

OPINION

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JAMES L. KNIGHT (1909-1991)

Grow Miami's middle class

Cities across the country are putting their best foot forward to lure prized 25- to 34-year-olds. Our best research says that this age group is the most entrepreneurial and most likely to live within or close to an urban geographical center.

In return for their talent and vigor, this fresh, young blood demands a city that is clean, green and safe. They want creative and social vibrancy and don't easily tolerate hours of mind-numbing traffic. They're growing up, too: Good schools and an affordable home are fast becoming the deal makers or breakers.

If these are the criteria, then our community offers both heaven and hell. Miami is bursting open today, with jackhammers promising sweeter music down the road. But the economic and social landscape of any city's future, particularly Miami's, will be built upon educational and workforce opportunity. Consider these critical barometers of urban well-being from the forward-thinking CEOs for Cities organization:

- The percentage of college-educated people is the best predictor of economic success.
- Per-capita income, rather than a swelling population or highrise cityscape, is the most reliable measure of successful growth.
- Income inequality and the isolation of minorities and immigrants are devas-

tating to economic and civic growth.

Miami has one of the worst levels of poverty in America, and Miami-Dade County fares only marginally better. Our percentage of degree recipients is also among the nation's lowest.

You can grow your pool of college graduates in two ways: Attract them from elsewhere or grow them from within. The same Brookings Institution study that chronicled our low percentage of degree recipients also found that Miami-Dade County was losing middle-class residents as low-income immigrants arrived. This suggests that our most viable option is to grow from within.

Our community has enormous assets and daunting challenges. The undeniable foundation for growth — measured, inclusive and long-term — is quality education, from early childhood through college. Classrooms should offer authentic and challenging academic content in a supportive climate. Our educators should be valued as the most pivotal of all contributors in society.

Here's the next big idea: Every child and every adult — every resident — of our community goes to college. If you have the desire to learn, the opportunity will be there. This is becoming necessary if we want to prosper in the 21st century.

**- EDUARDO PADRON, president,
Miami Dade College**