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## MAN OF THE MOMENT

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

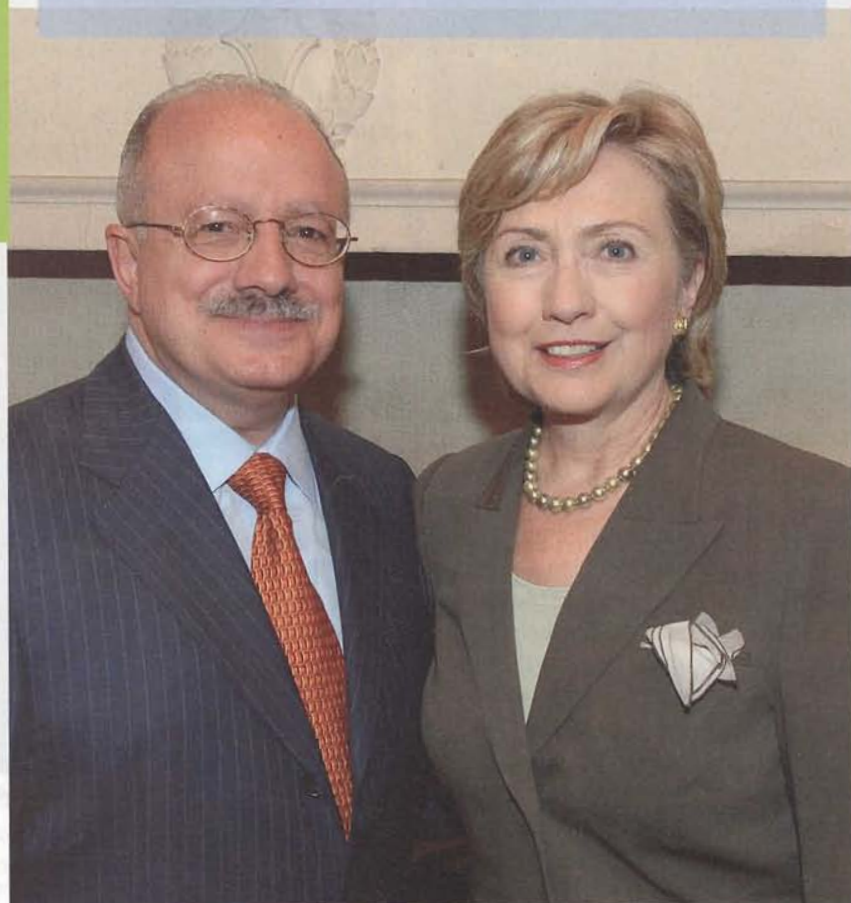




Miami Dade President Eduardo Padrón heads presidential advisory panels on Latino education while also serving as chair of the American Council on Education board of directors.

BY PEARL STEWART

# A Leader Among Leaders



Dr. Eduardo Padrón and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

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.

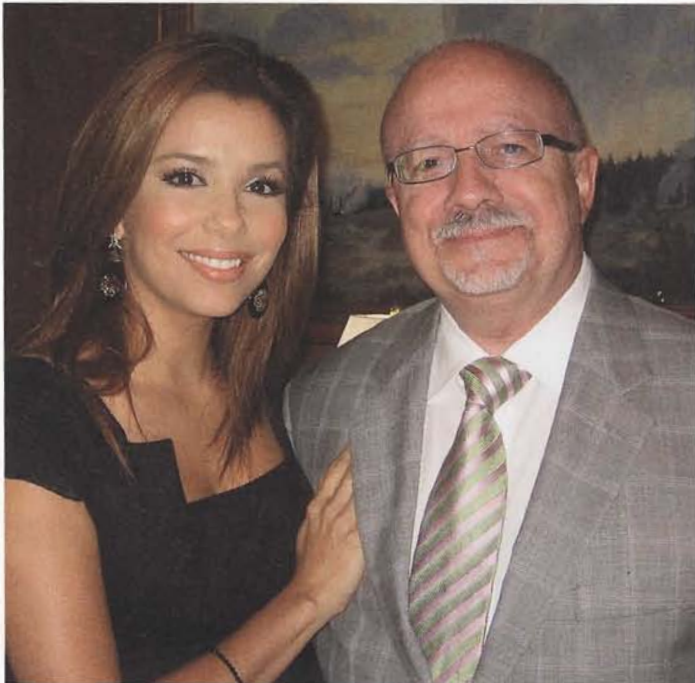
In October, Jill Biden, a professor at Northern Virginia Community College, convened a White House Summit on Community Colleges where Padrón was among the invited participants. Within a few months, he was appointed chair of the advisory commission. Combined with his position as chairman of the American 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 15 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.





Actress Eva Longoria and Dr. Eduardo Padrón

"First and foremost, MDC remains a community college," Padrón tells *Diverse*. "And many community colleges which have shed the 'community' designation also remain committed to the educational and economic needs of their geographical regions." He contends that the bachelor's degree programs at MDC "reinforce our commitment to the community."

Padrón doesn't view the ascent of a community college education as a signal of the decline of four-year schools. "Fiscal problems dog nearly every public and private institution today. I don't think the economy is playing any favorites," he says, adding that community college education is an "absolute necessity" to solving the nation's unemployment crisis.

More than half of all Hispanic students do not finish high school, according to a report titled "Winning the Future: Improving Education for the Latino Community," released by the Department of Education and the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics in April. The White House Initiative, created by President George H. W. Bush in 1990, was the basis for the Presidential Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, which Obama established in October 2010. Padrón chairs both entities.

However, the report also points to a positive trend: "During the past two years, there has been an increase in the number of Latinos that have enrolled in technical education programs" and half of those students "earned a postsecondary credential (compared to 54 percent nationally) and 73 percent of Latino students" were able to make a successful transition "to further education or employment (compared to 74 percent nationally)."

Based on those findings, the president's 2012 budget calls for robust funding of minority-serving and Hispanic-serving institutions. The report also states "the federal government will invest an additional \$2.55 billion in MSIs over the next decade—including \$1 billion at America's HSIs. This funding can be used to renew, reform, and expand higher education programs to ensure that Latinos are provided every chance to rise to their full potential, earn their degrees, and enter or re-enter the workforce."

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 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 chairman of the two presidential-level education initiatives, 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 MDC has demonstrated 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



James Piersol, principal at MC Harry Associates

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 Neimand, 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 workers."

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." ■