

15 Cuban students will start at Miami Dade College

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PEDRO PORTAL / EL NUEVO HERALD STAFF

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padron, right, arrives to a press conference with the first group of students coming from Cuba to study at Miami Dade College for a semester on Monday, Jan. 13, 2014.

Fifteen young Cubans, from rappers to dissidents, will begin classes at Miami Dade College Tuesday in an unprecedented scholarship program for students from a country where universities regularly expel opposition activists.

With some of the students already wearing sky-blue MDC hoodies, the 15 were introduced in a ceremony Monday to the professors who will see them through a six-month program of English, computer, business and social studies.

The students did not allow the news media to ask the students questions, and a person involved in the program said the Cubans were very nervous, especially the younger ones and those who have never been out of their country before.

Cuban universities, all controlled by the communist government, regularly expel or deny entry to pro-democracy activists and sometimes even their children, under the well known slogan of "the university is for revolutionaries."

Just last month, Miguel Molina reported he was expelled from his second year of medical studies in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba because of his activism in the dissident Cuban Patriotic Union.

MDC Provost Rolando Montoya touted the "We are One People" scholarships as the first of its kind since 1959. Other Cubans have studied in U.S. universities, but as individuals and usually with direct or indirect Cuban government approval.

The 15 are expected to return to their country after the program and teach what they learned in Miami to "others who don't have the same opportunities," said Juan Antonio Blanco, head of MDC's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Initiatives.

A Miami non-profit, the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba, will pay the estimated \$12,000 to \$15,000 cost of transportation, housing and food for each of the students. The

foundation won a \$3.4 million, three-year grant by the U.S. government in 2011 to help civil society groups in Cuba, and gets more than \$600,000 from private donors each year.

The Cubans, who arrived over the weekend, range in age from 18 to 37, are racially diverse and more than half are women, MDC officials said. They did not have the full list of names but some were known.

Among them are three well-known government critics: Raudel Collazo of the rap group *Escuadrón Patriota* "C Patriot Squadron; graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado, known as El Sexto; and blogger Henry Constantin, who was expelled from the University of Oriente in 2006 and the Marta Abreu University in Villa Clara in 2008.

Four are children of dissidents, including Lienys Moya Soler, daughter of Ladies in White leader Berta Soler and former political prisoner Angel Moya; and Sayl^a Navarro, active in the Ladies in White and daughter of former political prisoner Felix Navarro. She was expelled from the law school in Matanzas in 2010.

Also in the group were independent lawyers Lartiza Diversent, who explain their rights to defendants in courts although she cannot practice in court because she's not a member of a government-approved lawyer's office, and Yaremis Florez.

The Cubans will study English as a second language until March and then move on to the other classes courses regularly offered by MDC but redesigned to meet their specific requirements.

MDC, the nation's largest college with 175,000 students at eight campuses, said it welcomed the Cubans as it does with hundreds of students it receives each year from across the globe, especially from the Caribbean and Latin America.

Blanco, a former senior analyst for the Communist Party of Cuba, said the college had been quietly working on the program for months.

Half a dozen relatives of Cuban rulers Raul and Fidel Castro have studied abroad, many of them in Spain and with Spanish government scholarships, according to the blog *Cuba al Descubierto* "Cuba uncovered.

But it's doubtful that the Cuban government will approve of the Miami scholarship program.

The message sent is tempting and highly subversive: Not only those who belong to official institutions can leave to study abroad. And return, Miami blogger Emilio Ichikawa wrote over the weekend.

The Obama administration offered scholarships to Cuban students who wanted to enroll in U.S. universities in 2008. About 750 applied at the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana, which selected 30, Miami geographer Eudel Cepero said. But the Cuban government denied them permission to travel abroad and the program foundered.

Cepero noted that thousands of U.S. university students have traveled to Cuba to enroll in courses there, in some cases guided by sympathizers of the country's government.

More than 500,000 students from about 200 countries enroll each year in U.S. colleges and universities. Nearly 60 percent come from Asia, 14 percent from Europe and 10 percent from Latin America, Cepero wrote in an on-line column.

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