

‘Common sense prevailed.’ Miami Dade College won’t lower requirements for president

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Miami Dade College President Eduardo J. Padron speaks during the ceremony to rename InterAmerican Campus the Eduardo J. Padron Campus in Little Havana on Friday, May 17, 2019. [BY MATIAS J. OCNER](#)

The people tasked with finding the next president of Miami Dade College have repeatedly insisted that Florida’s Sunshine Law, which requires names of candidates to be publicly disclosed, has kept quality candidates from applying for the public position.

But in at least one case, it was the perception of a politically tainted search process that scared a top candidate away.

Cerritos College President Jose Fierro, one of about six candidates seriously considered for the job, withdrew his application by May 15 because the politics and publicity of the search “made him very nervous,” the headhunting firm contracted by the college told the presidential search committee Thursday afternoon.

[The college’s faculty union raised alarms about a rigged process in favor of a specific candidate](#) when newly appointed trustees wanted to drop minimum requirements last week. The college’s board of trustees held a special meeting Thursday morning, days before the June 2 application deadline, and ultimately voted 4-3 against a proposal to allow candidates with master’s degrees to apply.

“The articles in the press have not escaped the candidates,” said Diversified Search’s managing director in Miami, John Mestepey. “It has created some consternation and concern in their minds, and we have been busily quieting the waters and encouraging them to stay in the process. We think they will.”

Fierro wrote in an email to the Miami Herald that he was solicited by a recruiter for the job.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article230983188.html>

“I am happy to serve at Cerritos College and I made this clear to the recruiter who solicited me for the Miami Dade presidency,” he said. “While I am flattered to be considered for the position, it is strictly a reflection of the great work we do at Cerritos College.”

New trustees Michael Bileca and Anay Abraham proposed earlier Thursday to undo requirements set by a prior board of trustees, before Gov. Ron. DeSantis appointed four new trustees to a board of seven. Bileca and Abraham are among those four.

They said doing away with must-have requirements like a doctoral degree, or a “terminal” degree equivalent, and six years of academic administration experience would create a more diverse applicant pool. New trustee Marcell Felipe, also a DeSantis appointee, supported that motion. He was met with jeers from the crowd.

“Really, we’re limiting to a Ph.D, doctorate or lawyer,” Bileca said. “It’s creating an opportunity for people to apply who might not fit this narrow thing. The more I think it’s better because it’s creating a diversified candidate set.”

Their efforts were contested by Mark Richard, the retired head of the United Faculty of Miami Dade College, who called out the board for politicizing the search in a letter penned to trustees last Friday. He was backed by tenured and adjunct faculty who packed the board of trustees meeting Thursday morning.

Richard said he personally knows a candidate who met the criteria and decided against applying for the presidential job.

“This is regrettable but not surprising,” he said. “What happens is when there’s game playing and jockeying for something as serious as the president of the largest college in the country, unintended consequences are very hurtful and undermining the institution. And now the question is, are they intended consequences? And time will tell.”

Trustee Carlos Migoya said he was “troubled” with allowing candidates with a master’s degree to apply. Vice Chair Jose Fuentes said the process should play out as is. The board ultimately kept the status quo.

Outgoing president Eduardo J. Padrón, who was present at the board of trustees meeting but never spoke during it, said afterward that “reason prevailed.”

“I feel ... common sense prevailed at the end, and that speaks well of this group,” he said. “I feel the consensus was, let’s let the process work.”

Bernie Navarro, who chairs the board of trustees and the presidential search committee, also voted to keep the standing requirements.

“It’s unfortunate that [Fierro] withdrew his name,” Navarro said. “I’m hopeful that with the message today, we reinvigorated where we stand in the search criteria and going forward, there’s going to be a clear message that we’re unified in what is needed in the search criteria and that’s what this college needs — the strong academic and administrative background by any candidate.”

Navarro maintained that the true barrier for quality applicants was the Sunshine Law.

“It is an issue,” he said, “there is no doubt in my mind.”

Richard disputed that.

“How come that same law didn’t in any way erode the effectiveness of those [past] searches but somehow now is the problem?” he said. “It’s only a problem for anyone who wants to avoid the sunshine.”

The presidential search committee will meet again June 6 to decide which candidates to interview. There have been 47 applicants, mostly all from academic settings. A second internal candidate, Beverly Moore-Garcia, president of the Kendall and West campuses, is among the six candidates seriously under consideration. She is joined by executive vice president and provost Lenore Rodicio.