

Single Stop USA's Elisabeth Mason and Miami Dale College's Eduardo J. Padrón discuss how the nonprofit organization and community colleges can work together to break through the barriers facing underserved populations.



# Single Stop USA

THE GOAL OF SINGLE STOP USA, A REVOLUTIONARY anti-poverty initiative, is to “slash poverty and increase economic mobility by bridging the information gap that separates eligible low-income families and students from essential benefits and services that remain untapped and inaccessible,” says Elisabeth Mason, the organization’s CEO and co-founder. Originally a flagship program of the New York City-based Robin Hood Foundation, Single Stop USA spun off in 2007 to expand its services to a national scale.

In 2009, Single Stop USA launched a community college initiative to provide services at community colleges in four states and established system-wide partnerships with three of the nation’s largest community college systems — City University of New York, City College of San Francisco, and Miami Dade College. To ensure a holistic approach to the diversity of barriers that its clients face, Single Stop provides free and comprehensive social, legal, and financial services and uses existing state and federal resources as a proxy for stipends that have been shown to help students complete school. As an intermediary, Single Stop also builds the capacity of its community college partners and provides valuable resources, training, and technical support while working closely with existing initiatives to enhance available services and ensure coordinated case management. It has also partnered with ACCT to develop a national strategy to build the capacity of community colleges to improve college completion rates.

“Single Stop is about more than just service delivery,” Mason says. “At the end of the day, we’re working proactively to change the way America combats poverty by focusing on prevention rather than intervention, by building on best practices, and by shifting the welfare paradigm to utilize existing benefits and services to stabilize families and augment financial aid.”

Part of this proactive work is taking place at Miami Dade College in Florida, one of the nation’s largest and best-recognized institutions. *Trustee Quarterly* spoke with Mason and Miami Dade College President Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón about their groundbreaking collaboration.

ELISABETH MASON

Single Stop USA CEO and Co-Founder



EDUARDO J. PADRÓN

Miami Dade College President



**Q:** What brought Single Stop USA and Miami Dade College together? Why this partnership and why now?

**MASON:** As the largest educational institution in the country, Miami Dade College — its diversity, the role it plays in the Miami Dade area, and its commitment to student success — represents exactly why we find community colleges so compelling. Building on our success in Newark, San Francisco, and New York City, we thought Single Stop could succeed here and that these successes would resonate with education leaders and policymakers nationwide.

**PADRÓN:** Approximately 80 percent of new jobs being developed in the current economy require college-level learning. The chance of building a prosperous life without a college education is next to impossible today. Employers in every field tell us they need people who have not only specific and practical skills in their field, but also rich preparation in communication, problem solving, teamwork, cultural awareness, and other relevant areas. And the single greatest deterrent to achieving a college education is economic issues.

Close to 40 percent of MDC students live beneath the federal poverty guideline. More than 60 percent qualify as low-income.

For us, Single Stop is the proverbial no-brainer. If we help our students economically, we have a much better chance of supporting them through to graduation. And if these low-income students, traditionally underserved in higher education, don't find their way to a diploma, it is difficult to imagine the U.S. achieving the goals set by the Obama Administration to once again lead the world in the achievement of college degrees.

**Q:** Single Stop USA is a national anti-poverty organization that could pursue several avenues to improve access to government services. Why has Single Stop devoted so many of its resources to its Community College Initiative?

**MASON:** Single Stop USA was created to find innovative ways to improve access to government services for families, especially through national and sustainable institutions. Community colleges provide a national network where we can replicate our success.

Community colleges serve more students of color, more low-income students, and more first-generation college students than their higher-education peers. In essence, Single Stop and community colleges are serving the same families. At the same

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time, we recognize that the best way to reduce poverty and increase economic mobility in this country is to increase the number of college graduates. The problem is that so many community college students do not complete the degree and certificate programs they set out to achieve. Low-income students who are high academic achievers are about as likely to finish college as low academic achievers who come from more privileged backgrounds.

Luckily, multiple studies by the Manpower Development Research Corporation (MDRC) and others have shown a powerful connection between financial interventions and services for students and rates of retention and completion. With the increased focus on college completion, we thought we could combine the two best anti-poverty tools we have — coordinated access to the nation’s safety net and a postsecondary education — in a campus-based, wraparound service model.

**Q:** What’s in it for Miami Dade College? Why did you decide to partner with Single Stop?

**PADRÓN:** Elisabeth and her colleagues at Single Stop are passionate about this work. They have set out to put an end to poverty, and regardless of who thinks it quixotic or impossible, they are making a difference. I happen to share their passion from a different angle, but the two paths intersect.

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**Q:** What does this look like on the ground?

**MASON:** Single Stop works with Miami Dade College to hire full-time site coordinators to staff the Single Stop offices on campus. These coordinators work directly with students to identify benefits and services that can help them stay in school, whether it’s help buying groceries and paying rent, filing their taxes, or coaching them on how to manage debt. Right now, we have offices at the two largest MDC campuses, Wolfson and North. Single Stop and MDC partner with local organizations in Miami

to provide free tax preparation, financial counseling, and legal counseling to any student who walks through our door.

Our aim is to empower the college to respond to the diversity of student needs with an equally diverse set of services. No student is the same, but all students can benefit from some aspect of the Single Stop model.

**Q:** What are the barriers to students succeeding at Miami Dade College?

**PADRÓN:** The range of challenges is daunting, but most are directly related to the root cause of poverty. Eighty percent of our students work, with nearly half of that number putting in 35 hours a week or more. Our average age is 27, so you know that many students are supporting families already. Most have struggled throughout their public school careers or are returning after several years. Seventy-four percent of our students arrive underprepared for college level work. And more than half are the first in their families to attend college, so they are often lacking the experienced hand to guide them into their college experience.

At MDC, this is an intense focus for us — providing the early and constant support to orient students to a much more rigorous learning environment. If family economics add additional pressure, the chance of success deteriorates.

**Q:** How do Single Stop and Miami Dade College address the demand for skilled workers?

**MASON:** In the not too distant future, we will fail to provide the skilled workforce that our 21st century economy demands unless we help more students who are in college finish college. A recent study out of Georgetown University projects that America’s economy will require 22 million new workers with college degrees by 2018, but we will fall short by at least 3 million.

Single Stop’s Community College Initiative is about keeping students in school so they can acquire the degrees and certificates to compete in the global economy. Our theory of change is grounded in the belief that postsecondary

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education is the best path to a quality job and a fulfilling career.

**PADRÓN:** This workforce environment is the most volatile we’ve ever known. We are preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist. Many that do will be outmoded by the time students graduate.

Students must have a toolkit of skills that will allow them to successfully navigate the workforce rapids. They need excellent communication skills and a foundation in the sciences and math — in essence, the foundations of liberal learning, but with a practical, relevant eye for important trends. They need skills to work in teams and solve problems. They need to understand environmental issues and the impact of sustainability measures on a given enterprise. They need technological acumen, an ethical compass, and much more.

Our faculty has spearheaded a college-wide commitment to 10 liberal education learning outcomes that are infused throughout the curriculum, as well as a new set of authentic assessment approaches. MDC has also developed more than 70 new degree and short-term certification programs in the past five years. This is the necessary work of higher education today if students are to be prepared for the current workforce environment.

**Q:** President Obama has called on the United States to once again lead the world in college degrees by 2020. You both attended the White House Summit on Community Colleges last October. Why is there such a profound interest in community colleges from policymakers, and why is Single Stop a key part of this nascent national conversation?

**PADRÓN:** If our country is to meet President Obama’s challenge of once again leading the world in the percentage of people with a college education, it will be community colleges that make that possible. And it will be the underserved low-income, minority population that is the game-changer.

For too long, economic mobility in this country has stagnated. Unless low-income earners have the chance to gain a college education, we will continue to see the gap widen between an enclave of high wage earners and a growing base of low-income members of the community. This is the case in far too many urban areas of the country. Single Stop and community colleges form a partnership that can mitigate the effects of poverty and help students complete their studies. That’s the bottom line.

**Q:** What is the end game?

**MASON:** I often say to my staff and our partners that Single Stop should be out of business in five years. Community colleges should be implementing a Single Stop-like model at all of their campuses. It’s vital that we challenge the way policymakers, college administrators, and all Americans think about financial aid. To do this, Single Stop has partnered with ACCT and is working to identify multiple systems in which to pilot its model over the next several years. We have been remarkably fortunate to work so closely with J. Noah Brown and ACCT.

What began as a shared commitment to student success has grown to a strong and close partnership focused on showing colleges and policymakers that we must reorient our financial aid and student support systems if we are going to connect students to the services they need to succeed in school. We need to augment FAFSA and Pell Grants with access to government services and tax credits. If community college can augment traditional financial aid with a wraparound human service model, more students will complete their education and move up the economic ladder.

**PADRÓN:** Change doesn’t occur on a whim. It’s based in understanding — and that’s always the first challenge to accomplishing a major shift. The country is mired in an economic downturn and is just now recognizing the crisis at all levels of education. The simple fact is that we need highly educated people in our country — lots of them — if we’re to compete in an economy that is evolving at an unprecedented velocity. Every student needs a toolkit of skills and understandings to have a viable chance to participate, to build meaningful and prosperous lives.