

ISSUES & IDEAS

The Miami Herald



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2007 | COMMENTS: Issues&Ideas@MiamiHerald.com

A***

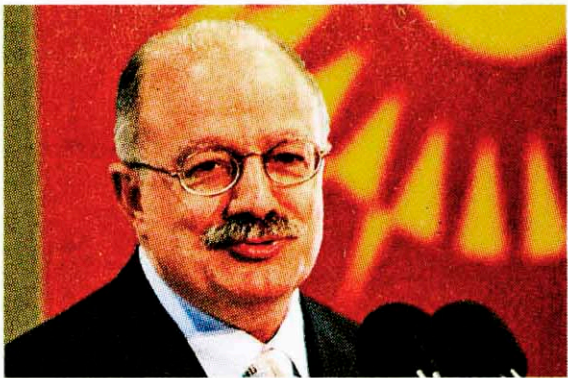
FLORIDA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES



MCT

THE RISING COSTS OF EDUCATION

FLORIDA'S TOP PUBLIC EDUCATION LEADERS ARGUE THAT QUALITY COLLEGES HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT, BUT INADEQUATE FUNDING THREATENS OUR STATE INSTITUTIONS. THEY LAY OUT THE KEY CHALLENGES AHEAD



EL NUEVO HERALD FILE

**EDUARDO J. PADRON,
MIAMI DADE COLLEGE
PRESIDENT**

Harsh as it may seem, the term “economic suicide” has become an unforgiving urban reality. The phrase was coined by a workforce researcher for the plight of students who fail to graduate from high school. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings recently upped the ante, noting that 90 percent of all new jobs in the U.S. require a college degree. She called a college education a “must-have.”

Must indeed. In Miami, with the second-lowest median income in the nation, a college degree is a ticket out of an uncompromising cycle of poverty. But fewer than half of our high school students are enrolling in college today. For every young person who grabs the lifeline, another is sinking into that downward spiral. Feeding the lower rungs of our economic strata is not a recipe for community prosperity.

In the face of these challenges, our partners in Tallahassee have been struggling with an ailing balance sheet, the remedy for which appeared to be a drastic cutback of 4 percent of the funding for MDC and colleges across the state. Fortunately, budget negotiations have limited the losses to 1.8 percent, and a once-rejected but desperately needed 5 percent increase in tuition has been agreed to by the Legislature.

These stop-gap measures offer a much-

STUDENTS SOUND OFF

MIAMI-DADE COLLEGE



DONNA E. NATALE PLANAS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

• **Jessica Mondestin**, 20, second-year nursing major, graduate of William H. Turner Technical High:

"I definitely favor raising tuition to have the opportunity to take smaller classes. We should keep it like that. In my nutrition class, we had to move to an auditorium. Last summer, it wasn't like that - 20 to 25 students. Now it's over 40 students."



DONNA E. NATALE PLANAS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

• **Christina Marcellin**, 19, second-year psychology student who graduated from North Miami High:

"We can afford to pay more. Here at the north campus of Miami-Dade College, we get free parking decals and IDs. At the universities students have to pay for that."



DONNA E. NATALE PLANAS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

• **Lance McGibbon**, 22, a native of Jamaica, is a second-year student studying funeral service and business. He is president of the North Campus' student government:

"If we don't get the increase, we will have to focus on classes only. There won't be leadership development seminars - what builds our character outside the classroom."

'Maybe we need to ask ourselves just how much we value access to higher education. What sort of community do we want to build?'

- EDUARDO PADRON, Miami Dade College president

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

Questions for each of us to ponder

• PADRON, FROM 1L

appreciated respite from the immediate crisis. But the next crisis is waiting around the corner. Much of the restored funding is "non-recurring," meaning that January will again be the witching hour. MDC and community colleges across the state educate nearly 800,000 students each year, almost four times the number at our state universities but with less than half the funding per student. We need to be asking bigger, bolder questions in search of more lasting solutions because this "must-have" isn't close to generating the urgency that it deserves.

Miami Dade College has been the critical step up the economic ladder for more than 1.5 million people since 1960. I was one of those people, and I'm not alone in asking where South Florida would be without this institution. Today, MDC hosts the largest undergraduate enrollment in the nation, more than 160,000 students. That number soared by more than 8 percent for the fall semester, evidence of a volatile economy and a workforce that demands advanced skills.

This community cannot afford to see its primary avenue to higher education underfunded. Of our public high school graduates who do move on to higher education in Florida, more than two-thirds attend MDC. Many more return years later because the "must-have" is just that. What they encounter is a special environment, a culture of success that has life changing potential. They are challenged - and supported - as never before. The curriculum is rigorous, delivered by faculty who love to teach. Through small classes and innovative support strategies students discover talent and desire that was waiting to be tapped.

Underfunding this institution jeopardizes the best

of MDC. An 8.4 percent increase in enrollment translates to more than 4,000 new students. That means more faculty are needed to preserve the small learning environments that are MDC's signature. But we will be unable to provide those added faculty because MDC is "backward funded," meaning this year's enrollment increase is funded next year - if we're lucky. MDC has carried unfunded enrollment often for years. Four thousand students, then, are without state support, two-thirds of each dollar of the community college funding base. Add the cost of additional classroom technology, the 10 percent increase in healthcare costs and the long-standing deferred maintenance to buildings across our campuses, and even the smallest decrease in funding seems absurd.

Maybe it is. But maybe we need to ask ourselves just how much we value access to higher education. What sort of community do we want to build? Do we want a two-tiered society, with an enclave of wealthy people at the top and an ever-growing poverty trap at the bottom? Or do we want to grow a miracle, a place where the door to college is open and learning is the community's trademark?

These are questions for each of us to ponder, residents and policy-makers alike. But know that the facts are clear: A college education is the "must-have," the critical piece at the center of the prosperity puzzle. If our people discover talent and hope, the community will flourish. If they don't in significant enough numbers, the community will languish, and we will have little control over the forces of an unpredictable economic and social environment.

The writer's e-mail address is epadron@mdc.edu