

The University of Puerto Rico's Bilingual Initiative: Valuable Experiences and Opportunities for Latino Students residing in the United States

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The *University of Puerto Rico's Bilingual Initiative* provides access of quality and affordable higher education for Latino students who reside in the United States. Students also improve their Spanish language skills and become fully bilingual, increasing their recruitment potential in their chosen field of study. However, beyond these benefits this Initiative has generated unique opportunities for participating students.

Contact between Latino students in the program and other Puerto Rican students on campus has allowed Bilingual Initiative students to learn about other cultures, strengthen their Spanish, reacquaint themselves with their roots and stretch their bonds with their relatives and family in Puerto Rico.

For example, Daniel Ramírez who comes from New York and studies International Business in the Humacao Campus says that his motivation in applying to the *University of Puerto Rico's Bilingual Initiative* was to learn Spanish.

"My mother is American and my father is Columbian. I wanted to learn Spanish. When I was small I only spoke English, I didn't like Spanish. All my friends were Americans. Then, when I was eleven I realized that I could not get to know my Spanish speaking family. I could say, "nice to meet you", "Thank you" and "I am hungry" things like that but not much more. This motivated me to come to Puerto Rico.

Nick Rendón, a student from Philadelphia who studies Social Sciences in the Cayey campus, expresses a similar situation. He states that his motivation was to learn Spanish, his Puerto Rican father's native language.

Lolita Knight, a resident of Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands is currently studying Architecture in the Río Piedras campus. "I joined the program because I wanted to learn Spanish. Although I can understand it, I have difficulty speaking it. Reading texts in Spanish has been a lot of work, but the experience has been good."

For Helenie Suárez, a Puerto Rican raised in Florida since the age of six the program turned out better than she expected. Heleine, who is majoring in Anthropology in the Río Piedras campus pointed out that -"In my case almost all of my courses have been in English which allowed me to understand things easier although I also speak Spanish. The problem is that I don't write it as easily which is why I was interested in the program."

For Samuel Rivera, born in Chicago of Puerto Rican parents, the experience at the University of Puerto Rico has been very good. "I like the University. I didn't have any problems with Spanish because Spanish was always spoken at home and I learned English when I started school. I only went to Puerto Rico for vacations. A year before graduating from high school, I went to see the University, liked it and returned from Michigan where I lived"- Samuel stated.

The experience with the Bilingual Initiative has not been easy for all the students and that is precisely why some of them define this experience as invaluable and enriching.

Melissa Cintrón, a Puerto Rican raised in Chicago, explained that in the beginning the change was difficult, yet she isn't sorry about her decision. "I had to return to Puerto Rico if I wanted to continue my education. It was hard to adapt to the Puerto Rican life style but when classes began, things changed. All my classroom peers were nice and friendly. They offered to help me. When I needed books I went to *Plaza Las Américas*, after getting lost several times. I was always getting lost but now I can find my way around. In addition, now I have the opportunity to share with my cousins and all the other members of my family living in Puerto Rico. In the beginning I said that I would return to the States after completing my degree but now I plan to stay on the Island. I would recommend this experience to everyone because although it is difficult in the beginning, one learns a lot about our culture, about oneself. You grow and mature thanks to these experiences. This is the best decision I have made and I have learned a lot." - Melissa said.

But the program's valuable experiences are not limited to the students because those involved in providing services also have benefitted. Dr. José Luis Cruz Rivera, Associate Vicepresident of Student Affairs expressed that "initiatives such as this one generate greater understanding among countries and increase peoples' tolerance for differing points of view. It is important to understand that being a Puerto Rican in New York and in Puerto Rico are two different things".

The *University of Puerto Rico's Bilingual Initiative for Latino Students* residing in the United States is a support service program with several components. The first and possibly most important is the economic component. Those who apply under this Initiative pay tuition as residents of Puerto Rico which is \$45.00 per credit for the current academic year.

The costs of a bachelor degree at the University of Puerto Rico are very low in comparison with similar universities in the United States. Dr. José Luis Cruz Rivera explains that "students who pursue a college education in a public university in the United States pay an average of \$12,605.00 annually for tuition, housing and meals while at the University of Puerto Rico the cost is currently around \$7,964.00. Furthermore, contrary to the state universities used to compute this average – the University of Puerto Rico is highly selective- thus the quality for the cost of attendance is significantly greater".

Depending on the campus and the number of students who need it, the program provides some of the first year freshman courses in English, to ease the transition to Spanish instruction. Additional language skills services are provided by the Linguistic Competency Centers on each campus.

The program was established to provide Latino students residing in the United States the opportunity to continue their education in a top rate institution at an affordable cost. . Dr. Diana Rivera Viera, Coordinator for the UPR Bilingual Initiative pointed out that - “The University of Puerto Rico has made a commitment to the Latino community in the United States, particularly Puerto Ricans, after discovering that the high cost of tuition in higher education institutions in the United States was limiting the opportunities for many young Latino students to further their education. The *Bilingual Initiative* is our response to that commitment”.

The program began in 2003 in the Cayey campus with only three students. Four years later the program has expanded to include the Humacao and Río Piedras campus and the number of students has increased considerably. Student support services have been strengthened, for example, assistance in housing and Spanish language support services.

Those interested in obtaining more information about the *University of Puerto Rico's Bilingual Initiative* can contact Dr .Diana Rivera Viera, Coordinator by sending an email to: bilingual@upr.edu or dirivera@upr.edu. You can also call the following number (787) 250-000, Ext. 2002 or 4613.