

Towards a Shared Vision for the Center for Puerto Rican Studies

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I'd like to share some thoughts on what I consider key elements in the challenging undertaking of developing a Shared Vision for the Center for Puerto Rican Studies.

Since its inception in 1973, Centro has been a well-regarded institution serving the Puerto Rican community in general, and more specifically the students and faculty of Hunter College and CUNY, and the City of New York. Centro researchers have established a foundation for the intellectual field of Puerto Rican studies. Centro since its origin, has provided unique insights for our understanding of the diaspora and for the incorporation of Puerto Ricans into communities across the United States. Subsequently, Centro has promoted an examination of this experience in the context of the broader Latino community, and in relation to other racial minorities in the country. This intellectual contribution has been matched by a methodical effort to collect and preserve archival and other resources documenting the history and culture of Puerto Ricans in the Centro Library & Archives. Today, this award winning library and archives serves as an example of how an academic effort transcends the narrow confines of intellectual inquiry and becomes a vehicle for the empowerment of the community.

Establishing the foundation of Centro was a challenging process. Over the years the institute responded to dramatic changes in the needs of the Puerto Rican community by rethinking its strategy and adapting its programs. In this process, Centro expanded its dissemination of studies responding to the more critical questions of the time and

developed timely outreach programs responding to a highly demanding base of stakeholders, and maintaining close contact with the community. For instance, the CENTRO Journal has established itself as the leading journal of Puerto Rican culture in the United States and one of the leading journals in ethnic studies more generally. Our journal is the main vehicle exploring the dynamic relationship between the Puerto Rican culture and that of other Latinos and racial minorities, particularly African-Americans.

In addition to an active program of academic and cultural activities, Centro established and maintains the dissemination of a wide range of publications, scholarly exchange programs, a close collaboration with Puerto Rican studies departments throughout CUNY, and more recently, fellowship support for young scholars. In recent years, a well-designed web portal has become an immensely popular vehicle allowing the general public to have access to the library archival materials and other resources. Taken as a whole, the success of these strategies is an indication of a strong organization and offers a wealth of experience on how to respond to new organizational challenges.

The most important challenge to Centro, and to Puerto Rican studies more generally, is intellectual relevancy. The roots of our academic tradition can be traced back to the tumultuous 1960s, when our community rejected preconceived notions of assimilation and searched for an appreciation of its identity. Centro pioneers, Frank Bonilla and the other collaborators of the History Task Force, provided critical leadership for a community of young scholars to establish their own paradigms for an understanding of the Puerto Rican experience in all its complexity and richness. Not all agreed with them, but no one could ignore their analysis and few were able to dismiss their findings.

Over the years, the intellectual agenda evolved to view the Puerto Rican experience in relation to that of other Latinos and racial minorities. Centro collaborated with other Latino research centers in the development of a common agenda, again playing a critical leadership role. Most recently, Centro and the Centro JOURNAL more specifically, have served as a forum for some necessary "cultural wars," both within our own community and in relation to other communities, Latino and African-American. What distinguishes Centro in these processes is its vanguard role, a role that was grounded on a profound understanding of what is relevant at any given time.

Intellectual relevancy is primarily about directing research efforts to tackle the most significant problems of the time, and re-aligning organizational priorities to have academic, policy and community impact.

While in the 1980s we had an explosion of demographic and socio-economic analyses of the social context of its day, and its implication for policy and community formation, for

those of us that were part of that effort it is apparent the sharp decline in primary research. Here is a brief review of what I consider departure points towards a richer discussion on the current demographic, economic and political environment.

A changing demographic profile of the Puerto Rican community. Our core constituency of Puerto Ricans in the United States has changed tremendously over the last 30 years. The original wave of migrants to New York City and the Northeast are by now retired, with many moving back to the island, Florida, or other areas; their children, baby-boomers, are now coping with the challenges of aging parents, college bills, and wondering about how to develop a realistic approach for retirement; the most recent generations search for an identity that is now expressed in English as a primary language, and not so much in Salsa but in rhythms of hip hop and Reggaetón. Workers of all ages have moved back and forth to and from the island searching for jobs.

A growing presence of Latinos in the United States. When Centro was founded, Latinos constituted less than five percent of the total population, and Puerto Ricans and Cubans were the second and third largest national groups among Latinos. Blacks represented more than twice the Latino population with an eleven-percent share of the total. Today, Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the country, with over fifteen percent of the total population, and with other minority groups now represents about one-third of the total population. The political, economic, cultural and social implications of these broad demographic changes are tremendous and not well understood at the moment. From the political climate surrounding immigration and the status of undocumented migrants to the backlash in policies targeting disadvantaged populations, a relevant research agenda for Puerto Rican studies must include a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective regarding the social conditions of other Latinos and ethnic groups in the country, particularly of African Americans.

A declining perception the value of Puerto Rican Studies education. Given the discussion above, it is understandable why many administrators would question the value of Puerto Rican studies. Perhaps a manifestation of this perception is the merging of Puerto Rican Studies departments with other Latino or African American Studies departments over the last decade, and the decline of Puerto Rican faculty across the CUNY system. One of the goals for Centro may well be to focus on fostering new pedagogies that celebrate and value our cultural and historical heritage, and use this knowledge to affect social change and public policy.

A declining interest among social sciences scholars in producing Puerto Rican-focused research. Though it is hard to assess the number of scholarly articles and books that focus

on topics related to Puerto Ricans in the U.S. over the last decades, it is noticeable that less scholarly production is devoted to the understanding of our community in general, and more specifically to the first two demographic-driven changes described above. Several factors may have contributed to the decline, such as the lack of suitable mentors for young scholars with interests in these topics, the lack of support mechanisms for those who do decide to undertake such topics, and the lack of opportunities for the discussion and dissemination of this research. These are all areas where encouragement and support of young scholars and Centro leadership could make a marked difference.

Where do we go from here? Though the above is not a comprehensive listing of the factors that might be considered for the re-development of a strategy to support Centro's mission, we may well take them as a point of departure. Evidently, there are some core activities that Centro should continue, such as the library and its archives and collections, the journal, the website, and other outreach and dissemination activities. And we need to find ways to strengthen support for them.

A response to the changing challenges posed may involve a combination of objectives and strategies. Below are some strategies that may be part of a broader effort to respond to the challenges previously outlined:

1. Development and implementation of a research agenda that fosters understanding of the changing situation, and places this understanding in a broader context of changes affecting Latinos and African-American communities.
2. Establishment of effective partnerships with Puerto Rican studies throughout CUNY to support the development of a common intellectual agenda. This effort would take advantage and build upon the increasing operational collaboration among various Puerto Rican studies programs in CUNY, but will direct new initiatives to identify curriculum gaps and prioritizing on the various forms of scholarship (e.g., discovery, teaching and learning, artistic creativity, integration, application) that can be deployed to close those gaps.
3. Exploration and documentation of the unfulfilled potential of contextual and service-learning pedagogies and how these approaches could allow Puerto Rican studies to be more connected and responsive to the needs of our communities. In addition to making learning more student-focused and Puerto Rican studies more relevant, service and project-based methodologies provide academia with a direct link to community development, social action, and policy debates.
4. Strengthening and establishing partnerships with other Latino and African-American research centers and academic programs to examine issues of broad relevance to the

status and well-being of minorities in the country. Specifically, Centro needs to be part of a broader dialogue and research effort about immigration, racial discrimination, growing economic disparity, and asset building in our communities.

5. Strengthening the intellectual and educational pipeline of Puerto Ricans scholars and researchers. Obviously the beginning for this strategy is to expand programs such as the Latino Leadership Opportunity Program sponsored by Centro for the benefit of undergraduate students at Hunter. However, Centro must also be involved with graduate programs throughout CUNY and offer active support to young scholars who would like to share in a common research and intellectual agenda. Ideally, Centro would sponsor an ongoing seminar where young and more seasoned researchers exchange ideas and provide support to each other, and promote the formal and informal matching of mentors who will nurture the next generation of Puerto Rican scholars.

6. Strengthening and establishing partnerships with Puerto Rican community leaders to provide a formal mechanism for active participation in a common agenda. Specifically, Centro should maintain an advisory board that articulates external support for Centro, including but not limited to financial contributions, promoting archival donations, voluntary work in Centro activities and programs, and other forms of community participation.

Developing a shared vision for Centro was and continues to be a collective process. We already have started such a broad consultation process, which involved the administration, students, and faculty at Hunter College and CUNY, and other partners and stakeholders in New York City and nationally. We need to continue. With a common vision, as an organization we have a better sense of what Centro can become in response to challenging times and a road map on how to get there.

Please share your reaction to these ideas and let us know of your interest in joining us in strengthening the field of Puerto Rican studies, and our links to the community.

Best,

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Published on Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños (<http://centroweb.hunter.cuny.edu>)

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