

## UPFRONT

By Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón

## DEMOCRACY 101

CHALLENGING POPULAR BELIEF, HARVARD PROFESSOR MICHAEL PORTER'S RESEARCH SHEDS SOME HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF INNER CITY RESIDENTS.

Opportunity changes everything," were the words President George W. Bush used to describe Miami Dade College in his recent commencement address, echoing a cherished theme of the college. In conversations with the White House, the democratic principles engraved in MDC's mission and its involvement with the South Florida community were priority topics. From presidential media contacts to speechwriters to protocol staff—all were eager to learn about MDC's academic contributions and its connections to the community's economic, cultural and civic life.

MDC serves a remarkable urban region, reflective of the new frontier that America's cities are fast becoming. They pose challenges that crisscross the economy and workforce with basic quality of life issues, including the availability of parks and recreational facilities, cultural opportunities, effective transportation and environmental advances.

Harvard business professor Michael Porter's work has added new perspective to the discussion of inner city revitalization. In *Competitive Advantages of Inner Cities*, he was able to reframe heretofore perceived liabilities into viable advantages for urban development. His emphasis on strategic location drew easy consensus. The research that established underserved consumer markets, clarifying that inner-city retailers were meeting less than 75 percent of residents demand, raised eyebrows and attracted entrepreneurs from inside and outside the core neighborhoods.

Two final points of Porter's urban advantages, however, drew this educator's special attention. He identified more than 500,000 business enterprises in U.S. inner cities, ranging across the spectrum of industries. These

businesses employ 7 million people and generate a trillion dollars in revenue. Far more important than drawing new commercial ventures is the need to ensure that existing endeavors, particularly those who are succeeding and ready to grow, find a supportive climate to build upon these massive contributions. Available land, friendly local government policies and most importantly, a readily available and well-educated workforce are the deal makers or breakers in the decision to stay or relocate.

The most telling element of Porter's new list of urban advantages, however, is the presence in every major city of an underutilized workforce. His research estimated that more than 54 percent of workforce growth for the ensuing 10 years would come from minority communities, which are heavily concentrated in major cities, particularly the core districts. The economic advantage that this particular burst of workforce strength would provide these communities would be immense. But it simply will not happen without the requisite access to education and training that complement the growing industries in the region.

It brings us back to the beginning. The chance to attend college is the cornerstone of opportunity in our country. As the digital revolution continues to drive the economy and workforce around new bends, a college education has become an essential resource. It offers not only specific and specialized training but also the liberal knowledge that makes students viable in a world that is, literally, around the bend because of digital technology. Foreign languages skills, awareness of other cultures and most importantly, the foundational ability to continue learning is the essence of a college education.

But the foundation of access to this resource is cracking as tuition and fees rise, financial aid is depleted and universities vie for more elite and exclusive status. Our universities deserve their world-class status, but the door simply does not swing wide enough for the times in which we live.

Bush called MDC "Democracy's College," recognizing the critical anchor it has become for South Florida. MDC and 1,200 other open-door institutions have made higher education a reality for 11.6 million students, many residing in the heart of urban America. Nearly half—46 percent—of all undergraduate students attend a community college, including 47 percent of blacks and 55 percent of Hispanics attending college. The great majority of them are low-income and living in the cities for which Porter has such high hopes. In an overwhelming number of cases, they would never attend college were it not for the opportunity offered by their community college. They would enroll in the school of very hard knocks and be wound into a cycle of poverty.

Porter is right to see advantage where others have seen liability. But the core element of our cities is a learned workforce. The real competitive advantage is within each person. Failing to maximize that resource could very well negate all the other wonderful advances we're uncovering each day. **H**



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