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**Latino Policy iReport**

## **The Vanishing Puerto Rican Student at the City University of New York (CUNY)**

By Angelo Falcón (August 14, 2012)

"The interaction between CUNY and the Puerto Rican community dates to the 1950s and 1960s when significant numbers of Puerto Rican students began to attend and graduate from the University. This important relationship continues to the present day. As the lion's share of Puerto Rican professionals have stayed in New York City, they have enriched the workforce, the arts, our education system and earned numerous management and leadership positions at all levels of society."

---CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein (2003)

"This year the National Puerto Rican Parade celebrates Puerto Ricans and Higher Education. It is through education that the community can continue to progress. Higher education is a source of empowerment that greatly improves the social and financial conditions of individuals aspiring to better their lives. The Parade's theme will showcase the educational achievements of Puerto Ricans and continue to encourage further growth."

---[2012 National Puerto Rican Day Parade Theme](#)

Puerto Rican student enrollment at CUNY "declined steadily from 28% in 1999 to 11% in 2010" [of total Latinos.]

---[CUNY Office of Policy Research \(2011\)](#)

The advent of the school year prompted this review of the presence of Latinos in the massive City University of New York, given the university's responses to issues being raised by community advocates in the last couple of years. While many of the concerns expressed focused on the city's largest Latino national origin group, Puerto Ricans, CUNY's statements kept referring to "Hispanics" in general, conspicuously excluding references to Puerto Rican students (although they have plenty of data on this important group in their institutional databases). While New York City's Puerto Rican population has been declining in the last few decades, the more than 723,000 counted by the 2010 Census still make them, at 31 percent of the total, the largest Latino and ethnic group in the city.

The City University of New York (CUNY) is by far the most important institution of higher education for Latinos in New York. In Fall 2011, CUNY

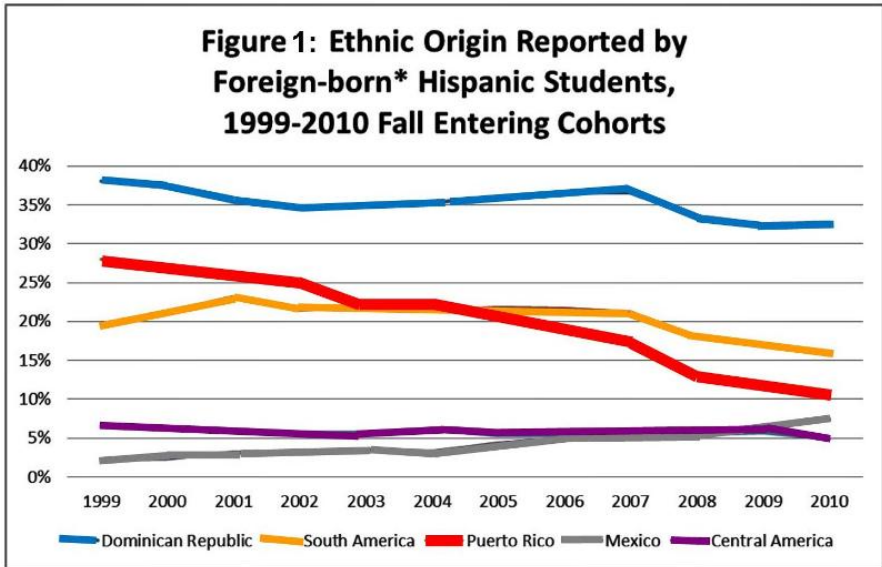
had 80,242 Latino undergraduates enrolled, representing 27.2 percent of its total student population. Between 2000 and 2010, Latino student enrollment at CUNY jumped an impressive 54 percent, compared to 36 percent for CUNY's overall enrollment. Compared to PUNY and SUNY (the private universities of New York and the State University of New York, respectively), CUNY's track record in Latino student enrollment is to be generally applauded.

This past June, [the Community Service Society issued a report](#) that found the apparent beginnings of a process of Black and Latino student enrollment declines at CUNY's top tier senior colleges, raising questions about racial-ethnic tracking. This prompted an article in the *New York Daily News* by La Shawn Pagán titled "[Fewer Boricua Faces at CUNY](#)" (June 6, 2012) that was broadly critical of CUNY for limiting access to Puerto Ricans based on the findings of this CSS report and [an earlier one they did on disconnected Latino youth](#).

In a June 10th letter to the editor, Jay Hershenson, CUNY's longtime and politically astute Senior Vice Chancellor For University Relations, responded by defending the university's track record of increasing Latino enrollments at the senior colleges. But I noticed at the time that although the article he was commenting on focused exclusively on Puerto Ricans, his response ignored this group and referred exclusively to "Hispanics." I found that a bit curious.

Earlier this year, CUNY produced a 156-page report, "[Building on a Strong Foundation: A Strategy for Enhancing CUNY's Leadership in the Areas of Faculty Diversity and Inclusion --- Diversity Action Plan](#)" by their Office of Human Resources Management and Office of Recruitment and Diversity. This exhaustive report documented the underrepresentation of Latino faculty at CUNY and provided much of the Latino faculty data broken down by Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics. But when it provided data on student enrollments, just as Vice Chancellor Hershenson did on this letter to the editor, they only reported on the broad category of "Hispanics" and did not provide Puerto Rican-specific information. I found that also a bit curious.

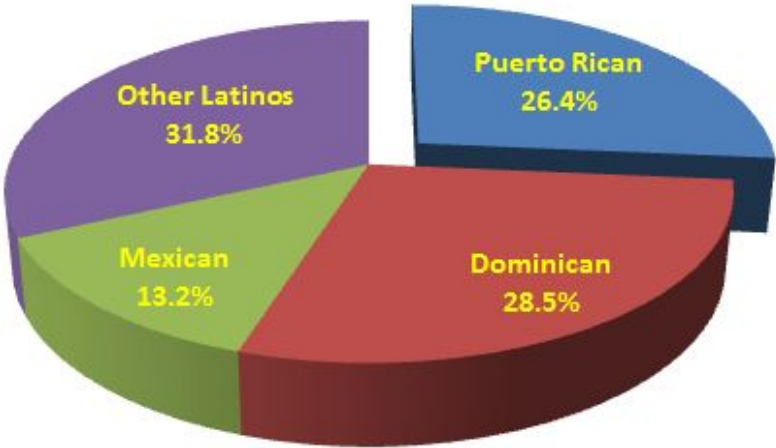
So, in other words, these two things made me a bit curious. I poked around until found a little CUNY Policy Research Brief, "[Hispanic Student Enrollment at CUNY: A Decade of Growth and Change](#)" (April 15, 2011) by their Office of Policy Research. This report found that of total Latinos. Puerto Rican student enrollment at CUNY "declined steadily from 28% in 1999 to 11% in 2010."



\* includes Puerto Rico. Students born in the U.S. or other non-Hispanic majority countries are excluded.  
 Source: [CUNY Office of Policy Research \(2011\)](#)

This precipitous decline in Puerto Rican student enrollment in CUNY in a decade is alarming. At first blush, this would appear to be the result of the continuing decline of the overall Puerto Rican population in the city and perhaps the aging of this community. According to the 2010 Census, however, the median age of Puerto Ricans was 33 years, compared to 31 for all Latinos, 43 for non-Hispanic Whites and 38 for non-Hispanic Blacks. Puerto Ricans made up 26.4 percent of the city's Latino youth, ages 16-24, that year.

**Fig. 2 - Latino Youth by National Origin New York City 2010**

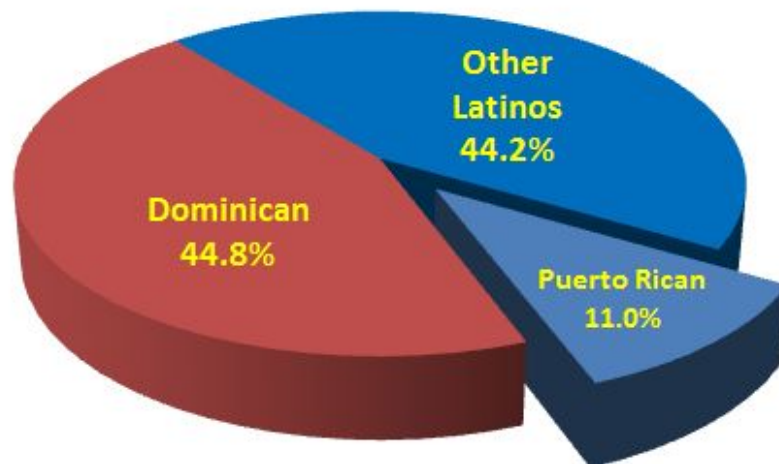


Extrapolating from published CUNY enrollment data, in Fall 2010 there were approximated 7,289 Puerto Rican undergraduates enrolled in CUNY (about 7.7 percent of total students). All other things being equal, based on the size

of its share of the Latino youth population, there should have been a Puerto Rican enrollment of 17,515, more than double what it actually is.

Despite being 33 percent of New York City's youth ages 16-34, in Fall 2010, Latinos as a whole made up only 29 percent of CUNY's enrollment. The largest Latino national origin group enrolled in CUNY is Dominican, who make up 13 percent of CUNY students, followed by Ecuadorans (3.9 percent) and Colombians (2.9 percent). The general Latino access to CUNY remains an important issue, especially at its senior colleges, where Latinos make up only 24 percent of total enrollments. In this regard, CUNY's most recent emphasis has been on the integration of new immigrants, perhaps being a factor in allowing the Puerto Rican situation to deteriorate for this part of the Latino population that is not made up of immigrants.

**Fig. 3 - CUNY Latino Enrollment by National Origin, Fall 2010**



The specific experience of Puerto Rican youth at CUNY and the city in general is extremely troubling. In [a 2010 report by the Community Service Society on Latino youth](#), they compared the socioeconomic status of the major Latino subgroups and had this to say about Puerto Ricans:

Puerto Ricans face the greatest challenges of all youth sub-groups, despite the fact that they are overwhelmingly born within New York City. Puerto Rican youth have lower rates of school enrollment, educational attainment, and alarmingly higher rates of disconnection and poverty than other native-born Latino youth. Puerto Rican males have rates of in-activity in school and work that exceed those of black male youth, a population that receives more public policy discussion.

The findings of this report sent shock waves within the Puerto Rican community at the time. As the oldest and largest Latino group in New York, with the largest number of Latino elected public officials, how could this be? There was much commentary, some community meetings and [even news conferences held](#), but very little serious follow-up by the Puerto Rican community leadership.

At a news conference held in late 2010, Elizabeth Yeampierre, Executive Director of the Brooklyn-based community group UPROSE, commented that, "The Puerto Rican community has contributed greatly to this city --- we have opened the door for countless Latinos from all over the world. But the problem is, we are still holding the door." At the same news conference, lower Manhattan Councilmember Rosie Mendez pointed out that,

"For the last several years I've been fighting for public resources, and it's been tough. If I look at my district, I'm losing a lot of those organizations that were providing services to the youths. We are in tough economic times, but it is exactly during these times that we have to allocate the necessary resources. And we have to look now, especially because of this study, at the Puerto Rican community and find out why we are faring less, and make sure that those services are given to our community."

And now, as we start asking questions about CUNY in terms of [disturbing trends in its top tier senior colleges](#), the [lack of faculty diversity](#), the [Pathways Initiative](#) and so on as they affect Latinos in general, a perhaps even more fundamental issue arises for Puerto Ricans at this important institution --- the rapidly disappearing Puerto Rican student presence at CUNY.

Even more disturbing is CUNY's apparent efforts to cover-up this growing problem by ignoring and thus failing to address it at all. If anything, this points to the importance of assuring that the data gathered by government agencies and other institutions reflect the diversity of the Latino population. Without specific data on Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans and other Latino subgroups, it becomes impossible to hold these institutions accountable and, as in the case of Puerto Ricans in CUNY, can serve to allow serious problems to be missed, ignored or easily covered up.

But perhaps of even greater concern is the inaction by Puerto Rican community leaders and institutions to acknowledge this problem and develop strategies to address it. How is it possible that, at a time when the national discussion focuses on the importance of higher education access for the well-being of the United States, Puerto Rican leaders are not focusing on this educational crisis in their community? And why aren't Puerto Rican parents and the community in general holding CUNY accountable on this? So, at the beginning of this report we quote with the deepest irony the National Puerto Rican Day Parade making higher education the theme of their 2012 program.

In looking at this accountability problem, a good starting point would be within CUNY itself. Given the important role that Puerto Ricans have historically played in supporting CUNY, fighting for open admissions and affordable access to higher education, and the development of bilingual education and Latino studies programs within CUNY, it should be viewed as unacceptable that CUNY appears to be turning its back on this community today.

What are Puerto Rican and Latino students programs, faculty and staff doing to address this crisis within CUNY? The Center for Puerto Rican Studies ("El Centro") is lauded as the major Puerto Rican research center in the United States and yet it does not currently conduct any research on the status of Puerto Ricans within CUNY. There was a time when the Centro was created in the 1970s when it had an [Higher Education Task Force that conducted](#)

[ongoing research on the Puerto Rican presence at the university](#) and held the institution accountable on this score. Why, many have asked, did we learn about the current plight of Puerto Rican youth and CUNY students solely from the Community Service Society and not an institution like the Centro?

We find ourselves in the midst of this crisis and too many of us, especially within CUNY, continue to function as though things were just fine on this score. The irony is that if these trends continue and the Puerto Rican student presence in CUNY continues to dwindle to almost nothing, what in the world would be the rationale for the Centro and Puerto Rican studies to continue to exist? Isn't anybody thinking about this at these places?

We also now have at least three Puerto Rican college presidents at CUNY, faculty at numerous CUNY campuses that teach and do research on Puerto Rican studies and bilingual education, there are two Puerto Ricans serving on the CUNY Board of Trustees, and there is even an ineffective Latino Faculty Recruitment Initiative (originally called the *Puerto Rican Faculty Recruitment Initiative*, see the trend?) all as a result of Puerto Rican community struggles to open up the university to our community. How can these people, many of whom make hefty salaries, continue to function as though it is business as usual in the midst of such a crisis?

And then there are the 25 Puerto Rican elected officials we have in this city who include Congresspersons, a borough president, state senators, assembly members and city councilmembers who have failed to focus on this problem. Some of them even serve on higher education committees in their institutions (the chair of the NYC Council's Higher Education Committee is a Latino). Besides holding a CUNY reception every year, for example, what are our state legislators doing as part of their annual *Somos El Futuro* Conferences on this issue?

There are, as well, the community-based educational advocacy groups like Aspira of New York, recently celebrating its 50th anniversary, the United Bronx Parents, and others that once made up the Puerto Rican/Latino Educational Roundtable. What role have they played in addressing this problem lately? The Hispanic Federation, a United Way-type coalition of 97 nonprofits, has recently been funded by the Lumina Foundation to operate the *CREAR Futuros* project, a partnership with CUNY, to build, implement and sustain successful "place-based efforts" focused on significantly improving Latino college success in New York City. As part of this work they have plans to create a citywide coalition of advocates on higher education issues facing the Latino community. Perhaps this could be a starting point for addressing the serious challenges facing Puerto Ricans with the CUNY system.

Why, finally, aren't CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, Mayor Bloomberg, Governor Cuomo and other key policymakers hearing more (or at all) from our community on this issue?

Have those of us who purport to advocate for the best interests of the Puerto Rican community collectively failed to protect our community's most valuable asset, our youth? Have we, in the process, compromised the future of our community in irreparable ways? In the spirit of such legendary *boricua* elders as the late Antonia Pantoja and the late Evelina Antonetti, is there still time for all of us who have been silent for too long on this issue to turn this crisis into an opportunity to close ranks and return to the days when



the Puerto Ricans were feared and respected in the centers of educational influence in this city? Is there?

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