



# A Leader in the Making

**T**here's no doubt that college is life changing. After nearly giving up on her own college dream, Jessica Giraldo shares with LEAP just how dramatically going to MDC changed her world.

“ It’s important to realize that you are smart enough and capable enough to succeed. Because you are. ”



Born in the U.S. to Colombian parents, Giraldo was raised in Miami. When she was 16, her father asked her to make one promise: that she would get a college education – something he and her mother had been unable to do. Recently graduating with two associate degrees from MDC, this grad is holding fast to that promise and rising as a young leader.

While an MDC student, Giraldo received the 2012 Newman Civic Fellows Award and the President’s Volunteer Service Award. She was also the only non-Honors College participant in the Harvard Latino Leadership Initiative (LLI) and co-founded 305 Rise, a peer-to-peer mentorship program to help students stay in college.

### What kind of high school student were you?

You mean besides awkward and insecure? Kidding aside, I was a good student. I took honors courses and joined the newspaper staff. Nothing prepared me, however, for just how different college would be.

### So the college experience wasn’t what you expected...

Absolutely not. I was the first in my family to go to college. When I first went off to a public university

in Colorado, I was lost. As a first-generation student, I didn’t have a support network of family, friends or mentors to help me navigate the confusing system of admissions, financial aid and college life – and my grades suffered because of it.

### How did you turn it around?

I came back home to Miami and decided to take a second chance at MDC. I quickly excelled, earning a 3.8 GPA and obtaining an Associate in Arts in Pre-Law and an Associate in Science in Paralegal Studies. I also got involved on campus and made long-lasting friendships.

There were times when it was really hard and I wanted to give up. But I was fortunate to have family and friends that encouraged me to reach my potential and push to the finish. College, especially for a first-generation student, will never be what you expect, but it will always be worth the hard work you put into it.

### Why did you choose MDC?

After my experience in Colorado, I knew I didn’t want to attend a large school, and my grades weren’t great. MDC’s policy to accept anyone who wants an education was exactly the second chance I needed. Looking

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Giraldo, second to the left, at the gates of Harvard University.

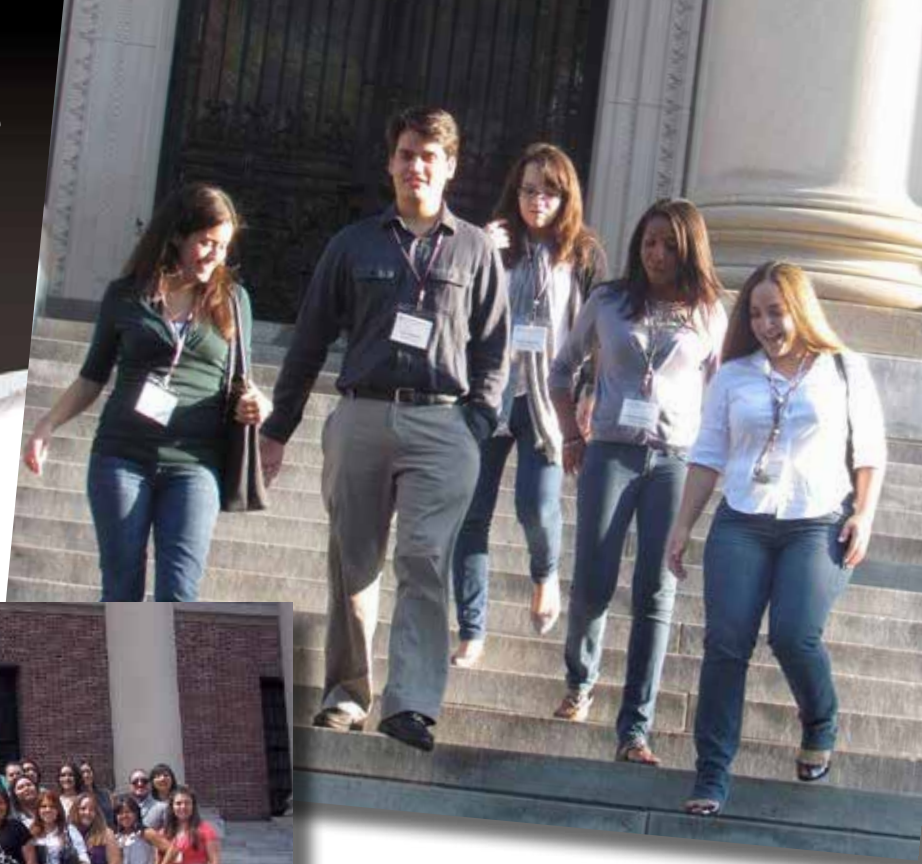


At Harvard, Giraldo, left, met CNN political analyst David Gergen, center.



Giraldo, left, with fellow 305 Rise founder Luis Sánchez, and author Junot Díaz.

“ Going to MDC proved to me that if you have the will and the drive, you will succeed. ”



**By putting her best foot forward at MDC, Jessica Giraldo, above right, was chosen to take part in the prestigious Harvard Latino Leadership Initiative, alongside a select group of top students from around the country, at left.**

back, I can say that the smaller classes, attention from the faculty and administration as well as the savings in tuition made MDC the right choice for me. It also proved to me that, if you have the will and the drive, you will succeed.

### **What was the best thing about going to college?**

Getting involved on campus was the single most transformative and rewarding aspect of my college experience. It felt good to be part of something and to contribute your own unique talent to a common goal. It also allowed me to build a community of faculty, administration, peers and mentors – all of whom made a difference in my college path. When it came time to get letters of recommendation, I knew exactly who to ask.

### **Any insights from your experience at the Harvard LLI that would you like to share?**

There were so many, but here are a few: 1) It's not who you

know, it's who knows you; 2) when you take the elevator up in life, always remember to send it back down; and 3) most important, never forget where you came from.

### **What's next for you?**

I plan on double-majoring in communications and sociology at the University of Miami next spring and then applying to be a Teach for America corps member and obtain a Master's in Education and Social Change. My goal is to work for an institution of higher education, a major nonprofit or an advocacy group with the goal of empowering young people.

### **A word of advice to high school students?**

Don't let anyone tell you that your dream is too big. If it doesn't feel scary, then it's not big enough. It's also important to realize that you are smart enough and capable enough to succeed. Because you are.