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Critical Junctures and Puerto Rican Studies

Pedro Cabán

Many of the contributors to this volume were directly engaged in the seminal struggles to establish Puerto Rican studies and in the process sought to redefine the educational mission of City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York (SUNY) systems. During periods of budgetary crisis of the 1980s, faculty in unison with students and community members stubbornly resisted attempts to dismantle Puerto Rican Studies departments and undermine their curriculum. In the 1990s they negotiated the treacherous ideological terrain of the culture wars to defend the content and role of Puerto Rican Studies in the context of disinvestment and political attacks against public higher education. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century nativists are waging a virulent right wing attack on Latinos—newly racialized as a threat to the Anglo-American nation. This paper is a preliminary discussion on evolution of Puerto Rican Studies in the changing American university.

In this essay, I will present some preliminary thoughts on the evolution of Puerto Rican studies in the context of critical junctures: turbulent changes at the national and state levels that undermine existing institutions. Mindful of the editor's charge "to create a record of the different educational and intellectual struggles that engaged members of our generation," and to capture the "personal experiences and institutional challenges in the academy and different aspects of the process of developing and institutionalizing" Puerto Rican Studies as an academic field, I will also briefly comment on my experiences as a professor who has been an advocate for programs for the study of US racialized communities.

In his examination of the evolution of the communications and media field, Robert McChesney (2007) observed that critical junctures for the field occur when a series of conditions, including political crises, emerge that undermine existing institutions. We can draw a parallel by tracing how a radically altered national political economy challenges the legitimacy of public higher education and how Puerto Rican Studies has responded to the resulting changes within the university. Looking at the development of Puerto Rican Studies in the context of such disruptive changes is of heuristic utility since these changes profoundly affect the university's treatment of race and ethnic studies departments and perceptions of their academic missions.

The three conjunctures that I identify are: 1) the sustained social ferment and political unrest of the late 1960s through the 1980s, 2) the decade of the 1990s approximately through the end of the George W. Bush administration, and 3) the period beginning with the Barack Obama

administration, although space constraints for this article prevent me from including a discussion of the third period, which is still unfolding.

Changes in the university are manifested in a variety of ways. But for the purposes of this article my critical concern is the type of knowledge that is produced and validated. This issue is not as benign as it may appear. Integral to the question of university-sanctioned knowledge are a series of critical considerations: what faculty to hire, promote, and retain, what graduate programs to support, what research to support with internal funding sources, what resources to allocate for instruction, curriculum development, and academic programming. This is merely a sampling of issues of genuine immediacy for academic programs and departments.

The First Conjuncture: Global and Domestic Challenges to US Hegemony and Racial Inequality

Puerto Rican Studies was born during a moment of social and political crisis in the United States. The crisis that bedeviled the government and other institutions was precipitated by Third World challenges to US global dominance and the eroding legitimacy of key US institutions. During the 1960s endemic student confrontations with the increasingly corporatized and militarized universities, urban uprisings of oppressed racialized communities, cross-racial civil and human rights movements, and the eroding capacity of the state to contain mass opposition to the Vietnam War created the strategic opportunity for student militants to effectively press their case for the creation of race and ethnic studies departments.

Puerto Rican militancy and protest were components of this broader popular challenge to state authority not seen in the United States since the 1930s. Puerto Rican activism erupted on a variety of strategic fronts: the Puerto Rican independence movement, urban community-based organizations that demanded reform of public education and delivery of state-mandated social services, and an assault on the university for its role in perpetuating the production and dissemination of knowledge that preserved the racialized, inegalitarian social order.¹

The field of Puerto Rican Studies emerged during a period fundamental crisis for the Puerto Rican community in New York. The state had failed to adequately address the critical social, public health and education needs of this economically marginalized community. Puerto Ricans realized that continued quiescence would erode their capacity to challenge and transform the institutions responsible for their oppression as a racialized people. The public university was implicated in the marginalization of Puerto Ricans and accused of providing an education designed primarily to assimilate them and to uncritically embrace the

dominant narratives that legitimized the inegalitarian social order. Puerto Ricans were determined to contest and rewrite a narrative that portrayed them in a condition of perpetual colonial subjugation. From its inception Puerto Rican studies was a social movement of resistance and national affirmation that erupted during a moment of institutional uncertainty on how to react to a population thought incapable of affirming their rights.²

In an article on universities and race and ethnic studies programs, I wrote that the conceptual linchpin of Black and Latino student movements “was its analysis of the relationship between university-sanctioned forms of knowledge and racial power.” Activists “were keenly aware the university was a repository of political and academic power, and of its enduring connections to the US state and corporate capital.” They understood that the university was “directly involved in perpetuating racial and social inequities,” and they sought to “acquire some of its resources and reinvest these to fight racial oppression” (Cabán 2007, 6). Faculty engaged in Puerto Rican Studies at the time embraced these tenets as central to their academic mission. But the relationship between university administrations and the nascent Puerto Rican Studies departments was fraught with tension; the latter being treated as academic parvenus whose unexpected arrival was barely tolerated. The university obviously rejected the activist scholarship grounded in principles of human emancipation and social justice as antithetical to its self-proclaimed objective quest for knowledge.

CUNY in particular was the “major focus of the Puerto Rican drive toward self-realization and institutional articulation” (Bonilla and González 1973, 225). Students decried CUNY’s alienation and aloofness from the surrounding Puerto Rican communities and the university’s utter lack of civic responsibility and accountability. This disregard for a community whose labor and taxes helped build the thriving economy of the region energized Puerto Ricans to militantly demand that academic programs on the Puerto Rican experience be established in the CUNY system, Rutgers University, and the Buffalo and Albany campuses of SUNY. These programs were essential for creating an emancipatory and socially relevant scholarship and pedagogy. African Americans and Chicanos also successfully fought for the establishment of comparably liberating academic programs. In the annals of the American university, no academic field of study had originated as a response to student militancy from racialized communities. Seldom have I felt the urgency for institutional transformation and the absolute certainty in the legitimacy of the task during that period of student activism.

When I began working at Fordham University in the Bronx in 1978,

the Puerto Rican Studies Program was on a precarious academic footing since its director, whom I replaced, had not been granted tenure. I nonetheless was relatively confident the program would endure since influential Jesuits on campus felt the university had an obligation to provide its growing Puerto Rican student body an academic space to learn about its history and culture. Puerto Rican Studies at Fordham was always a modest enterprise. At its peak the program had three core faculty, despite periodic requests for additional lines. Given its limited resources, the program could have been relegated to the margins of the university's intellectual life. Yet it overcame its isolation and marginality by building alliances with the Peace and Justice Studies Program, the African American Studies Program, the Hispanic Research Center, and politically progressive faculty. In informal faculty workshops and reading groups, we refined our analysis of the American university's role in legitimizing and sustaining an inequalitarian economic order and racial hierarchy, and collectively organized activities to heighten awareness of the positive role that race and ethnic studies could have in a liberal arts education.

In addition to sponsoring the Puerto Rican Students Association, the Puerto Rican Studies Program, along with other campus units, supported the Progressive Student Alliance and Pax Christi in their campaign to stop CIA recruitment on campus. During the height of the Central American wars, the program helped spearhead a campus-wide program of activities in support of the people of El Salvador, and it sponsored conferences and speakers on Puerto Rican-related matters.³ Lloyd Rogler, director of the Hispanic Research Center, and Joseph Fitzpatrick, S.J., who had done extensive research on the Puerto Rican community of New York, were proponents of the program and allies on a number of initiatives.

During the first critical juncture, Puerto Rican Studies programs retained their tenuous hold in the academy and continued to fortify their knowledge base. The departments often were consumed in the debilitating bureaucratic politics of academe, while simultaneously developing a curriculum, teaching large classes, recruiting faculty, continuously agitating for marginal expansion of limited budgets, and seeking allies to develop survival strategies when the state imposed financial cuts on the public universities. A number were shuttered during this period. These were the routine dynamics of most Puerto Rican Studies departments, all of which were virtually under a state of siege as they struggled to sustain their operations as administrators continued to slash budgets and enforced program consolidation to economize (Rodríguez-Fraticelli 1989).

While the struggles for institutional survival were often solitary affairs, Puerto Rican Studies scholars created intellectual spaces for sustained and

serious deliberation on the future of the field. Initiatives such as the Puerto Rican Research Exchange, the Puerto Rican Council on Higher Education (PROCHE), and Centro's Higher Education Task Force provided essential spaces for identifying research priorities and for sharing ideas among supportive colleagues. The rigorous intellectual exchanges helped sharpen my understanding of the evolving research directions in the field. During the formative period of Puerto Rican Studies, the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños under Frank Bonilla's direction was a critical mooring for the larger Puerto Rican Studies research and activist endeavors. Its robust academic agenda opened new lines of inquiry and promoted dialogue across disciplines and intellectual camps. Centro's scholarly productivity, growing library holdings, conferences and community events, and increasing prominence provided much-needed validation for Puerto Rican Studies programs to counter a university administration that was too eager to dismiss their academic validity.

Although progress in expanding Puerto Rican Studies' institutional imprint was glacial, most faculty would have agreed with Jesse Vázquez's observation written in the late 1980s that "Since the 60's ethnic studies have become firmly established as legitimate academic courses at most universities, and are a key element in the effort to include minorities in our national life." But he observed with some concern the shift "from the political and social urgency that characterized their founding," and warned about their transformation "toward the kind of program that conforms to and is consistent with traditional academic structures" (1988a, A48). This seeming path toward absorption and validation of the knowledge production in Puerto Rican Studies had the related consequence of diminishing "the central intellectual and social issues that brought ethnic studies into the university in the first place" (Vázquez 1988b, 24). The diversity of approaches and broad range of analytical concerns contrasted with the unity of purpose and urgency of the activist academic agenda that was central to the early Puerto Rican Studies movement.

In reality, Puerto Rican Studies was developing multiple research venues that were located outside the highly contested original location of struggle, the colleges of liberal arts and sciences. Research with more immediate policy import for the Puerto Rican community was increasingly situated in research centers, professional schools (particularly education, health, and social work) and law. Puerto Ricans were also actively creating a distinctive urban-based cultural identity through the arts, which made increasing inroads into the academy through its alliance with Puerto Rican Studies programs. As early as 1982 some of the leading Latino social scientists in charge of Chicano research centers and the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños were setting the foundations for

the Inter-University Project for Latino Research (IUPLR). The capacity to coordinate and direct substantial research energies to studying the economic and social conditions of Latinos(as) in the United States was firmly established by the early 1990s. The generous support IUPLR obtained from foundations served not only to validate its *Latino-focused* research, but made evident the policy relevance of this work.

Despite seeming abandonment of an activist scholarship that had utility for beleaguered Puerto Rican communities, the new research built the intellectual foundations for radically rethinking the nature of Puerto Rican colonial subjectivity. Puerto Rican Studies employed interdisciplinary methodologies that yielded new findings that exposed the inherently biased and distorted assumptions that guided university-sanctioned research on our community. The research led to major advances in pedagogy, a reconceptualization of Puerto Rican subjectivity beyond the confines of cultural nationalism, dialogue with other race/ethnic and disciplines and eventually set the foundations for Latino Studies. One cultural theorist captured the transition that was unfolding during this period. "The presumed seamlessness and discreteness of group identities characteristic of earlier Latino perspectives have given way to more complex, interactive, and transgressive notions of hybrid and multiple positionalities" (Flores 1997, 213). Research based on the notion of exceptionalism wrought from the domination, displacement and oppression that was constitutive of the American empire was challenged for its superficial comprehension of the complexity of the Latino condition.

Notwithstanding the considerable scholarly advancement of the field, Puerto Rican Studies programs and departments were under siege by budget-conscious administrators. Detractors opposed to academic programs in race and ethnic studies resurrected earlier portrayals of Puerto Rican Studies as an inconsequential academic field whose scholars had little to contribute to the general store of knowledge the academy valued and rewarded. But by the late 1980s the perception of Puerto Rican Studies as an academic field inclined to advocacy rather than to critical inquiry could no longer be sustained in the face of the mounting scholarship.

The Second Critical Juncture: Demographic Transformation, the Neoliberal University, and Rethinking Puerto Rican Studies

The second critical conjuncture was marked by neoconservative attacks against multiculturalism and ethnic studies, the ideological assault on the liberal university, the erosion of affirmative action, the demographic transformation of the nation, and the episodic fiscal crisis of local states. During this period there were unmistakable indications of

the creeping neoliberal reconfiguration of higher education. Ironically, the period was also characterized by the continued scholarly maturation of Puerto Rican Studies, and the institutionalization of Latino Studies as an academic field. Puerto Rican Studies underwent a robust change in research directions, and its scholars exercised a leadership role in the development of Latino Studies.

Publication outlets for Puerto Rican-oriented scholarship were difficult to secure during the formative years of Puerto Rican Studies. Only a few journals specialized in the publication of race and ethnic studies research. The editors of the discipline-oriented professional journals often eschewed publishing ethnic studies research that did not hew to the concerns of the established academic fields. But by the 1990s race and ethnic studies scholars had established alternative outlets for their research after encountering skepticism and resistance by the mainstream journals. Particularly important venues for publication on the Puerto Rican experience included the *Journal of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños*, the *Latino(a) Research Review*, the original *Latino Studies Journal*, *Callaloo*, and *Race and Ethnicity*.

During this second conjuncture, feminist, sexuality, cultural, and social theorists continued to interrogate the normative, insular, and overwhelmingly male-centric underpinnings of Chicano and Puerto Rican Studies. Their critique resulted in a broadening and redirection of the field's analytical foci and research priorities. In a widely published article, Angie Chabram Dernerseian (1994) criticized the essentialist discourses of Chicano Studies. "So powerful is the hegemonic reach of dominant culture that fixed categories of race and ethnicity continue to be the foundation, the structuring axis around which Chicana/o identities are found" (273). A similar introspection was recasting the research priorities and dominant colonial narrative in Puerto Rican Studies.

While research on the history and political economy of Puerto Rico and its people was not abandoned, other areas of inquiry that were not bounded by the particularities of national minorities and the legacies of US imperialism and territorial conquest gained prominence. Research on race and class, gender and sexuality, identity and representation, labor markets and income inequality, globalization and transnationalism occupied the energies of contingents of scholars and further eroded the hegemony of nationalist anticolonial paradigms. Vibrant debates exposed an awareness that Chicano and Puerto Rican Studies needed to go beyond the study of its particular forms of oppression as exceptional, to one that looked at the array of forces that comparably impacted our communities to search for unifying themes. In the process, this robust, theoretically vibrant adoption of new approaches and new questions, created

a fruitful environment for the emergence of Latino Studies. The diversity of research areas actually served to enhance the academic credibility of the field. Moreover, this development significantly expanded the opportunities for dialogue and collaboration with colleagues in newly evolving subfields and specializations in the traditional academic units.

Ironically, the rationale for sustaining autonomous Puerto Rican Studies departments and programs came under siege partially as a consequence of the new scholarship. The original basis for these departments and programs, which included claims to exceptionalism attributable to Puerto Ricans' singular condition as a colonized subject became unsustainable. University administrators, who had persistently expressed their reservation with stand-alone race and ethnic studies departments, grasped the political significance of the scholarly differentiation. Puerto Rican Studies was once again portrayed as the residual legacy of a period of unwelcomed activism that catered to a Puerto Rican population that was rapidly being displaced by other Latin American and Caribbean people. Institutional survival dictated that a number of Puerto Rican Studies departments reconfigure themselves as Latino Studies and expand their curriculum to include the history and culture of the growing student populations from Mexico, Central America, and the Dominican Republic.

This robust development of the scholarship occurred in the context of a fiscal crisis of the state and disinvestment in public education. In an atmosphere in which resources were to be judiciously apportioned, senior administrators were more inclined to shield the traditional departments whose scholarship they valued. It was disconcerting that many senior administrators continued to exhibit a woeful lack of understanding of the importance of a program or department structure for sustaining research in race and ethnic studies. They often failed to grasp that the traditional discipline-based structure, which was sanctioned as the *sine qua non* for serious research, actually discouraged the collaborative, interdisciplinary and innovative methodological approaches Puerto Rican Studies scholars relied upon to conduct their research. The dramatic demographic transformation that was reshaping the Latino presence in the northeast and the evident demise of student and community militancy by the mid-1990s at CUNY and SUNY, were additional factors for rethinking the role of Puerto Rican Studies in the university. The 1990s were a period of consolidation of Puerto Rican Studies departments and programs, as many reworked their curricula to address the history of Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean people who had recently settled in the region. In addition to these challenges, Puerto Rican Studies was engulfed in the maelstrom of the culture wars. In the

1990s neo-conservatives launched a particularly virulent attack against multiculturalism and race and ethnic studies program. These programs were falsely accused of promoting racial balkanization and undermining national unity since their major purpose was to indoctrinate students in identity politics (Wilentz 1996).⁴

In the context of diminishing public support for CUNY, administrators could now assert budgetary exigency to end the continuance of race and ethnic studies as separate academic units. The departments continued to labor in often hostile political and institutional environments. By the mid-1990s the political climate was favorable for the CUNY administration to terminate one of the most visible and long-standing ethnic studies departments in the system.⁵

My arrival at Rutgers University in 1990 coincided with the emergence of a national dialogue on the trajectory of Chicano and Puerto Rican Studies and relationship to Latin American area studies. Chicano and Puerto Rican scholars, many of whom were trained as Latin Americanists, began to question the implications of studying Latino populations in the United States in isolation from their countries of origin. They pointed out the limitations of research that ignored the import of Latin American immigrant communities in the United States on the national dynamics of their home countries. The interdisciplinary research that was fundamentally reconstituting the focus of Chicano and Puerto Rican Studies from the national and culturally immutable toward transnationalism and hybridity strengthened this call for a reconceptualization of Latin American Studies. Latino Studies advocates lobbied the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) for a Latino Studies section within the association. In 1992 a group of Latino scholars, mostly drawn from the field of Puerto Rican Studies, drafted the mission statement for the Latino Section:

The Latino reality in the United States is frequently analyzed as either comparable to "other minorities" because of common experiences of marginalization, or in contrast to these populations because of its distinctive culture and history. Seldom is the discussion of Latinos situated in the broader international dimension or contextualized by reference to transactional dynamic between Latino communities in the US and Latin America. The transnational features of Latino formation are only now entering the discourse of the academy (Cabán 1992, 1).

A 1994 Bellagio conference that Frank Bonilla was instrumental in convening, and the subsequent publication of the conference papers,

demonstrated why the presumed distinctiveness between Latinos(as) in the United States and Latin Americans was analytically suspect given interconnectedness, interdependence, transnationalism, and boundary fluidity. Technological advances in communication and affordable electronics further eroded the significance of borders that demarcate material space and that had been the overriding component of individual identity. Bonilla described the primary objective of the conference as “the formulation of a long-term research, policy and organization building agenda linking the intellectual and political resources generated by Latinos in the United States with the counterparts in their countries of origin” (Bonilla 1998, x). I was privileged to be a participant in this conference and contributor to the volume.

However, it is important to recall that already in the early 1980s Latino faculty at the University at Albany, SUNY had pioneered the integration of ethnic and area studies into a coherent academic program. The synthesis of Puerto Rican Studies and Latin American Studies, anticipated the direction that some Chicano and Puerto Rican Studies programs would subsequently adopt. The academic rationale for this programmatic reconceptualization was based on the faculty’s analysis that Puerto Rican Studies scholarship revealed the transnational dimensions of the Puerto Rican experience, which challenged the notion of reified analytical boundaries between the colonial subject and the colonial migrant. Puerto Rico was treated in the area studies literature as a Caribbean nation, while the Puerto Rican migrant to the continental United States was studied by social scientists as a racialized ethnic minority. These boundary distinctions had been demonstrated to impede the formation of more complex and variegated understanding of the Puerto Rican experience. The transnational dimensions of the Puerto Rican experience served to establish the intellectual foundations to propose a much broader framework linking Latinos(as) in the United States with populations in their countries of origin.

I spent a dozen years at Rutgers from 1990-2002 (during the 1999-2000 academic year I was at Cornell University as the interim director of the Latino Studies Program) and served as Chair of the Department of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies (PRHC) for eight years. My tenure was marked by the exhilaration of rebuilding the department and having the privilege of working with colleagues across the nation in a sustained dialogue to rethink the role of Puerto Rican Studies in a university setting. Our unit was brought into the midst of energizing campus debates on progressive multiculturalism and what some colleagues termed the tyranny of the disciplines. But my time at Rutgers was also marked by the rapid deterioration of the Department

we had labored so hard to build. I was motivated to leave Rutgers in 2002 for a position at the University of Illinois because of the steady erosion of the department's standing at the university and nationally.

The Dean of the Faculty of the Arts and Sciences of Rutgers, Richard McCormick, Jr., who had hired me from Fordham in 1990, supported my vision for the Department of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies. During his tenure much was accomplished in the Department. New faculty was hired, the curriculum was revamped, the budget expanded considerably, a campus-wide conference on the role of Latino, African American, and Women's Studies was convened, a visiting scholar program with the University of Puerto Rico was established.⁶ The college approved a joint appointment protocol for hiring new faculty. Partial line weight was allocated to a discipline-based department with the stipulation that PRHC faculty would teach in the graduate division. The Department established a collaborative relationship with Cuba's Centro de Estudios de América, and some of its most prominent researchers were in residence at Rutgers for varying lengths of time. In April 1993, the Department convened a conference "Cuba in a Changing World" which brought renowned scholars from Cuba and the United States together for two days of intensive discussions on the status and prospects for changed relationship between these two countries.

After Dr. McCormick's departure to the University of North Carolina to serve as provost, support for the Department began to wane. An associate dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences refused to appoint interdisciplinary scholars the Department had recommended for appointment as assistant professors. Ultimately rejected by Rutgers, these young scholars were hired by elite private institutions that grasped the value of their innovative, although non-conventional, research. These embarrassing outcomes persuaded a formerly skeptical administration to accept the PRHC department's recommendation and not effectively defer the decision to traditional departments whose faculty had only a dim comprehension of Latino Studies. As a consequence, additional faculty were hired whose research focused on sexuality and feminist studies, and interdisciplinary social science. In 1993 the department organized a community event to discuss a possible name change to the Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies Department. However, "community activists and former alumni forcefully opposed the change of name on one particular ground: they were afraid that a change of name would erase the history and contributions of Puerto Ricans to the very creation of the department in the 1970s and, more broadly, to the current politics and civic welfare of the State of New Jersey" (Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies). Nevertheless, in 2006 PRHC was renamed the

Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies. The new title more accurately reflected the course offerings, faculty scholarship, and student interest in a diversified range of Latino related subjects.

After the departure of Dr. McCormick, the department's ability to continue to make advances was aided by strategic and productive relationships with key campus units. PRHC enjoyed support from the history department, and I was appointed a fellow and subsequently a project director of the Center for Cultural Analysis. By the time I stepped down as Chair the department had six full-time tenure-track faculty. The newly hired faculty were also actively engaged in the university's robust intellectual scene. They were invited to participate in a variety of faculty-initiated interdisciplinary endeavors and were the recipients of internal fellowships and research support.

After serving continuously for eight years as Chair, I chose not to accept reappointment to the position. Soon after relinquishing the position, a newly appointed associate dean was given substantial authority to oversee the academic units that reported to his office. The Department's significant achievements notwithstanding, the associate dean exhibited a disconcerting antipathy toward our unit and was culpable in precipitating a debilitating decline in faculty moral. An external review team noted the difficulties that confronted the Department, and raised questions about the effectiveness of its internal leadership. Near the end of my tenure at Rutgers, I accepted an appointment at Cornell as an interim director of the Latino Studies Program (LSP), motivated in part by the creeping deterioration of the Department.

Cornell proved to be a tumultuous environment in which hyper nationalist discourses and ideological battles divided the student body. Faculty differed intensely over the direction of the program, and the lack collegiality made any academic expansion of the program virtually impossible. Unfortunately, some faculty were implicated in fomenting student opposition to the administration and to the Latino Studies Program. Despite the charged environment, the program organized a successful conference on the status and trajectory of Latino Studies, invited prominent Latino Studies scholars to campus, and put forward a number of student-centered academic initiatives.⁷ My year at Cornell convinced me that the administration did not assign academic significance to LSP. The program was not given autonomous lines, and its core faculty tenure resides in traditional departments. Cornell has hired only one additional core faculty member for the program during the decade after my departure. The program affiliates received the support that a well-endowed Ivy League institution is prepared to invest in its faculty. But the primary function of LSP was to provide a cultural space for

Latino students and to offer a loosely coordinated minor.

During my year at Cornell I was informed that a colleague in PRHC, who had received the unqualified support of all the evaluative units, had been denied tenure by Rutgers. This moment constituted the absolute nadir in the Department's evolution given the utterly unjust and academically indefensible tenure denial of an accomplished young scholar, who had published an important book on Puerto Rican labor migration, and who had been instrumental in helping rebuild the department (Whalen and Vázquez-Hernández 2005).⁸ Although my colleague was eventually vindicated and was offered tenure, she had chosen to accept an appointment at Williams College, ranked first among the nation's liberal arts colleges.

By the fall semester 2001, it was apparent to me that as long as the associate dean and department leadership remained in place, that PRHC would continue to deteriorate and be relegated to the margins of the university's intellectual life.⁹ These unfortunate developments prompted me to accept an appointment as director of the Latino Studies Program (LSP) in the University of Illinois, one of the preeminent public research universities in the country. My tenure at the university was not particularly lengthy; I left after five years to assume a position as Vice Provost for Diversity and Educational Equity at SUNY system administration. But during this period LSP attained a number of academic goals that set the foundation for its subsequent and significant advance. LSP funded and helped organize a biennial national graduate student conference, hired three new faculty, and was able to negotiate tenure rights for LSP appointed faculty. As was the case at Rutgers, we established very valuable alliances with key campus institutions, most prominently the chancellor's Center for Democracy in a Multiracial Society and the African American Studies Department. LSP worked with other campus-based race, ethnic and gender studies programs on a proposal for an interdisciplinary doctoral program in these fields. LSP was the beneficiary of support from the chancellor and provost, both of whom had a normative commitment to fortify the race and ethnic studies programs at the University.

Ending Comment

This essay on the relationship between critical junctures and the evolution of Puerto Rican Studies as an academic field is in its preliminary stage. It is an initial attempt to conceptualize how the production of knowledge about the Puerto Rican experience is affected by two forces that operate simultaneously. As an academic enterprise situated in the university, Puerto Rican Studies is affected by the myriad of political, economic, social, and cultural impulses that shape the university's

response to government, business, and society at large. Secondly, Puerto Rican Studies is one academic endeavor among numerous within the university setting, and as a result is embedded in a network of relations that influences the trajectory of the intellectual work within race and ethnic studies and cognate fields and disciplines. In other words, Puerto Rican scholarship both influences and is influenced by its interconnect-
edness with other academic endeavors.

Although attempts to marginalize Puerto Rican Studies as academic departments and programs persist, there has been a positive change in the perception of Puerto Rican Studies scholars. These scholars have the academic training and credentials that compare favorably to faculty in the traditional disciplines. Nonetheless, I think that Puerto Rican Studies scholars were and are still viewed skeptically for generally failing to internalize the values and norms of professional graduate training. Colleagues in traditional fields were often mystified by the Puerto Rican Studies scholar's tendency not to accept the shibboleth that as professional academicians they should engage in scholarship cognizant of how it could advance their careers. Faculty that adhered to the norms of their discipline are fairly convinced that Puerto Rican Studies faculty do not sufficiently value their academic careers. After all, Puerto Rican scholars have chosen to focus on areas of research that are deemed marginal, if not inconsequential, to the momentous concerns of the traditional disciplines. Either naiveté or a nostalgic nationalism can explain the Puerto Rican scholar's continued scholarly indiscretion. I have found that this portrayal is not uncommon at the various universities in which I taught. Fortunately, Puerto Rican Studies scholars persist in their explorations of the Puerto Rican experience and in the process have attained a measure of academic validation and institutional inclusion that was unimaginable in the late 1960s.

The history of the development of Puerto Rican Studies during the third conjuncture remains to be written. But it is apparent that the United States has experienced a resurrection of a dormant narrative that the Latino presence is a threat to national unity, as the financial meltdown has disproportionately affected Black and Latino populations. In addition, new legal challenges to affirmative action, efforts to dismantle Chicano Studies in Arizona, intensified persecution and deportation of undocumented immigrants, and unprecedented reduction of state support for public services make life in the United States increasingly difficult for Latinos(as). This assault against Latinos(as) and the institutions they most value for their ascendancy out of poverty has been launched during a period of virtually unprecedented fiscal austerity in the United States. New York, California, and Illinois, and other states that are in

the throes of a dire fiscal crisis have slashed support for public higher education precisely as the Latino population grows and numbers of Latino high school graduates reach historically high levels. With the disinvestment in public higher education, which is occurring in tandem with the accelerated expansion of the neo-liberal corporatized university, the concept of public education as a right has been debased to education as a privilege for those who can pay or are willing to assume debt. Increasing numbers of Latino college students are joining the legions of indebted young people who graduate college in pursuit of employment in a fragile and volatile labor market.

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Notes

¹ Torres and Velázquez (1998) provide an excellent overview of the period.

² Frank Bonilla (1974) observed, "Those changes occurred at time of crisis in the university...a crisis that dramatically exposed the dependent and subservient position of the academy vis-à-vis government and industry as well as its incapacity to provide a liberating education to our youth or generate the kinds of new knowledge required by our people in their drive for self-affirmation" (22).

³ A number of CIA agents graduated from Fordham. Among the most prominent were Director William J. Casey, Michael Sulick the Director of the National Clandestine Service, John O. Brennan, chief counterterrorism advisor to U.S. President Barack Obama, and Ray McGovern. See <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/05/06/lessons-from-the-fordham-9/>.

⁴ Although Wilentz was not identified as a neo-conservative his highly critical commentary on race and ethnic studies in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was manna for the National Association of Scholars and others who sought to shut down Puerto Rican Studies departments.

⁵ In 1996 the Black, Jewish, Asian and Hispanic American Caribbean Studies departments in the City College of New York were downgraded to interdisciplinary programs. CCNY president Yolanda Moses "conceded that the financial exigency provides an umbrella to look at a lot of programs and departments." She also academically justified the reorganization in terms of "enhanced educational opportunities" (Stout 1996, B4).

⁶ Some of the scholars who were in residence for an academic year included Norma Burgos, Alice Colón, Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, Humberto García Muñoz, and María Milagros López.

⁷ Emerging Trends and Interdisciplinary Discourses in Latino Studies, April 13-15, 2000 Cornell University.

⁸ See pages ix-x.

⁹ After the removal of the associate dean and the departure of the Chair, the Department has undergone a renaissance under the leadership of Dr. Aldo Lauria. Now renamed the Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies, it boasts eleven core faculty members, many of whom have joint arrangements.

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