

28 Mater Academy High School Seniors Earn College Associates Degrees Before Graduation

Mater Academy Students Among Largest Group of Dual-Enrollment Program

Graduating Seniors in Miami-Dade County

MIAMI (June 02, 2011) – As children of Hispanic immigrants and a majority being the first in their families to attend and graduate from college, 28 Mater Academy Public Charter High School seniors will receive their high school diplomas on June 10, having also earned their associates degrees from Miami Dade College through Mater Academy’s highly-successful dual enrollment program.

The distinguished high school students, who graduated from Miami Dade College on April 30th, were among the largest group of graduating seniors within Miami-Dade County Public Schools to earn this recognition. This fall, these students will enter universities across the country as juniors.

“We encourage all of our students to challenge themselves by taking college level courses,” said Judi Marty, Principal of Mater Academy, located in Hialeah. “The dual-enrollment program helps students earn college credits and raise their GPA, but most importantly, it provides them with an opportunity to conquer their fear of the unknown, as many are the first in their families to attend college.”

Hundreds of posters of smiling seniors line the walls outside the media center at Mater Academy, each listing students’ names and what college they have been accepted to. At the center hangs a large color photograph of the 28 dual-enrollment students in black caps and gowns at their graduation from Miami Dade College.

“It is a wonderful honor for these 28 students, who have simultaneously balanced Mater’s rigorous high school curriculum with Miami Dade College classes, after-school activities, sports, service and interest clubs, and honor societies,” adds Marty. “This program prepares them for

the college environment, while giving them an incredible amount of confidence to succeed in their future endeavors.”

Confidence is definitely not lacking for these graduates: Junior year, twins Andrew and Michael Rodriguez were already taking AP calculus, history, English and Spanish, when they asked the school principal to add AP chemistry to their schedule. When told the class was not yet offered at Mater Academy, the Rodriguez brothers developed their own plan, which the faculty fully supported. Working with Mater Academy science teacher Kelly Gimbel and her college textbooks, the brothers conquered AP chemistry and passed the course.

“You are motivated to do more here,” explains fellow Miami Dade College graduate Victor Garcia, who will be the first in his family to graduate from college, and will attend Mercer University in Georgia in the fall.

Cornell University bound Veronica Dagostino echoes the same sentiment: “We were encouraged to take classes beyond our high school schedules and were introduced to a world of possibilities,” says the Hialeah resident. A member of Future Business Leaders of America and the Mater Academy dance and soccer teams, Dagostino earned a full academic scholarship to Cornell University and is among the 155 students selected to attend its pre-freshman summer program.

Mater Academy students are encouraged to take Advance Placement and college-level courses offered through Miami Dade College, Florida International University and Florida National College. Beginning in the 10th grade, the participating Mater Academy students begin their dual enrollment courses. Additionally, they are required to go through a mock college application process, including requesting information from three universities, completing applications and financial aid forms, and writing entrance essays.

“This exercise serves to ease the transition from high school to college,” adds Silvia Macho, College Assistant Program (CAP) Advisor. “Taking students on college tours is not enough to prepare them for what is ahead. Mater Academy’s program prepares them to handle a college workload, understand what is expected of them, and improve their chances of succeeding and graduating.”

In recent years, Mater Academy Charter High School's graduation rate has exceeded 95 percent -- a figure above the U.S. average of 71 percent, and the national average for Hispanic students. According to a U.S. Census Bureau press release dated June 2004, an estimated 57 percent of Hispanics earned high school diplomas and roughly 11 percent received bachelor's degrees. Mater Academy has continued to outperform previous year records since opening its doors in 2002. In 2010, 15 Mater Academy students graduated from high school and Miami Dade College through the dual-enrollment program; eleven students earned a 2-year college degree in 2009.

Mater Academy's strong academic track record has been recognized by the Florida Department of Education and Miami-Dade County Public Schools. In 2009, Mater Academy Middle was named Breakthrough School by the National Association of Secondary School Principals – one of 10 schools recognized nationwide for dramatically improving student achievement. In 2008 and 2009, Mater Academy was named one of the nation's top 500 high schools by *U.S. News & World Report's* ranking of "America's Best High Schools."

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