



Hispanic Heritage Month: Meet Eduardo Padron, College President Redefines 'Community Colleges'

By Isa Adney

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When Eduardo Padrón left Cuba for America at the age of 15, with his younger brother in tow, he could have never imagined that one day he would be named one of the top 10 college presidents by TIME magazine as president of Miami-Dade College.

Today, under Dr. Padrón's leadership, Miami Dade College, one of the largest colleges in the country with over 174,000 students, enrolls more minorities than any other institution in the United States, and is transforming the model of higher and, most importantly, help students like him break the cycle of poverty.

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"Today, two thirds of new jobs require some form of post-secondary education," Padrón, 68, begins as he considers the future of higher education. "We need a public education and higher education system that is wide open and gives opportunities to everyone. The economy requires that. And if we don't develop educational systems that help minorities, help the poor, get access to college, we're not only sacrificing that human talent, but we are really sacrificing our future as nation."

Though Miami Dade College is one of the largest institutions in the country, individual attention and support for students is a priority, he said.

"We are creating a culture of success, where failure is not an option," he said.

Padrón is credited with transforming a once commuter two-year college, then named Miami-Dade Community College, into an academic powerhouse with a slew of bachelor's degree programs – at a fraction of the cost of other universities.

Initiatives such as mandatory orientation and advising, individualized education plans, and structured curriculum options are keeping students on track and providing them with the kind of personal connections with faculty, staff, and peers that made all the difference to Padrón's success.

While Padrón was once rejected from universities like Princeton, today some of those same universities have given him honorary Ph.D's. A list of his awards and contributions would take up over five full single-spaced-12-point-font pages - contributions that our world might not have received had Padrón not been given the chance at a higher education.

"Community college changed my life," he says with a melodic Spanish accent, symbolic of all he's achieved, all he's sacrificed, and all he represents when it comes to what can be possible for the next generation of Hispanic leaders.

The Beginning of the American Dream

At that time he arrived at age 15, under Operation Peter Pan, a program that allowed parents to send unaccompanied children overseas to escape communism, Padrón was looking to make it in a country his parents promised would offer greater opportunity.

Padrón finished high school in Florida, and struggled to learn in a new language. It was the days before bilingual education or ESOL classes.

"It was a whole new brave world," he said of attending high school in America for the first time. "I didn't know the language, I didn't know the culture, and I didn't have my parents with me. Trying to understand the system was not easy."

In addition to trying to manage school, Padrón also worked three to four jobs to support himself and his younger brother.

"I grew up very fast," he says of those years. "I'd get up a 4 a.m., go to school, and then after that I'd iron clothes at a dry cleaner's,

then wash cars at a car wash, and then stock inventory at a department store. I spent more hours working than going to school, and slept only two to three hours per night.”

It's difficult that anyone with that kind of schedule and so many obstacles could graduate high school. But Padrón did just that.

He credits his mother for helping him to not give up.

“If I really wanted a future I'd have to go to college,” he says of what she instilled.

“But I had no idea how to go to college,” he said.

Padrón looked to his high school counselor for guidance: “She told me I was not college material and that I should go to trade school and become a carpenter or plumber.”

Padrón thanked her, but he could not get his mother's voice out of his head. He knew he needed to go to college. So he used all of his savings to apply to the top universities in the country. “I was overly ambitious,” he says with humor in his voice, “I applied to all these top universities thinking I'd have a chance.”

That spirit of ambition would pay off later for Padrón.

In the meantime, the college rejection letters poured in, and eventually equaled the number of applications he had spent his savings to send.

He would never get to college.

At least, that would be the story if community colleges didn't exist. “I learned that there was this school that had just opened recently,” Padrón said of the renewed hope he was given after his rejections, “It was called Dade County Junior College at the time.”

Community College Was the Difference

For Padrón the community college experience was transformative: “It was like I was born again.”

“There were all these people who took interest in me,” Padrón says of why the experience was so life changing. “They helped me fill out my application, helped me register, and helped me understand what college was all about.”

Padrón also found that same support with the faculty at the institution: “After community college, I went to several other universities and I never found the quality of faculty that I found at Dade County Junior College.”

Padrón also connected with students at the college who had similar backgrounds. “We formed a support group,” he says of their friendship. He laughed as he described how only one friend had a car, and how every morning eight of them would pile into it and drive to college, and then wait around until the last friend had finished the last class.

“They gave me a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, and a renewed confidence,” Padrón says of the support he received in college.

That confidence took Padrón all the way to a Ph.D in Economics from the University of Florida, after having graduated Summa Cum Laude from Florida Atlantic University. He then began fielding job offers from the top companies around the country. After living a life of poverty, Padrón jokes, “When people asked me what I wanted to do growing up, I simply said ‘I want to be rich.’”

After accepting a job offer from DuPont University, Padrón paid a visit to Miami to tell one of his community college professors the great news.

His professor said, “What do you mean you're going to join the corporate monster? We were hoping you'd come back here and pay your dues.”

“He gave me an incredible guilt trip,” Padrón says of the encounter. And it worked. “I told DuPont that I was going to take a year and

teach economics at the college, and would then be back if the offer still stood. I was only going to teach for a year.”

But Padrón never returned to DuPont.

“Halfway through that year of teaching, I knew that’s what I wanted to do the rest of my life,” Padrón said of this defining decision in his life. “Teaching reminded me of my beginnings. I saw people of all ages who knew that the only chance they had to achieve the American Dream was being in that classroom.”

Padrón spent the rest of his career making a difference in students’ lives, and is now President of the institution that gave him his start, now called Miami Dade College.

“I never became rich,” he says of his career decision, “but I am the richest guy you’ll ever meet. It is such a privilege to work at a place that changes students’ lives.”

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