

NC STATE
College of Education

**Growing Inequality and
Declining Economic Mobility**

Twin Challenges of Our Time:
What Higher Education Leaders Can Do

Eduardo J. Padrón

President
Miami Dade College

**2017
DALLAS HERRING LECTURE**

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to present you a copy of the 2017 Dallas Herring Lecture, delivered by Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón, President of Miami Dade College in Miami, Florida, and a 2016 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Lecture is titled “Growing Inequality and Declining Economic Mobility, the Twin Challenges of Our Time: What Leaders of Higher Education Can Do.” It was hosted by the College of Education at NC State and Envisioning Excellence for Community College Leadership, which focuses developing a leadership pipeline to community colleges in North Carolina and funded by the John M. Belk Endowment.

Dr. Padrón’s Lecture was extremely timely in North Carolina and the United States at large. A recent joint report by MDC and the Belk Endowment found that the education-to-career continuum within North Carolina is not generating the level of social mobility for which we would hope. This trend is a serious and severe economic headwind against which we are struggling, as Robert Gordon and other economists have noted. Dr. Padrón illustrated the reality of economic inequality within higher education with staggering and unsettling data.

Fortunately, Dr. Padrón outlines opportunities for us to act against these forces in his Lecture: “[W]e are anything but powerless.” We must recognize our starting economic reality in which we find ourselves. But as Dr. Padrón argues, we can move away from current college ranking systems, re-embrace vocational education, build channels between education and entrepreneurialism, advocate more effectively for higher education to legislators, and expand student support. We invite you to engage with us on our Community College Leadership Blog about these and other critical topics that affect student success: <https://envisioningexcellence.ced.ncsu.edu/blog/>.

NC State’s College of Education is committed to training educators and leaders to harness the power of education for North Carolinians, thereby restoring key features of social mobility. As we work with partners like the Aspen Institute through Envisioning Excellence for Community College Leaders, we are preparing future community college leaders to confront economic inequality with dynamic programs and partnerships. Thank you for your ongoing support of our work and mission: pioneering education and personalizing research to enhance the lives of everyone we serve.

Cordially,



Mary Ann Danowitz, Ed.D.
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About Eduardo J. Padrón



Since 1995, Eduardo Padrón has served as President of Miami Dade College (MDC), the largest institution of higher education in America with more than 165,000 students. He is credited with elevating MDC into a position of national prominence among the best and most recognized U.S. colleges and universities. An economist by training, Dr. Padrón earned his Ph.D. from the University of Florida.

Dr. Padrón is widely recognized as one of the top educational leaders in the world and is often invited to participate in educational policy forums in the United States and abroad. During his career, he has been selected to serve on posts of national prominence by five U.S. presidents. In 1993, President Bill Clinton recognized him

as one of America's foremost educators. President George W. Bush nominated him to the National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board and the National Economic Summit. More recently, President Barack Obama appointed him Chairman of the White House Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. President Obama also awarded him in 2016 the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the U.S., for being a prominent national voice for access and inclusion in higher education.

Dr. Padrón's pace-setting work at Miami Dade College has been hailed as a model of innovation in higher education. He is credited with engineering a culture of success that has produced impressive results in student access, retention, graduation, and overall achievement. MDC enrolls and graduates more minorities than any other institution in the United States, including the largest numbers of Hispanics and African-Americans.

He is nationally respected for his advocacy on behalf of underserved populations in higher education, and his in-depth research report, "A Deficit of Understanding," highlights the funding crisis that threatens access for low-income and minority students. He has also championed innovative teaching and learning strategies and developed support initiatives to ensure student success. He was a member of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Greater Expectations national panel that re-examined baccalaureate education in the U.S. and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation's Commission on the High School Senior Year. More recently he has been called upon to co-chair the Century's Foundation's Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal.

Under Dr. Padrón's leadership, Miami Dade College has received national recognition for its longstanding involvement with its urban community, its catalytic effect for social and economic change, and the marked difference the College has made in student access and success through pace-setting initiatives. The most recent recognition includes the 2011 CHEA Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes.

The 2017 Dallas Herring Lecture: Introduction

Colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be with you today to deliver the 2017 Dallas Herring Lecture.

I've chosen a topic to discuss with you today that, quite frankly, has been a preoccupation of mine for a very long time. Inequality and economic mobility are immense and deeply complicated issues. Once I dived into preparation, I was asking myself if I bit off more than I can chew.

But regardless of the issue's complexity, we in higher education are smack in the middle of this conversation. We can actually take the lead and set a standard for others to follow. But we have a lot of work to do.

But first, a little history of my preoccupation. I arrived in the U.S. from Cuba as a teenage refugee. This was 1961. Fidel Castro was in Havana and I was in Miami. I felt about as unequal, immobile, and strange as anyone could possibly feel. But I had strict instructions from my very straight-talking mother: Borrowing from Emma Lazarus, it went something like, "Do not give me your tired, your poor and yearning to be free and easy back in Cuba; you were sent to America to get a college education." So, naturally, after completing a year of high school, I applied to Harvard. And Yale. And a few other prestigious schools that evidently preferred a stronger grasp of the native tongue. When the admissions decisions were in, the only school that wanted me was the local community college. It was known at the time by the somewhat affectionate nickname of Chicken Coop College, in honor of the previous residents of our classrooms. Talk about prestige.

The rest is history. I returned to Miami Dade College after completing my Ph.D., just to say hello and wave goodbye, on my way to big money at the Dupont Corporation. But one of my former professors barked at me, "What on Earth do you think you're doing? Why aren't you teaching right here at Miami Dade?" I waved goodbye to Dupont. Forty-seven years later, from student to faculty to serving as the college's President this very day, it has been a rich history.

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Growing Inequality

For my institution and, really, for all of higher education, these days often feel like we're under siege, at the mercy of forces we cannot control. If we're honest, we really don't know what our institutions—and more importantly, our classrooms—will look like in the years ahead. We need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves who and what we can be in a 21st century America.

Will we be an engine of inequality or the best hope of people trying to build lives in this new America? We don't lack for viewpoints. Anthony Carnevale, Director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, recently said higher education "takes the inequality given to it and magnifies it. It's an inequality machine." That's a harsh verdict, but the facts should give us pause: The share of bachelor's degrees to students from the bottom of the income spectrum has decreased from 12 percent to 10 percent since 1970. Nearly three times as many students from families with incomes of \$150,000 or more earned bachelor's degrees compared to students from poor homes.ⁱ

No surprise then that the United States has one of the lowest college completion rates among advanced nations. One writer in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called it a "pay to play" barrier that we've erected to the best jobs.ⁱⁱ That's disparaging enough, but worse, we have asked low-income students, "How high can you jump?" In other words, "How much debt and disappointment are you willing to risk?"

As a community of educators, this is a conversation we need to have. And we are anything but powerless.

But we need to ask ourselves where our power comes from. I recently heard a gentleman speak on the topic of peace. It was impressive because he defined peace as a human experience, not a worldly state of affairs. Ceasefires and treaties come and go, but real peace was different. People, he said, need to experience peace, just like they need air.

Now, ask yourself what your life would be like if you had been denied the opportunity to learn. I'm not talking about the earnings lost or the achievements that didn't happen. I'm talking about the deep empty hole in your life. You and I would be impoverished in ways that cannot be measured. We would be gasping for air.

If all of this seems a bit too obvious, consider the danger of taking the obvious for granted. I do understand the complexities. I know our internal struggles and our external challenges. I've met the detractors. But if we're to take on the challenge of inequality, we will need to know, really truly know, what the enterprise of learning means to every person who crosses our doorstep—and more importantly, what it means to those who do not. It's not just the prosperity of families and communities at stake; it's the notion that college isn't for me, that it doesn't matter if I continue learning—that notion is given license. And that is a travesty, an American travesty violating the most enduring of

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our principles. It is an injury to the inborn need in each one of us to learn. I, for one, am afflicted by the feeling that we have to do something about this.

This is our context: Across the entire bottom 60 percent of income distribution, incomes have barely moved in more than 50 years. The great American middle class has been sinking. By contrast, households in the top 5 percent have enjoyed a 37.5 percent increase since 1989, according to Census data. The average salary for this group stands today at \$350,000.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Economic inequality has also widened along racial lines. Despite the losses of the economic crisis in 2008, whites still maintain net worth at 13 times that of Black families and more than 10 times that of Hispanics. This is our country's history of race and class speaking, shouting to us in higher education to take the lead in addressing it.^{iv}

Declining Economic Mobility

The other pillar of this discussion is declining economic mobility. In simple terms, it's the hope that each new generation will do better than the one that came before. But slow economic growth translates to less new income to go around. Add income inequality to the equation and it turns into a dead end for people on the wrong end of the income spectrum. Beyond the math, income inequality is always about opportunity.

This leads us to the Stanford findings on economic mobility. In 1970, nine of every 10 American 30-year-olds earned more than their parents did at the same age, after adjusting for inflation. In 2014, only half of 30-year-olds were able to better their parents' income. In what amounts to just over a generation, nearly half of the nation's children have lost upward mobility.

It's important to understand that the current circumstance did not simply appear out of thin air. Policy matters.

The G.I. Bill of 1944 dramatically changed the economic and social strata of the nation. Educated workers were needed to restart a peace-time economy, and unlike our current policy environment, Congress responded. Returning soldiers of every stripe, many of whom had lived in ethnically segregated neighborhoods, went off to college, moved to the suburbs, and established mainstream, middle-class lives.

The country's racial attitudes persisted, however. Black soldiers were welcomed at colleges at less than half the rate of whites. But the introduction of Pell Grants and civil rights activism did help minorities to attend college in greater numbers, though not nearly comparable to enrollment of white students.

But the 1980s brought policies that began a different trend, one that has endured to this

day. The Reagan administration cut a billion dollars from Pell Grants and other aid for education. Support for higher education shifted from taxpayer-funded grants to bank-based federal loans. The rhetoric of the day often joined students with welfare recipients as “tax eaters” and “freeloaders.” Students who defaulted on loans were labeled “deadbeats.” The balloon of student debt had set sail, and lower- and middle-income families were, and continue to be, hit the hardest.

The political winds blew these policies down to the states, eliminating tax revenues and public services across the board. Every year, I go to Tallahassee and litigate the same question: Is learning a need or is it a luxury for those who can afford it?

A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article summed it up: Support that once provided a “leg up” is now labeled an entitlement or a handout.^v Education for the common good, a staple of democracy, has been cleaved down to an individual asset.

Since 2008, state funding for higher education has plunged 18 percent per student, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.^{vi} At Miami Dade College, state funding has fallen from 75 percent to 45 percent over the past 20 years. It comes as no surprise that the share of lower-income students at many public colleges has decreased. These numbers should stop us cold because they are not mere numbers. They reflect decisions that change the course of people’s lives.

Consider a recent study by the University of Wisconsin of some 450 public colleges. Plain and simple, the colleges that served mostly white, more affluent students received more of their funding from the state. The colleges that served minority, primarily low-income students, relied more heavily on tuition payments from students.^{vii}

The author of the study pointed to the disparity in Tennessee as a glaring example. The University of Tennessee, where only 7 percent of students are Black, receives \$19,500 per undergraduate. At Tennessee State University, where 71 percent of students are Black, per student funding is \$5,600. To say the least, these are troubling results for a country based on equity and opportunity. I suspect the Tennessee legislature will offer explanations, but it’s a tough starting point.

For a moment, let’s stand back from the damning statistics. For a moment, confront a deeper reality about ourselves as Americans and as just plain, everyday people. Our country is changing. We will be a minority-majority nation in about 25 years.^{viii} And

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whether it's this or some other damning statistic, we seem perplexed and stuck. We don't discuss so much as argue in our public discourse. We're impassioned, which should be a good thing, but unfortunately, we don't listen very well. We tend to believe a little too strongly in our differences, missing the commonalities that might give us comfort. I don't for a moment suppose that I have a remedy to offer. And no policy will address our divide. But if we're to uproot the years of inequality and declining economic mobility, we will need to be aware that these challenges are as much about us as people as they are about ideas and policies. This suggests clearly where change begins, and all too often where it hits a brick wall.

I recently rode the subway in New York City. If you're standing on a crowded train, just above eye level are a myriad of advertisements, subway maps, and this one dazzling piece of information. It read, "Did you know that CUNY—the City University of New York—sends more graduates to the middle class than all of the Ivy League schools combined?"

The actual data show the CUNY system propelled almost six times as many low-income students into the middle class, and beyond, as all eight Ivy League schools, plus Duke, University of Chicago, M.I.T. and Stanford, combined.

The leaders for upward mobility are schools like Cal State-Los Angeles, University of Texas-El Paso, Glendale Community College, the CUNY System, ITI Tech, in Baton Rouge, New Jersey Institute of Technology—and, I'm proud to say, Miami Dade College, which ranked in the third percentile among almost 2,500 schools. That's despite 70 percent of our students at Miami Dade arriving underprepared in at least one area (math, English or reading). Many of the top producing colleges on the list are from the nation's 1,100 community colleges.

This isn't suggesting that community colleges are better than the Ivy League. What community colleges do is combine access, affordability, and academic excellence. And students are being driven to community colleges by high costs elsewhere in higher education. Research done at Stanford found 38 of the nation's elite institutions enrolled more students from the top 1 percent of family incomes than from the entire bottom 60 percent.

Studies like this are revealing but precipitate the wrong conversation. I was asked a few years back for feedback on a project that aimed to send more low-income students to top universities. Their research identified some 35,000 low-income, high-performing students who fit the project's profile. That's equivalent to one-tenth of one percent of students in higher education. One-tenth of one percent. My response was, "Nice idea, but the entire project misses the point. It's an elitist approach to low-income students."

We need to see this moment with some perspective. This is not 1950 when a high school diploma and a \$20 per hour manufacturing job was a ticket to the middle class. This is

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the 21st century; the students with the 2.0 and 2.5 GPAs also must attend and graduate from college. A high school diploma today is a ticket to the cycle of poverty. Our great universities are the best in the world, but they cannot fulfill higher education's promise to this country. Hundreds of colleges and thousands of brilliant educators span the higher education landscape. We need to fight for the resources to help them be great, too. If we don't address this larger challenge, we will continue to reinforce income inequality with dire consequences. We will wear Professor Carnevale's label of "inequality machine."

I always, however, come back to the notion that we are not powerless. There are steps to be taken.

5 Steps Higher Education Leaders Must Take

Reclaim the Meaning of Prestige

Number one, let's reclaim the meaning of prestige in higher education from the ranking gurus. Let's reorder the calculus of how many students we turn away toward how many ways we can open the learning community to more people.

I'm sure U.S. News & World Report is making a fine profit without every parent in America buying a stake in its rating system. Children, at the doorstep of their adult lives, are being driven to anxiety medication. It's a morally corrupt enterprise that is stoking an arms race, driving up budgets, and reinforcing the exclusivity of a college education. Their inputs are SAT scores and advanced placement courses. Compare that to the outputs of the Stanford study of real life upward mobility at campuses across the country.^{ix} I'm sorry to borrow a dicey phrase, but the rankings are selling fake news.

Reclaim Vocational Education

Number two, fast on the heels of broader inclusion, let's also reclaim vocational education. And let's rename it higher education, because it is.

Georgetown's Carnevale posed this question going forward: Will we in higher education be idealists or realists? He called it a "fit of progressiveness when we threw away

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vocational education.” Someone else chimed in, saying, “We gave it over to the for-profits, which shows we don’t care about it.”^x

I have long argued for broad liberal education, but I have also embraced career and technical education. At a time when the cost of a bachelor’s degree can knock you over, we need to be rethinking the pipeline of higher education. We need to construct “degree ladders” or “stackable credentials,” the terms applied to the effort at Northwestern University. As Professor Carnavale has said, “All the returns to the economy are coming from higher education now. Our ability to expand that is key.”^{xi}

We need to embrace the understanding that talent is universal, but right now, opportunity is not.

At Miami Dade, our latest tiered approach addresses data analytics, perhaps the country’s most in-demand field. We begin with a 20 credit, one-year college certification in Business Intelligence. 200,000 job openings exist across the country, and our certificate students are capturing entry level salaries of \$40,000. As they work, they can continue through the Associate in Science and the Bachelor’s degree in Data Analytics.

Link Higher Education to Entrepreneurial Energy

Number three, we need to link higher education to the entrepreneurial energy bursting forth in the nation’s metro areas. We can help a new generation of Gates and Jobs and Zuckerbergs to emerge from their garage workshops. They can walk into a supportive environment like the Idea Center at MDC. Here they can develop and market their ideas and engage with mentors and investors. In the same building is MDC’s MAGIC, Miami Animation and Gaming International Complex. Both of these utilize a tiered, stackable approach to learning and jobs.

If we can do it, if Northwestern can do it, any institution in the country can do it. Opening the door to low-income students can be done at a reasonable cost. It also implies that if community colleges are stacking tier one and two, these credits need to be in sync with universities and accepted for transfer. In high schools, these programs should be billed as another path to college. The cultural stigma needs to be eliminated.

Keep Making the Case for College Learning

Number four on the can-do list brings us to our friends in our state legislatures. We haven’t won a lot of battles lately, but my sense today is, “You never know.” Things can and do change. Today’s political environment is the logical and extreme expression of what began in the 1980s. Anti-tax, small and even anti-government postures are starving education. But the voice in response is also rising; it may be only talk, but when did even a whisper of

free college tuition make itself heard before? We need to remain vigilant, keep making the case for the undeniable social and economic benefits of college learning.

Our business partners can help us make the case. Some years back, several CEOs from the biotechnology and biopharmaceutical industries came calling. They complained of the time and money spent training traditional biology majors. They worked with our faculty on curriculum and provided high tech equipment for our labs. In just a few years, we've provided hundreds of Bachelor of Science graduates to biotechnology and biopharmaceutical companies.

Today, MDC has 22 bachelor's degree programs, all geared to emerging workforce needs, all in partnership with industry. What's more, all ensure that students can complete their four-year study for about \$10,000. Companies like Siemens, Amazon, Google, McKinsey, Microsoft, Facebook, Viacom, and others have helped us develop bachelor's degrees. As community colleges and universities across the country develop affordable and timely connections to the regional workforce, business CEOs should be at our side in the state capitol.

At a presidential debate, one of the candidates said, "We need more welders and less philosophers." Under our umbrella, some will study physics, others poetry, and still others will make sure that highly calibrated automobiles and medical equipment don't let you down. A recent *New York Times* article, from professors at Brandeis and the University of Massachusetts, cited 600,000 open jobs in manufacturing.^{xii} As for the presidential candidate who loved welders, it's fewer philosophers, not less philosophers. Perhaps we need more English majors.

Build Comprehensive Support Systems for Students

Last on my to-do list, let's build support systems for our students every bit as comprehensive as our academic agendas. Most students arrive at our colleges straining to grow up and deal with the pressures of college. While it's especially true for low-income students, the research shows that far too many students from every economic and achievement level fall by the wayside. Assuming students will succeed simply because they're smart is a recipe for losing a lot of them.

Our success at Miami Dade College despite our size, comes from our conclusion that we would not succeed unless we engage students—orient, advise, tutor, mentor, counsel, and more—every

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step of the way. The *Harvard Business Review* just began a series on loneliness in the workplace. A challenging academic environment can be a very lonely place, and social media is no savior.^{xiii}

The good work of Carol Dweck and her Stanford colleagues is relevant here, not only because it applies to our students but also because it speaks to the challenges we face. Professor Dweck's work demonstrated the simple point that students who believed their intelligence could be developed (a growth mindset) outperformed those who believed their intelligence was set (a fixed mindset). Faculty who understand the growth mindset do everything in their power to unlock effort, confidence and ultimately, learning.^{xiv}

Oddly enough, Professor Dweck's later work also lent credibility to the fixed mindset. Each of us is a mix of fixed and growth mindsets, and probably always will be. That spoke to me about our challenges. If we're to take on inequality in our own backyards, we're going to run smack into a lot of reasons why we cannot change. A wise person once said everyone loves change as long as it's the change that suits us. If we invite our students to be courageous, to see, and to understand beyond what they currently believe, we also need that same courage. Change is not an overnight project. We would be wise to remember Professor Dweck's assessment that the path to a growth mindset is a journey, not a proclamation.^{xv}

Concluding Thoughts

At the close of a panel discussion last September, I was asked for the one big, necessary change I would like to see in higher education. I said, "We need to move into the 21st century." We need to recognize our duty, as college educators, to the country, to the people struggling to find their place in a changing world. We need to fulfill our obligation to work with a new generation of students. We need to pride ourselves on how many students we include in this great learning enterprise, not how many we turn away. We need to embrace the understanding that talent is universal, but right now, opportunity is not. We need to change that equation.

Thank you all for being here today and letting me share these thoughts with you. Thank you.

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About Dr. Dallas Herring & The Power of Education

Dr. W. Dallas Herring made it his life's work to build a system that would serve all of North Carolina's residents by preparing them for productive work and active citizenship. As a teenager, he established a 75- book community library in the local general store of Rose Hill, his home town. He later developed a statewide system of technical education institutes that eventually became the North Carolina Community College System. He also served for 20 years as chair of the North Carolina State Board of Education. Throughout his career, he was always guided by his vision of educational "opportunity for all the people."



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About the NC State College of Education

NC State University began offering degrees in education over 90 years ago; and today, the NC State College of Education stands as the leading college of education in North Carolina. We are the only college in North Carolina that conducts research, prepares professionals and engages with communities where they are in order to address the needs of learners across their entire lifespan, from pre-K through higher education.

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