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 Sanguilliano, 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 Aldina 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.
This semester, students Esteban Santis, Jennifer Sanguiliano, Tania Alidina, Jill Haladay, Rachael Mack, and Kenan Sualp partnered with Polis Institute, a nonprofit Orlando-based organization dedicated to “designing solutions to social problems,” according to polisinstitute.org. Polis was hired by LIFT Orlando, a partnership between business leaders that aims to “help solve some of our city's most complex social problems,” according to liftorlando.org.

“Partnering with POLIS has enabled PAF doctoral students to apply what they are learning in the classroom to real concerns that impact people’s lives,” Anderson said. “In doing so, they not only develop their research skills, but also are able to assist agencies in their quest to better serve communities. Their work with POLIS has had a significant impact on their learning, and PAF looks forward to partnering with additional organizations as we move to the downtown campus.”

The Polis Institute partnered with Anderson and her students to evaluate their MVP Families program which “helps children who live near Camping World Stadium succeed academically and in life by providing support to the whole family,” according to polisinstitute.org.

“UCF helped glean beneficial information from parents and provided an insightful third-party evaluation of the impact that MVP Families is having on participants,” said Natalie Lovero, director of community partnerships for LIFT Orlando. “Their group worked on this project with dedication and excellence, and we’re thankful for their partnership.”

Shawn Welcome ‘17 is the MVP Family engagement coordinator at Polis Institute, and said that the program “strengthens communities in dignified ways.”
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