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Greater Miami Chamber honors Miami Dade College president

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PETER ANDREW BOSCH / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Eduardo Padron is being honored with the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Sand in My Shoes award for the work he has done in the community and his success in building Miami Dade College into a leading institution.

Eduardo Padrón never planned to go into education when he graduated from the University of Florida in 1970 with a Ph.D. in economics. He had already accepted a job with DuPont and was coming back to Miami to thank his old junior college teachers for starting him on his road to success as a student.

But Padrón's professors pushed him to come work at what was then Miami Dade Community College. Out of guilt and obligation, Padrón agreed to take a salary 75 percent lower than the well-known chemical firm had promised and give them a year of his life. After that, he still planned to pursue a corporate career.

That never happened. Halfway through the school year, Padrón discovered a passion for teaching.

"I found my religion," said Padrón, 66. "I saw the ability to change people's lives. There is no comparison in terms of the satisfaction you get out of seeing that happen. People come here with little hope and the reward is seeing them become leaders in all areas of this community."

Forty-one years later, Padrón is still at Miami Dade. He's had one employer in his entire career, rising up the ranks to become president in 1995. Under Padrón's leadership, Miami Dade has morphed from a junior college to an institution with four-year

degrees that is frequently hailed by U.S. presidents as an educational model. It is the country's largest institution of higher learning with seven campuses and 174,000 students.

Tuesday, he will be recognized with the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Sand in My Shoes Award, the group's most prestigious honor presented annually to a leader who has made a significant contribution to the South Florida community.

There's no denying Padrón fits that bill.

"This is a mission for him and something he takes to heart," said Hank Klein, a real estate executive, past vice chairman of the Miami Dade College Board of Trustees and a past chairman of the Greater Miami Chamber. "He feels very strongly that those tens of thousands of students that pass through that school mean something to him. He will do anything within his power to be sure that they all get a chance at a quality education."

One reason Padrón identifies with the challenges of Miami Dade's students is because he was one of them. A Cuban refugee who came to the United States at 15, Miami Dade was the only college willing to give Padrón a chance. Schools like Princeton, Harvard and Georgia Tech didn't even respond to his application.

"Miami Dade saw something in me and gave me a tremendous lift," Padrón said. "I'm forever grateful to this place."

The ability to provide that opportunity for all students regardless of their academic and income levels lies at the heart of Padrón's educational philosophy. It's reflected in the college's motto, "Opportunity Changes Everything" and the nickname "Democracy's College." By the end of this year, Miami Dade expects to have enrolled 2 million students since the school's founding in 1960 – that's in a community where the population is 2.5 million. Miami Dade graduates more Hispanic and African-American students than any other college in the nation. Its students represent about 180 countries and speak nearly 80 languages.

One-third of the first-time Miami Dade students are starting college later in life, with an average age of 26. Most students – 61 percent – attend school part-time. They come for one of the more than 300 programs that run the gamut from nursing to funeral services. Some come just for a technical certificate; others stay on to earn an associate's degree and more recently the addition of bachelor's degree programs.

"This is an open-door institution," Padrón said. "We like to feel that every human being has the potential that can be harnessed. Today more than ever this model of inclusion has to be the norm. The only way we can really compete in the world is by educating the masses."

That philosophy has garnered Padrón the respect of U.S. presidents from both parties. The last six presidents have all appeared there – including Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton – for policy speeches, commencement addresses and authors at the college-sponsored Miami International Book Fair. International leaders often stop by as well, including former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, former Poland President and Nobel Peace Laureate Lech Walesa and recently, India's speaker, Meira Kumar.

Padrón isn't shy about inviting political leaders to visit or asking them for what he needs, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said.

"He's very good at lobbying, not just for his college, but for community colleges in general," said Bush, who estimates he's visited for 30 different events. "He's not threatening; he's not a blow hard," Bush said. "He just comes across as someone completely committed to his business and his institution."

Those who know Padrón say he's always working on new programs to better prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow. That was the idea behind the culinary training program initiated in 2011 and

its new restaurant Tuyo, which was a decade in the making. It's also why he worked with Florida Power & Light to develop a program in nuclear technology. Already, he's talking about a program to train students if Florida passes laws to allow destination gaming resorts.

"This is somebody who is always thinking ahead," said attorney Bob Martinez, former chairman of the Miami Dade board of trustees. "He's always thinking about how to make the community better through the school. He's not somebody who just has an ivory tower view. He's very practical. He's a visionary."

That combination of vision and pragmatics has earned Padrón numerous awards.

TIME magazine in 2009 named Padrón as one of America's "10 Best College Presidents"; The Washington Post last year named him one of the eight most influential college presidents in the country. Earlier this month, Padrón stood on stage next to rocker Jon Bon Jovi as both were honored with the Voices for National Service's Citizen Service Award. Padrón is current chairman of both the Federal Reserve's local advisory board and the American Council on Education, and is past chairman of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

With that national respect have come countless offers for jobs in both the public and private sectors, including an ambassadorship and assistant U.S. Secretary of Education. Those who know him well aren't surprised that Padrón said no.

"His heart is in Miami," said developer Armando Codina, who has known Padrón since they were boys in Cuba. "I think he sees his work here as not complete. With Eduardo, it will never be complete."

Many throughout Miami credit Padrón with helping to change their lives. One of those is Al Salas, a former Pepsi executive vice president and now the largest Hispanic Pizza Hut franchisee with 62 restaurants. When Salas was graduating from Miami High in 1978, he was one of two boys from low-income, single-mother homes that a social worker asked Padrón to mentor.

Salas credits Padrón with helping his mother to get him on the right path in life. Salas earned his associate's degree from Miami Dade, followed by two more advanced degrees and eventually becoming a certified public accountant. But without Padrón, Salas acknowledges his life could have easily gone in a different direction.

"I was a hot head with a chip on my shoulder, who could have ended up in the wrong place," said Salas, 49, a Miami Dade graduate who lives in Pinecrest. "Eduardo is part of my family. When my father walked out of my life, he was my role model. Even today, he's the guy I know I can always go to for advice and to bounce ideas off of. He's the guy I look up to."

Walk though campus with Padrón and he's frequently mobbed with students wanting to say hello. Go out with him to a community event and you'll find him talking to everyone from the waitress who went to school at Miami Dade to the top civic and business leaders.

"Sometimes you feel like you're with a rock star," said Helen Aguirre Ferre^v, Spanish-language journalist and chair of the Miami Dade board of trustees. "People feel an attraction to him and a comfort level. It's because no matter who they are, he makes that person feel so special."

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