

Doctoral Students Partner with Polis Institute

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Back row, L-R: Walker Dawkins, Brandy Hannah of Polis, Phil Hissom of Polis, Jenni Sanguiliano, Natalie Lovero of LIFT Orlando, Ronald Jones of Polis, Esteban Santis, Jill Haladay, Kim Anderson, Kloe Faucher; Front Row, L-R: Gabriella Calderon, Noah Murphy, Tania Alidina and Shawn Welcome of Polis

In Kim Anderson's Research Practicum course (PAF 7947), doctoral students are introduced to the art and practice of community-engaged research, where they gain real-world experience by working in collaboration with a community partner. Anderson is a professor in the School of Social Work and the Public Affairs Doctoral Program.

For one night a month during the school year, interested family members meet to bond over music, a meal and engaging in meaningful conversation about topics suggested by the members. "A city is only as strong as its weakest neighborhood," Welcome said. "Partnering with UCF to assess the West Lakes MVP Families program was mutually beneficial to all parties involved, and a great start to our relationship with the university in the context of best practices around community engagement. The doctoral students were thoughtful and professional throughout!"

On Monday, April 2, the students unveiled the data they had collected at a meeting of the MVP Families program at Frontline Outreach Youth and Family Center near Camping World Stadium.

The students conducted focus groups with 33 parents and guardians and shared the data with Polis, who will use the information in their annual reports and marketing materials to help continue the objectives of the MVP Families program, which includes "assisting students with college acceptance and scholarships, developing community leaders, strengthening the bonds between parents and children, connecting families with other families, and setting and achieving family goals."

"This was a fantastic experience that put to practice the skills and knowledge we have gained in the PhD program," said Jenni Sanguiliano. "In a short semester, we were able to: meet with a community organization, agree on a shared goal, create research and interview questions, meet with focus groups, transcribe the recorded conversations, discuss themes, code the data, select quotes that represent the codes and themes, create a presentation, and present the findings to the community."

The data showed that the age range of the participant focus group ranged between 26 to 68, with an average age of 42; that 30 percent were graduates of a community college or junior college; 24 percent had earned a bachelor's degree, and 10 percent had a master's degree or higher.

When asked by the students, "What strengthens families?" participants indicated that "support, engagement, unity, security, and communication" were the factors within the family, while outside the family, "resources and activities" were mentioned as factors.

The students also asked the parents and guardians a series of questions regarding the efficacy of MVP Families. One of the respondents stated, "It takes a community to raise your child, and MVP is that community. With all of the resources that they provide and the programs they have for our families and our children, it's a real good big impact – especially in the neighborhoods where we are living with our families–MVP is a safe place for us to go with our families."

Sanguiliano said, "Polis and MVP Families have done an excellent job working with the community. I am so happy we were able to pair with them for this project!"

Special thanks to UCF student athletes for attending the MVP Families program on April 2: Gabriella Calderon, Kloe Faucher, Walker Dawkins and Noah Murphy. The students interacted with the children of the MVP Families participants, and showered the children with UCF swag.

By Camille Dolan '98