

Why I Became Centro's Director

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I have been part of the Centro extended family for a long time, and consider it both a grand honor and great responsibility to take on the role of director. I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you how my past work experiences have prepared me to become the director of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies.

Research Experience and Interests

I have conducted research in a wide variety of areas relating to the Puerto Rican diaspora and other Latino experiences. I have devoted considerable attention to understanding how Puerto Ricans adapt within U.S. labor markets, the causes and effects of persistent poverty, and the role of migration on their ability to adapt to demands of labor markets so as to overcome structural disadvantages. One of the main findings of this body of work was that migration, though it may have contributed to socio-economic disadvantage among first generation migrants, was not the primary factor explaining inequality and persistent poverty. Rather, the effect of structural discrimination within the labor market was more important in explaining labor market disadvantage and, by implication, Puerto Rican poverty. In this context, I compared the labor market experiences of other Latinos when explaining income inequality and poverty.

My dissertation and early research, seen through the lenses of the Puerto Rican and the Caribbean economies, focused on how small economies were affected by globalization during the economic crises of the 1970s and early 1980s. Subsequent work in this area examined the evolution of policies and institutions during the late 1980s and 1990s as the Puerto Rican and Caribbean economies adapted to globalization. Puerto Rico, A Colonial Dilemma (1993), a book that I co-edited with my brother Edgardo, became the textbook of choice for many Puerto Rican studies courses in the United States, and for many social science introductory courses in Puerto Rico. This collection of essays presents a broad overview of the social conditions and popular movements in Puerto Rico during the post-war period.

Another important area of my work involved the standing of Latinos in the U.S. labor

market. More than half of the books I authored or edited have covered the integration of Latinos into the U.S. labor market and economy. The book on Latinos and global interdependence, *Borderless Border: U.S. Latinos, Latin Americans, and the Paradox of Interdependence*, is an example of a project developed under the leadership of Frank Bonilla and Centro. This volume, which I edited in collaboration with Professor Bonilla and two other colleagues, resulted from a week-long conference held at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Italy where over twenty-five American and Latin American scholars had the opportunity to exchange ideas on the challenges posed by global integration to the socio-economic well-being, cultural assimilation, and political participation of Latinos in the United States.

My work on Puerto Ricans and Latinos in labor gave me an understanding of certain policies and interventions that could mitigate adverse dynamics and promote their more effective participation in labor markets. Early work in this area included an investigation of policies that affect the community organizations that provide Latinos with institutional connections to labor markets. One of the most interesting and perhaps influential studies that I have conducted examines the effectiveness of community-based programs that train the disadvantaged. The study of the structural factors influencing the success of the Center for Employment Training, a program primarily serving disadvantaged Latinos, highlighted some of the best practices in workforce development programs, such as the connection to employers, and the importance of job-related training and support systems.

Finally, I recently devoted attention to the contentious policy issue of Latinos and immigration. My efforts in this area are twofold. First, I have examined the labor market experience of day laborers, one of the most disadvantaged groups of Latino workers, and certainly one of the most visible and vulnerable segments of recent immigrants. In collaboration with my colleagues Abel Valenzuela and Nik Theodore, leading scholars on this topic, I recently published several monographs describing the working conditions of day laborers and the public health and safety concerns associated with their employment. Second, my colleague Martha Montero and I assembled a collection of papers addressing the changing context for Latinos, and the social implications of such changes.

Public Policy and Community Development

It must be apparent to you by now that I am very interested in how research on social conditions provides a foundation for effective public and community interventions to mitigate structural disadvantages in labor markets and the resulting economic inequality and poverty. My interest in community development and urban policy led me to seek directorship positions first at the Mauricio Gaston Institute for Community Development and Public Policy at UMass Boston (1992–98) and then at the Community Development Research Center, or CDRC, at the New School (1999–2004). As director of the Gaston Institute, my efforts were directed at building bridges and sustaining partnerships among the multiple institutions servicing Latinos in Massachusetts and the faculty and students of our campus. At the New School, my role at CDRC was to direct and engage others in a common research agenda. Community economic and workforce development provided the focus for a substantive portion of sponsored research for the center over the period of my tenure as director. An important component of

my work was to serve as a mentor to junior colleagues who needed support as they built portfolios of publications and sponsored research projects, while they advanced work in key areas of research.

Management Experience

In twelve years as administrator of school or college-wide centers, I have managed over thirty-five research, community outreach, or demonstration projects, and supervised or collaborated with numerous faculty and departments across campus. Under my leadership, both centers were successful in seeking and obtaining sponsorship of research and outreach projects from a diverse group of local and national sources. An important aspect of both centers' missions during my tenure was to provide research opportunities and training for students. Some of the most effective strategies involved facilitating project-based team building. Our staff and university faculty collaborated from project conception to writing funding proposals to completing and publishing the research. On many occasions, our projects involved collaborations with other centers from the same university or from the outside, including the Monroe Trotter Institute and the Institute for Asian American Studies at UMass Boston, the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois in Chicago, and Center for the Study of Urban Poverty at UCLA. I found these networks to provide an effective support system for our projects.

Educational Practice

Throughout my academic career I have promoted a broad range of educational activities germane to the mission of public higher education, including the mentoring and advising of doctoral, masters, and undergraduate students; the design of on-line courses; the use of client-based teaching for professional training; and the implementation of professional development programming. For example, at the Gaston Institute, we sought funding and then implemented the Latino Leadership Opportunity Program. This program provided a year-long mentoring and support group for Latino undergraduate students and trained them in leadership, computer, and research skills. At the end of the program the students participated in a week-long summer institute with students from across the nation. At the New School, I opened my elective and required masters-level courses to undergraduates from Lang College, thereby supporting a five-year combined BA and MS program. At Fordham University and UMass-Boston, I taught introductory economics literacy courses targeting undergraduate students who were hesitant to enroll in traditional microeconomics and macroeconomics courses. I used project-based techniques and the discussion of current events to foster their interest in economics as a discipline. Similarly, in the housing minorities and minorities in the workforce courses at Fordham, I asked my students to write case studies and interview practitioners involved in these areas of community development as part of the class requirements.

As an advocate of experience-based and contextual learning in higher education, I collaborated with community leaders in developing and implementing educational programs that provide students the opportunity to interact with practitioners. For instance, at CDRC we sponsored two summer institutes for community development practitioners. The first program was organized on campus and consisted of four day-long workshops, with the mornings dedicated to roundtable discussions and the afternoons to skill development workshops. The second program involved teaching a sequence of community development and nonprofit management modules over the Internet. I have taught two client-based courses (Laboratory in Issue Analysis, and an advanced seminar) and, to the extent possible, incorporate contextual learning techniques in my other courses.

Public and Community Service

Service to the community is an important component of my professional life. In Boston and New York, I

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served on numerous community and policy boards. In Boston, for instance, I served on a blue ribbon commission to guide the city's capital investments for the school system; I was a mayoral appointee on the Boston School Committee; and I served for many years as a board member of the Hispanic Office of the Program and Evaluation (HOPE), a local agency that focused on education. In New York City, I served as a board member of the United Settlement Housing, a network of about 35 housing developments across the city, and as a board member of Seedco, a national intermediary promoting best practices in community and workforce development. I recently served as a member of The Mayor's Commission for Evaluating the Feasibility of Day Labor Job Centers.

Joining Centro has allowed me the opportunity to continue and enhance my research on the Puerto Rican experience, and to place such experience in a broader context of economic and social forces affecting Latinos and other racial and ethnic groups

I believe my research interests, educational trajectory, management experience, and academic leadership complement the interests of the Centro staff and Hunter College's faculty and students. I fully embrace the academic mission and institutional objectives of Centro and I have become an active participant in the development of a vision that responds to the current organizational challenges. I am confident that the hard work of our stakeholders and staff implementing the first year of the strategic plan has set the foundation for sustaining the leadership role of the organization and strengthened links to our communities.

Unquestionably, I benefit from the daily interactions with such a well-seasoned staff and the support of a committed college leadership. I hope to make a significant contribution to the intellectual and administrative leadership of Centro in future years, and I am eager to help build the future success on what has already become a premier research center in this country and abroad.

As renowned writer and political commentator Garrison Keillor would say in his radio show, be well, do good work, and keep in touch!

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