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TOP STORY

New MDC leadership focusing on equity

Programs created to help Black students and promote tech

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MDC Executive Vice President and Provost Malou Harrison (L), MDC President Madeline Pumariega (R) - #BeMDC sign at Miami Dade College's West Campus./Courtesy of Miami Dade College

Two women are at the helm of the most diverse educational institution in the country.

Miami Dade College President Madeline Pumariega and Provost Malou Harrison are leading the way to ensuring that every student has a place at the college, including building a more equitable future.

As part of the vision the leaders have in store, an initiative geared toward a population of students who have historically been the most underrepresented in higher education is underway – the Rising Black Scholars Program. It will launch in the summer and offer free two-year tuition to 100 Black students graduating high school this year.



Plans for the initiative came about after Pumariega and Harrison looked at equity gaps at the college and found that Black students make up 15% of the total student population while graduation rates among Black students were 5% lower than Hispanic and non-Hispanic white students. Another equity gap they came across was the fall-to-fall retention of Black students, which is 11% lower than the college-wide retention rate.

“That did not sit well with us,” said Harrison. “We started looking at ways that we could incrementally close that equity gap, and one of the ways that we instituted immediately was this program. What we wanted to do was to start planting the seeds of higher education early for our Black students.”

“It really came from us thinking about how could we ensure that every student in high school graduating this year knows that they belong at Miami Dade College,” Pumariega said. “In speaking to the provost and our campus leaders we launched the Rising Black Scholars Program and invested a million dollars toward it, and so far are incredibly encouraged by the outreach of the community.”

The Rising Black Scholars Program will provide the selected 100 students a full ride at Miami Dade College, meaning full tuition, a book stipend, fully paid technology like a laptop computer and scholarship opportunities for the duration of the completion of an associate degree at the college.



A socially distanced student doing work at the Homestead Campus/Courtesy of Miami Dade College

The program will also ensure that those students have wraparound services available to them, including academic support in the form of tutoring and an assigned advisor that would be their go-to person for all things academic and non-academic.

The school is accepting applications to the program until April 5. More than 180 have been received so far, according to Harrison. Those applying must graduate from a high school in Miami-Dade County this academic year and apply to be a student at MDC. An essay, a letter of recommendation and interview are required.

The program, expected to become annual if funding remains available, kicks off June 21 during the Summer B semester.

Miami Dade College's leadership change comes about in the midst of the unprecedented pandemic crisis.

As the college's first woman president in its 60-year history, Hialeah native Pumariega also broke barriers as the first woman and Hispanic named chancellor of the Florida College System.

In her 20 years of service at the college, she was a part-time assistant women's basketball coach, academic advisor and adjunct faculty at the Kendall Campus, dean of students at the Wolfson Campus, and dean of students and administration at the Medical Campus. In 2011, she was promoted to Wolfson Campus president.

Pumariega attended the college decades earlier as a student-athlete. Because of that, she said she leads through the lens of a student.

"[Students] are the purpose, they're the reason we do the work that we do, why we innovate, why we stay up at night, to try to create an environment at the college where every student can succeed," she said.

Pumariega's passion for ensuring a path toward student success comes from experience. Similarly, Harrison is committed to meeting the needs of underserved students in higher education, a priority she's taken with her since the beginning of her career.





Students walking on campus / Courtesy of Miami Dade College

Prior to MDC, Harrison started as a professional at TRIO Educational Opportunity Center, a U.S. Department of Education grant-funded program. It was her first job after college, where she served economically and academically disadvantaged students in Buffalo, New York.

“Leaving the North Campus to join President Pumariega here at the district administration in my capacity as provost, I want to tell you that my heart and my work is still about advancing equity for student success and making sure that every single student has a place at Miami Dade College,” she said.

Now responsible for academic priorities of the college as provost after serving as president of North Campus for the past seven years, Harrison marks a 30-year career at MDC. Previously, she was chief of staff to the college president, executive assistant to the Wolfson Campus president and adjunct professor of English at Wolfson.

Both leaders aim to make MDC the institution of choice for residents in South Florida, becoming that open door for those who have graduated from high school and are ready for postsecondary degree attainment; individuals who want to upskill from their workforce or make career changes; and students still attending high school who would like to enroll in college credit courses to accelerate.

Additionally, the college can help students toward earning credentials – not just a traditional degree, but micro-credentials and digital badges that can boost a résumé to catch the eyes of future employers.

“I think that we have been the community's college because anyone can come to us at any stage of their life and find a path and success,” said Pumariega. “We are the place where so many in our community either got their start, just like me, or come for the opportunity to live out the American dream, to finish their degree transfer to a university or go to work and provide a meaningful life for themselves and their families.”

At the beginning of Pumariega's and Harrison's tenures, MDC Live ('live' standing for 'learning interactively in a virtual environment') was implemented. It gives students and faculty an opportunity to interact in real time, as one would in person, through web conferencing programs on scheduled days and times. Live was launched because students voiced how they missed engagement with peers while taking their courses online.

MDC currently has four forms of classes: live, blended, online and in-person. The leaders say the adoption of remote and digital learning during the pandemic will continue to persist post-pandemic due to its accessibility.

“We believe that we have really made our campuses a student-ready college because we're meeting every student where they want to be met,” Harrison said. “Whether it's in their living rooms at home or online studying independently, or if they want to come on campus, they have the ability to do that, or if they want a hybrid of online and on-campus, they have the blended format. This is what a pandemic and post-pandemic learning environment requires to meet the needs of our community.”

Harrison and Pumariega have also been leading an effort to put together a team of "academic success coaches" to help students navigate their college experience, getting them real-time support and helping them connect to the resources they may need to help make them achieve their goals.

Across the country, the pandemic has affected colleges and universities alike, one area heavily impacted being enrollment. At MDC, things have begun to look up. Pumariega said there was a 12% student enrollment loss during the fall term and this semester there is a drop of 6.5%.

“Like everything, the pandemic has been difficult, but it's also given us the opportunity to reimagine the college going forward,” the president said. “There is no greater time to invest in your education than right now because jobs are going to come back and they're going to require additional skills.”

As Miami Mayor Francis Suarez promotes the city as an emerging tech hub and communicates with business and media magnates Elon Musk and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, the college is working on prioritizing tech to become well-aligned with what the industry is requiring.

MDC has already been collaborating with the industry, including partnerships with IBM for a cybersecurity practitioner course, Amazon for an Amazon Web Services cloud computing program, a Google IT programming courses and an automotive technician training program with Tesla.

“We have programs in cloud computing, data analytics, cybersecurity, information systems technology, help desk, networking – you name it,” Harrison said. “The beauty is that individuals who have absolutely no experience in tech can come in and enroll in our college credit certificate, because those are basically entry level with a little bit more prerequisites, and they're able to earn that credential and then use those credits back up to an associate degree and further.”



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