Raising Funds in Down Times

Is Higher Education's Business Model Broken?

Going Where the Students Are

lessons from the Abyss

What the Economic Downturn Taught Higher Education
Miami Dade College (MDC) recently celebrated admission of its two millionth student. That’s a notable accomplishment in many ways—especially considering that our institution opened its doors just 53 years ago.

But that milestone of serving the public would simply not be possible without the upwelling of support for MDC itself. Indeed, MDC’s success in connecting with its alumni and the corporate citizenry of South Florida has produced a very noteworthy record of fundraising accomplishment: At $336.2 million, our current endowment—the largest endowment of any community college in the nation—ranks as the fourth largest of any Florida college or university.

Against All Odds
How One Community College Is Powering Through the Economic Turmoil
We're particularly proud that so much of this support comes from our community and successful alumni. Miami Dade College is today the largest college or university in the nation, with 175,000 students at eight campuses across Miami-Dade County, and three generations of Miami's melting pot have gathered in MDC's classrooms, going on to become a who's who of South Florida—the leaders of nearly every industry in the region.

But leveraging those strengths doesn't just happen, of course. We worked hard to tap into our alumni's connections with MDC and appreciation for what the college had done for them—the same kind of appreciation I continue to feel decades after first entering its doors as a student.

**Reaching Out, Tapping In**

I was 15 years old when I arrived in Miami from Cuba, armed with only a handful of English words and the sound of my mother's voice, reminding me that going to college was mandatory. High school diploma in hand, I applied to Harvard University (MA), Yale University (CT), Princeton University (NJ), and several other institutions. The only one that would have me was MDC, then known as Dade Junior College. My immigrant's optimism was deflated, but I soon discovered that attending this fledgling college was the best thing that could have happened.

Years later, as we began to reach out to our alumni, we heard that same kind of story: of MDC as a “dream factory” that provided extraordinary support and helped countless students find their way. Our circle of contacts has expanded steadily, growing from a mere 7,000 emails 10 years ago to our current database of 340,000. In addition to our annual giving campaigns, we've added monthly alumni events, including outings to Miami Dolphins, Heat, and Marlins games. We have hosted alums in classes at MDC's new Miami Culinary Institute and held social media tutorials, investment seminars, and happy hour meet-and-greets at collaborating restaurants and bistros. Alumni have also been special guests at MDC-sponsored events that include Miami Book Fair International, the Miami International Film Festival, and the Miami Leadership Roundtable speakers series. Because of MDC, they've been able to shake hands with Madeleine Albright and Mikhail Gorbachev, Javier Bardem and Demi Moore, Tom Wolfe and Isabel Allende. Alums have been welcomed to MDC Art Gallery System openings to view works by Salvador Dali, Francisco de Goya, and other well-known and rising artists.

**Getting Personal**

These initiatives gradually expanded our contact with alumni. But our efforts took both a personal and a dramatic turn when we shone the spotlight on the alumni themselves as proud representatives of MDC's success. Across the county and in a variety of media, our 2000 campaign “Everywhere You Turn: Successful Alumni” began to turn heads. Seemingly in the blink of an eye, the college was able to change perceptions about the potential of an MDC education, and to energize an enormous alumni base.

“Everywhere You Turn” introduced a remarkable lineup of successful and prominent professionals, all trumpeting their roots at MDC. The faces of congressional representatives, ambassadors, doctors, lawyers, fire and police chiefs, corporate CEOs, Olympic gold medalists, big league ballplayers, and others appeared in English and Spanish print media, and shone down on the commuting public from billboards. Soon, soliciting alumni involvement was no longer needed; they surfaced in overwhelming numbers, asking to be included in the campaign. To date, nearly 4,000 successful alumni have participated.

“Everywhere You Turn” didn’t translate easily, but Spanish-language ads played on a well-known Hispanic saying: “Dime dónde estudiaste y te diré quién eres.” Loosely translated, the phrase means, “Tell me where you studied and I'll tell you who you are.” In English, we might say, “I can tell who you are by the company you keep.” The college’s latest promotional campaign, “I am MDC,” offers a new album of faces and histories that express pride and ownership. The leaders of our community stood up again to say: “That's me—that's my school. That's the company I keep.”

Since 2003, we’ve also gone a step further, enshrining 260 outstanding alumni with induction into the college's Alumni Hall of Fame. They've
included athletes (New York Yankees World Series hero Bucky Dent and 12-time All-Star Mike Piazza), playwrights (Pulitzer Prize winner Nilo Cruz), musicians (industry leader Emilio Estefan), public servants (U.S. Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and John Mica, both (R-FL)), actors (Andy Garcia), and leaders in industries from South Florida and across the nation, including the Miami Heat, Carnival Cruise Lines, Continental Airlines, Merrill Lynch, and many more. The Hall of Fame Gala hosts nearly 1,000 guests each year, and has raised close to $7 million in scholarship contributions over the last decade. Overall, 2012 individual and corporate support exceeded $11 million.

Thriving Amid Adversity

All those extra steps and outreach efforts have become even more essential as economic conditions and public funding deteriorated, particularly for community colleges. As noted in Bridging the Higher Education Divide, a recent report by The Century Foundation, “two-year colleges are asked to educate those students with the greatest needs, using the least funds, and in increasingly separate and unequal institutions.”

Funding disparities noted in the report reflect this widening economic and class division between community colleges and four-year institutions: In 2009, the average per-pupil public funding for public research universities was about $17,000 nationwide. For public community colleges, it was less than $9,000. MDC’s current full-time student equivalent funding is currently just over $2,900—the result of a 20 percent reduction over the past five years.

That burden matters as MDC and other community colleges fight our perennial uphill battle to attract outstanding college-ready students, as well as to provide opportunities for those who have been underserved and underprepared. For the latter group, MDC’s open-door policy and commitment to developmental support have been cornerstones of our identity—and of our value to a community that has long been among the poorest in the nation. But the faculty and staff at MDC have created a learning environment that has also attracted and challenged the brightest young people emerging from area high schools, many of whom are children of our successful alumni.

Our efforts to help guide student success despite profound economic challenges include a heralded Honors College, which has prepared gifted students to continue their educations at Ivy League and other top-flight universities. MDC’s articulation agreements have opened doors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Georgia Institute of Technology, Smith College (MA), the University of Wisconsin, and 75 additional institutions. The bachelor’s degrees we offer—developed in collaboration with leading industries—have prepared thousands of students for in-demand careers in information technology; education; health care; biotechnology; supervision and management; engineering; film, television, and digital production; and several additional areas of the emerging South Florida economy.

Our 12 professional schools, including the Schools of Aviation, Fire and Environmental Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Architecture and Interior Design, and Health Sciences, offer short-term certifications as well as associate and baccalaureate degrees in fields that are central to new economic growth. Lastly, our faculty established a set of 10 learning outcomes that reflect skills and knowledge that prepare students for the challenges of a changing society and workforce.

Success Leads to Success: Philanthropic and Government Grants

That learning outcomes project established a culture of student success that spanned the classroom and a full range of co-curricular and support activities. It has also earned praise from the U.S. Department of Education and awards from the College Board, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and several additional organizations. In turn, the project drew the attention of many of the nation’s largest philanthropic organizations and government agencies focused on student success: Over the past five years, MDC has been awarded grant funds from more than 100 sources, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bank of America Charitable Foundation,
and the Walton Family Foundation, as well as the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, the Florida Department of Education, and the White House Social Innovation Fund. In 2011-12 alone, MDC was awarded more than $10 million in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) program support. Between 2009 and 2013, MDC has secured nearly $130 million in grant awards.

Among the most significant awards has been MDC’s partnership with the Gates Foundation via its Completion by Design project. This funding has spurred MDC’s college-wide Student Achievement Initiatives, involving several hundred faculty, staff, and administrators, to review and reinvent the student experience and ensure that failure is not an option for students at MDC. Every aspect—including outreach, orientation, advisement and mentoring, financial and social supports, developmental education, curriculum pathways, and more—is included in our effort to significantly increase retention, graduation, and successful transfer and workforce placement.

Persistence and Quality

MDC’s story reflects the rise of community colleges nationwide. Together, our challenges, successes, and failures are evidence of a changing economy and workforce, and of the shifting needs of students and communities across the country. The essential role that MDC and community colleges in every state fulfill has become increasingly obvious; we are entrenched as the colleges of necessity, and developing as the colleges of choice. Our connection and responsiveness to workforce advances have placed our institutions at the center of community development, and forged educational and workforce pathways for countless students—students whose college prospects have become real because of community colleges.

As we have rallied to meet all these needs, our strategy of developing MDC’s alumni base and a broad range of supplemental funding has been grounded in the basics of persistence and quality. We have reached out to the legion of graduates who have changed this community, inviting them back to the place that gave them their first real chance at success. We continue to make the case for the college’s essential and qualitative contributions to the growth of the community.

We know that the years to come will hold new challenges no less daunting than those we’ve experienced in recent years. But we also know that the quality of our response to those challenges must be worthy both of our students and of our past success in finding resources to serve them. Our future depends on it.