



President Madeline Pumariega Comes Home

By Sylvia Mendoza | [August 2021](#)

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Being a hometown girl can be an advantage when coming back “home.” Born and raised in Hialeah, Madeline Pumariega found her passion for education as a student athlete at Miami Dade College (MDC) nearly 30 years ago. She worked as an administrator there for 20 years. This year, she returned as the first female president of the college.

“I absolutely believe it’s a tremendous advantage in my first hundred days to be able to hit the ground running, knowing both the internal and external community.”

With her own flair, experience, and knowledge base, she views her leadership role as the opportunity of a lifetime. “What a female president brings to the table—one of the most important tools we have as leaders—are the questions we ask. The questions I ask through the lens of a Latina are different, and I really hope it brings a culture of care, a culture of empathy, but still a culture of high expectations and accountability.”

As a Hispanic-serving institution, MDC has a 75% Hispanic student population. The college confers more associate degrees than any other college in the nation to Hispanics, Pumariega says. The college is also ranked #5 for awarding associate degrees to African-American students. Students’ success matters to Pumariega, and their educational journey is just the start. Her priorities include educating students about meta-majors, streamlining processes of earning certificates and degrees, and creating opportunities for them to join the workforce upon completing their coursework.

Building partnerships with companies that can provide training or jobs for graduates is a challenge she’s ready for. “I’ve always believed if you’re at the right place at the right time, you’re the right leader.”



Foundational values of a leader

Pumariega's roots go deep and sustain her in a world where a balancing act is hard to come by. "The role that I have as a leader, the role that I have as a mother, as a daughter, as an aunt, and sister blends my own core values about prioritizing my family and my faith together with my life's work, friends, students and colleagues. There isn't this compartmentalization of life."

Her parents were immigrants from Cuba, processed through the Freedom Tower, a historic building that will turn 100 in 2025, that Miami Dade College manages. They were sent to Texas, then lived with an aunt in New York, then started over in Miami.

Her dad was a banker. Her mother initially worked in a factory and then went back to school to get her degree so she could teach. "And there I was as a kid, hanging out outside her classroom on Saturdays, or checking papers and putting stickers on students' papers with "Good job.""

Learning the value of family, hard work, humility, starting over, and the difference an education can make shaped much of who she is and how she leads. “I bring to education an entrepreneur mindset, an innovative mindset, and the desire to work with business and industry closely. That’s my natural leadership style.”

Building talent pipelines and partnerships

That leadership style helps Pumariega hold onto MDC’s mission, even as she addresses hard facts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 13% of community college students graduate in two years. Only 30% graduate in four years. Miami Dade College is working hard to change those statistics.

“What we know is that the majority of our students are working while they’re studying. We’re the community’s college, that workforce engine for our community, and many of our students do leave us to go to work. They need to build those future work skills so they can be successful in the world of work.”

One way to get there is through “meta-majors” and stackable credentials, Pumariega explains.

In 2013, Florida approved a law establishing meta-majors to help streamline the path to a degree by giving students focused areas of study. The eight categories are: (a) Arts, Humanities, Communication and Design, (b) Business, (c) Education, (d) Health Sciences, (e) Industry/Manufacturing and Construction, (f) Public Safety, (g) Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and (h) Social and Behavioral Sciences and Human Services.

Students can identify a category of interest and get an idea of opportunities within that meta-major. They can go the associate degree pathway, but also earn high value credentials that give them job skills to work and earn wages, says Pumariega.

Pumariega used nursing as an example for stackable certificates aligning with a career path. “A CNA—Certified Nursing Assistant—gets you into the workplace. You can come back and become a licensed practical nurse. And you can still be out there and earn more. Then if you come into the RN program, we’re giving you credit for that licensed practical nurse certificate—and you’re getting that RN degree. And as you get the RN degree, you can work on your BSN.”

With each certificate, students gain confidence and position themselves for new jobs or promotions. Partnerships with companies like Amazon, IBM, and Soft Bank can eventually offer opportunities to launch careers.

Beyond the campus: Reality

Pumariega is also aware of other obstacles students face that can affect completion. “It’s not just about what happens in the classroom. It’s what happens before they arrive and after they leave that makes or breaks their ability to be academically successful.”

She served as president of Take Stock of Children, a statewide nonprofit that helps break the cycle of poverty through mentors, scholarship and hope. She met students who were living out of their cars—but were still sticking with their education. Their hope was to help their families.

“If you can earn that high school diploma, and if you go onto college and earn that credential, you have the opportunity to get to those life sustaining wages and break the cycle of poverty.”

This statewide experience with the organization led to Pumariega’s appointment as the first female and Hispanic chancellor of the Florida College System, with 28 colleges and more than 800,000 students. Returning to MDC, she has a clearer idea of what students face, and fresh approaches to help them.

Pandemic shift

The COVID-19 pandemic helped MDC address students' needs differently. Pivoting quickly, MDC changed up the infrastructure and approach to student services. "The pandemic accelerated innovation and the future of work by five years," says Pumariega.

They moved to a virtual classroom environment. They adopted the kinds of technology and innovations that normally would have taken years. They partnered with the Department of Education and provided scholarships and stipends to students who could earn a rapid credential that could help them get a job right away.

"I learned how life is priceless and the importance of social interaction in how we support our students and support each other," says Pumariega. "Our students needed these online platforms for virtual mental health, virtual academic advising, virtual academic support."

MDC is not waiting to see what happens when things go "back to normal," says Pumariega. They intend to retain a competitive edge around innovation and more accessible resources.

The hope

Coming back to Miami Dade College as president is a responsibility that is not lost on Pumariega. Her vision remains steadfast: MDC will always be the "community's college." Building on academic excellence and innovation, she hopes they can close every one of the equity gaps and create a culture of success for every student that comes through the doors.

She wants to see students tap into their passions and talents, flourish in the workplace and far beyond Miami, the community they all love and call home. "My hope is that we graduate well-rounded students who understand their place in the world."



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Sylvia Mendoza is an award-winning journalist recognized as one of "50 Voices of the Future in Journalism" and "1 of 25 Influential Latina Leaders" invited to a United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women" forum. She is the author of *The Book of Latina Women: 150 Vidas of Passion, Strength and Success* and *Sonia Sotomayor: A Biography*. Her latest essay appears in the academic anthology, [Label Me Latina/o](#).