BUILDING
ON THE FOUNDATION
OF OUR HISTORY

By Sandy Shugart, President

Valencia Community College is celebrating its 40th anniversary this academic year with events and recognitions planned throughout the coming months, including this inaugural edition of Vitae magazine.

Later this year, the Valencia Foundation will publish a thoroughly researched and beautifully written history of the college. Throughout the book’s development, I’ve been able to discuss its content with many of the people who were present during the founding of this great institution. This process has given me a deeper appreciation for the college’s history. It is a story of adversity overcome by persistent servant leadership and a deeply optimistic vision of the role Valencia can play in the lives of our students and community.

You may not know that Valencia was the last of the 28 two-year colleges chartered in Florida. There had been earlier attempts to create a public “junior” college in Orlando, but they had failed because of serious opposition among some of the leaders in town. Does that surprise you? Who would oppose the creation of a college in town? As it turns out, several important people did.

The city was already home to a private, sectarian junior college called Orlando Junior College (OJC). A number of the “key influencers” in town were concerned that a new, public two-year college would compromise the future of this private institution. Others, however, were equally concerned about OJC’s discriminatory admissions policies that prohibited the enrollment of minorities.

A local industry leader, Ed Uh1, vice president of the Martin Company, the large defense contractor now known as the Lockheed-Martin Corporation, offered OJC a substantial grant to provide vocational and technical training for his company. His only stipulation was that OJC abolish its discriminatory admissions practices. Uh1’s offer was declined, and as a result, he became an avid supporter of the proposal to create Valencia.

In a sense, the OJC supporters were correct to see a public two-year college as a threat. Their institution no longer exists, while Valencia has grown to be one of the largest in the country. I’ll leave it to you to determine if this was “caused” by Valencia or if the vision of an open-door institution steeped in democratic ideals and designed to serve the whole community was just a better idea.

Even stronger opposition came from Martin Anderson, publisher and owner of the Orlando Sentinel. His main concern was that the creation of a new community college would somehow dilute the support for and enrollment in the region’s new university, Florida Technological University (FTU), now known as the University of Central Florida. He made a formidable opponent, since, as they say, it’s hard to argue in print with someone who buys ink by the barrel.

But Valencia attracted some courageous and persistent champions. Raymer Maguire, Jr., a prominent Orlando attorney, took the lead as chairman of the college’s first advisory committee. He received support from many others, most notably Superintendent Orville R. Davis and Chairman Jack Jennings of the Orange County School Board, the body that would have to adopt and support the charter for a new junior college. Important political pressure was provided in support of Valencia’s creation by Ed Fallon of the Martin Company and Joseph Brechner of local television station Channel 9. At the state level, the involvement of Lee Henderson, who served as director of the Florida community college system, was significant in getting the college “up and running.”

I’ll let you read about the public battle over Valencia in the forthcoming history...
book. It’s quite a story. But there is one more champion I must mention, the young founding president of FTU, Dr. Charles Millican. He made it clear to the public that a new junior college was in no way a threat to his budding university, but rather, an important partner. Without his support, it is doubtful that Valencia would have received its charter so quickly.

So what has history to say to these opponents and champions? Again, the outcome is quite clear. Both Valencia and UCF have flourished. Valencia is the largest producer in the world of associate degree graduates from a two-year college. More than 80 percent of these graduates enroll at UCF. And UCF now has the second largest undergraduate enrollment in the United States, aided by the large number of transfer students from Valencia. In short, rather than competing and harming one another, Valencia and UCF represent the most powerful and effective partnership for students in all of American higher education. How’s that for history vindicating the vision of our founders?

As this year progresses, we’ll be sharing more details on our history, here and elsewhere. I encourage you to learn more. Meanwhile, I want to point out two particularly important lessons gleaned from this history.

First, the vision that energized our founders and the principles that girded that vision are as valid today as ever in that everyone has the power to learn; education is the single most important assurance of democracy; opportunity works like almost nothing else can; our students, if we set high expectations, have the power to meet and exceed them; higher education access and quality are compatible goals; the most open institution can also be among the best; and a great faculty and staff is the beginning of a great learning experience for our students.

Second, great institutions don’t just happen; they are intentionally and carefully built. Personal investment and sacrifice is required. I am continually moved by the importance of the individual contributions of many, many people to founding, building, and nourishing Valencia. None of the founders I mentioned had anything to gain personally from the creation of Valencia, but they were willing to suffer public controversy and invest thousands of hours of personal time to bring the vision to fruition. As you will see in the history book, this has been true at every level and in every era of Valencia’s history.

Brilliant faculty went the extra mile to create Valencia’s Interdisciplinary Studies and Honors programs. Faculty, staff and administrators have made countless sacrifices to build the great nursing and allied health programs for which we are so well known. And the hospitals and healthcare organizations in our community have invested themselves just as heavily. The same can be said about our arts programs, our engineering programs, international studies, all of our learning support programs, etc. People, willing to serve and sacrifice, make all these things happen.

As alumni of this great institution, I want to ask you, will people look back 40 years from now and be as grateful to you as we all are to our founders and builders? What investment will you make in Valencia’s future, you who are in the best position to know the value of this institution? Whether it’s time, talent or treasure, here is the best reason to get involved. As a graduate of Valencia, one who benefited from its history, you are the steward of its future. ■