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Miami Dade College needs local tax to remain 'dream factory'

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Opportunity is the bedrock of our nation. And, nothing better exemplifies that opportunity than the prospect of a college education. In our community, Miami-Dade College provides that opportunity to almost two-thirds of our high school graduates each year.

MDC serves more than 175,000 students annually, making it the largest institution of higher education in the U.S. It is also our nation's largest producer of associate degrees, and graduates more Hispanic and

African-American students than any other institution of higher education in the nation.

It is impossible to envision our community without MDC. There is hardly a household in our community without an MDC student or alumnus, including huge numbers of women and workers returning to the workforce through MDC.

The college's range of academic and professional workforce programs fuels the full spectrum of our workforce, and serves the community by training the overwhelming majority of public servants in the areas of nursing and health sciences, teaching, police, fire safety, emergency medical and air traffic control. Through its professional schools, including 14 workforce-oriented baccalaureate degrees, MDC also provides the community with a highly trained workforce in business, information technology, engineering, biotechnology, entertainment and design.

MDC also brings world-class cultural events to our community, including the Miami International Film Festival and the Miami Book Fair International.

Yet, over the last decade, while MDC's student enrollment has increased significantly, MDC has seen its state funding cut drastically. Since 2006-07, the full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment has increased by 18 percent while the corresponding FTE funding has declined by 24 percent. Students pay the price to make up for these losses in state funding by the increased cost of their tuition. Yet, the MDC student population is among the nation's most economically challenged:

- 46 percent live beneath the federal poverty standard;

- 56 percent are the first in their families to attend college; and,
- 69 percent work while attending college.

The financial pressures on the students threaten the quality and breadth of the more than 300 programs at MDC. To maintain the quality of its academic programs and the positive impact on our community, the funding for MDC must increase just to catch up with the demands of those it serves.

Solution: A referendum to approve a temporary half penny sales tax for MDC.

Funding to supplement state support has become a necessity for MDC. Many states across the nation, including Texas, Ohio, California and Illinois, already provide a local revenue source to their community colleges, in addition to state funding. It is time we do the same for MDC.

There is currently a bill in the Florida Legislature, with strong bipartisan support, that will provide a local revenue source for MDC. The bill requires a referendum by the voters of Miami-Dade County to approve a half-penny increase in the local sales tax, with a 10-year sunset provision and establishes an oversight board to provide guidance, transparency, and accountability for the expenditure of the funds.

This new local source of funding will be used to provide critical and overdue funding for scholarships, to hire new full-time faculty, to upgrade the college's technology, to expand facilities and to address deferred maintenance.

We encourage our Legislature to pass this bill and give the citizens of our community the opportunity, through a voter referendum, to determine for themselves whether they want to approve a local revenue source to support MDC. This will be essential in maintaining MDC as the dream factory for countless of our residents who would not otherwise have the chance of a college education.

Norman Braman is a businessman and civic activist. Bob Martinez is a lawyer and former vice chair of the Florida Board of Education and served as chair of the Board of Trustees for Miami-Dade College from 1999 – 2005.