

EDUCATION NOVEMBER 19, 2016 12:18 PM

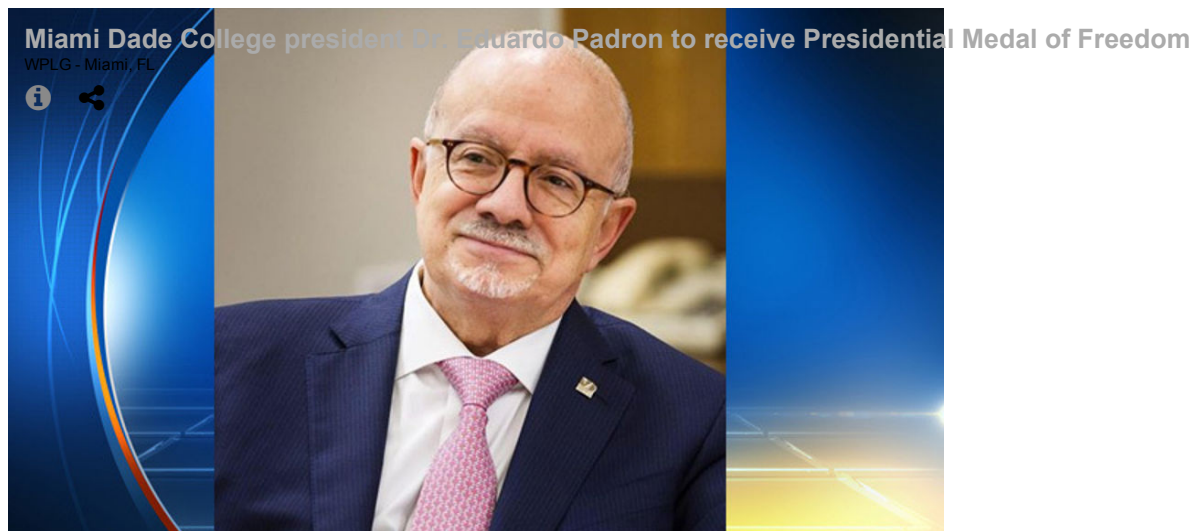
Champion of affordable college shaped MDC into model for higher education



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When Eduardo Padrón’s mother put him on a plane from Cuba to Miami in 1961, she gave him one final piece of advice: “No matter what happens,” she said with tears in her eyes, “you have to study. You have to go to college.”

For the 15-year-old immigrant — who will be honored Tuesday at the White House with the Presidential Medal of Freedom — following his mother’s dream proved a challenge. Like many young Cubans sent stateside without their parents in a wave of immigration known as “Operation Pedro Pan,” Padrón arrived with no money and limited English, disoriented in a strange place and struggling with responsibilities beyond his years. He cared for

his younger brother and juggled odd jobs in high school — delivering newspapers, sweating through long hours at an unairconditioned dry cleaning shop, washing dishes and mowing lawns — all in the hopes of saving up enough money to go to one of the nation's top universities.

But Padrón was rejected from every school he applied to — every one, that is, except the local community college, the precursor to Miami Dade College. Although it wasn't the prestigious institution Padrón had aspired to, the school proved a revelation — and a lifelong inspiration.

"I didn't understand anything about college, but I saw opportunities everywhere," Padrón recalled.

Except for a few years spent getting his bachelor's degree and Ph.D. at other Florida schools, Padrón, 72, has never left Miami Dade College, where he has been president since 1995. An economist by training, he has turned down lucrative corporate jobs to devote his life to building the school into what it is today. The sprawling, eight-campus college serves more than 165,000 students and ranks as the nation's largest undergraduate institution and its most diverse. In the process, Padrón has left an indelible mark on Miami and on the hearts and minds of thousands of students who have passed through MDC's doors. He has also helped change the way America thinks about educating its most vulnerable youth.

On Tuesday, President Barack Obama will award Padrón with the nation's highest civilian honor as part of a star-studded group that includes Tom Hanks, Bill and Melinda Gates, Michael Jordan, Bruce Springsteen and 15 other recipients. It's the crowning achievement in a long list of accolades and leadership roles, one that includes national appointments by six presidents and chairmanships at the helm of the country's top education associations.

Yet Padrón has remained, by all accounts, focused on his students and on using his national platform to advocate for expanding college opportunities for low-income, minority and immigrant youth.



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Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón

"This is the place that opens the doors and gave me self-esteem and self-confidence," Padrón said. "In this community, this is a college that has touched almost everyone."

That includes Florida's banks, businesses and houses of government, which are filled with people — often at the highest levels — who have benefited from the college's open-door policy. MDC counts state legislators, members of Congress, bank presidents, Hollywood actors and music stars among its alumni.

"Miami Dade [College] does this in an incredible fashion of giving everyone a shot," said Cesar Alvarez, a senior chairman of Greenberg Traurig, one of the largest law firms in the United States. "There you have this last chance of making it."

Alvarez should know. When he graduated from North Miami High in the mid-1960s, his college prospects were slim.

"In high school, I paid a lot of attention to refining my interpersonal skills but not my academic skills. That's another way to say I was partying a lot," he said, laughing. "I eventually made it to Miami Dade where somebody gave me a chance to work on my intellectual side. But if Miami Dade had not given me a chance, I don't know what I would be doing today."

Not every city is fortunate enough to have an equalizing force like MDC, or a champion for its under-served youth.

"Miami Dade [College] is special," said Donald Graham, former publisher and chairman of The Washington Post. In other cities, "there is no such institution of higher education with that price, that graduation rate and that quality of education."

Padrón, said Graham, "is a hero to everyone who cares about education nationally."

Amid a national conversation about how to make college education accessible — a topic that has increasingly become a political issue during state and national election campaigns — MDC serves as a model for large-scale, affordable higher education.

Once a two-year community college, MDC now offers bachelor's degrees in addition to associate degrees and short-term career programs. Almost three-quarters of the students come from households where the annual income is less than \$36,000 a year. Close to half did not grow up speaking English at home, and many are the first in their families to get a college education.

MDC invests a lot of resources in helping these often under-prepared students succeed, providing intensive language classes for English-language learners, flexible class schedules to accommodate working students, and help applying for financial aid to cover the roughly \$3,500 to \$3,800 annual tuition.

"They have found a number of ways to provide access to students who are trying to juggle a job, their family life and at the same time earn a college degree. This is a lot harder to do than it is to say," said Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education. "It's been an example that I think is being watched and copied across the nation. And you just can't say that about too many institutions."

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Padrón believes figuring out how to provide those opportunities is vital for the future of American democracy. In an era of shrinking funding for higher education, however, Padrón worries about the ability of institutions like MDC to sustain themselves.

“I am such a strong believer that talent is universal, but opportunities are not,” he said. Gone are the days of supporting a family on a blue-collar job, Padrón said. In the modern economy, not getting a college education “is basically an induction into the cycle of poverty.”

It's a cause Padrón has taken on not only in his role as college president, but also in his daily life.

“Dr. Padrón is a recruiter for students of the college and I say that with a smile because everywhere he goes, no matter what walk of life people are from or where he meets them, he recruits students,” said Malou Harrison, the president of Miami Dade College's North Campus. “When I was his chief of staff he'd come back from lunch, from one of his luncheon meetings, and he'd always have a piece of paper with a name and a phone number. A waiter, someone at the dry cleaner's, someone that he'd met walking down Second Avenue downtown, and he'd come back and say, ‘Malou, we need to get this person into school. They need a college education. Please call them right away.’”

To cultivate support, Padrón will work both sides of the political aisle, and he's a master networker. The school's magazine, for example, typically features several pages of photo ops called “Presidential Moments.” The most recent edition includes a shot of Padrón with Hillary Clinton and a shot of Padrón with Donald Trump, among a host of other national and international political power-brokers who visited the campus in recent months.

But when it comes to advocating for MDC, he does not shy away from pushing or conflict.

“He is one of the most humble, selfless people that I know and it's always been about the students, it's always been about the community,” said Armando Olivera, the retired president of Florida Power & Light and a close friend. “That's not to say that when he sets his sights on something he's not relentless.”

It's a laser focus that has brought many cultural events to Miami and even helped shape the city landscape. MDC has hosted the annual book fair, film festivals and concerts for Miami residents, and its Wolfson Campus has helped transform downtown Miami from an urban blight into a cultural center.

But that relentlessness also has occasionally gotten Padrón into hot water. A few years ago he found himself trying to smooth ruffled feathers after making comments to the Miami Herald Editorial Board about four state legislators he felt were trying to kill legislation that would have let voters decide whether to approve a local sales tax increase to help pay for building repairs at MDC. Saying legislators were acting like “bullies” and questioning one lawmaker's commitment to higher education because he was a college “dropout” did not win Padrón any friends in Tallahassee. The college lost its sales tax pitch.

His willingness to challenge those in power and defend the underdog has earned him a great deal of respect among students, however.

One of these students is Gaby Pacheco, who attended MDC in the mid-2000s after immigrating to the United States from Ecuador as a child. She got to know Padrón through her work as the president of the college's student government association, and considers him a mentor and a friend. When Pacheco's house was raided by law enforcement while she was studying at MDC, Padrón got her one of the city's best lawyers to keep her from being deported.

But there is also another, slightly less dramatic moment that stands out in Pacheco's mind.

As a sophomore in college, Pacheco had been asked to introduce then vice presidential candidate John Edwards when he came to MDC to speak during the 2004 presidential campaign. At the last minute, after Pacheco had written and rehearsed her speech, campaign officials decided they wanted Senator Bill Nelson to introduce the candidate instead.

Pacheco was in a make-shift green room with Padrón and other college officials when the Edwards campaign called to convey the change. Edwards' helicopter had already landed and hundreds of people were waiting in the gym to hear him speak.

“Gaby did you write your speech?” Padrón asked.

Pacheco told him that she had, but that it wasn't a problem if she didn't get to introduce the candidate.

“No,” Padrón said. “You worked hard on that speech. You're going to introduce him.” Then he turned to his staff. “If Gaby doesn't introduce him, then we're not doing this event.”

And that was the end of it. Because in Padrón's “dream factory,” as he calls it, everyone has the same rights to the American dream.