

MDC Board Of Trustees Appoints Rolando Montoya As Interim President

By JESSICA BAKEMAN · AUG 29, 2019



Rolando Montoya is a former member of the MDC Board of trustees.

JESSICA BAKEMAN / WLRN NEWS

The Miami Dade College board unanimously appointed a retired veteran administrator to serve as interim president while trustees restart the search for a permanent replacement for Eduardo Padrón, who retires tomorrow.

<https://www.wlrn.org/post/mdc-board-trustees-appoints-rolando-montoya-interim-president>

Rolando Montoya will return to the college as its interim president for the remainder of the search process, which trustees estimated could take up to another year.

He retired from the college in 2016 after a nearly three-decade career as a professor and administrator. He has previously served as provost and president of the Wolfson campus in downtown Miami. He is also a former member of the college's board of trustees.

During Thursday's meeting, Montoya said people have been encouraging him to apply for the president's job since the search process began. He wasn't interested until recently, when he began seeing the anxiety and divisiveness the search has created, he said.

"Then I said, maybe it's my responsibility to bring some harmony, to bring some peace, to grant some time to the board of trustees, so that they can do the job that you want to do," he said during the meeting. "And I am willing to accept your appointment in order to facilitate a fair and good process for the goodwill of the faculty, the staff, the students, this community."

Montoya said he's not willing to take the job permanently. His appointment is effective Saturday, Aug. 31, one day after Padrón's final day on the job.

The decision comes after a political battle that was on stark display at Thursday's meeting, as board chair Bernie Navarro openly battled with new members of the board recently appointed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Early this year, Padrón announced his plans to retire in August after leading the college since 1995. The original search was scheduled to yield the next president by late July, before Padrón left and a new semester began. But that didn't happen, thanks to a shakeup on the board ordered by DeSantis.

DeSantis appointed four new members to the seven-person board in March, after the previous board had approved the search criteria, appointed a search committee and contracted with a national search firm. Then the new board members pushed for an unexpected meeting on May 30 to consider changing the requirements to allow non-traditional candidates to apply. Faculty members argued the search was being upended and manipulated to favor a political candidate of the governor.

Ultimately, a proposal from new board member and former Republican state Rep. Michael Bileca to delete the minimum requirements that applicants have a doctoral degree and at least six years of experience in higher education administration was voted down 4-3. Board members said then they might reconsider the decision if the search, as originally designed, didn't yield quality candidates.

Two weeks before the scheduled vote, DeSantis appointed another new board member, giving him a strong majority of appointments.

In late July, the board interviewed four candidates, including Padrón's No. 2 at the college now, Provost Lenore Rodicio. But some board members didn't want to move forward with the vote. They said Rodicio was the only viable option of the four, and at least one board member suggested that the search committee might have preferred Rodicio, who many see as someone who would continue Padrón's legacy.

The board voted to start the search again.

Thursday morning was its first meeting since the debacle.

Through a spokesman, Rodicio said she's grateful the board has outlined next steps for the presidential search. She said she admires and respects Montoya and looks forward to working with him. For his part, Montoya

endorsed Rodicio as an ideal candidate for the permanent presidency during his remarks at the meeting.

Board members spent much of the meeting bickering.

Marcell Felipe, an attorney and recent DeSantis appointee to the board, has criticized Rodicio for her role on an advisory board of the college's Confucius Institute. The institute was established in 2010 in partnership with the Chinese government with the mission of offering Chinese language and culture courses.

[Confucious Institutes have been subject to wide criticism](#), particularly in American academic circles, for spreading Chinese propaganda. Felipe has argued [that Rodicio, daughter of Cuban exiles and a Republican](#), has aligned herself with the Communist Party through her work in the institute.

During the meeting, Felipe accused chair Bernie Navarro of censoring him and others who wanted to raise questions about Rodicio and the Confucius Institute. That's when the meeting devolved into an ugly public conflict between the two men.

At one point, the chair called on Felipe to speak. Felipe responded: "Finally, the censorship is lifted, and I'm allowed to talk."

Navarro jumped in, repeating: "This is not about you."

"You've made it about me, Bernie," Felipe said, "and, quite frankly, I am very disappointed in how you've handled this meeting."

Felipe said he would wait until future meetings to discuss his concerns about Rodicio in hopes of coming to a consensus with other board members on how the search should proceed.

"So, you commit, going forward, that there will be no accusations, ... no red herring, no McCarthyism, no public lynchings of any of the candidates? You commit to that?" Navarro said.

"This is what I will commit to," Felipe said. "First of all, I will commit to not voting for an unqualified politician. I will commit to not rubber-stamping a coronation of any kind, by anybody. And I will commit to not giving up my First Amendment right or my right to represent the community."

After unanimously appointing Montoya to take over, the board decided to later consider hiring a new national search firm that would begin looking for a president.

Mark Richard, an attorney who was a longtime professor there and now represents the faculty union, said the process for appointing an interim lacked transparency.

"To walk in here with a pre-picked interim candidate disrespects the entire process," Richard said.

"Mr. Montoya has a distinguished career. He's an excellent professor and an excellent administrator. He has to live with himself and ask a question, is this the way he wanted to end his career? Not by serving the college but by getting picked in the darkness and charading it as sunshine."