

RENAISSANCE MAN

By Nancy
Curry

VCC PRESIDENT SANFORD SHUGART, PH.D.
IS ALL ABOUT RESULTS.



PHOTO COURTESY OF VALENCIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Sanford Shugart, Ph.D. became VCC's president in January 2000, after eight successful years heading North Harris College in Houston, because he'd woken up one night "with the notion that I was swimming in the shallow end of the pool — and I belong in the deep end."

"Valencia had always had a great reputation as a good institution," he says. "What I discovered here was a commitment to authentic work that is uncommon — hundreds of people who are not interested in reputation, but in results."

That focus meshed well with Shugart's approach to education, and his fascination with how people learn. After earning a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of North Carolina, he had planned to study philosophy, but ended up with a doctorate in learning theory. "I went from 'how do we know the truth is true?' to 'how do we know anything?'" says Shugart.

That quest has made the critical difference for Valencia, which the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation selected in June as the Florida leader for its Developmental Education Initiative. The program awarded \$16.5 million to just 15 community colleges in five states to expand groundbreaking remedial education programs that boost college completion rates for low-income students and students of color. Shugart considers the recognition even more important than the \$743,000 grant.

"People all over the country are watching what we're doing," he says.

➤➤ With 46,000 students, Valencia Community College (VCC) ranks among the top of the nearly 1,200 such institutions in the country, but not just for the number of graduates it produces — its student success initiatives are earning the school national recognition. At its helm is a "Renaissance man" who believes that "anyone can learn anything under the right circumstances," and has the results to prove it.

"That's not to be arrogant — we have a lot to learn. I see it as we're in the lab and the work we're doing is very promising work.

"We are getting results — lots of them. Valencia has one of the highest graduation rates in the country, is consistently at the top of that list, and has the number one community college foundation in America.

"The way America goes to college has changed. The traditional student who goes to college full-time right after high school, that's only 17 percent of undergraduate students today. What many people don't realize is that more than half of U.S. students begin at community college — it's become the dominant mode of access to higher education in this country. And, we're in the vanguard of creating a system that really works for this new student profile.

"I believe that anyone can learn anything under the right circumstances," he says. "Most people believe that they are math-disabled, or that only some people can learn a foreign language or how to play a musical instrument. It's simply not true. Everyone has the biological ability to learn anything."

The Valencia difference lies in high engagement pedagogies, or teaching styles, such as smaller groups, a focus on problem solving, less dependence on traditional lectures, the creative use of media and very clear expectations.

"Our classes are scaled like seminars, not huge lecture halls," says Shugart. "When we induct students, we use extravagant learning support systems — not just tutoring, but creative, sub-

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stantive materials about how to learn better. We're able to show ways that we've closed the gaps between students of different races, ethnicities and educational backgrounds. That's led to more progress and faster learning.

"Our microelectronics manufacturing AA degree is producing lots of engineers, architects, and high-tech health workers, and our West campus has a new 100,000-square-foot building to support that. We have 1,700 engineering majors, 350 architecture majors. These are programs you don't usually find at a community college."

The school is providing local undergrad access to the University of Central Florida (UCF) via a program called Direct Connect, which Shugart calls "a guarantee — finish two years at Valencia and you're guaranteed admission to UCF. We are the largest producer of transfer students in the world, and in fact, 10 of the 11 distinguished undergrads at UCF this year were transfer students. Four were from Valencia."

Married 30 years, the father of four and a published poet and musician, Shugart thrives on the multitasking inherent in running a college, and has found a novel way to incorporate his artistic and work lives. About 12 years ago, he began singing and playing the guitar as part of his frequent local and national presentations. He published his first CD, "Irons in the Fire," in 2001. "I couldn't do one without the other," he says. "The work nourishes my writing and the performance nourishes my work."

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