

Valencia student rides bus for 2 hours to get to school



Alex Castro gets up before dawn to ride three buses from her home in Poinciana to her classes at Valencia College Osceola campus. (George Skene, Orlando Sentinel)

By [Gabrielle Russon](#) Orlando Sentinel [contact the reporter](#)

Alex, 20, wakes up at 4:10 a.m. to ride bus to college. "I'm going to school. Nothing more. Nothing less."

About 300 to 400 students from Poinciana ride the bus to Osceola County's Valencia College branch.

Do hurdles still exist for the working-class to get access to higher education?

Alexandra Castro opens her bedroom door into the shadows, leaving the light off so she won't wake her sleeping mother.

She uses her cell phone as a flashlight to see through the garage and navigate outside into the 40-degree chill.

Within minutes, the headlights from the small bus shine down the street of her Poinciana neighborhood, signaling the beginning of Castro's two-hour, 18-mile journey to Osceola County's Valencia College.

"I'm going to school," Castro says. "Nothing more. Nothing less. I don't think I'm doing anything extraordinary."

President Barack Obama has proposed eliminating tuition for some at community colleges, a move to make higher education more accessible.

But for many in the working class, hurdles still exist to earn their degrees. Castro, 20, is one of an estimated 300 to 400 students from Poinciana who ride the bus in the sprawling community, according to Valencia officials.

"We're in the northern part of Osceola," said Remy Ansiello, a Valencia counselor. "Poinciana is so far away. We have a lot of students who are in the same situation as her."

Valencia hopes to build and open a \$23 million campus in Poinciana as early as 2017, if the school gets the state funding.

'No shortcuts'

In high school, Castro's posse was a group of six girlfriends who often went roller-skating together or to the movies. Only one other girl has been in and out of college.

When Castro started Valencia in the fall 2012, her background made her statistically among the most likely to drop out. She struggled in reading, writing and math and required remedial courses in all three.

"She was definitely in an at-risk population of students," said Ansiello, who was assigned to be her counselor.

In her family, there were no others with college degrees for Castro to admire.

But Castro grew up with a mother who raised three children on her own, playing both the nurturer and the enforcer while working full time.

When her mother said her Ford Explorer broke down, she, too, rode the bus an hour each way to her job.

"I take no excuses," says her mother, Rebecca Duran. "There are no shortcuts."

Familiar route

Castro's alarm sounds at 4:10 a.m.

She skips breakfast and focuses more on her beauty routine. She squeezes out the Crest toothpaste, powders her face, sticks in her hoop earrings.

At 5:23 a.m., she heads outside to wait for the van run by Lynx's NeighborLink service that picks her up outside her mother's house and drops her at the Wal-Mart on Cypress Parkway.

She knows there is no courtesy honk. She can't be late. The driver will leave without her.

The ride is so familiar, Castro quotes the route – the street turns, the row of fast-food joints -- almost from memory. The faithful passengers know it well enough to direct a confused rookie driver.

From the Wal-Mart bus stop, she catches the No. 26 to downtown Kissimmee, and then either the No. 10 or No. 18 to Valencia. Sometimes a friend gives her a ride, but Castro typically rides the bus at least five times a week.

"You can count on one hand — and still have fingers left — how many times she's missed school," her mother says.

On the ride, Castro often listens to old-school music like Luther Vandross and the Isley Brothers, the stuff her mother taught her to love. The bumps in the road make it too hard for her to do her homework.

When the occasional rider is chatty, Castro can't help but turn her music down to listen in.

The other day, she heard a man bemoaning how much he missed his ex-girlfriend. Once, somebody sobbed on a cell phone in his seat.

On this morning, two women complain about their jobs.

"I do the best I can," one of them says. "I have nowhere else to go."

Door-to-door, it typically takes Castro two hours and six minutes to travel those 18 miles by bus, transferring twice.

Campus leader

On campus, Castro has emerged as a leader for being upbeat and planning campus events as part of her job at the school's student development office. She was handpicked to meet Obama when he visited Valencia last year.

With a GPA of 2.95, Castro expects to graduate with an associate's degree in hospitality management in May and transfer to the University of Central Florida.

Ansiello calls Castro "the embodiment of higher education."

Castro's persistence makes her mother, at age 45, want to take online courses and finish her bachelor's degree.

At 7:29 a.m., the bus pulls into the Valencia campus, and the morning commute is done.

Six hours later, Castro will be back on the bus, this time riding home.

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