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Like many urban areas, Miami is a city of contrasts. If you drive downtown, as I do each day, you will see more than a dozen cranes congested within as many city blocks. Right now, downtown Miami is experiencing almost exponential growth. Our skyline reaches higher with tall new buildings. At ground level, new cultural centers built low on the horizon are helping to create an urban centrality never quite experienced until now.

But this cultural wealth is countered by extreme poverty. Drive just a few blocks away from the American Airlines Arena and the Carnival Center for the Performing Arts and you quickly enter a completely different world.

All cities, from New York City to Los Angeles, contain extreme juxtapositions of rich and poor, the haves and have-nots. A key difference in Miami, however, is that our

city is a profound symbol of hope for so many people in the nations to our south. As the primary gateway into the United States for immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America, Miami is a beacon of hope for immigrants seeking better lives for their families.

Delivering on that promise depends on access to higher education. A college degree or advanced training in professional or technical fields is fundamental for low-income and immigrant populations to achieve a better life.

When I reflect on higher education's aims, I don't think about ivy-covered walls at a remote, pastoral college. Instead, I look through the lens of urban Miami Dade College, where I have worked for more than 35 years. And what I have learned during those years is that an institution of higher education within an urban society must itself become a miniature city within a city, directly mirroring the institutions and needs of the larger city it serves through its programs and curricula.

A city's college must live and breathe with the population it serves. There are no town-versus-gown rivalries between students and citizens at a place like Miami Dade College, nor at any of our local colleges and universities. To become this city within a city, higher education must do four things: reach all populations, address local workforce needs, be affordable and, finally, provide real opportunities to deliver on the promise of hope that Miami represents for so many people.

As leaders in higher education, we cannot be afraid to do what it takes to create a highly skilled workforce. If we don't, we will continue to see our nation's skilled jobs outsourced and our standard of living diminished.

Doing what it takes means continually developing and strengthening partnerships – with government, industry, health care organizations, non-profit organizations and educational partners throughout the learning spectrum – to create a real-world context for students to tailor and streamline their developing skills directly into society.

Miami Dade College, like many other large institutions of higher learning, partners with many of these groups. In the last academic year, for example, we have added partnerships with Florida Power and Light, Lockheed Martin, as well as the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Federal Aviation Administration. We are continually building and expanding partnerships with high schools, other universities and regional health care institutions such as Baptist Health South Florida and Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Urban institutions have a responsibility, different from that of small, pastoral colleges. The city within a city is an integral partner in the community's infrastructure. The identity and evolution of our educational institutions is directly linked with the South Florida community we serve.