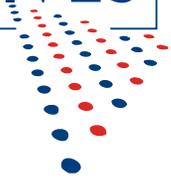


# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



A HIGHER EDUCATION  
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SERIES

*2014-2015 Series:*

**Inspirational Innovation**

CHAPTER  
**10**

**Tipping Point:**

*Community Colleges and the  
Challenge of Inequality*



## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

# Tipping Point: *Community Colleges and the Challenge of Inequality*

### **Dr. Eduardo J. Padron, President, Miami Dade College**

In 1816, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Charles Yancey, a Virginia legislator, on the topic of a newly-proposed college in their state. “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization,” wrote the President, now retired at Monticello, “It expects what never was and never will be.”<sup>i</sup>

Jefferson had set the compass. He had great confidence in the people, trusting in their inherent virtue. All they needed, in his view, was enlightenment through learning. The people were to be “the ultimate guardians of their own liberty.” And a democratic society was charged to provide the resources for learning if liberty was to endure.

Though he had passed on years earlier, Jefferson’s legacy can be credited for the Morrill Act of 1862, better known as the Land Grant College Act. Morrill established the foundation for a system of public colleges across the country, and American higher education began to extend the principles that Jefferson had envisioned, becoming an expression of an emerging American excellence.

Agrarian America became industrial America; wars were waged and soldiers came home. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act—the GI Bill—opened the door to college for thousands of young Americans, laying the brickwork for America’s robust middle class. It also served to transform the institutions that were once the province of the economic elite. Jefferson’s ideal took form, setting educational precedent in families across race, ethnic, and economic strata. Going to college became an American rite of passage, an aspiration that touched every corner of society.

Ten years later, *Brown vs. Board of Education* began to undo the long years of racial inequities, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 gave us the Pell Grant. In 2014, Pell Grants were awarded to nearly nine million students for a total of \$33 billion in aid.<sup>ii</sup>

***“In truth, no system of government can guarantee prosperity for all, but the spirit of an energized nation is in policies that ensure opportunity and a fair chance to prosper.”***



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At first glance, American higher education appears today at a peak of productivity. Enrollment increased between 2001 and 2011 by 32 percent, to 21 million students.<sup>iii</sup> More women and minorities are attending college and even older, working adults have risen in large numbers. Community colleges have become a critical route of access, now host to 45 percent of America's undergraduates.

But all is not well, and it should be stated emphatically. By now, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has sounded the alarm throughout American education. Our 15 year olds trail their counterparts in 30 other countries in math; 22 countries in science; 19 countries in reading; and 10 countries in problem solving. And the most telling indicator is that students on the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum fare worst, by far.<sup>iv</sup>

A widening economic and racial stratification has also reached into higher education. Today 71 percent of college students from the upper quadrant of incomes achieve a bachelor's degree by the age of 24, while only one in ten do so from the lowest income quadrant, and just 15 percent from the next quadrant.

These results are even more exaggerated when comparing community colleges and four-year institutions. The irony of greater access, owing much to community colleges, is serving to increase inequality all the more. The recent Century Foundation report found that high socioeconomic status (SES) students outnumber low-SES students by 14-1 at the most competitive four-year colleges and universities, while low-SES students outnumber high-SES students at community colleges by almost 2-1.<sup>v</sup>

This degree of stratification has evolved from policy decisions affecting funding in states across the country. Consider that between 1999 and 2009, per student operating expenditures increased by nearly \$14,000 at private research universities, while public community colleges saw just a \$1 increase.<sup>vi</sup>

This isn't the higher education system that Thomas Jefferson envisioned. Nor is it the democracy he outlined in historic documents that serve as a reference library for nations around the world. That we live in a time of political polarization in our country is hardly a secret. That powerful vested interests often hold sway in Washington and state houses is also no surprise. That both of these elements leave far too many citizens at the brink of apathy is poisonous in a democracy.

Ours is a system that has always been a delicate marriage of the entrepreneurial and the egalitarian. Out of balance, we are estranged, uneasy, and very stubborn. In truth, no system of government can guarantee prosperity for all, but the spirit of an energized nation is in policies that ensure opportunity and a fair chance to prosper. Right now we are at a tipping point, staring into the greatest chasm between rich and poor since the 1920s. Education and fiscal policy reflect this stratification. As college costs have skyrocketed, up 130 percent in the past 20 years at public universities, incomes have remained stagnant.<sup>vii</sup> Hence, the Pell Grant has lost its buying power, the incremental increases failing miserably to match costs.

While Pell remains a staple for low-income students, policy may be limiting its effectiveness. The debate on for-profit institutions is complicated but the benefits they derive from Pell are clear. For-profit schools enroll 13 percent of the higher education population, yet they receive 25 percent of federal student aid. Ninety percent of for-profit revenues derive from Title IV student aid. And they are responsible for 47 percent of student loan defaults.<sup>viii</sup> Lastly, for-profits received \$1.7 billion in post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in the 2012-13 school year. That represents more than 40 percent of the total \$4.17 billion in benefits awarded during that period.<sup>ix</sup>

Total student debt stands at \$1.2 trillion,<sup>x</sup> and the latest data from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau thrust a roadblock of \$27,400 in average debt in front of 71 percent of college seniors.<sup>xi</sup> And Congress remains unable to ease the forward movement of the next generation of our workforce.



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Jefferson might well have railed at the condition of public education today, but community colleges would have brought a nod of affirmation. They are uniquely American institutions, fulfilling both the entrepreneurial and egalitarian elements of the national equation. Community colleges have successfully recalibrated liberal learning to the demands of a work environment in rapid and often chaotic evolution. They are attuned locally and their doors are open to the low- and middle-income students who cannot afford the skyrocketing costs at both public and private institutions.

While the Century Foundation recommendations point to a range of policy and practical changes, community colleges are addressing the current circumstance and the enormous challenges that accompany students to college. The students at Miami Dade College pose a prime example, but they are not at all unique in terms of the data: 47 percent live beneath the federal poverty standard and 67 percent are classified as low-income; 70 percent work with 30 percent working at least 35 hours per week; 62 percent attend part-time; 72 percent of entering students are underprepared for college level courses; 70 percent are Hispanic, 17 percent African-American, nearly 1/3 are aspiring citizens and overall, students represent 185 countries; and perhaps, the most telling characteristic in changing the trajectory of families and communities, 56 percent are the first in their families to attend college.<sup>xii</sup>

But numbers don't tell the whole story. Recent work by Stanford education researchers studied the college experience of low-income, often first-generation students. They identified two primary stumbling blocks, especially virulent during transition points, including the freshman year: Doubts about whether they could ever truly belong at their institution collaborated with misgivings about whether they were smart enough for college. They believed in an "entity theory" of intelligence, as the researcher Carol Dweck named it; they had a fixed quantity of intelligence that wouldn't budge no matter how hard they studied.<sup>xiii</sup> This two-fisted uncertainty emerged as soon as students encountered their first setbacks, and far too often led to a downward spiral.

The good news is that these two central beliefs have proved malleable. Simple messages from older students from similar backgrounds who made it through the same challenges have shown significant data-based improvements.

At MDC, much of what we do to assist students, both academically and via student support, is aimed at disabusing them of these two beliefs. Our comprehensive, college-wide efforts are collected under the banner of the Student Achievement Initiatives (SAI). The broad range of initiatives, begun over three years ago with an intensive period of research and data analysis, reflects a clear pathway from pre-college interactions through intensive early college experiences and program planning, to closely-monitored progress toward graduation, transfer, and job placement.

All of these elements are characterized by a decidedly intrusive posture on the part of college personnel and the processes employed. Our research told us that students who complete at least half their required course credits and 25 percent in their major area in their first year are twice as likely to finish their degree.<sup>xiv</sup> Clearly, we recognized the need to reinvent developmental education, shorten its duration, and help students to identify a major area of study and remain consistent over time.

The following summarizes several of the elements within SAI, spanning the entire student experience at MDC:

- **Three-Tiered Coaching and Mentoring Model:** Includes *Pre-College Advising* (PCA), collaborating with high school staff, and working individually with MDC applicants; *Senior Academic Advisors* who manage student caseloads and follow student progress from orientation through the 25 percent benchmark; and *Academic Coaching and Mentoring* in which staff and faculty team to guide students from the 25 percent benchmark to graduation.



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- **Online Orientation:** Begins academic planning and financial aid applications. Includes Shark Bites video vignettes, MDC through the eyes of fellow students.
- **Shark Start Orientation:** Mandatory in-person orientation, required to register for classes. Includes introduction of assigned advisors, registration for classes, and completion of Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).
- **Developmental Education:** Modularized, accelerated, and co-curricular instruction, paired with in-class tutoring support, are approaches in math, reading, and writing. MDC and high school developmental education teachers work together on 12th grade remediation courses.
- **Shark Academy:** Concentrated one-week enrichment option for students who are not college-ready. More than half of participants improved to college-ready status.
- **Integrated Planning and Advising Services (IPAS):** Suite of integrated web-based platforms support case management; document campus engagement; and provide data collection and student dashboards. Platforms enable risk targeting and intervention, counseling and coaching, and education planning.
- **Student Success Inventory (SSI):** Motivation, academic discipline, and social engagement are the focus, with predictive indices for achieving a 2.0 GPA and a student's return for year two. Results appear on student's dashboard.
- **Academic Pathways:** Thirty-three sequential pathways providing advisors essential tools to help students clarify choices, chart a path, and avoid excess credits.
- **Focus 2 Career Assessment:** Self-paced, online, interactive, career, and education planning system to explore occupations and career planning maps.

Every period in this country's history has presented enormous, baffling challenges. Perhaps, the mere turning of the years implies that the current tests will be of greater complexity and urgency. It certainly feels that way. As a nation, we are, undoubtedly, being asked to regain our balance; to find the level point between our market-driven, bottom line intensity and the opportunity ethos that sits at the core of the nation's spirit. But beyond regaining balance, we need to find a way forward. Jefferson's notions of virtue and enlightenment may sound old fashioned, drawn from an ancient heritage before we knew the language of democracy. But what it says, simply enough, is that we're still here. No matter the sophistication, the wonder of our new methods, this remains a human endeavor. We will always be at the center of society's leaps and stumbles. And no matter the country or status from whence we came, we are quintessentially American in our hunger to learn and change things for the better.

We are all descendants of Jefferson and so many others who trusted not only in the people but in our institutions. We are an opportunity nation and all we ask for is a fair chance. Our community colleges sit smack in the middle of our American enterprise equation, workforce and opportunity engines both, and given that fair chance, we have an immense potential to do what we have been charged to do, to change things for the better.

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**Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón** — An American by choice, Eduardo Padrón arrived in the United States as a refugee at age 15. Since 1995, he has served as President of Miami Dade College, a national model of student achievement and the largest institution of higher education in America, with more than 175,000 students. An economist by training, Dr. Padrón earned his Ph.D. from the University of Florida. In 2009, *Time* magazine included him among the "10 Best College Presidents" in the United States; in 2010, Florida Trend magazine named him "Floridian of the Year"; and in 2011, *The Washington Post* recognized him as one of the eight most influential college presidents in the country. In addition, the Carnegie Corporation of New York granted him its prestigious Centennial Academic Leadership Award; he is the first college president to receive the National Citizen Service Award from Voices for National Service; he has been named an Ascend Fellow by the Aspen Institute; and he is the recipient of the Hesburgh Award, the highest honor in U.S. higher education.

Dr. Padrón is widely recognized as one of the top educational leaders in the world. He serves on the boards of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Business/Higher Education Forum, the League for Innovation (former chair), RC-2020, the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, the White House Fellows Selection Panel (chair), and the International Association of University Presidents. He has held leadership positions on the American Academy of Arts & Sciences/Humanities Commission and on the boards of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (chair), the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Campus Compact, and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. He is also the immediate past Board Chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Miami Branch.