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Executive Profile: Miami Dade College's Pumariega on how basketball prepared her to lead

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JOCK FISTICK / SOUTH FLORIDA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Miami Dade College President Madeline Pumariega

Editor's Note: Executive Profiles offer insights into the management styles, hobbies and inspirations of South Florida's C-suite. This Q&A is featured in our weekly print edition.

Madeline Pumariega

Age: 54

Birthplace: Hialeah

Residence: Miami

Current position: President, Miami Dade College

Previous positions: Chancellor, Florida College System; executive VP and provost, Tallahassee Community College; president, Take Stock in Children

Boards/organizations: Board member, Greater Miami Chamber Chamber of Commerce; trustee, Pace Center for Girls; trustee, The Miami Foundation

Education: Associate degree, Miami Dade College; bachelor's degree, St. Thomas University; Ph.D., Barry University, M.Ed., Florida Atlantic University



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[Madeline Pumariega](#) was named president of Miami Dade College in 2020, at a time when many students were learning remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. But now the majority of students are back on campus as she leads the college's bold new initiatives.

MDC is the largest university in South Florida, with more than 54,000 full- and part-time students. Many businesses depend on the college to train workers, especially as technology companies open here and need to quickly fill jobs.

Pumariega knows how transformative an education can be, as she was once an MDC student herself.

What was your favorite place to hang out while growing up in South Florida? The beach. I fondly remember vacations at the Delano and the National Hotel.

What was your first job? McDonald's. It's always a good way to start, to be part of an organization like that.

How did you become interested in pursuing a leadership position in education? My mom was a schoolteacher. I went back to MDC to help as assistant basketball coach and then became an academic adviser. And you see how you make a difference in peoples' lives. You see a problem you want to solve, and it becomes taking a leadership role. I was at MDC for over 20 years. I went from campus adviser to assistant dean to dean.

How did being on a basketball team help prepare you for your career? Basketball is a very fast-moving game. You always have to be looking up the court and at all the players. Leadership is very much like that. You can't be looking down at the ball. You have to be looking up the court and be willing to make adjustments. That has shaped strategically how I think. And also the teamwork. Basketball is really a team effort. Bringing those principles of teamwork guides my leadership style.

Did you have any mentors? My dad has always been a mentor whom I look up to. Along the way, there were different individuals I had the opportunity to work with. Most recently, [Jim Murdaugh](#), the president at Tallahassee Community College, was a great mentor.

Has enrollment at MDC recovered from the drop during the pandemic? We are seeing a recovery from the 2020 numbers and seeing students coming back. We are not seeing the same numbers as before [the pandemic] because a lot of students, when I talk to them about why they haven't come back, say they are working. Employers need more employees. Most of our students are low-income students, so having the ability to work and help their families is a priority.

How is MDC working with the tech sector? We just worked on a partnership with the city of Miami and the Knight Foundation, along with the DDA [Miami Downtown Development Authority] to create AI for All, a program to upskill people in tech jobs. We partnered with IBM earlier in the year for training faculty and students, and partnered with SoftBank on data analytics. We recently announced, with Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, a tech charter school we want to build in downtown Miami to focus on those tech careers. The partnerships we are doing are helping us increase access to these programs.

What are the biggest challenges for MDC? We continue to work on growing our enrollment. We are modernizing our technology processes. There is no doubt we have tech, but students are looking for that personalization. It's not just online learning. It's mental health, career services and admissions – those additional support services students need to get them to the finish line.

How do you relieve stress? I like to exercise. I like to go out for a run or a walk. I like to spend time with family and I like to go to the beach.

What are some of your favorite events in Miami? I love the Book Fair. Miami is the smartest city in the world the week of the Book Fair, when we bring in so many outstanding authors. I love the Film Festival and the Coconut Grove Arts Festival.

What book are you reading now? “Leadership on the Line” [by Marty Linsky and Ronald Heifetz]. It’s on adaptive leadership. We are reading it for our executive leadership team. I started reading it and I thought this would be great for us to read as a group. I can’t wait to start “The Lightning Rod” by Brad Meltzer. I just ordered it.

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