ones that are a little more specialized where I'm kind of wanting input from the professor, like where he's right in front of me and those I would want to take in person” (Mary, Student). Later prospective students noted that the online mode is not appropriate for all courses – Math was mentioned as an example. They all want an in-person experience, especially for the social interaction as first year students.

As a result of COVID some non-enrolled adults experienced unexpected changes related to training and the workplace. One was planning on training related to apartment maintenance, but he did not hear back and suspects the program was cancelled. He believes they're going to start a program in the Orange County convention center, a limited training program – but he is not certain. “No one ... comes in the office anymore,” explained another non-enrolled adult. “Everybody's working remotely here and a lot of my friends are in the

A Parent Explains Why Her Daughter Withdrew

One parent explained how her daughter is making her decisions and why she has withdrawn for now. “My daughter started in August and was living in a dorm [downtown] and then she left, and she dropped her classes because it was not working out on many levels.” They are currently in conflict trying to get reimbursement from UCF for the dorm room. “She plans to continue next year, probably next fall because for her, the whole situation just did not work out through COVID, with nothing being in person in terms of classes and social activities,” she later added: “it was really lonely and isolating for her.”

Focusing on the future, she explained: “right now [she] is still figuring out what she wants to pursue and ... I'm a big believer in a broad liberal arts education because in our world, no matter what you decide to do in your college years, things are changing. ... She also wants to pursue that ... overall right now, it makes more sense to kind of find something, and she's still figuring out what that something is, but something to pursue during a gap year and then return next year” (Maggie, Parent).

same position where their offices essentially closed and they're working remotely" (Renee, Non-Enrolled Adult). Another's job went online and then he was let go because the company was downsizing. "Unless ... you're an essential worker ... that's what I've seen, mostly happen" (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Uncertainty about career options is not a concern for him though. "I feel like we've had enough time to explore the options ... at this point, you kind of know what industries are hurting and what industries booming" and he referred to Amazon, Facebook, and Google, later companies related to household consumables (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult).

The pandemic has heightened the importance of credentials, as one of the non-enrolled adults explained: "I'm 34 years old and I've been through two crises. This is my second one. The first one was in 2008, so I know what that was. And I was just finishing college like around that time, I was in my 20s ... and I saw like I've learned a lot from that situation. And so seeing it from now. I'm like, looking at it again. I'm like, oh wow you know ... when times are normal ... you're only competing with like 10 or 20 people for a job. But in a recession or something as powerful of this. Now you're competing with 100 people for that one job, you know, you got to stand out and I know what it takes" (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult).

Prospective students said they are hopeful for the future, one explained: "I think knowing that a lot of the people who I know are concerned about other people's safety and well-being ... as long as we keep wearing masks and being responsible ... things can go forward to a place where things are more manageable for everyone ... just people knowing that this is important" (Lisa, Prospective Student). When asked about what makes them feel most hopeful or uneasy about the future one current student noted that the thought of a vaccine makes her hopeful. She added: "Things ... getting worse over the winter and having more lockdowns which would then in turn affect Valencia more negatively. And, you know, all other colleges in the area, I would assume. That makes me really nervous" (Mary, Student). Another explained he is getting a job in his chosen field, but before that he wants to work with a professor in person" (Tom, Student). "When I do transfer and I have to be in a lab, and I have to do research, then it's like I'm gonna have to play catch up. And that does scare me" (Valerie, Student, SGA). Non-enrolled adults said they were hopeful when thinking about a possible vaccine and eventually freely going out, without any restrictions, but "the earliest that I've heard that things will get back to normal, to some extent, would be late 2021 to early 2022" (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). COVID-19 is still a source of anxiety as is the presidency.

Key Considerations when Selecting a College

When asked about key considerations when selecting a college, while cost and location are important, prospective students say they are looking forward to learning a lot more than they do now, and also they are looking forward to learning about different cultures and ways of thinking. One prospective student is looking forward to being offered more books than she would have been assigned in high school, from different points of view. One noted that she feels like it is possible to find a job without a degree, but "I feel like if I go to college, I will like grow more and that's the main reason why I want to go to college" (Flora, Prospective Student). Beyond academics, another is looking forward to the relationships that she will make with the staff and the students (Maria, Prospective Student). She added that she is looking forward to "mentally [becoming] capable of doing things that I'm not right now like handling certain situations ... difficult situations ... I don't know if you understand what I'm saying."

When asked about any experiences they are looking forward to in college that are non-academic, one of the prospective students said: “I was never really good ... at making friends spontaneously in school ... I want to put myself in situations where I can grow with people instead of alone, like I did in school” (Maria, Prospective Student). Another said that participation in theatre activities has always been important to her, and another added: “I feel like I should be able to get involved more in stuff that's happening in school, because I feel like to my high school years I was more focusing on getting good grades and ... [I] should be able to do both in college” (Flora, Prospective Student).

Non-enrolled adults are currently experiencing the turmoil of the job market, and access to quick, affordable programs is key. “I see the struggle for a lot of people I know a lot of people right now who lost like their jobs and haven't had the opportunity to go back to school ... they're like, I wish I had the opportunity to go back to school and I see that a lot more. And, you know ... maybe they only have a high school diploma. ... Some of these programs or certifications are like the best way to get your door into a career, you know ... I've seen Valencia has like hundreds of programs that are like, great for people that are quick a couple of weeks, and you're, you know, you're done. And you have something” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult).

Reputation Matters

One of the current students pointed to the cost of classes and the integrity of the school, as priorities “whether it's going to be accredited or not, if anything was to happen, is it established?” Others emphasized the importance of location and reputation.

The relationship that Valencia has forged with UCF has been really, really impressive. Since UCF is such a good school. Like back in the day, my husband, he attended Valencia for some classes and like he even sees now like because he's nine years older than me so he sees ... the difference from when he went versus like me going now. And like even he's impressed with like opportunities that you guys offer – like the Downtown campus ... [you are] basically sharing that with UCF ... not solely because of that. I was just using that as an example as how you [have] bettered yourself, but it just seems like over the past 20 years like the people who work for the school have really tried hard to make the reputation for Valencia better and my experience here at the school has been really good (Mary, Student).

Another student agreed, noting that “not just the relationship between UCF and Valencia also ... the class sizes are pretty small. I went to a private school. I went to University of Tampa where I mean class sizes were intentionally under 20 ... Valencia has done that ... whether I pay ... \$60,000 a year or \$2,000 a year, I'm still having 20 students my class. So it doesn't you know that's something that that I give you guys credit, it's, it's pretty amazing” (Tom, Student).

The impact of messages about the relationship between Valencia and UCF was described by another student: “A lot of people just think that [Valencia is a] place where you go to and then you just get your degree [from UCF] and it might just come from the perception of what community colleges are in general ... and also because the advertisement to like transfer to UCF is so strong. People think that that's basically all we're for – just a transfer to UCF, and it's like, no, we got all that, we can also help you. We got a lot of resources ... We got great professors that can really change your life” (Sandi, Student, SGA).

Participants were asked to further describe their perception of the college's reputation and where they developed it. One of the current students pointed to people in the community and from advertisements. She added: "I've heard that it used to be called Valencia Community College and that because [you are] bettering yourselves, it's now just Valencia College. It has kind of taken a few steps up." She referred to a positive vibe that she has picked up from many people in the community over the past seven years (Mary, Student). Another explained:

Back when I was in high school [in Orlando] the reason why [the college's reputation] was a little bit negative is because everyone who would apply to Valencia would just get accepted immediately. There was not there was no necessarily like a process to get accepted or anything. You know you didn't have to have any background on it or any like high achievements in order to go or in order to get accepted into Valencia. I kind of saw that as a little bit of a negative. But ... once I got through the process like after I graduated college and I decided to go back to school ... I just think you guys are amazing. I mean, it's definitely not what it is. And it's basically what you make out of yourself. It's not necessarily what you know people make out of, out of the institution (Tom, Student).

Negative sentiments were more often reported by student leaders in the SGA, they may be tired from their continued student outreach efforts or are cynical as a result of being asked to represent the voices of students at-risk – and from carrying that responsibility. One of the leaders noted that sometimes the college may be perceived as uncaring. Another student leader explained how this belief might be turned around:

I have heard like some students say ... they feel like the college isn't really care about them. And I [feel] like that ties into like their perception of the world and how they feel like the system in America, how that's going, where it's just like no institution cares about you. But, ... [I also] feel like sometimes Valencia doesn't advertise all the things that they're doing to help students because either like a student like there's something at Valencia that could help them that they don't know about. ... Just knowing that the college is doing like as much as they can to help students overall like it would make me feel a lot better about the college because I know okay ... they care and they're doing something (Valerie, Student, SGA).

The Impact of COVID-19 on Beliefs about the College

When asked: "How have your beliefs about the college changed since the COVID 19 pandemic, if at all?" one of the current students mentioned he missed the in-person experience, explaining: "You lose ... hands on training, lose that hands on feel for school because I mean everybody learns differently. Everybody doesn't learn you know from reading and looking at a computer, sometimes it's easier shown to a person and being that we're secluded we can't do that" (Colleen, Student). Another student felt the opposite, that there are now "more advantages. Like I love being at home. I love being just, you know, sitting on my couch while I'm doing my calculus class, for example, where I don't necessarily have to be attentive, I can just read the book, because that's the kind of person I am ... that's for me ... and if I have questions, I can refer them to the professor" (Tom, Student).

When they were asked again if *their beliefs about the college had changed*, students said their beliefs remained positive. One expressed that he loves the college and found what he had been told prior was not true. "I [had]

heard that some of the professors are not really as attentive to the students ... but for me, I never experienced that. I never had an issue with that. So ... I feel very confident” (Tom, Student). Still another at first said, succinctly: “Ultimately, I think Valencia did the right thing these past few semesters. So like my opinion hasn't really changed.” Later she added: “Solely speaking in terms of response to the pandemic, I definitely have respect for the way you guys handled it. So I guess that would make it a little more positive” (Mary, Student).

Based on the participant responses and discussion of the results, new questions emerge that are not specific to the pandemic, for example we can ask:

1. How do we reach and support students who do not have the social capital that comes from having a support system in terms of family members who have experience in higher education,⁴ while still respecting and appreciating each student’s unique nature? How do we honor and affirm the values that students bring to the college, especially those they share with their families?
2. Prospective students and non-enrolled adults say they would like services and staff members who support them, if they enroll. Current students and parents speak highly of the services we offer, but also say that Valencia should more broadly share messages about the support provided - in part as a way to share a message of hope and support to the community. What might this look like in our outreach plan?

Research Methods

Participants were recruited using lists internal to the college, Facebook, and community contacts. Six staff members volunteered their time and attended a three hour training with practice using the focus group protocol⁵. The protocol, which included the questions asked, was developed collaboratively with Traci Bjella, Allie Vatcher, and colleagues from external marketing firms who have been our partners in the work as they develop the upcoming college campaign for 2021. Teams of facilitators and note-takers ran the one-hour sessions and handled transcriptions and the development of notes specific to each session. Since we were interested in understanding the multiple perspectives of the students, we employed an Interpretivist methodology and a qualitative research design (Erickson, 1986).

⁴ Acar, E. (2011). Effects of social capital on academic success: A narrative synthesis. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 6(6), 456–461. Accessed online: <https://academicjournals.org/journal/ERR/article-full-text-pdf/8BD71B95320#>

⁵ Amy Downs; Jessica Farnan; Nancy Mallison; Erica Reese; Melissa Shank; and Amaris Vasquez

Additional Observations from the Focus Groups

Observations Related to Outreach:

Prospective students noted that radio ads don't reach them, but billboards do – especially along the I-4 expressway. They recalled the ads being red and yellow. One commented that the ad she recalls suggested that Valencia is “a fast track to UCF.” Another recalled: “I didn't get any emails like other colleges were sending ... It was more of our teachers from my school saying, well, you know, Valencia, they are actually a very diverse college, they have a lot of things that you might be interested in and they can help ... not only financially but academically ... I received three, four mail correspondence and that's about it” (Maria, Prospective Student). Current students mentioned they learned about the college through print ads, TV spots, Google and through YouTube, with pop-up ads. While many could not recall details, they did recall red and orange colors. Messages that reached them included “enroll now” and information about Direct Connect. One recalled an image of a “guy and girl walking outside with books.” Another mentioned learning about the college through the Disney Aspire program.

The non-enrolled adults were in agreement that outreach is effective: “I think it's very well advertised, you know, even if you're driving in the car, you see like billboards ... Like on the radio stations. I think it's like Valencia College is like everywhere. So I think when you guys are doing great on advertisement ... I feel like every Floridian knows what Valencia colleges is at this point” (Ernesto, Non-Enrolled Adult). Social media were also mentioned “Facebook and Instagram. The posts you guys do” (Renee, Non-Enrolled Adult). Discussing his research online before leaving Honduras, “I realized that Valencia college was the biggest community college in this area, maybe one of the biggest in the country, and then I came here and I [visited] the East Campus” (Roberto, Non-Enrolled Adult).

Observations – SGA Students Describe Other Students:

One of the currently enrolled students who is a member of the SGA described the impact of the pandemic on their communication with other students, noting: “We used to have focus groups and meetings with students and we would know their stories and their struggles and how we could help them and some of the things that the college could do to help them and now it's harder and harder to reach students” (Sally, Student, SGA). The SGA students are more often asked to discuss ways the college might engage students and to describe what other students may be experiencing. She explained:

You have to think about a hierarchy of priorities – a hierarchy of needs – a student is not going to engage when their first priority is having food at the table or taking care of their children or their single mother, making sure that their kids are an online school and that they're doing everything that they can to support their family. They're not going to engage in Spirit week or some of our Town Hall events because it's just not a priority ... engagement college-wide is not a priority for the students ... However, for us, as student leaders engagement is a priority because that's how we make the connections. That's how we know what students are experiencing. I used to get so much information from my classmates ... just by sitting at the same table with them. Now it's a little bit more difficult (Sally, Student, SGA).

The SGA leaders are often asked to identify trends in student experiences or beliefs, so by necessity a generalized perspective of the student experience emerges. The SGA leaders described their perceptions of other students: “a lot of students think ... what is the quickest thing that I can do to get my degree and it's just like going through the motions so they don't get that because they don't think that it's valuable” (Sally, Student, SGA). Another agreed: “Personally, I've heard a lot of people talk about Valencia as just a place where we just stopped by to get your degree and then you basically transfer to UCF and I heard that a lot (Sandi, Student, SGA). Another explained that some students: “kind of don't have the college readiness skills that they need to really succeed. So on top of ... showing up to class and knowing the material, if they like fall behind that causes a lot of stress to them and there can also be ... family reasons they may not be from the best backgrounds” (Valerie, Student, SGA).

Observations Related to Race and Anti-Racism

A prospective student expanded the conversation about safety, “not only about the epidemic, but also about Black people ... all people in general no matter what color your skin is should be able to feel safe but also, as Black, there is some type of way that police react to some type of stuff that we do that makes us feel unsafe. And I feel like we should be able to feel [safe]” (Flora, Prospective Student). She later added:

I feel like Black people, there's always a way that we act – even though I'm Black – but if a police comes to you and asked you to do something don't just keep going back and forth with them [the police] just do it - I feel like the more you listen to them [the police] the more they're not going to hurt you, but if you pretend like you're not going to listen to them then obviously they're going to hurt you. But I feel like it should go both ways. You should respect people's life in general (Flora, Prospective Student).

Another student followed: “I think it's important for white people to acknowledge racism and be actively anti-racist so that everyone's life is respected” (Lisa, Prospective Student). She mentions a related daily email that she receives and she is thinking that if everyone thinks about racism and how to combat it in some way each day, this would help everyone understand how to “help people in every situation. Help them overcome how to help them to ensure the safety of people in marginalized communities” (Lisa, Prospective Student).

A Brief Case Study : A Student with Autism Experiences the College – A Parent’s Perspective

Looking at the college experience through the lens of this student a new perspective may emerge when technology doesn’t work, faculty members are perceived as inaccessible, and other challenges arise. As Kelly, the parent of a student at the college, explained: “I came to this [focus group] because I'm really concerned with the way everything is going. Because it doesn't seem like virtual is going to be going away anytime soon. And my daughter has gone backwards during this timeframe. And I know it's a big adjustment for the students, for the teachers, for the school, for the faculty, everybody. And just to see, you know, what my daughter’s challenges are and see if I'm not alone in with these challenges.”

She described many of the teachers that her daughter has had as caring, “but it's hard to get that across virtually” and she values the support provided by the Office of Student Disabilities (OSD) but the virtual environment is challenging. “We’ve been working with the Office of Student Disabilities. I've seen with the virtual, her self-advocacy has gone backwards. She's afraid to approach the teachers ... Some of the teachers are just there to just signing assignments, grading them ... some of them are just relying on a computer to grade the assignments and not even going back and double checking. ... I talked to the dean and the dean said that some of the some of the

professors have done virtual so they're used to it. Some of them, this is their first time with virtual also. So it's a challenge for them also."

The monitoring program on her browser to deter plagiarism is prone to glitches "and with her autism, she's very aware of right and wrong, and she's afraid of being accused ever, of being accused of cheating." She then asked: "What is the college doing to address the challenges that virtual students are facing? Is this the new way for professors? They're getting paid the same amount that they were paid face-to-face, as you know, virtually," but she then acknowledged, "I can't say it for all of her teachers." She described a faculty member who is committed to accommodating and supporting her daughter, once they approached him. "He said, 'Why didn't you bring it to us earlier?'"

Her daughter has another professor who has a fill-in-the-blank on a test online "and just two weeks ago, we went to check what she got wrong and she had quotes [quotation marks]... and the computer marked it wrong because it has quotes. So the correct answer was the word without the quote, right?" The textbook used quotes around certain words, she explained. "She emailed the professor and the professor hasn't gotten back to her yet. So then she sent a second email two days ago, and all of a sudden the teacher [sends a message] 'to all my students, please be patient with me. I'm trying the best I can.' She's trying the best she can. Well, we want the best, you know ... so I don't know..." [her voice conveys a mix of frustration and disappointment]. "My daughter is petrified of complaining because she doesn't want it taken [out on her]."

When asked to offer possible solutions she asked for more accountability, as time spent with professors can no longer be organized or structured by office hours. "The students are already being held accountable for their work. Professors have to be held accountable." Later she added: "This just giving assignments and handouts explaining how to do stuff, that doesn't work for her. She's getting through it. Don't get me wrong [said with pride] ... she's determined to get through it."

From this and other conversations with parents they may benefit from conversations with other parents and family members connected across the college due to concerns related to COVID, but also so that they can ask questions and begin to understand all that the college is doing to support students. Facebook may not be enough for them to engage, and not all parents are on Facebook. While most students are no longer minors and the college deals directly with the students, on the other hand all of the focus group results have highlighted the importance of family support, the values shared within families, the benefit for us when we learn about students' lives, and, for some, the impact that is possible when families learn about higher education and – possibly – decide to not only support their children, but also to attend.

Count*	Focus Group	Name**	Age categories	Race / Ethnicity	Gender	Years in Central FL	Feelings about future in 1-2 words
1	Non-Enrolled Adults	Renee	45-54 years old	African American	Female	20-29	
2	Non-Enrolled Adults	Ernesto	35-44	Latino/a	Male		
3	Non-Enrolled Adults	Roberto	25-34 years old	Latino/a	Male	Less than one	
4	Parents	Maggie		White	Female		Hopeful
5	Parents	Kelly		White	Female		Hopeful
6	Prospective (HS)	Flora	16 years old - younger	African American	Female	4-6	Nervous and happy
7	Prospective (HS)	Lisa	17-24 years old	White	Female	16-19	Overwhelmed
8	Prospective (HS)	Maria	17-24 years old	Latino/a	Female	4-6	Wishful, Overwhelmed
9	Student Government	Valerie	17-24 years old	Latino/a	Female		
10	Student Government	Sally	17-24 years old	White / Latino/a	Female	10-12	
11	Student Government	Sandi	17-24 years old	African American / Latino/a	Female	1-3	
12	Students	Colleen	25-34 years old	African American	Female	20-29	Positive, curious
13	Students	Mary	25-34 years old	White	Female	7-9	Lost, unsure
14	Students	Tom	17-24 years old	White	Male	10-12	Very good

*Some participants did not complete the demographic survey **Participant names are pseudonyms