

Under political pressure, Miami Dade College to end Chinese-backed language program

BY COLLEEN WRIGHT

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Miami Dade College's board of trustees chose former provost and trustee Rolando Montoya as its interim president on Aug. 29, 2019. BY SAMUEL NAVARRO

Miami Dade College is severing ties with a Chinese government-affiliated language program that has been a target of conservative politicians and groups with concerns over propaganda and censorship.

The college announced late Thursday that it will be sunsetting the Confucius Institute, a Mandarin-language program housed on the Wolfson campus, at the end of the semester. Interim college president Rolando Montoya, [who was hastily tapped for the temporary position last week](#), found that dwindling enrollment no longer justified keeping the program.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article234790282.html>

“I think it provided the opportunity to hit the reset button, to refresh, to evaluate the program,” said college spokesman Juan Mendieta. Participation in the program dropped from 86 students in fall 2016 to 36 students this semester. Mendieta said Mandarin courses will continue through modern languages offerings.

Bernie Navarro, chair of the college’s board of trustees, said he asked Montoya to look into the program’s enrollment numbers. Navarro says he had been briefed on the Confucius Institute by the FBI and other agencies but has not been told of any specific incidents of nefarious activity on campus regarding Chinese government influence or otherwise.

“We had no suspicion and no knowledge of anything happening at the Confucius Institute at Miami Dade College,” Navarro said. “However, it has always been a concern to me personally, it has always been a concern at the board, and it’s something I’ve been monitoring very closely.”

Efforts to cancel the Confucius Institute, which has hundreds of locations around the world, were renewed locally and have seeped into the search for a new college president. Trustee Marcell Felipe has harped on the issue since he was appointed to the board in March and has criticized the college’s executive vice provost, Lenore Rodicio, for her role as the chair of the advisory board for the Confucius Institute.

He declared the institute’s closing a “victory” of the college, praised Montoya for his leadership and said Rodicio, who was tasked with assessing enrollment numbers, looked at the issue “objectively.” Rodicio is the only candidate left in the running for the presidential job since the college’s board of trustees called off the search process in July.

“MDC and all schools should stand for academic freedom and independence and that means that you can’t partner with an institution once you know they persecute their own academics,” Felipe wrote Friday in an email to the Miami Herald.

Miami Young Republicans recently commissioned a poll on the matter. Miami-Dade County Commissioner Esteban Bovo penned a resolution urging the college to close the Confucius Institute “due to national security concerns.” It was approved 11-1 on Wednesday.

But it was U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, a Republican, who first called on the college to shut down its Confucius Institute some 18 months ago. He said in an interview that he's pleased that there are no longer any Florida colleges hosting the institute.

"They're the last college in Florida that had one, and I'm glad they made that decision. It was the right one," he said. "The Confucius Institute is used as an element of soft power by the Chinese under the guise of Chinese language teaching, but they also use it to spot and cultivate people who they think are going to be future business leaders towards China's narrative of events. I'm glad they're out of Miami Dade College."

The University of South Florida shuttered its Confucius Institute on New Year's Eve 2018. Other colleges have hosted more research- and policy-driven Confucius Institutes, however Miami Dade College has focused more on cultural and language classes as well as study-abroad trips.

Miami Dade College launched its institute with much fanfare in 2010. Eduardo Padrón, the recently retired president of Miami Dade College, referred to the institute at the time as "a treasure in our community."

Mendieta, the college's spokesman, said the Mandarin instructors were paid by Jiangsu Normal University in Xuzhou, China. The only expenses incurred by Miami Dade College are the executive director's salary and the office space on campus.

A letter of termination was sent from Montoya to Jiangsu Normal University on Thursday.

"We have appreciated the opportunity to host the Confucius Institute at Miami Dade College since 2010," Montoya wrote. "The language education and cultural courses and presentations provided through the Confucius Institute have been beneficial to our students and community."

Miami Herald staff writer David Smiley contributed to this report.

This story was updated after it was originally posted online to correct an error made by a Miami Dade College spokesman regarding the salaries paid to the Mandarin instructors.



From left, Yongli Wang, Eduardo Padrón, professor Fangming Xu and Mme Yanping Gao, Chinese consul general, unveil the new Confucius Institute Plaque during the institute's inauguration ceremony at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus in 2010. *MIAMI HERALD FILE PHOTO*