

A Q&A With Miami Dade's New President

The new leader of one of the nation's largest community colleges, Miami Dade College, is a Miami native with decades of higher education experience.

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COURTESY TALLAHASSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Madeline Pumariega grew up in Hialeah, a large city in Miami-Dade County, and attended [Miami Dade College](https://www.insidehighered.com/college/135717/miami-dade-college) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/college/135717/miami-dade-college>).

Years later, she's returning to her home to [lead the two-year college](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/11/19/miami-dade-college-chooses-alumna-president) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/11/19/miami-dade-college-chooses-alumna-president>).

with one of the largest and most diverse undergraduate populations in the country, enrolling about 111,000 students this fall. Pumariega, 53, will be the first female president in the college's history. She follows Rolando Montoya, the current interim president of the college, and Eduardo Padrón, who led Miami Dade for more than two decades.

Pumariega is currently the executive vice president and provost of Tallahassee Community College. She's expected to start at Miami Dade on Jan. 4. She's worked in higher education for decades, starting her career as a professor at Miami Dade and eventually becoming the first Hispanic woman appointed chancellor of the Florida College System.

Inside Higher Ed talked with Pumariega over Zoom before Thanksgiving to discuss her experience and her goals for the college. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: How do you think growing up in Miami-Dade County has influenced your outlook and professional goals?



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collegiate career -- at Miami Dade College. I think having the insights of the community and understanding the community

does give me, as the president, a sense of hitting the ground running, if you will, because I don't have to warm up to the community. I have family there as well as friends. I've really been overwhelmed by all of the emails and texts and calls that have come in welcoming me back home. I think that that's great.

Q: What moments in your career thus far do you think are most influential to how you think as a leader?

A: Spending 20 years at Miami Dade College certainly has been instrumental in me growing as a leader. I think leaving to run a nonprofit, Take Stock in Children, focused on breaking the cycle of poverty, shaped my leadership in two ways. One, seeing the lens of the psychology of poverty, which so many of the students that we serve at our college go through. And then secondly, working directly with a board of directors. Having that direct experience with a board has certainly contributed to my leadership and the way that I approach leading an organization.

Working with the 28 institutions that make up the Florida College System, as well as legislative leaders, as chancellor also contributed to my statewide perspective of higher education. I have an understanding of the best practices across our 28 institutions, and also of the spirit of collaboration, of being a collaborative leader to build that consensus.

During my time here at Tallahassee Community College as a provost, I really enriched our relationships with our faculty, which are the cornerstone of success, really, at any institution.

Q: Take Stock in Children aims to lift people out of poverty through education. Can you explain how and why you believe education can lift people out of poverty?

A: I'm pretty data-driven. What does the evidence tell us? That informs, then, high-impact strategies. When you think about Take Stock in Children, breaking the cycle of poverty through education, it really does do that. The data tell us that, while a four-year college pathway may not be for everyone, certainly a postsecondary credential beyond high school does ensure economic mobility. If you're really moving someone out of the generational cycle of poverty and you can get them onto a path to earn a degree, the data suggest there's a likelihood that their earnings are going to grow, that they're going to be able to enter the workforce and earn more, rather than continuing that cycle of poverty.

I saw it work with Take Stock in Children by setting high expectations for the students, engaging the family, ensuring that the students had a caring adult (a mentor) and then providing a scholarship to remove that

Q: Why did you want to take on this role at Miami Dade, especially during such a turbulent time?

A: A lot of friends have asked that question. I'm incredibly grateful for Miami Dade College, to be able to come back and serve the college during this very difficult time. There is no better moment to give of your time and your talent than when it is a challenging time. It's probably really easy to come back when everything's great. But I feel that, right now, it's my purpose to go back and make a difference at an institution that contributed so much to my life -- to be able to lead an institution that is near and dear to me through this challenging time by leveraging the opportunities and the talent of the MDC team, and especially working collaboratively with our faculty.

Q: The college and faculty union [have been at odds](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/14/miami-dade-college-reopens-despite-student-and-faculty-protests)

(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/14/miami-dade-college-reopens-despite-student-and-faculty-protests>) recently due to the pandemic, but it seems union leadership is happy about your hire. How do you plan to work with the campus community to regain the trust of faculty, staff and students strained by the pandemic?

A: When I think about coming here to TCC, the faculty had gone through a union contract and certainly there was some healing to do. I think that you do it through transparency and communication and collaboration.

I will use the same approach when I get to Miami Dade College, which is how I led there. I worked closely with the faculty. You know, they're partners in our work; they're colleagues. I think we all want the same thing, and that is academic excellence and student success. And we want Miami Dade to be incredibly successful, so the common goal's there -- that's the great thing.

Then, I think, it's working together collaboratively in developing how we achieve those goals. My plan is to continue the way I did when I was a leader there, how I've led here at Tallahassee Community College with our faculty, and again develop that trust through transparency and communication.

Q: Could you discuss what you think of how Miami Dade College has been handling COVID-19?

A: No one has ever led through a national pandemic. This is the first for everyone. Again, it's the community's college, so as colleges respond to COVID, there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. You really have to follow the science, you have to follow the data and you have to work collaboratively with the community and statewide leaders.

I think at Miami Dade, they've tried to, in a sense, do the same -- leverage their online offerings as well as hybrid offerings, and then some limited face-to-face courses. I think we just have to take a deeper dive in working with student outreach to get students to come back and enroll and realize that this is the most important time to invest in upskilling so they are prepared for the workforce of tomorrow and the jobs that will come in a post-COVID environment.

Q: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data show that enrollment, nationally, is down for community colleges. Can you talk more about your concerns on this issue?

A: I think it has to be a top priority. We're seeing the numbers across the country where two-year and four-year public enrollment is certainly down and not up. Which is surprising, right? Because we know that when the economy turns down and unemployment increases, typically we see colleges' enrollment increase. In this case, we're seeing the impact of the ongoing pandemic.

I think you have to study a bit of the behavior, in terms of students who wanted the college experience maybe are putting it off for a year. How do you reach out to them? I think it will be a top priority for me, because nearly 50 percent of the college's funding comes from tuition and fees, so we have to prioritize recruitment and outreach. Retaining the students that we do have and making sure they come back and continue on with their academic goals and then reclaiming some of those students who we may have lost -- especially our returning adults who may be balancing life right now -- and making sure that our academic offerings are essential and flexible in the way that they may need them to be at this moment.

Q: What do you think are the most pressing issues facing Miami Dade right now?

A: It's a three-part answer. One is obviously the enrollment, and being able to increase enrollment. That, obviously, for many reasons helps us, not only in terms of students, but also making sure we are helping the community recover in a post-COVID environment by having a trained workforce.

The second is working with our industry partners to ensure that we are aligning our workforce and innovative programs to what they need, so we meet their talent needs and we give them employees that are prepared. Working with our universities and shoring up our transfer pathways and our articulation agreements to, again, make sure they have a seamless path for our students.

And then, working with the Legislature. A big part of the budget, 53 percent, comes from state funding. So we need to make sure that we're working with the Legislature to align to how they want to invest in workforce programs, and in making sure that Florida's able to recover economically in a COVID and post-COVID environment.

Q: What do you see for Miami Dade's future?

A: We will continue to be a national center of excellence of higher education. We will continue to be known for our academic excellence, for our innovation, as well as our student success. When I think about being in a position with the rapid digitalization of the American workforce, we can be a front-runner in leading that for the country and especially for our community.

Q: The last president, Eduardo Padrón, had quite a long tenure. Do you hope to have a similar tenure?

A: The Board of Trustees makes a decision. The board certainly took the selection of the new president incredibly seriously, and in an open and transparent way. I think that I will lead that same way.

The time that I stay at the college has to be determined on the difference that I'm making at the college, advancing the college forward, ensuring that the college meets its strategic priorities, and that we continue to grow as a college and be successful as a college. That's going to require not only my commitment to be there, but also my ability to work collaboratively with our faculty, staff and with the board.

Miami is home for me. It is an incredibly special time in my life to be able to return back to Miami Dade College, where it all started for me, where those doors of opportunities opened. And to return to where I have so many friends and the support of family. I plan to hopefully have a very long and successful tenure at Miami Dade College.

Q: Anything else you'd like to add?

A: When we talk about education being that path to economic mobility, I do think that education also has an enormous role in democracy and civic engagement and an educated community. I would say that it's a privilege and an honor to lead the college and understand its very important role in not only economic mobility for our students and academic excellence and student success, but the role that it plays in ensuring that students have a path to the American dream and that they're able to meet and achieve those educational goals that put them on that path to achieve that American dream.

That's oftentimes the reason that they come to our college, that opportunity. The opportunity to learn and to advance themselves and to meet their goals. It's certainly a privilege and an honor to lead the college during this time. I take that enormous commitment seriously, and with the passion and purpose that I have and that really guides my leadership style.

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