

The scene at Miami-Dade College as Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders debate

Mike Mayo talks with voters at the Democratic Presidential debate at Miami Dade College.

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Visitors carrying **Hillary Clinton** and **Bernie Sanders** signs on Wednesday mixed with students scurrying to class before the biggest event ever held at Miami-Dade College's Kendall Campus.

"I want to watch the debate but I have to tape it – I'll be in physics class," said Nicole Cordoba, 20, of Kendall.

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The latest Democratic Debate brought a national spotlight to the sprawling commuter school on Wednesday, and there was an air of excitement amid the academic routine before Clinton and Sanders took the stage in the school's gymnasium.

"It's great for the college, great exposure for us," said Kurt Nowak, 25, of Homestead, a first-year business administration student who served in the U.S. Navy. "I wish both candidates the best of luck."

A small army of **Secret Service agents**, police and bomb-sniffing dogs roamed the 185-acre campus Wednesday, while janitors pushing trash cans and brooms made their daily rounds.

The Miami-Dade College system had more than 92,000 enrolled-credit students last academic year, according to its website, with tens of thousands attending the Kendall campus. Roughly 71 percent of students at the school are Hispanic, 17 percent are black.

Outside a student café that serves as a volunteer gathering spot, English professor Merlene Purkiss said she was proud and excited that the school where she has taught for more than 40 years was playing debate host.

"Nothing that happens tonight can change my mind because I already voted," Purkiss, a Democrat, said. She went to an early-voting site in Miami on Tuesday. "Hillary all the way. Bernie is a farce."

She called Sanders' free-higher-education-for-all plan unrealistic, saying it would trigger huge tax increases across the income spectrum, including minimum-wage workers.

But Sanders' populist pitch, which resonated with Michigan voters to propel him to an upset victory there on Tuesday, had plenty of supporters in the "free speech zone" located on the outskirts of campus.

In a spirited prelude to the debate, scores of demonstrators lined the main boulevard in front of the college campus to champion a hosts of causes than went well beyond shouts of support for the candidates themselves.

Fossil fuels, Israel, teachers' pay, war, tuition-free education were some of the issues under discussion and touted on signs as rush-hour motorists heading west into the setting sun indicated their responses with honking horns and hand gestures.

By 5:30 p.m., more than three hours before the televised debate was to begin, more than 150 demonstrators lined the north side of Killian Parkway in front of Miami Dade College.

Twins Kristin and Kaityn Contino, 18, of Homestead, chanted their support for Sanders. "He is for the middle class," said Kristin Contino, a student at Florida International University. "And I like his position of education."

But Clinton backers were well-represented too, especially from labor unions such as the American Federation of Teachers and then American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

"Bernie may say he supports our issues, but he is not prepared to do more than talk," said teachers' union employee Frank Bratka, on the road from his home in Baltimore. "Hillary understands our teachers' issues."

Sitting in front of a large Israeli flag, wearing a rubber Hillary Clinton mask and carrying a sign that read "Bern Hillary Bern," was inveterate demonstrator Bob Kunst of Miami Beach, who by his count has demonstrated for and against various causes at more than 800 events across the U.S.

Kunst said he once supported Clinton, but now blames her for the mess in the Middle East. "I am here to expose Hillary and Obama and Kerry and their policies," which hurt Israel, Kunst said.

Among the non-partisan demonstrators were red-shirted representatives of AARP, (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons). "We want to raise the visibility of Social Security to show its importance," said Peter Jeffries, 51, who traveled to Miami from Des Moines, Iowa.

Bob Senatore, 69, a retired teacher from Pembroke Pines wearing a "Feel the Bern" tank-top, came with a group of Sanders supporters from Broward.

"Number one – his platform makes sense," Senatore said. "Number two – he's not crazy. I don't care about how big his penis is, and thankfully he doesn't talk about it...I've never lost hope that he could become the nominee."

Cordoba, the physics student, said she intends to vote in the March 15 Florida primary, but is still undecided.

"It's really tough," Cordoba said. "Bernie Sanders has some...foreign views, some good views. He brings something different to the table. Hillary Clinton – strong image, strong woman, good for the gender, experienced. But she's also problematic."

Ron Milligan of Miami, a project manager at the school, said he had to catch a bus and couldn't stick

around for the debate. An independent who can't vote in the Florida primary, he said he would vote for Sanders in the November general election if he could. Milligan, an African-American, was surprised to hear that Sanders has been struggling to win black votes.

"Really? If you listen to him, the way he's talking would help blacks, working folks, poor folks the most," Milligan said. "Hillary Clinton is all rhetoric."

Nowak, who is still in the Naval reserve, called Clinton "a patriot" and Sanders "a nice man," but he won't be voting for either Democrat – he's a registered Republican.

"I've studied all the candidates and I say Donald Trump stands the best chance to disrupt the establishment," Nowak said. "Actually I liked Jim Webb [among the Democrats] because I thought he had a nice balance."

But like the students and campus workers who had to catch the bus home, early dropout Webb was nowhere to be found by the time the VIPs, big donors and party bigwigs filed into the debate hall.

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