

My name is Brenda Ilojirole, and I am a Financial Aid Specialist and Financial Learning supervisor at Valencia College. I completed my bachelor's degree in Clinical Psychology and will soon finish my master's degree in Higher Education Leadership Sociology track, class of 2023. I have been working at Valencia College for over six years, and as of May 2022, I have earned all 16 NASFAA credentials. I initially began working at the Financial Aid department as a federal work-study and fell in love with the process. Soon after completing my undergraduate degree, I became a Financial Aid Specialist. The best part of my job is knowing I am assisting underrepresented students with successfully obtaining their goals through higher education by ensuring the financial aid process is completed. It feels great when I am a gate opener to students by bridging the gap between college and university education. I currently supervise the Financial Literacy Program, where my team and I help students obtain financial awareness through presentations and hands-on events. We teach students that despite their financial background and current income status, they can achieve financial freedom through consistent effort. However, when I am not at the Financial Aid Office, I am at the gym five days a week. In addition, I love hanging out with my family and friends and trying out new restaurants in Florida.

Have you seen changes in higher education as it relates to diversity? What gaps still remain?

Diversity is an essential factor that contributes to the success of higher education. Over the past years, I have seen the gap in higher education decrease. Scholarship opportunities, additional grants, and emergency funding have been given to students with lower economic statuses. I have also seen empathy shown towards students with children by providing childcare services during class time. Higher education continues to evolve by providing services to our various student populations and enhancing technology offered for students with disabilities, tutoring options, mental health services, clubs, and organizations that embody diversity on each campus. However, the work still needs to be done to ensure we continue moving forward with diversity and inclusion at each institution. Each student comes with various backgrounds and experiences. It is crucial to ensure that our faculty and staff represent the population of students' race, age, gender, and disabilities. They also provide optional internship opportunities for every student to explore different education paths while networking and growing through teamwork. Diversity in Higher Education will continue to evolve as society changes. Higher education is making a pledge to challenge stereotype preconceptions and prepare students to effectively interact with people of all backgrounds by taking on the challenge to diversify every institution.

Who is your hero and why?

Of course, I could not choose just one. My heroes are my parents. They motivate me consistently to do my best and achieve my goals by applying myself. They are always at my corner to pick me up whenever I feel defeated or unmotivated. I barely scraped by in high school with a 2.6 GPA, but my parents encouraged me with positive affirmations insisting that I was intelligent and could achieve anything I put my mind to. Fast forward to completing my A. A degree with a 3.9 GPA and my bachelor's degree Magna Cum Laude. I can genuinely say that the healthy relationship my parents have provided has fueled my desire for success and motivation for others.

What are some of your professional or personal life goals?

The last few years of working in the Financial Aid Department have been incredible. I have challenged myself in many ways, such as stepping outside my comfort zone by presenting at the SASFAA new aid officer workshop and moderating the FAFSA annual conference. I have helped students of various ages,

demographics, and backgrounds achieve their goals as I counsel them through the financial aid process. I have encouraged K-12 and college-level students to start paying attention to their finances by budgeting and understanding financial terms and practices through the Financial Learning Ambassador Program. I am a front-end specialist who sees students daily and counsels them on their file for financial assistance. I process verification, sap, loans, and other financial aid processes to ensure the student's file is completed from A-Z. As an ambitious person, I love taking on new adventures that will challenge my knowledge in Higher Education. I am currently working on data analysis and pulling data from excel to determine how to increase student participation at on-campus events, and federal work-study hires after the pandemic. Along the way, I am learning different programming languages like SQL while using data visualization tools to tell my findings. I hope to continue data processing in Financial Aid and work with the background processes to understand the full scope of financial aid from front to back. I look forward to completing my master's degree in Higher Education Leadership Sociology track and using the knowledge I will obtain through studying the development, structure, and functioning of human society and applying it to the world of Higher education.