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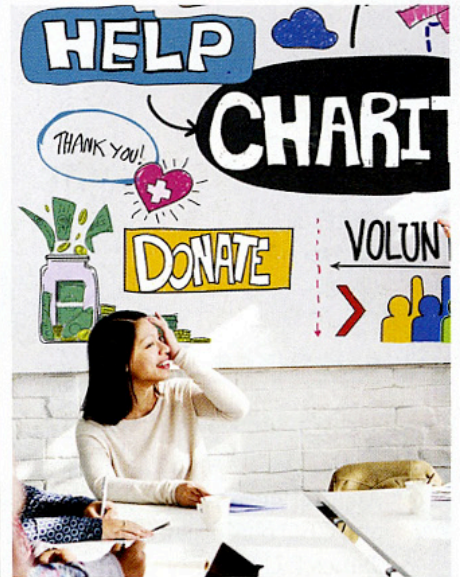
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Padrón in discussion with students

THE GAME CHANGER

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDUARDO J. PADRÓN,
PRESIDENT OF MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

BY JORDAN LEVIN

When Eduardo Padrón fled Cuba for Miami as a teenager in 1961, his mother, who had only finished third grade, told him he must go to college. Miami Dade College was the only school that accepted the aspiring young immigrant; in return, Padrón would dedicate his life to MDC and to the ideals of inclusion and opportunity. He has risen from an Economics professor teaching in storefront classrooms to President of a school he has made the largest and most diverse campus-based college in the country, with 170,000 students from 192 countries studying everything from new technology to culinary arts. Padrón has made MDC a cultural and civic pillar of Miami, while his numerous honors include the 2016 Presidential Medal of Freedom. His success, innovation, and drive to make college available to all, particularly immigrants, minorities, and the economically disadvantaged, have made him a national leader at a time when issues of diversity, affordability and accessibility have come to dominate the education debate in the United States.

This spring, Padrón, 74, announced that he would retire in August. IEFA sat down with him to talk about the ideals that have inspired him, what he's learned by leading MDC, and the lessons his experience offers for education moving forward. (This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

CARLOS LLANO

A lot has changed since you started here in 1970.

When it rained, it poured in the classrooms. When the air conditioning broke, I took my students to the park and gave class under a tree. By the end the number of students had almost doubled, because the homeless people in the park would join the class. They would even raise their hands to answer questions.

Why is it important to welcome students from different cultures and countries?

In this new globalized world of the 21st century, colleges and universities that do not facilitate cross-cultural understanding are missing the boat. Inclusivity creates a live laboratory where people of all backgrounds can come together and find creative solutions to the challenges we face. To me that should be the mission of every institution, especially in America. That's our strength as a nation, although some people don't see it that way.

We at Miami Dade College feel very privileged to have created an environment that has welcomed people from all backgrounds. But that work is never done. I set out to do this many years ago, based on my own experience as an immigrant. I saw the good and the bad of being from a different culture in an institution that was mostly homogeneous. Little by little, we've been able to build an atmosphere here that values everyone, accepts everyone, and is here for everyone. Presiding over that has been a privilege for me.

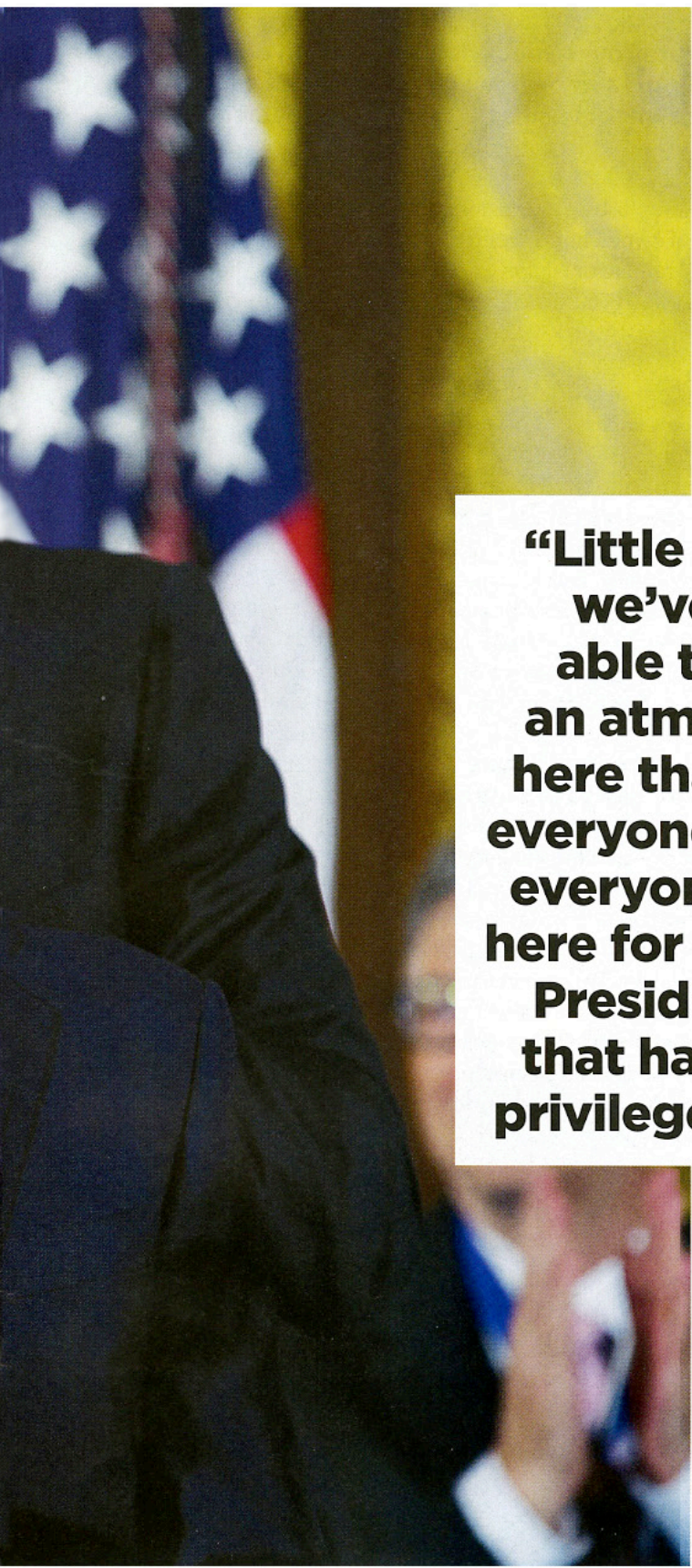
College has become more essential yet more expensive than ever, which has made affordability a major issue.

Today college has gone from an exercise for the very few to an imperative. Anyone who wants to access the new jobs being created in this country must have a post-secondary credential. I'm a great believer that college in America today should be a universal right. You have politicians who say college should not be for everyone. However, they insist their children and grandchildren go to college.

A little over a hundred years ago there was a big debate in this nation as to whether high school should be for every young person. In the end those who believed high school was for everyone won. That simple act is responsible for the predominance of America in the 20th century. College needs to follow the same process. It's not only for the individual, it's important for the nation as a whole. Nations today compete on the basis of talent. I always say this: talent is universal, but opportunity is not. We have to provide the opportunity, so we can harness everyone's talent. That is how we will preserve our position as the most successful country in the world.



Padrón receiving the 2016 Presidential Medal of Freedom from then-President Barack Obama.



“Little by little, we’ve been able to build an atmosphere here that values everyone, accepts everyone, and is here for everyone. Presiding over that has been a privilege for me.”

How will you go about increasing accessibility?

It’s a matter of will. Where there is a will there’s a way. This is the richest country in the world. There must be a way to make education affordable. You cannot find a more affordable place than Miami Dade College. Yet for some of our students, our tuition is the difference between putting food on the table and going to school. College has become unaffordable for most Americans. This needs to become a real priority.

How do you see online versus classroom learning?

I see online education the same way I see technology: as enablers. Not as an end in themselves. You give people options, especially when they have to work and go to school. For many people – especially for women with children who have to work – online education can be the perfect solution. So, online education is a tool which should be available to everyone. We have complete programs and courses online.

There is no single answer. I believe in a high tech, high touch education. “High touch” means interaction with the professor and interaction in class with other students. You’re not only learning subject matter and skills, you’re maturing. That’s how you learn to deal with people.

The role of teachers has also changed dramatically. Teachers have become more like mentors, coaches. The 50-minute lecture three times a week? Millennials have no patience for that. What the teacher has to do is teach the students how to learn, how to navigate and reach solutions. Today we’re big on project-based

learning, where students apply knowledge to become problem solvers. You are in a sociology course and the teacher asks, what are the top five problems facing Miami? You divide the class into five groups and they spend the entire semester finding solutions. Those students are going to find meaning and purpose.

We need to teach students to be lifelong learners. Because in our current rapidly changing economy, if we don’t become lifelong learners, we’re finished. Critical thinking is key today. Analytical skills. Teamwork. Cross-cultural understanding. Communications. All the skills employers expect.

THE WHITE HOUSE

That seems like sophisticated thinking for a community college.

I feel very strongly that the education we provide here is as good as or better than all the universities in this area. The proof is, when our students transfer, they do as well or better than the students who started in a selective system. But the students bring something else, too. They have grit. These are not students who take what they have for granted. Most of them have to pay for their own education. So they mean business. That, to me, is more important than any other factor in people's success.

That's interesting, given the recent college admissions scandal.

The way we have dealt with that is by believing there is potential in everyone. That everyone deserves a chance. We don't ask you what your grades were. If you have a high school diploma you should be entitled to go to college. It is up to you to adhere to the standards. This whole notion that only students with high GPAs and SATs, who spend thousands on college advisors and tutors, deserve to go to college is part of a corrupt culture. We don't play that game. Our approach does raise some challenges, because not all high schools are created equal. Not all zip codes support their children the same way. But, as educators, we need to find a way to harness everyone's potential.

Miami Dade College's connection to Miami is profound.

And unique. You're familiar with the term "ivory tower", right? It refers to colleges that are surrounded by walls, where only the privileged few can go inside. MDC is the opposite. Even this building is open. All the campuses have been designed to be very welcoming. You'd be hard-pressed to find a single household in Miami that has not been touched by Miami Dade College.

I don't believe there's another college in the United States that has had more impact on developing the leadership of its community. In government, from the chair of the [Miami-Dade County] commission to the mayor and the chief of police, the state attorney, the public defender ... I could go on. In the private sector it's even more impressive: the heads of major corporations, developers like [Forbes 400 List] Jorge Pérez. In banking alone there are 17 bank presidents. What most of these people will tell you is that, if Miami Dade College had not been there, they would not be where they are today.

Why is that connection important?

Why do colleges and universities exist if not to give people the opportunity to grow and contribute to society, to be good citizens? If you are not a part of that community, if you are not an institution that welcomes that community, how can you survive?

How has MDC been affected by the debates over freedom of expression on campus, and by how political division and social media can aggravate disagreements?

Those heated debates on social media are caused by a lack of cohesiveness in those institutions. We haven't had a problem here, because all the students and faculty have a sense of belonging, of ownership. Whether you're black or Hispanic or Haitian or Ukrainian or whatever, people feel they have the same rights and responsibilities. Not that there are not disagreements, different political views. But there is empathy, there is understanding, and these factors are crucial in creating a community that can differ in terms of ideas without trying to insult or hate the other members.

Tell me about an important issue we haven't touched on yet.

There has been a significant level of disinvestment in public institutions. That worries me tremendously. Especially in an institution like Miami Dade that has a significantly underserved population. How resources are distributed to make sure those populations are given a fair shake is one of the issues that will need to be dealt with if we want to keep America as we know it.

How can colleges advocate politically to encourage that?

It's becoming more and more difficult. Because the more you advocate and the louder your voice, the greater the temptation for some to silence you. Unfortunately, some educational leaders stay quiet in order to avoid repercussions.

I remain very hopeful, because the students coming to this college now are part of a much better generation than mine was. The question we asked most often was, how much money am I going to make? This generation has so much sense of purpose. They want to be change makers. In the end, that's what it takes: an army of people asking for change. I think this generation will make us proud.

What are your plans for the future?

That is my greatest challenge. I have so many options and things I want to accomplish. But I've been blessed with the opportunity to do what I do. When I made the decision to be an educator – which, by the way, was not my plan – I found my calling. I've been fortunate to be here for such a long time and to see so many lives change. I cannot think of another job where you can see the tangible results of your work on a daily basis. ■