

Miami Dade College hopes new president will avoid Tallahassee missteps

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As Miami Dade College's Board of Trustees searches for a successor to the retiring and revered Eduardo Padrón, there are but a few concrete requirements: The next president must have a doctorate, and must have 10 years of senior management experience, six of them at an institution of higher learning.

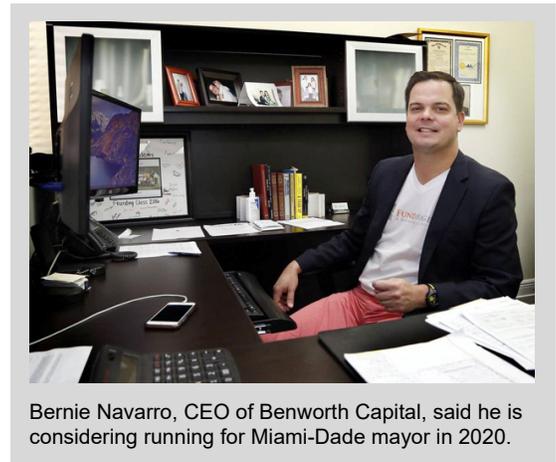
But there's another qualification that, while not exactly set in stone, carries weight: The college's next president must work well with the people who hold the purse.

For all of the unequivocal praise heaped upon Padrón toward the end of his nearly 25 years atop the college, few would quibble with the belief that his relationship with Tallahassee Republicans could have been better. Padrón, a Democrat, infamously called current House Speaker José Oliva a college dropout during a 2014 meeting with the Miami Herald Editorial Board about the college's unsuccessful pursuit of a local half-penny sales tax to support the college, and said the cigar company executive was "born into money."

So, as the search for Padrón's replacement gets going, there are some around the process who want to make sure that the college's leadership finds someone who will not only know Miami inside and out, but also Tallahassee.

"Every year, dealing with the Legislature is a saga," MDC Board of Trustees Chairman Bernie Navarro said late last month during the first meeting of a selection committee put together to help vet and pare down an expected lengthy list of candidates. "And we have to understand they're 50 percent of our stakeholders."

Lawmakers in state government do indeed have a great deal of influence over the laws that govern the college's operations, as does the governor, who just appointed four of the seven members on the board. They help set the budget for the Florida College System — a network of 28 community colleges of which Miami Dade College is a member — and control, for instance, the extent to which MDC can offer four-year degrees.



Bernie Navarro, CEO of Benworth Capital, said he is considering running for Miami-Dade mayor in 2020.

John Thrasher, a former House Speaker and campaign chairman for Rick Scott whose 2014 ascension to Florida State University president was highly controversial, is sometimes mentioned as an example of how picking a politically savvy president can benefit a university.

Navarro, a private equity firm president who has served as campaign finance chairman for Republican U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, says there are a great many other qualifications that the college's future president will need beyond political savvy. He also said it would be unfair to say that Padrón has a bad relationship with Tallahassee Republicans.

Publicly, Oliva patched things up with the retiring college president after a rocky patch in which Miami lawmakers accused the college of trying to raise taxes while sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars in reserves. And in 2014, then-MDC board chairwoman Helen Aguirre Ferré — now the chief spokeswoman for Gov. Ron DeSantis — stood firmly in support of Padrón.

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“That happened in the past and that’s water under the bridge between the speaker and the president,” Navarro said. “Right now, I’m talking about the future.”

But Manny Diaz Jr., the Hialeah Republican who sits as chairman of the Florida Senate’s K-20 education committee, says there’s still a disconnect with the college: “They have not had the strongest relationships with the Legislature lately.”

Most current and former board members who spoke to the Miami Herald say they haven’t felt any pressure from the state to pick a politically connected president. And unless the newly constituted Board of Trustees decides to change or ignore the criteria set by the former board in March, the hard minimum requirements for the position and the ongoing recruitment process by a headhunter and selection committee make a strictly political appointment less likely.

The new board meets for the first time April 24.

“The governor just appointed four new trustees to the board, and I think it’s up to the new board of trustees to figure out what they think is best for the college in their search,” said Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran, a former House speaker who oversees the state’s chancellor to the Florida College System.

There are also financial considerations untethered to Tallahassee, as whoever takes the position will also need to help pursue grants and lead a fundraising effort in 2020 as the college celebrates its 60th anniversary. Either way, the college, which has made Padrón the top-paid Florida College System president for years, is prepared to keep spending like they want a top-quality candidate by offering an expected base salary of around \$500,000.

“That’s a hell of a task they’re taking on,” said Sen. Diaz Jr. “It’s a big moment, and a big burden.”

Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau reporter Emily Mahoney contributed to this report.