

EDITORIALS

Black students are dropping out of MDC at alarming rate. We must stop the trend | Editorial

BY THE MIAMI HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD

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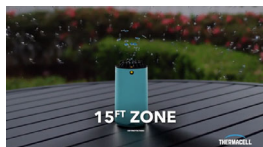
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As she marks her first 100 days, the president of Miami Dade College made some startling revelations on Tuesday that should concern all of us: Local Black students are dropping out of the nation’s most diverse institution of higher learning at an alarming rate.

That has serious implications for their future and that of this community, which already has one of the highest levels of income inequality among large U.S. cities.

MDC President Madeline Pumariega believes these students were among the hardest hit economically by the pandemic. Community college classes have become a luxury they can no longer afford.

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“When we contacted students to see why they were not re-

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Pumariega said overall enrollment had dropped 17 percent by January 2021. When the college took stock and asked “Who did we lose?” to the pandemic, the answer was clear: “We’ve had a disproportionate loss of Black students,” Pumariega said. As fall enrollment opened in 2020, existing Black students were not re-registering at the same rate as other students, she said. Black students made up 15 percent of the student population in 2020, but 7 percent of them have stopped attending.

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FEWER BLACK GRADS

Pumariega took over in January, replacing long-time president Eduardo Padrón as the head of the eight-campus institution.

The dropout rate is compounded by another troubling trend, Pumariega said: The college has also noticed that fewer recent Black students graduating from local high schools are enrolling in MDC. Instead, they are going straight into the workforce, too often as low-wage earners.

Pumariega says the collision of those two trends is significant because, in a knowledge economy, a high school diploma is just not enough to make a decent living.

These students’ lifetime wage-earning power will be impacted, she said, likely trapping them in poverty and income inequality — a problem that spills across an entire community. Think of the tech entrepreneurs or big national corporations drawn to Miami-Dade for its diverse workforce. Black, college-trained

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Pumariega knows it well. Young Black residents cannot be left behind, or we'll all be left behind.

"PEOPLE'S COLLEGE"

Such a dire scenario is challenging for MDC, which has always been viewed as "the people's college," a place where minorities especially could attain a firm hold on higher education. Few students are turned away; if you need remedial help, it's there. If you need financial help; it's there. But this time, the losses from the pandemic are hard for MDC to make up for its students, many of whom are also food insecure, Pumariega said. But MDC is up to the challenge, Pumariega said.

She has insisted on switching away from online classes to live Zoom classes, called MDC Live; she has launched the Rising Black Scholar program to attract, assist and retain Black students; MDC is planning to offer students industry certification, instead of two-year programs only; and the school launched a collaboration with IBM to advance diversity and workforce-development in technology.

We commend Pumariega's quick response to address alarming trends post-pandemic and her effort to bring students back to the fold for a valuable education and a better life.

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