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# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

By **Kiki Bocchi** and **Marissa Rodriguez**

While **graduation rates** among Hispanics plummet, **one college** has devised a method to **turn it around.**

+ From left: Miami Dade College alumni Miami Mayor Manny Diaz, Judge Margarita Esquiroz, Emilio Estefan, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, real estate mogul Jorge Perez and MDC President Eduardo Padrón.

CRISTIAN LAZZARI

Success breeds success. It's not only a phrase oft repeated by the president of Miami Dade College, Dr. Eduardo Padrón, but his philosophy on increasing the achievement rate of his students. His approach is a multigenerational one: Let past students who have "made it" be beacons for students today so that they can go on and be role models for tomorrow. And it's working. In light of declining Hispanic high-school graduation rates and even fewer making to and then through college, Miami Dade College is the exception.

"When there is an environment of success, it is contagious," Padrón says.

Miami Dade College, which changed its name from Miami Dade Community College

in 2003, is an enormous community college system with eight campuses that together serve 160,000 students throughout South Florida, making it the largest institution of higher learning in the nation. Add to that the fact that the university has the most minority students of any college system (the College Board reports that 71 percent of attendees are Hispanic and 16 percent are black), that many require English proficiency assistance, and that close to 40 percent attend part time, the college would seem to have an even larger challenge on its hands than its smaller and less diverse counterparts when it comes to getting students to the cap and gown ceremony.

But it doesn't. In fact, the school regularly awards more degrees to Hispanics than any other college in the country. In 2006, *Community College Week* magazine ranked the college system at No. 1 among four-year associate-degree producing schools for Hispanics with 3,220 total awardees for the 2002-2003 school year. It far surpassed the No. 1 two-year school El Paso Community College, which graduated 1,020 during the same scholastic time period.

How is it that Miami Dade College (MDC), faced with insurmountable obstacles, is able to succeed where the rest of the community college, and

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+ Miami Dade College's InterAmerican Campus



# WORTHY OPPONENTS

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four-year college world for that matter, have not?

The world may be surprised, but Padrón is not. During his 37 years at this institution, both as a teacher and administrator, he has learned never to underestimate the potential of any individual, which just might be the key.

“The students here understand that this is their passport to a better life,” Padrón says. “They are not here to waste time. They are here to learn. ... Fifty years ago it was a privilege to go to college. Today it is not a privilege, it is a requirement. Students who graduate high school and do not move forward are destined to flip hamburgers at McDonald’s. They will not enjoy the fruits of progress.”

Over the years, Padrón has watched a parade of students come through the college’s doors, people who refused to be deterred from getting an education, regardless of their personal or financial situations. Fighters for their future, these students are determined to overcome obstacles and grab every opportunity to advance themselves.

Viewed in that light, it should be no surprise that Miami Dade College counts among its alumni some very big names: U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Emilio Estefan, music producer and icon, Jorge Perez, mega-real estate developer, Carlos Alvarez, mayor of Miami-Dade County, Ralph de la Vega, president of AT&T, wireless operations, actor Andy Garcia, Nilo Cruz, a Pulitzer prize-winning playwright, Manny Diaz, mayor of

Nothing captures the nation’s imagination like a classic underdog story. And this is definitely one of those stories. The plucky community college chess team from Miami faces the academic titans Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth and Northwestern in a fiercely competitive chess tournament—and then, beats them all.

In fact, every year since its establishment, a mere five years ago, the Miami Dade College team has made it to the finals of collegiate chess. No small task considering that this past year the team had to best the Ivy Leaguers mentioned above to even make it to the final four of the Pan American Intercollegiate Chess Tournament where they would battle the most feared teams in the country.

Anchored by a deli clerk, a security alarm salesman and a 34-year-old computer science student, all immigrants and all part-time students, the chess team is more representative of average working students than silver spooners. They must juggle academics, jobs, finances and family pressures in order to attend just three tournaments a year, not to mention their other challenges. One member spent his first two years at MDC learning English, and another is struggling to do the same.

Renier Gonzalez, one of the founding members, is currently working toward two associate degrees in computer science and system information technology. Gonzalez, currently the team captain and a former national player in his native Cuba,

arrived in Miami less than six years ago after defecting during a chess tournament held in Colombia. Within 15 days, he was enrolled in English night classes at a local high school.

Laila Cardona, also his teammate on Cuba’s national team, is his teammate once again. In addition to her schoolwork, Cardona now works at a grocery deli.

Gonzales, too, had to work, in construction, as a restaurant busboy, an air conditioning maintenance assistant, in landscaping, and a restaurant deliveryman. Once he was eligible to register for classes at the college, he jumped at the chance. He spent his first two years in ES-OL classes and helped launch the chess team. He is the only original member who remains; the others have graduated.

The small team has not escaped the notice of such organizations as the U.S. Chess Federation College, who named the MDC the “Chess College of the Year” in 2004. The federation considered 120 schools for the title.

“I know what I came here for,” Gonzalez says. “To do hard work, to learn and to survive.”

Checkmate.



The MDC chess team

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE



# MIAMI DADE IN THE COMMUNITY

College campuses are known for being worlds unto themselves, divided and isolated from the thriving metropolises that surround them. Not so at Miami Dade College. In fact, the school has made considerable contributions to the culture of the city.

The Miami International Film Festival, which will celebrate its 25th year in 2008, is one of the most acclaimed film festivals in the country. Presented by the college, the festival's main offices are located on the college's downtown campus. In 2007, the festival hosted more than 70,000 attendees and films from 42 countries.

MDC has also used the festival as an opportunity to present The Reel Education Seminar series, which is co-sponsored by the University of Miami department of communication. It's a weeklong program of panels and workshops directed at educating the general community about film and film business.

In 2001, the college founded the Florida Center for the Literary Arts, an umbrella organization that encompasses all forms of literary work from journal-

ism to creative writing. The center has pushed for more literary events in the region year-round. Its signature event is the Miami Book Fair International, an eight-day celebration of books and international author symposia. The fair transforms the downtown campus, also located in the city's downtown, into a street book fair full of independent and discount booksellers from around the world, but with special emphasis on Caribbean cultures.

MDC's impact on the city has been significant. Even President George W. Bush has taken notice of its success. Scheduled to address only three colleges this year during commencement, the White House announced that Bush will speak at the Kendall Campus of Miami Dade College on April 28.

The other two schools at which he will speak are the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut and Saint Vincent College, a small liberal arts private college in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, whose president, Jim Towney, was once the director of Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

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Miami, and Margarita Esquiroz, circuit court judge, among many others. There are so many among these accomplished personalities that the college recently put out a special issue of the slick 88-page *MDC Magazine* highlighting the achievements of its graduates.

Shining the spotlight on these alumni "ambassadors," as Padrón calls them, is more than a public relations effort. It is a tactical move based on the "success breeds success" school of thought.

"When these people came here, they had no money," he says. "They had no other schools to go to. If they could do it, anyone can do it."

Their experiences largely mirror those of today's MDC students. More than half of MDC students are the first in their families to attend college, according to college figures. Eight out of 10 students need basic skills or English language remediation upon entering MDC, and over half report a native language other than English.

Padrón, now 62 and grandfather of two, was once one of those students. He arrived in Miami as a refugee from Cuba at age 16, with his younger brother in tow. Still, he earned a high school diploma and enrolled at MDC. A professor drove him back and forth so he would not have to take three buses between home and campus. He eventually earned a doctor-



ate in economics from the University of Florida and landed a job with Dupont, but when he went back to share the news with his old mentors at MDC, they convinced him to teach at the college's newly established downtown campus for at least a year. It was 1970. Padrón never left and has never regretted it.

The collection of life stories, and Padrón's own, proves there are no excuses not to succeed even though the skyrocketing cost of college, poor working knowledge of English or the packed schedules of working parents or of older adults might seem insurmountable obstacles and have, in many circumstances, prevented Hispanics from attending college. The college succeeds by providing a method by which students facing one, or even all three challenges, can still attend the school and complete a degree.

MDC's open-door policy means the only thing students need for admission is a high school diploma, or its equivalent GED. If students are not ready for college-level work, they can enroll in development classes or ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programs to shore up their lagging skills.

Some 36 percent of students are below federal poverty level for their household size, and 55 percent are considered low-income, which are markedly higher than the county's poverty level, which in 2003 was 18.9 percent according to the Census Bureau. And nationally, one in three Hispanic children live in poverty. The school awards more federal Pell Grants, a need-based grant for low-income undergraduates, than any other educational institution in the country. One in every 100 Pell Grants awarded nationally in public colleges and universities is at MDC.

Students facing tough financial situations often find themselves having to work through school. Approximately 80 percent of MDC's students work while attending college and 28 percent work full time. That's on par with the national average. According to the U.S. Education Department, more than 80 percent of full-time students at community colleges work

and more than 40 percent of students work 35 hours-plus weekly.

More than one-third of first-time college students at MDC are starting college later in life, rather than right out of high school. For those students who have no choice but to remain working full time, there are classes available online.

The situation is even more dire for undocumented students or children of the undocumented. Although 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year, their chances of financing an education are small.

Federal law prohibits undocumented persons from receiving financial aid or even for in-state tuition at public universities, but the pending DREAM Act could change that. However, the bill has yet to be passed. Some children of the undocumented are unable to obtain visas; and even if they are, they must pay premium tuition rates because they are considered "foreign" students.

"Most of those 1.6 million children have grown up in the U.S., nearly all in low-income homes and inner-city schools. And those who have beaten the odds—stayed in school, hoping to be the first in their families to attend college—they hit

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the wall upon graduation, charged tuition that is often three to four times what their classmates since childhood will pay at state colleges and universities," Padrón says. "After years of integrating into American society, their parents' illegal entry long ago stands as a roadblock to a viable future."

Improving many Hispanics' financial situation, reforming immigration laws that make it difficult to attend college without documentation and enhancing educational systems in poor communities would naturally improve the chances of more Hispanics making it to college. However, MDC's approach has been to work around these problems.

"Community colleges are the most relevant and most democratic institutions in America today. They are the equalizers. ... When people ask me what we do here, we grow people, that's what we do," Padrón says. "Who opens the doors for these people if not us? They are this nation's human capital."

Andrea Murillo, 19, a dancer and working student, reluctantly chose to attend MDC after high school partly for financial reasons. Initially worried that she missed out on an opportunity to attend college out of state, she now says that staying close to home was a wise move. "I could have taken out loans, but it would have been dumb. I'm getting the same education." She was recently accepted to Fordham University in New York.

Focusing above all on the needs of students like Murillo is a large part to what makes Miami Dade College tick, Padrón says.

"It appears to be a complex situation, but the answer is not so complex. It's a question of how much you invest in your students," Padrón says. "The secret of our success is that we believe that personal interaction with the student is a very, very important factor to retention and success. We have teachers who are dedicated to teaching, small classes, and a lot of support. The people who say it cannot be done need to come here and see how it is done." +