

After tense meeting, Miami Dade College board unanimously picks interim president

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Miami Dade College's board of trustees chose former provost and trustee Rolando Montoya as its interim president on Aug. 29, 2019. BY SAMUEL NAVARRO

The Board of Trustees at Miami Dade College hasn't been able to agree on much since it started looking for a new president.

The "old" board voted 4-3 to keep the job requirement of holding a doctorate degree. After five new trustees were appointed mid-search, only their chair disagreed that the four vetted finalists weren't up to par.

Even on Thursday, as the board met for the first time since suspending the search process in July, trustees bickered over the timing and manner of how the meeting was run. Yet all

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seven trustees agreed on an interim president whose name was revealed publicly for the first time just 10 minutes before voting.

Trustee Michael Bileca introduced former MDC provost and trustee Rolando Montoya as the sole option for interim president. Montoya accepted the invitation on the spot.

“I’m ready to bring peace, to bring harmony, to facilitate the process, to bring the time you need to be able to do your job,” Montoya told the board.

This is his second time acting as interim president. MDC spokesman Juan Mendieta said Montoya took over Eduardo Padrón’s presidency for one month in the mid-2000s. Montoya said he spent 11 years as a faculty member and served as department chair, academic dean, president of the Wolfson campus and ultimately as college provost and board trustee.

He told reporters after the meeting that he was approached by several board members over the past few weeks about the opportunity. He said he initially declined the offer.

“I’m doing a favor to the institution for a short period of time to make sure we achieve peace in the process,” Montoya said. He’ll start Monday; Padrón is officially retiring Friday after 24 years.

Montoya has not applied to be president and said he wouldn’t as interim. He gave an endorsement of the sole internal candidate, executive vice provost Lenore Rodicio, the only candidate left in the running for the job.

“You would have to conclude she’s an excellent candidate for the presidency of Miami Dade College,” he told the board.

Montoya has been tasked to work with the head of the college’s human resources department to find a new headhunting firm and restart the presidential search. Diversified Search, the headhunting firm paid more than \$167,000 to conduct the first search, has been dismissed. Bileca said he was unimpressed with Diversified’s work.

The board will meet again Sept. 17.

RAUCOUS MEETING

Despite board chairman Bernie Navarro's call for "professionalism, decorum and protocol" in a statement released Wednesday, Thursday's meeting quickly spiraled into contention. The conference room, filled to capacity mostly with faculty and staff angry about the botched search, jeered along. More watched from a spillover room upstairs.

The board opened with quibbling over when it should hold public comment. Some trustees said it wasn't on the agenda, but hardly anything was. There was only one item on the agenda for Thursday's meeting, which had neither the letterhead of the college nor the time of the meeting, that read, "Miami Dade College Presidential Search — Next Steps."

A lawyer for the college said it'd be "meaningless" and a "slap in the face" to hear public speakers after the board deliberates.

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez was first up to speak.

"This delay, delay and more delay does not serve the best interests of this exceptional institution," he said. "As alumni I'm very concerned about what lies ahead for the people's college, and as mayor of Miami-Dade County, I'm hearing from my constituents, many of which are outraged.

"It's time to move forward," he added.

MDC Foundation chair Julie Grimes said raising funds during the tumultuous search process, which some have characterized as being "fixed" for a political candidate, has become "much more difficult." Louis Wolfson, whose family has donated more than \$170 million to the college, also condemned the process.

"Even to consider replacing Dr. Padrón with a political influencer, someone that does not understand the complexities of Miami Dade College or higher education to head up this institution, will absolutely erode our hometown reputation and trust," he said. "You can already see it and hear it and feel it from our community."

Before former United Faculty of Miami Dade College President Mark Richard was allowed to speak, trustee Marcell Felipe objected. He accused chair Navarro of only recognizing speakers he favored.

Felipe has become a lightning rod of controversy since he was appointed in March. As the most outspoken trustee, Felipe has gone on TV and Spanish radio defending the board's decision to reboot the search process and dismissing complaints of a fixed search. He has said that the established process may have been set up to favor a preferred candidate, and that the "new board" should conduct a new search.

Only one public speaker was denied the opportunity to speak. The college's attorney described Isabel Del Pino, a former MDC professor who accused her colleagues of plagiarism and Rodicio for condoning it, as "litigious." Felipe wondered how that was any different from letting Richard speak.

Richard's law firm recently filed a lawsuit on the behalf of five current and former professors alleging that the board of trustees "arbitrarily and capriciously violated its established process." It has called on a judge to compel the board to reinstate and finish the selection process previously established.

Richard took a soft but stern tone on Thursday.

"The professors of this college want you to know that in the community and in the airwaves and in the churches and in the mosques and in the classrooms where appropriate," Richard went on, "we're gonna tell them something's wrong. That things are decided before we get here. Something's wrong."

TESTY TRUSTEES

Things became testy when Navarro changed the subject to Felipe's harping on Rodicio's involvement with the Confucius Institute, a Chinese cultural institute at the college that Felipe has said is communist propaganda.

"Finally the censorship is lifted and I'm allowed to talk," Felipe said.

"This is not about you," Navarro retorted.

"You've made it about me, Bernie," Felipe said. "I thought you would rise above it as you made in your statement yesterday."

Navarro asked Felipe to commit to “no McCarthyism, no public lynchings of any other candidates.” Felipe vowed to not vote for a nonqualified politician and to not give up his First Amendment rights.

Bileca introduced Montoya shortly after and said he hoped the new search firm will “cast as wide a net as possible.”

The selection of an interim president and a new search firm were also not enumerated on the public agenda.

After the meeting, Felipe knocked Navarro’s handling of the meeting. Felipe said he heard three candidates were considered as interim president. He said he couldn’t recall who floated Montoya’s name.

Richard took issue with how the board landed on Montoya as the interim president.

“To walk in here with a pre-picked interim candidate disrespects the entire process,” Richard said after the meeting. “It doesn’t matter that this candidate has credentials, because he does. The question is when did this happen, how did it happen, who is the person asking for this to happen? All of this is done without any stakeholders.

“Again, students, alumni, faculty are completely cut out of the process,” he said.

Navarro denied having conversations about Montoya out of the sunshine. He chalked it up to coincidence that Montoya, who was invited as a former trustee, was at the meeting and accepted the job.

“He was here, he’s a person we all respect, he knows this institution inside and out and I’m very happy he accepted,” Navarro said. He said a new search committee may be formed, though vetting of candidates may fall to the board.



Rolando Montoya talks with reporters after he was appointed Miami Dade College interim president by the Board of Trustees during a meeting at the Wolfson Campus in Downtown Miami on Thursday, August 29, 2019. SAM NAVARRO *SPECIAL FOR THE MIAMI HERALD*