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Stephen Bauer

# MR. PADRON GOES TO WASHINGTON

MDC PREZ IS OBAMA'S  
POINT MAN ON EDUCATION

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# A Lesson in Excellence



**M**ET EDUARDO PADRON: PRESIDENT OF Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the country; member of the board of directors of the influential Council on Foreign Relations; chair of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans; member of the Miami branch of the Federal Reserve Bank; chair of the prestigious American Council on Education – and when he can find the time – a haunter of flea markets.

Padron enjoys uncovering a gem hidden amid junk.

“He loves going to a flea market and seeing a glass jar and dusting it off and discovering – Oh my God, this is a crystal decanter,” says Helen Aguirre Ferre, chair of the college’s board of trustees and the opinion page editor of *Diario Las Americas*.

It’s an apt metaphor for his life’s work. Padron has made a career out of taking the students other colleges and universities don’t want, the ill-prepared, the impoverished, the undocumented, and giving them the tools to succeed in spite of the obstacles. And as he’s done that, he’s changed the way major American universities look at community colleges, legitimizing his students and showing the country a more democratic model of higher education, one that’s open to any student willing to learn.

“We provide people with an opportunity to get educated in a system that is responsive to their needs,” he says. “I have seen so many kids that come to me under the worst circumstances—broken homes, drugs, poverty, gangs—and they’ve been able to become millionaires. They found somebody here who took an interest in them, somebody who cared.”

Many credit him with making MDC what it is today, a national model for community college education.

EDUARDO PADRON SEEMS OMNIPRESENT LATELY, SERVING ON BOARDS, ADVISING THE WHITE HOUSE, AND CARING FOR HIS STUDENTS — 170,000 STRONG — AT MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

By susannah nesmith.



[Padron with President Barack Obama at an MDC graduation ceremony]

“He’s brought national attention to the importance of community colleges in American education,” says Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Padron and Hrabowski recently made a *Washington Post* list of the 10 most influential college presidents in the country. “It’s taken years to get four-year institutions and research universities to appreciate how important community colleges are in American education,” he says. “I would call him one of my heroes.”

Padron’s dedication to community college students is founded in his own experience. He and his younger brother were Pedro Pan kids, sent to the United States in 1961 along with more than 14,000 other children whose parents so feared communism, they were willing to send their children alone to a foreign country to escape it.

Before Padron left Cuba, his mother made him promise to get an education, but when he graduated from high school, the only college that would take him was MDC. After earning his bachelor’s degree from the University of Florida and a PhD in economics from the University of Miami, he came back to

MDC to teach and rose quickly through the ranks, becoming president in 1995. That’s when he began remaking MDC.

“When I took over this place, things were not rosy,” he says. “We were facing a very, very serious economic situation. I told the board I would have to do some very drastic things. I told them the faculty would probably unionize.” He forced the faculty to offer more classes at night, when many students who were working full-time could take them. He froze hiring and raises. And he got the reaction he expected.

“It was really bad. They did ugly things. They slashed my tires, threw eggs at my house,” he says. “They went on Spanish radio to complain about me. That backfired. I had become a little bit of an icon in this community from my work with the Spanish American League Against Discrimination. Afterwards, they realized I was not the devil.”

Mark Richard led the drive to unionize the faculty in 1998, a time he recalls as tense. Today, he is president of the union. He’s also one of Padron’s biggest fans because, he says, Padron always puts students first. Padron’s stock with the faculty is as high as it’s ever been, attests Richard. “His greatest trait, quite frankly, is that he’s still

a professor. You can talk to him about academic issues and you don’t have to remind him of where he came from,” he says.

“He’s hard-driving. He’s a micro-manager, but it’s all to the good of the mission, rather than just idiosyncratically,” he adds. “He believes in the mission of the college and he’s not going to let that slip on his watch.”

Padron has a reputation as one of the most demanding bosses in Miami, a fact he recognizes. “I set high expectations for others but I can also carry chairs because guests are coming and the chairs need to be in place,” he says. “I think I’m very fair. I expect people to produce results. I give people a lot of freedom to use their own methods. I am perhaps too much of a perfectionist and sometimes I expect more than I should.”

Over the years, many at MDC have risen to the challenge. Gina Cortez-Suarez, president of the InterAmerican Campus in Little Havana and a 32-year MDC employee, says she worried about how demanding Padron would be when she first started working directly for him, but she’s found him to be a great boss because he encourages her to innovate. “He doesn’t meddle. He lets you run with





new ideas. He'll hold you accountable, but he'll let you run with it. The college is very innovative and that's because he's allowed and encouraged that." And he keeps her on her toes.

"He knows this college so well and the campus presidents know that. He will drive by the campus and notice things, physical things," Cortez-Suarez says. "He will call and say 'you know that banner you have up, it's really kind of frumpy.' And I run out and look at it and think 'Oh my God! Why didn't I notice that?'"

That attention to detail—all details in fact—sometimes startles people who work for him. "It's very hard to go to him with something that is happening at a campus or with facilities or even with different employees and find him surprised," says Provost Rolando Montoya. "He realizes that it's the natural consequence of something he'd already observed."

Montoya recalls telling Padron that the restrooms in one building needed attention and Padron responding that he knew that was going to happen because the building was 40 years old and the college hadn't been able to invest in its upkeep. "He is kind of omnipresent," Montoya says.

It's hard to overestimate MDC's reach in the local community. The college sponsors the city's annual film festival and the Miami Book Fair International, runs a downtown theater and hosts a wide variety of free cultural events. And with 170,000 students currently enrolled at eight campuses and the thousands more who have attended, most people know someone who got their academic start there. Many of those alumni, now leaders in the community, are fierce Padron supporters.

Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle, a graduate of MDC, calls Padron a genius.

"He's a man of few words, but a man of great ideas," she says. "And he's a great political strategist."

Padron spends a lot of time strategizing how to get the funding he needs. He easily spouts the statistics—local schools get roughly \$7,000 per student while the state's public universities get almost \$13,000. "We barely get \$3,000 per student," he says.

"It doesn't work...Florida is at the bottom of the nation in every aspect of education," he says. "All schools in Florida, they want to have medical schools, law schools—as if we don't have enough lawyers. They want football teams. But who's teaching the students at those schools? Graduate assistants. I think the state has failed to prioritize what's important."

To Padron, what's important is giving all kids the opportunity to compete, in the academy and in the workplace. In 2003, he got state approval to start offering bachelor's degrees, arguing that the workforce needed more people with certain skills, such as nursing for example, than state universities were producing. In 2005, he got approval to open campuses in Doral and Hialeah so students living and working in the western reaches of the county could take classes closer to home. This year, he opened the Miami Culinary Institute at Wolfson Campus, again seeing a need for trained chefs in the local economy, and students who wanted to fill that need, but lacked training.

And he has taken his fight for disadvantaged students to the national stage.

David Skorton, president of Cornell University, and also on the *Washington Post's* list of influential college presidents, says Padron's soft-spoken and thoughtful advocacy for his students gives him a certain gravitas in national education circles.

"I've been a great admirer of his leadership, especially on the issue of access to higher education regardless of background," he says. "We in the higher education community listen to him. And because of his background, he very well represents the Hispanic community in a very prominent, national way."

Padron's latest crusade is to get the Dream Act passed so undocumented immigrants who came here as children have a way to legalize their status.

President Barack Obama spoke at one of MDC's graduations this spring, receiving wild applause when he vowed to push for passage of the Dream Act.

"We should all be able to agree that it makes no sense to expel talented young people from our country. They grew up as Americans. They pledge allegiance to our flag. And if they are trying to serve in our military or earn a degree, they are contributing to our future—and we welcome those contributions," he told the crowd, acknowledging that a group of MDC students had publicly revealed their illegal status, in the hope that by telling their stories, they might help change the law.

Jose Salcedo was one of those students. Padron called him the next day. "With all the things he has to do, so many meetings and so much traveling, he took time out to call one student," Salcedo recalls. "He said, 'Jose, I saw what you did and I admire your bravery. Keep my number and if you have any problems, call me.' That meant a lot."

Salcedo got his associate's degree this year and, to Padron's delight, is headed to St. Thomas University in the fall, with a full scholarship. He wants to be a lawyer and work for justice.

"I think if more Americans get to know these students, the whole situation would change," Padron says.

He's working on it. ■