

Lessons on collaboration from US higher education icon Eduardo J. Padrón

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Padron is stepping down this August after serving nearly 25 years as MDC President.

To label Miami Dade College (MDC) President Eduardo J. Padrón an accomplished man would be a gross undersell.

Padrón started life in America as a teenage refugee. He'd left Cuba during a period of unrest in 1961, arriving in America as a 16-year-old armed with two lofty goals: to get an education and make something of himself. That was the promise he'd made his mother before leaving home.

As he would for everything he set his mind to later, Padrón over-delivered.

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In 2016, he was conferred the US Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honour, by then President Barack Obama.

In 2009, TIME magazine named him one of the US's "10 Best College Presidents". In 2010, the Florida Trend magazine christened him "Floridian of the Year". In 2011, The Washington Post said he was one of the "Eight Most Influential College Presidents in the US."

He has been called upon to serve on numerous national commissions and task forces of leading organisations such as the National Science Foundation, Carnegie Foundation, Woodrow Wilson Foundation, Aspen Institute, Knight Foundation, Century Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Ford Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation and the Marguerite Casey Foundation, to name a few.

He is also the recipient of more than 15 honorary doctorates and highest honours from prestigious universities such as Princeton, Brown and Harvard, among many others.

And his list of accolades goes on. With a career spanning half a century, Padrón is an icon of American higher education and an immigration success story.

As MDC president, a role he served for nearly 25 years, he has led innumerable efforts to elevate the institution to its current position of national prominence, placing it among the country's best and most recognised.

That the MDC has graduated more minorities than any other institution across the country, including the largest number of Hispanics and African-Americans, is no accident—it's a culmination of Padrón's transformational and innovative approach to higher education. The college today serves over 165,000 students, making it the largest higher education institution in the United States.

But more than championing the importance of open access education, Padrón's leadership has created impact far beyond the walls of MDC. By focussing on the growing needs of an increasingly globalised economy, MDC has played an extensive role in upskilling Miami's workforce, creating a talent pipeline for the city that's primed for any future.

In other words, Padrón understands that the higher education journey doesn't just encompass teaching students new knowledge. It includes putting them on a pathway that leads to meaningful employment and that ends with filling real workforce needs.

But this is easier said than done.



(File) Padrón speaks at The 2017 Concordia Annual Summit at Grand Hyatt New York on September 19, 2017, in New York City. Source: Riccardo Savi/Getty Images for Concordia Summit/AFP

As many studies and employer surveys have revealed in recent years, businesses and universities have been struggling to keep pace with the speed of

advancements in technology. According to a McKinsey report, technology may require over 375 million workers to switch occupational categories by 2030. A Dell Technologies study meanwhile suggests at least 85 percent of the jobs these workers will be entering probably don't even exist today.

Padrón understands that to arrest the problem, higher learning institutions must create educational opportunities that allow them to anticipate tomorrow's workforce needs. And the way to do that is by bridging the gap between higher education and industry.

In a recent Op-Ed for the *Miami Herald*, he discussed the importance of industry connections in preparing graduates for the future world of work. This, he said, has been his approach to guiding MDC students to success.

“As president of Miami Dade College, I have focused on creating educational opportunities that anticipate the workforce needs of tomorrow's global economy, furthering equity in opportunity for our extremely diverse student population,” he wrote.

“For me, creating equity means empowering our students with marketable skills and creating career pathways to greater economic possibility in communities we serve.”

One example is the creation of MDC's stackable credentials in data analytics. Padrón said MDC partnered with the Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) to implement a methodology able to identify, respond and build academic pathways customised to the region's workforce needs.

“We know there is a growing need for workers who possess digital science and analytics skills. A Gallup poll revealed that by 2021, 69 percent of employers expect candidates with data, science and analytic skills to get preference for

jobs, yet only 23 percent of college and university leaders say their graduates will have those skills.

“Our data analytics-focused curriculum fills this talent gap,” he said.

“Working closely with BHEF, we were able to engage in a deep and fruitful partnership with Nextera Energy, a leading clean energy company headquartered in Juno Beach, Florida. This partnership resulted in a symbiotic relationship, providing our students with curriculum, engagement and experience while providing Nextera with a pipeline of qualified workers.”

The methodology was created by BHEF, with funding from the National Science Foundation. BHEF is America’s oldest membership organisation of Fortune 500 CEOs, college and university presidents, and other leaders dedicated to creating a highly skilled future workforce. In 2015, Padrón was elected to serve as its president.

Today, MDC’s digital science and data analytics ecosystem continues to thrive.

As the only public institution in Florida offering an analytics major, it has turned itself into an exemplar of 21st century higher education. Its students benefit greatly from the uniqueness of the programme, with many landing jobs even before graduation. In fact, over 78 percent of MDC’s student body work while attending college.

“While working extremely hard, these MDC students are enjoying greater career satisfaction and financial success,” Padrón said.

This isn’t lip service. One hundred percent of the programme’s first graduating cohort in 2018 have been recruited into key roles such as business intelligence analyst, data warehousing specialist and data analyst, earning annual salaries that average over US\$75,000.

And as we've mentioned, many in the second cohort have already secured their places in the workforce.

What Padrón has proven through MDC is that education is not a zero-sum game; firstly, equity in education and academic excellence can go hand; and secondly, everyone benefits from collaboration.

Padrón is retiring this August.

Although he will leave a gaping hole in American higher education, his retirement has been in the offing for some time.

Now 74 years of age, Padrón believes it is time to pass the buck. And with MDC celebrating its 60th anniversary next year, he says there's no better time for a new leader to take over.

"There's already an excellent foundation to build upon so we're ready for that transition," he said when announcing his retirement in February.

Since hearing of his impending retirement, members of the Miami community from students to politicians, academics and friends have been showering Padrón with gifts. From tributes and proclamations, to the keys to the city and to the college, and even to naming a street and an entire campus of MDC after him, those whose lives he's touched have been clamouring to show Padrón their appreciation.

But for Padrón, the greatest gift of all is having shared in the responsibility of creating meaningful impact through education, which, in his words, is "the only way to achieve the American dream."

And as he prepares to leave, it is his wish that other leaders of higher education continue to do the same for the communities they serve.

Citing MDC's successes, he challenged them to "pursue more meaningful and methodical partnerships with industry" to give their graduates a fighting chance for survival in a business landscape that's becoming tougher and tougher to navigate.

"By partnering with these companies and BHEF, we at MDC are playing an essential role in the economic growth of our region and our students.

"We are proud to be leading the way in this innovative way of teaching, learning, skilling and employing."