

Padrón's Career Built on Making American Dream Accessible

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by David Pluviose

The spectacular Miami skyline view from Tuyo, a new dining restaurant that sits atop the Miami Dade College Culinary Institute, punctuates the world-class vision of Dr. Eduardo Padrón, who is celebrating 20 years as president of Miami Dade College this year. Padrón named Tuyo — which means “yours” in English — himself, and Tuyo, which rivals the best restaurants in the region, is a concrete example of what Padrón is talking about when he says that Miami Dade College is a “dream factory.”

“As I always say, we would like to see this place and we believe this place is a dream factory where a student can come and achieve their dreams, and that’s how you create an equalized community,” Padrón says.

“One of the greatest issues we have in America today is the divide between the haves and the have nots, which is growing. It’s a worldwide problem, and it is something that institutions such as Miami Dade College can help in bringing about significant solutions, allow people to believe in themselves, because, like me, many students come to us because they feel this is the only ticket to a better life, the only ticket to the American dream, to the middle class,” Padrón adds.

Indeed, Eduardo Padrón is living the American dream, if there ever was one. Padrón, 70, arrived in the United States as a refugee from Cuba at the age of 15. His Miami Dade College (MDC) journey began after enrolling in MDC following his graduation from Miami Senior High School in 1963. He then went on to earn a B.A. in economics in 1966, summa cum laude, from Florida Atlantic University, where he also was valedictorian. He subsequently earned an M.A. in economics from the University of Florida (UF) in 1967 and a Ph.D. in economics from UF in 1970.

Among his many distinctions, in 2012 Padrón was awarded the Citizen Service Award from Voices for National Service, the TIAA-CREF Theodore M. Hesburgh Award for Leadership Excellence in Higher Education and the Aspen Institute Ascend Fellowship. Padrón is also the past chair of the Board of Directors of the American Council on Education (ACE) and is a past chair of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

In recognition of his exemplary commitment to the success of the vast population of underrepresented and underprivileged students he serves at MDC, Padrón has been named the 2015 recipient of the Diverse Champions Award. The Champions Award was created by Diverse: Issues In Higher Education in 2012 upon the retirement of the inaugural Champions Award winner, Dr. John E. Roueche, who was director of the Community College Leadership



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Program at The University of Texas at Austin.

Padrón points out that the foundation to his celebrated career in higher education was laid at MDC, which allowed an immigrant of modest means and limited language skills such as him to thrive.

"What this institution did for me, in giving me the self-confidence, allowing me to believe in myself, set goals — that changed my life," Padrón says, adding that institutions "such as Miami Dade College are change-makers, and there is nothing more important in life than to feel that you make a difference. Making a difference is what we all aspire to do, and I don't think you can find a better place to make a difference in the life of the citizens in the community than Miami Dade College."

Indeed, MDC has prospered under Eduardo Padrón's leadership as president over the last 20 years. Currently, MDC is the largest traditional college in the nation by enrollment, with more than 165,000 students. Miami Dade also sits atop Diverse's Top 100 Associate Degree Producers total minority ranking for 2014, having graduated a total of 8,921 minority students in the 2012-13 academic year, more than any other institution.

Padrón points out that Miami Dade's IPEDS graduation rates for Hispanic and Black, non-Hispanic students have increased significantly over the past 10 years — by 43 percent for Hispanics and 33 percent for African-Americans.

Roueche, currently the president of the Roueche Graduate Center at National American University, notes that the completion push at MDC started by former MDC President Robert McCabe and continued by Padrón was not well received by those who thought that the community college's open-access door would be shut on students needing the most help.

"It took a lot of effort on the part of Dr. Padrón and Dr. McCabe to reassure people that we're not closing the door, and we're not limiting opportunity, but rather making sure that students are well prepared for the courses before they are admitted into them," Roueche says, adding that "they did a lot of really revolutionary things. Eduardo was at the helm of that."

Former Miami Herald publisher and noted children's advocate David Lawrence, who has known Padrón for 26 years, says that both McCabe and Padrón "were transformative leaders. Bob McCabe was clearly such and he took what was a junior college into something much bigger, even more special. But he was succeeded by someone that I think is one of the great education leaders in the United States of America" and a "remarkable human being." Padrón is "among the most creative people I've ever known."

Notable alums

MDC boasts an impressive roster of alums who are at the top of their respective professions, from Miami-Dade County State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle, to Highlands County, Florida, Sheriff Susan Benton, to Greenberg Traurig LLP Co-Chairman César Alvarez to television host Bob Vila to actors Sylvester Stallone and Andy García. Though many high-profile individuals tend not to highlight their community college roots, Miami is full of proud MDC alums.

"In Miami, almost everybody you talk to is a graduate of this college, everybody in leadership positions, from our people in Congress, our people in the state legislature, our mayors, our commissioners, the state attorney, the public defender, the chief of police, the fire chief. I could go on and on and on, but it's even more impressive in the private sector. ... Right now, we have about 17 bank presidents who are Miami Dade graduates," Padrón says, adding that getting such high-profile people to promote their community college roots "takes a lot of work."

"Most of the time, students who come to community colleges and they transfer to other universities, their loyalty somehow ends up with that university. Sometimes they're even embarrassed to say and put in the résumé the fact that they graduated from a community college. In Miami, we have changed that," Padrón says.

According to Padrón, one of the reasons MDC alums are proud of their roots is “because this institution has an incredible prestige, nationally and locally” and MDC has “worked very hard to identify our alumni. We have worked very hard to get them engaged with the institution,” Padrón says. He adds that MDC has more than 500 alumni and others involved in advisory committees for all MDC programs.

In addition, MDC inducts alumni into its Hall of Fame annually, and beyond that, MDC has “constant communication with the alumni. … I’ve had strong supporters as a result of that, and it’s important not only because they open doors for our graduates in their businesses, in government, etc., but in addition to that, they are a good source of revenue for the institution, and that has helped the college achieve” an extraordinary endowment by community college standards.

At around \$434.7 million, it “is by far the largest in the country. It’s larger than nine of the state universities,” Padrón adds.

The long haul

Undoubtedly, Padrón has had numerous opportunities to move on to higher-paying, ostensibly more prestigious posts but, at MDC, he has found his calling, he says. “In life, you have to follow your passion. That’s what makes a difference. And I came here and I stayed here because I believe this is where I can have my greatest impact.”

Padrón says his initial plan was not to use his University of Florida economics Ph.D. and become an educator; instead, he had planned to seek a high-paying job in the corporate world.

However, Padrón notes that one of his professors said he needed to come back and pay his dues. Thus, he decided to come back to MDC for one year only. Yet, Padrón says he never left “because I fell in love with the mission of the institution.”

Dr. Lenore Rodicio, MDC’s provost of academic and student affairs, says Padrón’s having undergone the struggles himself as an immigrant with a heavy accent, who was given a chance at a college education at MDC, fueled a passion for his work at MDC “that I don’t know would have surfaced had he not experienced it himself.”

Rodicio adds that the philosophy Padrón emphasizes when it comes to student success is, “So as long as you have the will, we’ll make sure that you’ve got all of the support, all of the resources in order to achieve that goal, and that’s a non-negotiable for him, and that is made abundantly clear to everyone who works at this institution.”

Indeed, Padrón says he rejects the sink-or-swim college concept, believing that “the learning process is a shared responsibility. It’s an activity in which the learning is not just a responsibility of the student, but it’s also the responsibility of the institution, at least 50 percent.”

According to Padrón, a “right to fail” institutional philosophy, which puts the student success onus solely on the student, has not “helped America in the past, and I think we need to change that.”

Padrón adds that many of the students coming to MDC “bring several deficits. Many of them are poor. Many of them are first-generation college students. Many of them are immigrants, and many of them have to work and go to school. They have to support their families. This is typical of most community colleges, but we don’t take that as an excuse for … the student not to succeed.”

According to Padrón, helping such students “and giving them the tools to be able to achieve their goals, it is the most important thing that we can do.”

For many of MDC’s students, says Padrón, having people at MDC who believe in them, “who are willing to mentor them, are willing to take them by the hand, makes all the difference in the world, and we see it here.”

Miami Dade College North Campus President Malou Harrison notes that Padrón is indeed nurturing the dreams of

prospective students all the time. “I have to smile because I’ve seen him day after day bringing students into the institution that he has encountered in restaurants as busboys,” or “customer-service folks at dry-cleaning places, drivers, etc. And so, on that very personal level, the leader of our institution is a top recruiter, so to speak, enabling the access of this institution to so many.”

Thus, according to Harrison, Padrón “has truly modeled what it means to care about individuals who otherwise would not be cared about.”

Fighting for funding

Lately, Padrón has been fighting some pitched battles with Florida legislators over a bill that would have allowed voters to consider a half-penny increase in local sales taxes. The bill would provide funds for MDC to move forward with pressing needs to rehab aging facilities and expand, according to the Miami Herald.

In a sit-down with the Miami Herald editorial board last April, Padrón harshly criticized four Florida state House Republicans for their efforts to block the bill, which ultimately failed. Padrón did apologize and has taken steps to mend fences, yet his frustrations do highlight the struggles of many community colleges to cope with declining public funding.

“I think we need more of our leaders in community colleges to stand tall on the courage of our convictions. We cannot be quiet about it. I think we have a responsibility to speak and be the voice for those students who are disenfranchised, who have not been getting the support that they need because of the lack of funding from our legislature — legislatures in whatever state,” Padrón says.

However, despite the challenges MDC has in terms of public funding, Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado expects MDC to keep growing “because Eduardo has the ability to raise money from the private sector. He understands that governments are not the sole funder for education. He’s always bringing people that can contribute for grants, for scholarships.”

To Regalado, the success of MDC alums is “like a never-ending engine. It never stops. So they keep giving grants, and getting grants, for the college. So I know that Eduardo fights all the time for public funding at the state level and the national level, but I believe that, even if cuts are made, he will figure out the way to keep growing.”

According to Padrón, “there’s a tremendous deficit of understanding, and part of the problem we have created ourselves because we are taken for granted.” Padrón notes that community colleges continue to achieve, and “the reaction is, ‘Well, you’re doing well with the little that we give you so, you know, it’s okay.’”

Though Padrón acknowledges that resources are limited due to the recent recession, his hope is that “America is waking up to the reality that, No. 1, we cannot succeed as a nation unless we’re able to harness the potential of every single human being” and that over two-thirds of the new jobs created in the United States require postsecondary education.

In this age, Padrón notes that, for those only holding a high school diploma, “for the most part, they’re going to live in the cycle of poverty for the rest of their life. So depriving people young and not so young from getting a postsecondary credential is a condemnation to a life that is not deserved.”

Padrón says that sustaining national priorities such as Social Security and Medicare will require a workforce that is educated and earning wages high enough to support such priorities with taxes. Thus, as the economy improves, “I think that community colleges will be less and less of an afterthought and more of a priority for funding agencies.

“We don’t have the football teams and ... many of the things that universities have that attract a lot of support, but we are really helping the people that are going to make or break the United States of America, and making sure that we do that right is essential.”

Community development

Regalado calls MDC “one of the crown jewels of Miami for several reasons.” First, he says it was critical that McCabe and Padrón believed “in Downtown Miami. When downtown was sort of a ghost town, they, and especially Eduardo, began building campuses in downtown and bringing students. Downtown grew around Miami Dade College. And now Downtown Miami is one of the places to go in the world.”

According to Regalado, MDC “has been the architect of this generation and future generations here in Miami.”

According to Padrón, when it comes to diversity, “you cannot find a more diverse institution in the United States than Miami Dade College, in more ways than one.” Padrón adds that, at MDC, when it comes to diversity, “we feel that’s our greatest strength, so we’ve been able to create a culture of success, where the students feel that they belong, where the student takes a great pride and a sense of ownership in the institution, and where failure is not an option.”

Thus, whether students are African-American, Hispanic or hail from other underrepresented groups, at MDC Padrón says such students “achieve at incredibly high levels and almost at par with everybody else, and in some cases even higher. … We take a great deal of pride in that, and our work is never done.”

Catherine Morris contributed to this article.

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