Pre-College Academic Campus Experience (PACE): “Sowing the Seeds” of College in School Students
Miami Dade College

There are two basic objectives for this practice:

1. Provide early motivation for college-going behavior, through an exploration of career choices and the continuum of educational options that lead to those careers; and
2. Expose elementary, middle and high school students to the various academic areas within Miami Dade College through interactive, experiential learning experiences.

At Miami Dade College, the Pre-College Academic Campus Experience (PACE) offers primary and secondary school students with age-appropriate opportunities to learn about the College, engage with faculty and college students, and experience first-hand the various fields of study associated with each academic department. Drawing on collaborative involvement across Student Services, Academic Affairs, and high school staff, it uses a holistic, customized approach to providing academically-enriching campus experiences. The goal of the program is for students of all ages to explore their educational options and gain a deeper understanding of the career choices and academic pathways available to them.

Developed in 2007, PACE is a concerted effort to make Miami Dade’s pre-college program serve as a better mirror for a true college experience. Traditionally, high school students had been invited to Miami Dade
campuses by the Recruitment Department and provided general information about the college and its program offerings. Students were sometimes also invited to the college to take the Computerized Placement Test. Beyond just an informational campus visit, the PACE approach was designed with the sensibility that prospective students should be connected to an engaged academic campus experience.

The PACE curriculum engages school students in three ways once they arrive at the campus. The first activity is an age-appropriate college presentation that encompasses an overview of programs, degree offerings, high school opportunities (such as dual enrollment or summer programs), testing and placement information, financial aid and scholarships, student involvement and leadership opportunities, and other audience-specific, targeted information. Next, participants are divided into interest cohorts of no more than 25 people each, and they engage in rotating, 30-60 minute interactive learning forums. Each such forum uses a hands-on activity to provide curricular and career information from a specific school or academic area, as well as in-person experience with college classrooms, laboratories and other learning spaces. Faculty, academic chairs, and enrolled college students serve as facilitators. Finally, the students are presented with direct information about career options and the corresponding pathways in specific fields.

Implementing the PACE approach entirely overhauled the traditional campus visit program at MDC. It addressed and built upon issues raised in the Florida Secondary School Reform effort to establish the academy model of career pathways in alignment with statewide occupational clusters. PACE opportunities are actively marketed to elementary and middle schools in each campus’s feeder region. By extending these academic campus experiences to younger and less mature populations of school students, Miami Dade intends to foster a college-going culture even before students enter high school.

One key element of the PACE approach is its customizability. Each visit is planned and coordinated in response to the needs of the requesting school. This allows for maximization of the student experience based on particular interests and needs. For example, a group of school students enrolled in a high school film class could participate in a forum focused on Film and Editing, with hands-on activities in Miami Dade College’s television studio, and in a second forum facilitated by faculty from the School of Business. This customizable approach allows the components of the experience to be planned in collaboration with high school representatives to ensure the experience meets the academic and career learning objectives for the students.

The PACE approach has been successful because it is intentional in its effort to provide school students with meaningful and holistic pre-college learning experiences. Its integrated structure brings into the planning process key partners from Student Services, academic departments, and high school staff. The desired outcome for PACE is for school students to have multiple opportunities to experience college first-hand, throughout their primary and secondary school years. In this way, students graduating high school will understand the continuum of educational and career opportunities available to them, resulting in increased motivation toward completing both school and college.