

Effective Educational Leadership: A Case Study of a University Chancellorship  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### Abstract

Two years into the term of Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico Aguadilla Campus, the author reflects about the experience. The performance has included many integral elements as an educational leader. The first priority of the leadership team was to bring the best of our abilities to the campus in the form of a structured leadership approach. The primary goals of this approach were twofold. The first goal was to focus on the identity of the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla Campus and create a vision for present and future students. The second goal was to show respect for the decision making process in the campus as a main priority (Chancellor's Proposal, 2014). Today, the results of our management are evident. Student's retention, satisfaction and graduation rates have increased significantly. This paper presents the author's view of why the efforts were successful. This was the product of team work. The real architects of this successful production were the body of deans committed to the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla.

Effective Educational Leadership: A case Study of University Chancellorship  
in the XXI Century

Two years after becoming Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico Aguadilla Campus (UPR Government Board, 2014), the author reflects upon the experience and how it has shaped his approach to educational leadership.

The first priority of the leadership team was to bring the best of our abilities to the campus in the form of a structured leadership approach. The primary goals of this approach were twofold. The first goal was to focus on the identity of the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla Campus and create a vision for present and future students. The second goal was to show respect for the decision making process in the campus as a main priority (Chancellor's Proposal, 2014).

The vision of the campus is to be "an example of academic and organizational excellence among similar institutions, focusing on learning and success of our students and commitment in the development of critical thinking skills, social responsibility, communication and leadership that enable our graduates to be citizens to contribute to the creative and collective development of ideas, generate solutions to problems that benefit the country, especially in the northwest region" (University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla Catalogue, 2016).

Additionally, the mission of the campus is to offer university alternatives to studies by encouraging research, creativity and critical thinking about our society. This offer has to be done "in a way that is responsible, respectful and open to diverse opinions..." (University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla Catalogue, 2016, p10). It is irresponsible to implement external or internal changes without understanding the culture and ways of the campus community of the University of Puerto Rico. The current Chancellor, Dr. Nelson Arnaldo Vera Hernandez, has 34 years of experience in the Aguadilla Campus, having arrived as a student in 1982. This experience provides the insight to fulfill the mission when included in a process of leadership that is participative, integral, and open for dialogue.

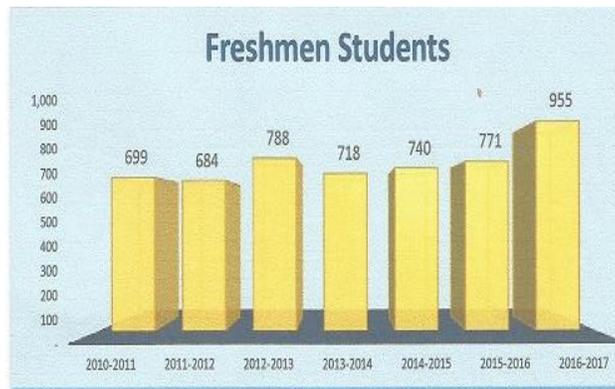
During the past two years, the leadership team has done its best to open doors to any person who wants to talk with the chancellor. Every decision made is consistently evaluated for the impact on the well-being of the University. Each decision is made with the sincere desire to maintain the vision benefit of the diverse campus community. Two examples which demonstrate the inclusive approach for both student and faculty participation include the changing of the location of the Christmas Opening Lighting so people with disabilities could participate in this activity, and the election of new directors by members from each department.

The approach of the Chancellor's leadership team at the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla is to use history, culture, science and art to expand and share our ideas. Most of our ideas of expression come from a Puerto Rican novelist and writer, Dr. Enrique A. Laguerre (Laguerre, 1941).

The colleges within the university have the same priorities regarding students. The intention is to do whatever it takes to encourage our student success. Our support for all student activities (academics, cultural, athletics and social) has been constant and consistent. This is evidenced by the participation in the University of Puerto Rico Athletics Games, and in academic activities. There have been numerous recommendation letters written and sought for internships or graduate schools. Each of these sample activities provides students with the space to share their activities, and encourages the faculty and employees to experience those activities alongside students.

Figure 1

*Freshmen Student by Year from 2010 to 2016*



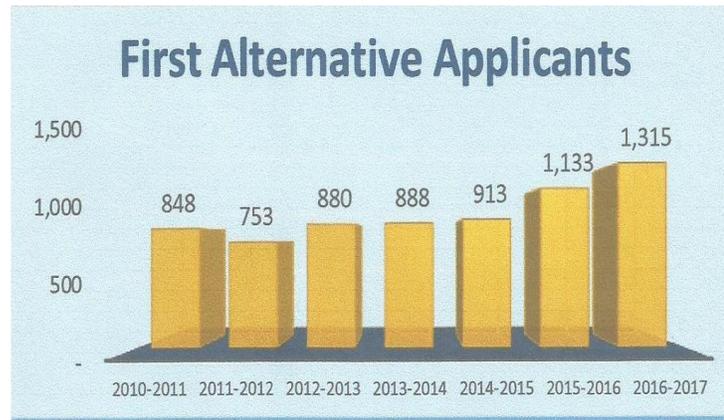
Source the Office of Planning and Institutional Research Office Fact Book, 2016

Some facts that evidence the priorities regarding students are the freshmen student enrollment from 2010 to 2016. Figure 1 provides evidence for this growth, with an increase in Freshmen students from 699 in Fall 2010 to 955 in Fall 2016.

Previously, results from student surveys and Middle State Commission of Higher Education findings indicated a lack of satisfaction with students services offices (MSCHE Findings Report, 2012). As a result, the first course of action was to increase the services in all student related offices from the beginning of enrollment up to the day of graduation. All the offices that offer student services were placed in the same building. The Admissions Office was placed near the Registrar's Office, Medical Services Office, and Bursar's Office. For the first time in UPR Aguadilla history, there is a recruiter to bring in new students. This has all paid off. The implementation of key personnel to attend to students' interests yielded an increase of new applications by the Office of Planning and Institutional Research Office (OPEI UPR Fact Book, 2016). Further evidence of the payoff in these recruitment and retention efforts is indicated in Figure 2, which shows the increase in applicants who have identified the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla as their first choice. Such applications increased 35% in six years and 31% in the most recent two years.

Figure 2

*First Alternative Applicants by Year from 2010 to 2016*



(Source: The Office of Planning and Institutional Research Office Fact Book, 2016)

In addressing the service to students' needs, it is important to establish an understanding of the student body. The UPR Aguadilla students come from the second most poverty stricken region of Puerto Rico and continue to be the first in their families to attend college. This population of students has increased by 80%, according to OPEI (OPEI UPR Fact Book, 2016). Moreover, Puerto Rico Census Data shows that university students continue to decrease since 1990's (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These are some of the reasons for our commitment to be a source of inspiration for prospective students.

Recognizing the potential challenges of retaining these students, the leadership team developed a campaign to create an esprit de corps. As part of this campaign, two slogans were created: "I am 844", which is a reference to the number of the university in the UPR system, and "The home of the sharks", which is a reference to our symbol and mascot "Sharky". Sharky is an extraordinary icon that represents the male students, and he has a partner named "CORA: The Shark Lady", who helps represent the 58% of the total enrollment students who are females. One can witness this awakening of spirit associated with these mascots by looking at the sheer number of student organizations creating shirts and posters with pictures of sharks, as well as by the wide acceptance of these slogans among the internal and external university communities. It

is amazing to witness the significant increase of new student organizations, as well as the re-certification of older ones. Today, the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla has 30 certified student organizations (University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla Catalogue, 2016), an increase from 24 in 2014.

It is important to mention that the quantity of students enrolling in the Aguadilla Campus from others areas of Puerto Rico is increasing. The retention between semesters increased by 95% and it increased by 87% in between academic years (OPEI UPR Fact Book, 2016). It is important to say that for the academic year 2016-2017, for the first time in the history of our campus, we have exceeded the number of students that have selected UPR Aguadilla as their first choice of places to study: 1,150 students. Of these 1,150 students, 950 are registered and seated in classrooms.

One of the goals of the leadership team is to give students a comprehensive education in academic, social, and professional aspects to reach their goals and needs. As a response, we strengthened community involvement by the student organizations. Our job is to provide resources to mentor, educate, and guide the student population to complete their studies. In addition, this trained workforce will eventually go on to become professionals and contribute to their community.

A productive country has to have a prepared and successful working force. Introducing the program of a First Work Experience (FWE) and increasing the courses directed towards research and undergraduate practice provides the space for students to responsibly integrate their skills. We have served 160 students in the FWE in a year and a half.

We started the program of strategic school visits with all the executive staff, with the objective that the university goes to the high schools to find the best students. We encourage the student organizations from all the academic departments to be part of this initiative, specifically the northwest side of Puerto Rico. We emphasize the public high schools are feeder schools, but we don't leave out the private schools. Eighty-five percent of our students come from public schools and that number is still growing. We anticipate expansion to 3,500 admitted and

registered students in five years. Our benchmark for the past two years is 3,400. UPR Aguadilla has the qualified faculty to offer all the courses, but we have to think about how to increase future programs.

The campus administration is undergoing the process of increasing the space for students and for programs in high demand. As of yet, we have not reduced the space for currently enrolled students. Further, and thanks to the work of the Admission Office, we have analyzed the inclination to expand the programs in higher demand. We are not forgetting the programs in less demand; they also receive attention from the effort. We created the Associate Degree in Aeronautics and Aerospace Technology in August 2015. In fact, with a vision of the country, we have contributed to the development of the programs of the Certificate Aeronautics Technical A (CAT A) to provide academic and administrative support to the Institute of Aeronautics and Aerospace of Puerto Rico.

We also developed some minors in programs with low demand, such as the four-year program degree in English Education. These minor concentrations are in *Writing English Skills* and *Translation*. Likewise, the Office Systems Department with was also integrated with two other minors: *Medical Billing* and *Law Office*. In addition to these efforts, we maintain the support to the departments and programs with greater demand, such as Biology and Environmental Technology.

We have an immediate need to develop some academic areas. In 1983, the students in the Humanities and Social Sciences departments protested with the slogan “CORA 4 years”. This protest was the impetus to see the first bachelor’s degree. Today we offer sixteen separate degree opportunities. Our commitment is to support any efforts of departments to encourage the students to finish their bachelor’s degree. An exciting development is the Social Science Department has drafted a proposal for a bachelor’s degree to graduate its students close to their places of residence. Additionally, the Humanities Department focused its efforts to expand the transfer program, and proposed a bachelor’s degree program. The OPEI, Academic Affairs Deanship and

the Budget Office state that the Social Science Department is likely to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Other academic departments are expanding and increasing innovation in their programs. One of them is the Spanish Department. Initial conversations with their partners in the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez are moving forward; a transfer program has been signed and they are working on a proposal of another bachelor degree to be presented for the 2016-2017 academic year.

We have been establishing partnerships with some national and international universities. Some examples include the National University of Chiapas in Mexico, other UPR campuses (Arecibo, Ponce, Mayagüez, and Río Piedras), government agencies and nonprofit organizations.

We continue to expand the services of the Professional Studies and Continuous Education (DECEP) by offering community services with professional certifications in bioethics, Puerto Rican national dances, drama, tourist guides, languages, tax preparations, medical billing, and others. We expanded the courses for the external community through formalized agreements with Fomento Industrial, the Astronomic Society of Puerto Rico; the Department of Education of Puerto Rico and municipalities likes Isabela and Aguadilla. We have started to have partnership conversations with the City of Moca, the Infant Diabetes Society, the Department of the Family, and the Museo del Mundillo.

Clearly these academic initiatives must be integrated into a process of construction, reconstruction and improvements of the physical facilities. We know that UPR Aguadilla has to grow academically and increase our physical facilities.

We proudly state that the first impression for visitors to our campus is positive because of the garden areas and exemplary building maintenance. We have created gardens and buildings are painted on a regular basis. The preventive maintenance program prepared by the Office of Physical Resources is ambitious. The following are critical to this plan: 1) to improve the physical spaces of the institution with a plan to remodel bathrooms in which eight were fully remodeled and comply with the ADA and OPPI regulations; 2) construction of recreational areas

of the Department of Business Administration and the Department of Education; and 3) improvements to sidewalks behind the Library and soon in the Department of Humanities. There are still items that would improve our physical space. There are plans for a multi-floor parking lot with the help of private sector; we have a new telephone switchboard; and we began efforts to build an indoor court with the campus and the central government through capital improvement budget funds. A future goal is the installation of solar panels to reduce cost and provide ecofriendly electricity, thereby improving the lighting system and air conditioning in mass spaces. There are constant improvements to classrooms and faculty offices in different departments. All policies and requirements are in compliance with the law and as identified by audits by such as Fire Department Permit, requirements eviction, a basic plan in case of emergency, the annual safety report regulations, updating parking and map of the facilities enclosure. We finished remodeling the roof of the Department of Business Administration and the Student Center because of water leaks.

Even with all this work for the students, it was not enough. It was time to examine the faculty and non-faculty human resources. The history of UPR Aguadilla shows that our professors are extraordinary teachers who are responsive to the administration. The ideal faculty is one who creates proposals and projects like *Vida Marina* (protection of sea turtles and beaches), el *Centro de Aprendizaje y Adiestramientos en Agricultura y Ciencias Relacionadas* (workshops of agriculture and related sciences) and the *Sistema Híbrido de Energía Renovable* (eco energy systems), el *Coro de la UPR Aguadilla* (UPR Aguadilla Choir) and the Concert Band. These teams represent the best of the campus: professionals committed to excellence. Their work honors all of the UPR Aguadilla. Each of these proposals has received our support. One example of this support is the increase of the budget for the *Fine Arts Program*, which is distinguished nationally and internationally. There are also updated agreements to protect the marine ecosystem in our region, and all proposals for external funds directed to research.

Teaching has been strengthened by granting tenure positions to all faculty members who have more than 8 years in their positions, excellent assessments, extraordinary educational

quality in teaching, and student assessment. Following a priority order, there are eight new teaching tenure positions in the following departments: Chemistry, Electronics, English, Business Administration, Office System, Mathematics, Social Sciences, and Library. These positions strengthen our accreditation.

Further, we raised the number of faculty members with doctoral degrees. Prior to our chancellery, the average was 27%. It is now 36% (OPEI UPR Fact Book, 2016). The new doctorates represent different areas of knowledge such as Applied Chemistry, Practical Philosophy, History of Art, Online Education, English Education as a Second Language, and Business Education.

We signed study proposals and exchange programs with teachers from national and international institutions. The Dean of Academic Affairs communicates, maintains relations and experiences with the universities or professional institutions. These institutions are located in different areas, such as the College of Chemists of Puerto Rico, through Dr. Carlos Ruiz Martinez (past president of the College), and the American Sociological Association, through the chancellor.

As a state university, the campus personnel must comply with a professional development related to the Office of Government Ethics, ADA, Internal Audit, Office of the Comptroller and others. The proposal is to institutionalize faculty development days to have time and space for these initiatives. Conferences, workshops, and other activities for faculty and staff have been developed to meet the requirements of the Office of Government Ethics and others. Faculty Development Day includes part of the activities for these purposes aimed at teachers and non-teaching personnel.

Another initiative was to have departmental members of faculty (full-time or fill-in positions) and support staff in offices recommend, among their peers, people who should run their offices or departments. There was much discourse and advisement that went into that process. Today, all offices have chosen their directors and have respected the decision of the

departments of Social Sciences, English, Electronics, Business Administration, Library Office, and Information Technology.

The goal was to decrease the number of part time teaching staff, even though they are a necessary element on campus. We created a list of possible professors and distributed courses in order of seniority, areas of specialty, average peer evaluations, student and functions inherent to teaching. The practice of using seniority and merit to assign course loads was well received.

The non-teaching staff is governed by contractual agreements by the Central Administration. There have been moments of conflict, but through dialogue the situations were handled and solved. Effective communication has been and remains the mechanism to address all claims, mishaps or situations that occur. Issues regarding transfers, reclassifications, highlights and other actions are approached by respecting collective agreements. Meetings between the Union of Workers, the HEEND and Teachers Association have been constant and obvious to solve conflicts. Presently, there appears to be little conflict with the labor unions and the university.

The experience as bargaining process and mediator of labor conflicts prepared us for these moments. We have to say that the Chancellor was president of the Independent Union of the Land Administration Employees from 1986-1991. This practice leads us to conclude that most of the labor-management problems occur because of ignoring of contractual agreements. We set up workshops and conferences for supervisors, office managers and others about the details of these contractual arrangements. Today, staff members of the various offices have attended workshops, conferences and seminars to enhance knowledge on these issues. We extend our thinking when, in meetings of chancellors, we have recommendations that align with the Central Office of Human Resources. Conflict is inevitable; the question is to know how to deal with conflict so each party is valued.

Our native tongue is Spanish, and we use English as a second language. It is therefore important to correctly learn Spanish in order to learn other languages. This approach is aimed at the correct expression of our culture and exposure. It is proposed to establish the Culture of the

Northwest Center Study. It starts with agreements with the Industrial Development Handicraft Workshops, the conferences at the Bobbin Lace Museum and the House of Culture Pepiniana Concert Band. We established partnerships with agencies dedicated to these purposes. One example of this is the Puerto Rican Endowment for the Humanities and its director, Dr. Cesar Rey.

Our campus activities are enhanced by a relationship maintained by UPR Aguadilla staff with the *Dialogo* newspaper and the *University Radio* (WRTU 89.7 FM). Recently, WTRU 89.7 FM accepted our proposal to establish a radio program which will be named “Coloquio Aguadillano” and to house a radio cabin inside our campus. There are already prepared faculty to use as resources for this partnership.

We established an agreement with the company *Alterna Communications* in order to publicize what happens in UPR Aguadilla. All of our success stories are published frequently with UPR Central Administration media. Social and natural sciences scientists have presented their studies and work, as well as artists, musicians, and writers. It has also highlighted the talent we have in athletics, choir, band concerts and other activities.

*Alterna Communications* raised our presence in national and international notes and newspaper articles. Our presence is also highlighted in other Puerto Rican media such as radio and television. Every month, the amount of diffusion of information is analyzed among the UPR campuses. UPR Aguadilla has been among the top four in all monthly comparisons.

We have inserted ourselves in the outside community to the UPR Aguadilla through the resources we have. The work done in the immediate Ramey Base community demonstrates this initiative. We have service learning with the community newspaper, we provide free plays and art functions through the fine arts program, and we strengthen the links with sports organizations and security. Also, our work with the northwest region has been evidenced through the link with the *Latin American Union of Writers*, with *Puerto Rico Zoo* and *Rio Camuy Cave Park*.

UPR Aguadilla is exploring alternatives with the UPR Central Administration to analyze the possibility of providing medical and psychological services through dispensaries that are in

different campuses. This idea was presented at a meeting of chancellors and staff of the Presidency. The goal is to increase revenues and to provide services to the outside community. There is a continuous effort to analyze existing practices and to transform.

Another proposal is to provide accounting services through student interns under faculty supervision. This particular initiative will assist in filling federal tax and the Puerto Rico Department of Internal Revenue for local taxes.

The third proposed community service is to create the Editorial UPRAG. This began with services to internal and external community members generating income for the campus. The community may also sponsor their products or services and donate to the Campus. This has been established in internal rules for managing sponsorship.

Another successful element is to rent university facilities to service the external community. Again, through *Regulation of Sponsorships*, the university can receive free sponsorship through radio, television and activities. Previously, few institutions knew that we could grant spaces and facilities for their activities. Today, more people and institutions know that we offer more than academics, and that they can rent our facilities for other activities or events.

The problems in education have always been present in the Puerto Rican mindset. A mid-twentieth century database showed that about 50% of children out of school and were illiterate, and only 1% of college students finished their studies and other requirements (Puerto Rico Statistics US Census Bureau). On campus today, we only hear silence about this issue. Our student body represents the best of the country and is demonstrated in studies carried out by the office of OPEI. We have a new reality.

We must continue working so that our extraordinary students become enlightened in the fields of technology, science, culture and social studies. In fact, most of our staff of teachers with doctoral degrees today are the result of UPR Aguadilla. In other words, we consume what we produce. We proudly say that Dr. Vera Hernandez is the first chancellor alumni of the campus

and his student number is 844-82-5743. Remember that 844 means the code number for the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla.

We must continue to support students to finish college. Prior to our initiatives, there was little retention semester after semester. The reasons are vast. Some students reported leaving because of "unknown reasons". In the past, this may have been attributed to student conflicts. Today, 95% of the student body is retained between semesters and 92% is retained between academic years. The number has increased significantly. The truth is that we know our students and they are not traditional. They work, have a family and depend on a low income to sustain their studies. As a result, we intentionally coordinate all scheduled activities by academic departments and student groups. Everyone is encouraged to recognize various situations and serve them immediately.

Other elements have been and will be present in our management. We maintain a culture of success and production at UPR in Aguadilla. It is seen in the number of students who are hired. With a low budget, we have maximized operations expenses that increased the quality and beauty of the campus. We have established an organizational culture so the body of deans has a participatory action and presence throughout the university work. This allows for a culture of internal and external service to the university community.

Collaboration contributes to the collective benefits of UPR Aguadilla. This has allowed us to do better than in previous years in government academic inspections (MSHC, CEPR and academic programs by professional agencies). All inspections have demonstrated significant improvement. In the Office of Information Technology, processes dating from 2008 have been updated. The experience of retired staff has been vital to matters related to accreditation and periodic reports to MSHC. The Association of Retired Personnel of UPR Aguadilla is actively involved in the internal management of the campus by contributing their knowledge. Retirees contribute greatly to the university; they represent management and institutional success.

The latest proposals were directed to the immediate duties for the Chancellor. First, the Chancellor kept teaching courses such as SOCI 3261 *Introduction to Sociology*, SOCI 3335

*Social Problems of Puerto Rico, SOCI 3265 Research Methods in Social Sciences.* This practice allows the Chancellor to keep close to students' perspectives, as well as those of non-teaching staff and academic departments. In addition to the teaching courses, the Chancellor continues to present both nationally and internationally, publish books used in various campuses and write press articles. All of this is accomplished without abandoning the responsibilities as Chancellor. Second, we used the official car for official purposes only and the car stays in the campus during weekends. As evidence, the official vehicle has traveled less than 16,000 miles during our management period (two years). Third, the team selected is committed to the mission, vision and objectives of the university. The meritorious members of the UPR Aguadilla community were granted the opportunity to meet the historical responsibility of captain of this ship in the UPR fleet. Dr. Herminia Alemañy Valdez, Academic Affairs Dean; Dr. Carlos Ruiz Martinez, also on Academic Affairs Dean's Partner; Dr. Migdalia Gonzalez Guerra in Student Affairs Dean's Office; Mr. Luis Alvarez Ruiz from Administrative Affairs Dean and Mrs. Carmen A. Rodriguez Perez as Executive Assistant have demonstrated exemplary academic credentials and commitment and help lead the charge.

Humbly, the real architects of this successful production were the body of deans committed to the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla. We have established mutual trust in both directions and it has allowed us to do what has been proposed. Without them, we have no reason to keep this ship moving. In fact, we appreciate the respect in our criteria selection of this successful crew by the Central Administration of the University of Puerto Rico. They are professionals with dignity and justice. They show that they have been the right choice for the entire university campus community.

This paper presents some ideas about what has been done for the past two years as Chancellor. The UPR Aguadilla leadership team believes in a country of quality and has a vision of what a university should be.

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