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MDC's open door threatened

On May 2, more than 9,100 students graduated from Miami Dade College, and I saw each one of their faces as they walked toward me.

After 39 years, I know the look -- two parts joy, one part surprise. I also know that when they looked in the mirror that evening, they liked what they saw.

Their surprise is the most telling, because what occurs at MDC isn't supposed to happen. The lives that cross that stage were destined for so much less. Thirty-five percent of MDC students live in poverty, nearly 60 percent reside just above that border and more than half are the first in their families to attend college. Just for good measure, 75 percent arrive at MDC under-prepared for college-level work.

It will be these students and their children who fulfill President Obama's goal of doubling the number of college graduates by 2020. But there's a serious catch. The open door of this college was all but slammed shut.

The Local Option bill, which would have authorized our community to vote on the question of local support for MDC, had sailed through six committees in the state House and Senate with unanimous approval. Not a single vote of dissent. On the floor of the Senate, the bill passed by a vote of 39-0. But one legislator in the House refused to allow her committee to vote on the bill, preventing the measure from reaching the floor. So the bill died without a vote.

Back in November, 61 percent -- more than 448,000 Miami-Dade voters -- said Yes to Amendment 8, which would have offered the chance for local residents to support MDC with a temporary half-cent sales tax. When Amendment 8 failed statewide, we asked the Legislature to authorize our county to consider the need for local support. We asked to determine our own course, but 448,000 voters saw democracy dismantled by political arrogance.

When we elect our representatives, we don't grant them permission to impose their views on voters or fellow legislators. When the democratic process is held hostage, far greater damage is done than the abuse of a single bill. It is a betrayal of the system in which we place our faith.

Under state budgets, MDC lost about 12 percent of its operating budget since the 2008 school year. Close to 34,000 students are attending classes with no funding from Tallahassee, equal to a loss of \$38 million. The reasons that 9,100 graduates made that journey across the stage are many, but they converge at the open door of Miami Dade College. Now, on the eve of the

college's 50th anniversary, that open door is in jeopardy of closing on the next generation.

Democracy asks us to discover what we care about. Then it gives us the chance to make a public statement. We are now at a crossroad. The chance to learn is central to the character of our nation and certainly, our community. Our elected officials should know precisely what we care about.

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