MAN OF THE MOMENT

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón uses extensive political connections to advance community college agenda.

Also Inside:
- FAMU President James Ammons navigating perilous fiscal waters
- Will first-ever Senate DREAM Act hearing improve its prospects for passage?
- Neil Horikoshi becomes unlikely advocate for Asian-American students
Miami Dade President Eduardo Padrón heads presidential advisory panels on Latino education while also serving as chair of the American Council on Education board of directors.

BY PEARL STEWART

When President Obama delivered the commencement address at Miami Dade College in April, it was yet another coup for the high-profile institution — but not a first. Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton also were graduation speakers, as the community college continues to be a magnet for national and international dignitaries.

MDC has earned its place in the limelight for achievements ranging from its chart-topping enrollment of 174,000 students on eight campuses to its growing number of baccalaureate programs, making it a model for the advancement of community college education.

Leading both its growth and transformation is MDC’s ubiquitous president, Dr. Eduardo Padrón, who was recently named chairman of the White House Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. The administration’s higher education initiatives and efforts to promote community colleges by Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, have brought increased attention to the community college movement.

In October, Jill Biden, a professor at Northern Virginia Community College, convened a White House Summit on Community Colleges where Padrón was among the invited participants. Within a few months, he was appointed chair of the advisory commission. Combined with his position as chairman of the American Council on Education board of directors, Padrón has ready access to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and to the White House. He is poised to raise the national profile of community colleges and to fight for their growth and development.

"I have the good fortune of interacting with college and university presidents and other education officials on a regular basis," says Padrón, who arrived in the United States at age 19 as a Cuban refugee and later earned a Ph.D. from the University of Florida. "Community colleges, as President Obama and Secretary Duncan have both stated, can and should play a significant role in revitalizing the American economy."

One of Padrón’s colleagues on the ACE board, Dr. Antoine Garibaldi, president of the University of Detroit Mercy, praised his “outstanding reputation in higher education” and called him “a trailblazer whose work has propelled lots of other community colleges to become even more important.”

MDC has launched eight bachelor’s degree programs in disciplines including education and nursing, leading a trend among community colleges nationally. More than a dozen Florida community colleges offer bachelor’s degrees, and community colleges in approximately 20 other states have followed suit or are in the process of doing so. Just as MDC did in 2003, some of these institutions are dropping the word "community" from their names.

Dr. Eduardo Padrón and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

www.riversseeducation.com

July 21, 2011 | Diverse 11
In his comments to Diverse, Padrón stresses that education should not be regarded as a discretionary item vulnerable to major budget cuts. "Unfortunately, we are not only dealing with a recession but with a longstanding trend over more than 30 years that has drastically cut into education spending. And we are seeing the bitter fruits of these decisions in the decline of our K-12 system and the loss of funding to our public colleges and universities."

When asked about his goals as chair of the Miami Dade County School Board, Padrón says, "The success of Hispanics in education affects communities across the nation and the country as a whole. What follows is the building of a comprehensive approach, one that calls upon not only the education sector but community entities, private industry, the Department of Education and state officials, community groups and families. To be successful we will need a genuine collaboration among all these parties."

One of the things that have impressed Padrón is that community colleges are not rivals of other colleges and universities but, increasingly, partners. MDC has more than 70 articulation agreements with universities throughout Florida and across the nation," Padrón says. "They pose terrific opportunities and incentives for our students to transfer to many of the finest institutions in the country." He mentions partnerships with MIT and Georgia Tech, among other top-tier universities.

Dr. Susan Neiman, director of MDC's School of Education, which offers associate's and bachelor's degrees, acknowledges that she is an unabashed cheerleader for the institution and for community colleges in general.

"It's wonderful that this institution and other community colleges are now receiving the national attention that they truly deserve," she says. "They are wonderful places because they are very focused on workforce, the niche they fill is to provide the next generation with the people who are going to be the workforce."

Another cheerleader for MDC is Miami architect James Piersol — a principal at MC Harry Associates — who began his studies around the time Padrón arrived as a young assistant professor. In 1973, Piersol transferred from MDC to the University of Florida where he earned his master's degree in architecture.

MC Harry Associates designed MDC's new 90,000-square-foot science complex, and Piersol was recently honored as one of the college's distinguished alumni.

"Back in the 70s, attending a community college was seen as starting at a lower level than a four-year institution," Piersol says. "But that's no longer the case, and Dr. Padrón's leadership at Miami Dade College has been a great part of that change."