Congress allocates $7.5 million for construction of Aerospace Research Institute at RUM [1]

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Dr. Sheilla N. Torres Nieves, INME professor and lead author of the proposal.

The U.S. Congress approved an allocation of $7.5 million for the construction of the Aerospace Research Institute (AIR) at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) Mayagüez Campus.

The funds, which will be provided to the campus by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), will be used for the construction of a building adjacent to the Department of Mechanical Engineering (INME), which will house state of the art laboratories.

"This assignment represents the transition point between a before and after in aerospace at the University of Mayagüez Campus and on the island. Since 2017 we have been trying to obtain funds from federal agencies for these purposes. At the University we have made many efforts to strengthen the aerospace sector and thus be able to support the development of this industry, which is one of the fastest growing in the country," said Dr. Sheilla N. Torres Nieves, INME professor and manager of the proposal.

"This is the next level of what we want undergraduate and graduate research to be, in areas of interest to the industry. The proposed facilities are the first step in creating this infrastructure from which we can better train our students, continue to do quality research and continue to support the needs of industry," she added.

Ubaldo M. Córdova Figueroa, professor of the Department of Chemical Engineering, who while serving as executive vice president of Academic Affairs and Research at the UPR, collaborated in the search for funds and follow-up with the pertinent agencies.

"The most important part is to have had the vision of Dr. Torres. She, along with others throughout the aerospace ecosystem, had established this need. After several attempts through various programs in multiple agencies, both local and federal, we were able to identify a way out through the federal government in the budgeting process. Thanks to the support of Resident Commissioner Jenniffer González, the project was accepted by the House Appropriations Committee, which eventually was presented in the federal budget that was approved in December. Follow-up and perseverance were key here. In addition, for me it was a commitment made to the Precinct in my years as Executive Vice President. Hand in hand with the Campus and with Dr. Torres, we achieved this great dream and this great asset for Mayagüez," said Córdova Figueroa.

Dr. Luis A. Ferrao, president of the UPR, and Dr. Agustín Rullán Toro, rector of the RUM, praised Dr. Torres' work for the initiative that places the Mayagüez campus of the UPR in a very important position.

"Historically, RUM has been recognized as a leading institution in science, engineering and aerospace research. This million-dollar appropriation from the U.S. Congress solidifies our position as a leader in the world of academia by allowing us to expand our infrastructure, curricular offerings and research capacity. This allocation is also an additional example of how the UPR has been proactive in identifying external sources of funding for the development of its infrastructure in times of economic challenges. I congratulate and thank the RUM faculty, especially Dr. Sheila Torres Nieves, who conceived the proposal, the students and all the staff who worked on this process that today bears positive fruits for the UPR and for Puerto Rico. From the presidency, I reaffirm my commitment to support all efforts to identify and obtain external resources aimed at strengthening and developing the infrastructure and academic excellence that distinguishes us as a world-class institution," said the UPR President.

"With this new step, we reaffirm our century-old mission of training professionals of excellence. This assignment comes at a historic moment in which the aerospace industry is in full growth on the island. Likewise, our students have shown great interest in this area through research and internships. On the other hand, recruiters always tell us how qualified our graduates are. So we are in a winning formula. With the development of this facility and the strengthening of the curriculum, the students, the University, the country and the organizations that recruit them all win. I congratulate Dr. Torres for such an excellent initiative! I am grateful to all those who made these funds possible", said the Rector.

The 12,000-square-foot building will have four floors of specialized laboratories, including propulsion, navigation and unmanned systems, auditoriums, offices for researchers, as well as student and meeting spaces.

"This is a well-thought-out project, as we have been five years in development. During this period, we have met on multiple occasions with the RUM administration to identify space. In 2020, an architectural firm was hired, which did all the design for the building. The reports necessary to be able to begin construction are now available. The land and title studies required by the agencies had already been completed. Once we receive the NIST guidelines, then we will proceed with the next steps, which would be to begin the construction process, complying with all the University's regulations," Torres Nieves explained.

The construction phase is expected to take two to three years. Once the new facilities are in place, they will strengthen the aerospace curriculum at the campus.

"It has a direct impact on the curriculum. The initiatives we are currently working on, for example with Pratt & Whitney, curriculum development and growth is one of the most important areas. We keep collaborating with industry to understand how we can better train our students, mainly to shorten that training time once they enter the working world, whether in private companies, as researchers in academia, or in federal agencies; what we are looking for is to train our students with what they are looking for in the short term and in the future," said the professor, who directs the Center for Aerospace Engineering and Unmanned Systems of the RUM College of Engineering.

She noted that the feedback they have received from these agencies and entities highlights the caliber of the graduates of the College of Mayagüez.

"Our students are very well prepared and what we are honing now are those skills for interdisciplinary group work in the aerospace industry. What we see in the future is to use a similar program and identify other needs that the same companies dedicated to the subject require, to develop minor concentrations or specializations that will help us cover those areas," he added.

Córdova Figueroa expressed the same opinion, highlighting the importance of innovation and entrepreneurship focused on the aforementioned industry.

"With this physical asset, we can provide our students with the necessary spaces and programs to develop the potential we have here in Puerto Rico. These elements are being integrated to

continue advancing this mission," said the INQU professor.

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