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Subject: Artículo del Chronicle sobre Bilingual Initiative

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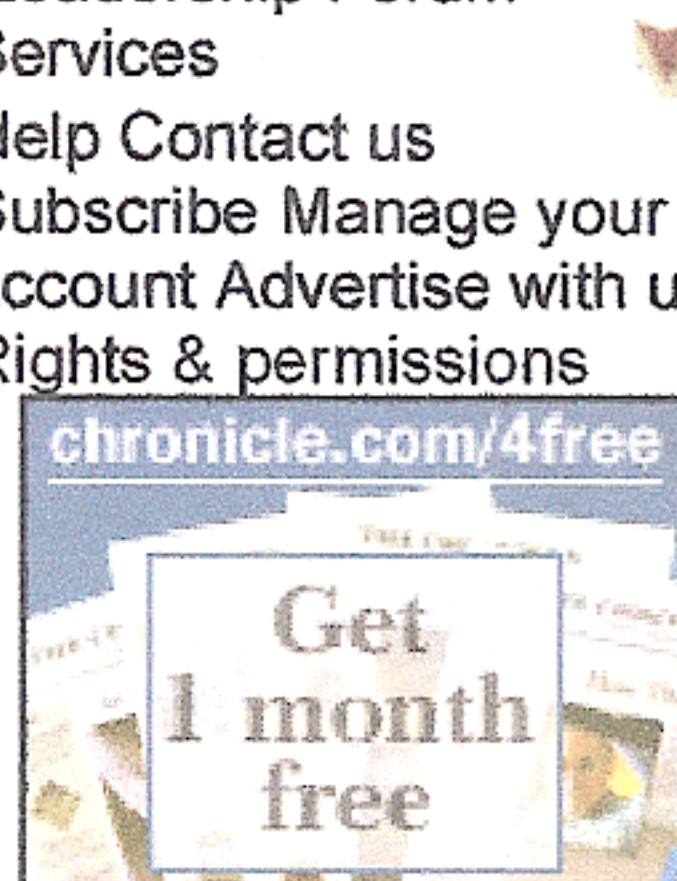
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Trying to Become 'the Hispanic Howard U.'

By PETER SCHMIDT

Cayey, Puerto Rico

Joshua Lynch-Ramírez is Puerto Rican, but only half, on his mother's side. A few of his cousins live near here, but he was born and raised in Memphis. Having grown up communicating mainly in English, he had not considered enrolling in one of this island's colleges, where almost all classes are taught in Spanish, as an option.

But thanks to an innovative program being offered here at the University of Puerto Rico at Cayey, Mr. Lynch-Ramírez and other predominantly English-speaking children of former island residents can now get degrees in their ancestral home.

The one-year transition program, called the Bilingual Initiative for Hispanic Students, provides counseling and other support services as they adjust to living and learning in Spanish. It is part of a broader effort by the University of Puerto Rico system to establish itself as a destination for Hispanic-Americans who want to return to their linguistic and cultural roots.

"It is almost like we are doing an exchange program, but we're not," says Mr. Lynch-Ramírez, 19, who says his desire to hone his Spanish-language skills brought him to this public, four-year liberal-arts college in the island's lush central mountains.

The eight participants hail from all over the United States. Most, however, have three things in common: a sense of adventure, family ties to Puerto Rico, and lower-middle-class parents who know a bargain when they see it.

The university system charges participants its in-state tuition of \$30 per credit hour, and, even though the cost is due to rise, they should be able to earn bachelor's degrees for well under \$6,000, less than many of their peers are paying for just one year at a stateside college.

The mainland's 3.9-million Puerto Ricans actually lag behind their island peers in terms of education. In 2003, just 13.1 percent of stateside Puerto Ricans over the age of 24 had bachelor's degrees, compared with roughly 25 percent of those here. The president of the University of Puerto Rico system, Antonio García-Padilla, says he believes that his system's offer of a low-cost college education can improve mainland educational attainment. Mr. García-Padilla says his main goal, however, is to build his institution as "Hispanic Howard University," a place that Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics will view as "a symbol of success, a symbol of belonging, a symbol of mainstream participation in higher education."

Brand Recognition

The university system, which did little in the past to market itself on the mainland, now translates its brochures into English. It has also set up a Washington office devoted partly to recruitment and partly to public relations, with a stateside public-relations firm to reach out to Hispanic community groups.

Mr. García-Padilla and other system officials also have begun visiting high schools in Chicago, New York, and other mainland cities with large Puerto Rican populations. He says that the university's market research shows that many Puerto Ricans continue to have a high opinion of it after moving to the mainland.

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mainland.

"The branding is very strong," he says.

Although the system does not have a precise count of its students from the mainland, administrators say that there are fewer than 200, almost all of whom are young people who have also spent most of their lives here and are already fluent in Spanish. Mr. García-Padilla wants to increase the system's enrollment of mainlanders to 1,000 in three years. As part of that effort, the system plans to open a bilingual program at the Humacao campus in the fall, and to expand a multicultural program on its flagship campus in Río Piedras. The Cayey program expects to take in 15 new students next year.

So far the Cayey program has encountered one major bump. The brochure for it said participants would take a year of general-education courses in English, but those who enrolled found that all of their classes were in Spanish -- partly because the system decided that there were not enough of them to justify setting up separate classes, and partly because the chancellor of the campus, Rafael Aragunde, was philosophically opposed to educating them separately.

"I just didn't feel like building them a ghetto," Mr. Aragunde says. "They would not have developed their Spanish."

Several of the students in the program say that, even with the English-language support services that were offered, their first semester was a struggle. Having made it through, however, they say that exposure to English made their Spanish much better.

As Melissa M. Cintrón González, 18, of Chicago, puts it: "My sister might be coming next year."

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