

# **WHAT ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION HAS MEANT TO PUERTO RICO, AND WHAT IT MUST MEAN NOW**

*Margarita Benítez  
Executive Director*

Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades

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I would like to posit three stages in the evolution of higher education in modern Puerto Rico, and link them to our island's development in terms of social justice and economic growth. My main thesis is that access to higher education has been the key to Puerto Rico's socioeconomic development since the nineteen forties, that we are smack in the middle of the third stage in the evolution of higher education in Puerto Rico, and that this one requires a concerted effort from all of us to reach its full fruition.

Begin at the beginning.

Thirty-two. Forty-six. Fifty. One hundred and twenty-one. Those were the dire statistics of Puerto Rico in the nineteen forties. Illiteracy, over thirty percent. Life expectancy, forty-six years. Only fifty percent of school age children were in school. Per capita income was a hundred and twenty-one dollars a year. Merely five thousand Puerto Ricans were enrolled in the island's few postsecondary institutions, out of a 1.9 million population living in an island of 100 by 35 miles.

The Stricken Land : that was the title of a powerful book about Puerto Rico in the forties written by Rexford Tugwell, our last and best American governor. Close to seventy percent of the 1.9 million Puerto Ricans lived in rural poverty, besieged by malnutrition and disease; indentured to agricultural cycles that left them without work in the *tiempo muerto*, the "dead" time between sowing and harvest. In the short harvest period, average wage for farm workers was 23 cents an hour. Thirty cents an hour in the processing plant. Fifteen cents in the fields under the burning sun, cutting cane, picking coffee, or harvesting tobacco. After that, *tiempo muerto*.

Barely two decades later, these dire statistics were transformed. Life expectancy grew by twenty years. New factories were opening all over the island. University enrollment quadrupled at the University of Puerto Rico alone. Per capita income quadrupled as well. Puerto Rico was hailed as a showcase of modernization, a laboratory of democracy in the Caribbean.

How that came to pass is an inspiring story. Suffice it to say that the heroes of the Great Depression, of the New Deal, and of World War II, the U.S. "greatest generation," found an equal partner in "la generación del '40"—the forties generation--in Puerto Rico. A young cadre of idealistic, hardworking, and competent men and women were summoned to public service by our great leader Luis Muñoz Marín, to spearhead a collective effort of national uplift that became known as "Operation Bootstrap:" lifting ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

The hours were long and the pay was low for those public servants of my parents' generation, but the rewards of conquering poverty, ignorance, and disease in our homeland, of creating opportunity and hope . . . those rewards were immeasurable. We can discuss the wisdom of particular choices today—every solution brings its own problems, and modernization is no

exception-- but no one can deny that in giving Puerto Ricans a new standard of living, Operation Bootstrap was a huge success. And Operation Bootstrap would not have been possible, successful or sustainable without the University of Puerto Rico, and specifically, without the contributions of "el Colegio de Mayagüez", our agriculture and engineering campus, "Colegio de Agricultura y Artes Mecánicas."

In the best tradition of land grant universities, for practically every problem that our country was facing, el Colegio's faculty and researchers developed a solution, and trained both men and women—also a major step forward--to put it into practice.

The application of scientific knowledge and the scientific method to agriculture and industry—a distinguishing feature of land grant institutions—also yielded important sources of revenue to the Puerto Rican economy. A small pilot distillery established at UPR in 1953—Planta Piloto de Ron—operated as a scientific lab to analyze all aspects of the rum making process, and made the results of its research available to rum distillers around the world. In Puerto Rico we have reasons to know that Puerto Rican rum is the best in the world, and now our U.S. visitors have a chance to confirm this fact, courtesy of university research.

Meanwhile—while all this rum testing was taking place--, the flagship Rio Piedras campus, where I was born and raised, like others of us here, trained the teachers, the scientists, the managers and planners that Puerto Rico needed, and welcomed intellectuals from Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America and the United States who faced war or political persecution in their homelands. In 1950, Puerto Rico's first School of Medicine was established at UPR: another landmark for access, opportunity, and social justice.

The second great expansion of access to higher education in Puerto Rico came about as a result of the Higher Education Act of 1965, whereby significant federal assistance for postsecondary education was made available to low-income students. In the 70s, the BEOG, later known as the Pell Grants, transformed the panorama of opportunity and the postsecondary landscape in Puerto Rico. Private institutions found an opportunity to grow and develop—and, boy, did they grow and develop!

*Excelencia* in Education, probably the best source of information about Latinos in higher education in the United States, points out in an information sheet available in your folders, that, with 93 institutions, Puerto Rico ranks among the top 15 U.S. jurisdictions in the number of colleges and universities—more than states like Michigan, Illinois, Arizona, that are much larger in size than we are!

Before I elaborate on this remarkable growth, allow me to allude to the stellar trajectory of three extraordinary private institutions whose missions were renewed and reaffirmed as they expanded their presence and influence to accommodate the interests and needs of new populations, and also to look beyond the island shores.

I refer to the islandwide expansion and Caribbean outreach of Interamerican University of Puerto Rico; to the radical reaffirmation of its original core values at the University of the Sacred Heart, formerly known as "el College de las Madres"; and to the remarkable transformation of what once was the Puerto Rico Junior College into the multicampus and multifaceted Ana G. Méndez University, that in recent years has extended its presence to the United States and Latin America.

What made these institutions not only blossom, but be fruitful and become the thought leaders that they are today? Federal funding helped make many changes possible, but in each case it was their vision of a more just and prosperous Puerto Rico, and of their responsibility to help bring it about that boosted these institutions far beyond their immediate circumstances. One dug deep; one spread wide; and one metamorphosed.

In the case of Sacred Heart University, it went from an exclusive Catholic women's college for the daughters of the well-to-do to a small and spunky faith based liberal arts institution with a strong focus on community development, women's advancement, and communications. With its far-reaching commitment to serve the communities around it, mostly low-income and immigrant, Sagrado exemplifies the "Love thy neighbor" mandate that is central to its foundational mission.

Interamerican University, also a faith-based institution, held true to the missionary zeal of its Presbyterian founders, went where the need was greatest, actively involved students in building up their institutions, and made possible professional schools such as optometry and aviation, as well as graduate degrees that had been unimaginable until their creation.

Ana Méndez is perhaps the most attuned of the institutions I know in Puerto Rico to opportunities in the national stage—"national" here referring to the U. S.—and to productive interactions, not only with our brothers and sisters in the Puerto Rican diaspora, but also with Latinos throughout the United States, and with many other members of what Lumina's president, my good friend Jamie Merisotis, has described as "the emerging majority."

And these are just three examples! Every institution represented here, from technical institutes to medical and engineering schools has an inspiring story to tell, and has made a significant contribution to the access and success of their students, and to the economic and cultural wellbeing of the communities that host them. Yet another instance: on a recent visit, I was thrilled to see how the town of Manatí has become a hub for first rate health services, thanks in no small part to the active presence of Atenas College and other institutions in the area, among them Rutgers University, as well as UPR-Río Piedras and Mayagüez.

Now let's talk about enrollment numbers. By 1977 the number of postsecondary students enrolled in private institutions in Puerto Rico was higher than in public institutions: 58,000, compared to 50,000 at UPR, whereas 10 years before, private postsecondary enrollment was half of UPR's. Private enrollment continued to grow, adding more campuses and new institutions, basically doubling the public numbers in the nineties and beyond. In the early 90s, the score was: UPR and other small publics, such as the San Juan Municipal College, and the School of Plastic Arts and Design, represented here: between 50 and 59,000, vs. a little over 100,000 in the privates. Then a public upsurge by the turn of the century. Up to the 70,000s, and the privates all the way up to 125,000. Before Hurricane Maria hit, the publics were scraping sixty thousand, and the privates a very slim hundred . . .

But wait! We are missing something here. This conversation should not be about a competition, keeping score as to who has more students, in an "I win, you lose" mentality. If anything, the competition has to be about how best to serve our country that's in danger. Or might the conversation be about working together, sharing resources now that they are scarce, and learning from each other's failures and successes?

What does this third stage we are in look like? What should it look like? I hesitate to characterize the plot and the players in this third stage—many of whom are with us today—because I am

mindful that I have spent two decades away from Puerto Rico, always paying attention to developments here and active in the field of higher education policy but, inevitably, at a distance. Let me try to sum up what I think.

Since the forties, Puerto Rico has moved from an agriculture to a manufacture-based economy, and then to pharmaceutical and medical equipment production. Nine of the leading twenty drugs in the United States—it used to be 13--, among them , Humira, Lyrica, Xarelto, and Benadryl (all the ads that we see in the news) are manufactured in Puerto Rico, as well as 50% of pacemakers and defibrillators.

At the inauguration of our admirable compatriot Waded Cruzado as president of Montana State University in 2010, I confidently said about Puerto Rico: "We are now on a path towards a knowledge-based economy, with a strong focus on biotechnology and nanomaterials. " Not long thereafter the sky fell in on us. And now we are in this hellhole of unimaginable, of unspeakable debt, with every indicator pointing downward: our young people leaving, college enrollment down by 7%--by 20% in the for profit sector!--, birth rates falling: the works! What can we do about this? Where do we go from here?

I am not going to cry for our beloved country. I am going to remind the educators here, the community leaders, the government officials and the foundation officers that again and again, access to education and to our institutions—including Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades, to be sure--has equipped our people with the tools to fight poverty, unemployment, disease, to reinvent ourselves and to recreate our sources of income. I am going to remind us that besides our own strengths, we have our strongest allies in the Puerto Rican diaspora, represented here by Ricardo Fernández and Edwin Meléndez, and by the experience of so many of us who have lived in "el monstruo" and know "sus entrañas", como dijo Martí.

My fellow Puerto Rican educators from the public and from the private sector: as we seek to protect our institutions and to maintain the learning spaces you've created, let us remember that the good of our country is our ultimate cause, that our institutions of higher education have the creativity and the human capital that our country most needs, and that we have to share, not hoard, that human capital and our other resources.

I will close with the words of Benjamin Franklin during the dark and uncertain period in 1776 that preceded a glorious moment in American history: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Thank you very much.