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## Dade Medical College owner to pay \$2,000 for ethics violations

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Ernesto Perez

Dade Medical College owner Ernesto Perez on Wednesday agreed to pay \$2,000 to the Miami-Dade ethics commission — part of a settlement agreement over accusations that Perez engaged in improper lobbying.

By pleading no contest to the ethics charges, Perez avoids a prolonged legal battle, which could have ended up costing far more money in attorney fees.

“We are grateful to put this matter behind us,” said Perez’s criminal defense attorney, Michael Band. Band noted that Perez “made no admission of guilt” in the ethics case.

The \$2,000 penalty includes a \$1,500 fine and costs of \$500. Perez will also accept a “Letter of Instruction” from the ethics commission, which has yet to be drafted.

Until his recent troubles, Perez was a rising star in the lucrative world of for-profit colleges. Perez spent at least \$170,000 on political campaign contributions and put some elected officials on his payroll.

Though the ethics case is now resolved, Perez still faces other, more serious legal issues. He has a pending [criminal case](#) for allegedly lying about his criminal past on government forms.

Perez is also the target of a separate ongoing criminal probe into possible campaign finance violations. His attorney declined to comment on that issue Wednesday.

“I’m not going to comment about any allegations which are currently pending, and may pan out and may not pan out,” Band said.

Leading up to Wednesday’s settlement agreement, Perez had been accused of eight ethics violations in total — all of them related to his failure to register as a lobbyist while

lobbying officials in Homestead and Coral Gables. Lobbyist disclosure laws are designed to encourage transparency in government.

The alleged improper lobbying occurred between 2011 and 2013, and involved various city staffers, including the city managers of both towns.

Perez has campuses in those cities, and he needed certain approvals in order to expand his operations.

Perez's attorney criticized the lobbyist registration requirements in Homestead, where most of the alleged violations occurred, as "ambiguous at best."

In Homestead, Perez once boasted considerable political power, and he envisioned his school becoming the new anchor of the city's struggling downtown.

But Perez's plans were thwarted in [December](#), when the city backed out of a planned land sale to Dade Medical's real estate affiliate. The deal would have granted the college 19 city properties at a deep discount.

While in office, former Homestead Mayor Steven Bateman pushed hard for that real estate deal — without disclosing that Perez had hired the mayor's wife as a real estate consultant. Bateman now faces criminal corruption charges that are unrelated to Dade Medical.

Bateman's criminal trial starts on Monday.