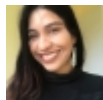


Puerto Rican students receive prestigious scholarship for research ^[1]

Submitted by [Alondra Caraballo Franco](#) ^[2] on 23 April 2024 - 11:07am



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Some of the winners of the Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) scholarship

[The National Science Foundation](#) ^[3] (NSF) recently announced that **2,037** students will receive the prestigious [Graduate Research Fellowship Program](#) ^[4] (GRFP). All outstanding winners in

science, mathematics, technology or engineering (also known as STEM disciplines) will receive financial support through a **\$37,000** annual stipend that will support their graduate studies and scientific research. In addition, they will receive an additional **\$16,000** over three years to cover educational expenses. The application for this scholarship is highly competitive, including several letters of recommendation, a personal essay, and a research proposal that evaluates both intellectual merit and societal impact.

We are very proud to highlight that **26** students and alumni from various campuses of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) distinguished themselves among thousands of applicants and were selected to receive the award. Likewise, **7** students from the UPR system also received Honorable Mentions.

Once again, the UPR, Mayagüez (RUM) ^[5] was the Puerto Rican institution with the highest number of scholarship recipients. **Eleven** RUM alumni obtained the scholarship: **María Gabriela Díaz, Elderson Mercado Rivera, Diana M. Perales, Carlos Ortiz Quintana, Yamilet Margarita Rivera Cintrón, Coralís Del Mar Friedman-Álvarez, Ángel Joel Hernández Viera, Pedro E. Rivera Cardona, Valerie Trinidad, Diego L. Rivera and Angeliz Andrea Soto Acevedo.**

Ten students and alumni of the UPR, Río Piedras campus ^[6] were also honored: **Ángel Sebastian Estruche, Amanda Conde Del Moral, Orlando A. Conde Del Moral, José Luis Llera Muñoz, y Diego Andrés Pomales Matos, Isis Paola Carmona Sepúlveda, Rachel Cruz Pérez, Lester G. Rodríguez Santos, Stephanie Ann Bernadette Colón Rodríguez and Pedro Rafael Trinidad Pérez.**

The list of winners also includes **two** graduates of the Cayey Campus ^[7], **Gabriel Romero Agosto y Krystal Marie Santiago Colón**; **one** student and **one** graduate of the UPR, Humacao ^[8]: **Félix Javier Berríos Ortega and Nitza V. Falcón Cruz**; and one graduate of the University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo ^[9]: **Selymar Peña Rivera.**

We would also like to congratulate those who received Honorable Mention: **Yahaira D. Álvarez Gandía, Pura Ileana Arroyo Morales, Paola Violeta Méndez and Sara Lucila Ramos Méndez** from the RUM; **Karitza Díaz and Astrid P. Ramos Rolón** of the UPR, Río Piedras, and, finally, **Alejandro Rivera Madera** from the UPR, Cayey.

In addition, we celebrate any #CerebrosBoricuas awardees who, because they completed their college studies outside of Puerto Rico, we are unable to mention by name. **If you are or know someone who won the scholarship and would like to be part of this write-up, you can email alondra.caraballo@cienciapr.org** ^[10].

Congratulations, #CerebrosBoricuas! This great achievement is just the beginning of your successful careers. We are proud and honored to know that all your sacrifices, commitment, efforts and determination put the name of Puerto Rico and the UPR on top! We wish you the greatest success in your lives and professional careers!



Some expressions from students upon learning that they won this competitive grant:

Coralis del Mar Friedman Álvarez ^[11], who is currently finishing a first year PhD in Seismology at Cornell University ^[12]: "I woke up anxious at 5 AM the day NSF published the list of students selected to receive the Graduate Research Fellowship. When I found my name on the list, I felt a wave of joy and relief, as well as nostalgia for receiving the news being far away from Puerto Rico and my main circle of support. After months of tireless dedication to perfect my application, receiving this scholarship not only validates my ability as a scientist, but also reaffirms my commitment to contribute to knowledge about earthquakes and their impact on society. I am deeply grateful for the training I received at UPRM, as well as the unwavering support of my mentors, professors and peers. I am proud to be part of the list of Puerto Rican scientists who have been selected to receive this prestigious scholarship and who contribute to highlight the

talent and determination that exists on our island, especially in the academic and scientific fields."

Lester G. Rodríguez Santos ^[13], who is completing his PhD in Neuroscience at Yale University ^[14], says: "Achieving this scholarship has made me feel very happy, I feel it is a validation of all the efforts I have made in the last few years to get to where I am. This achievement would not be possible without the help and support I have received from my mentors and my parents. Over the years, I have encountered key people who have helped me take each step in my scientific career. In a more general context, I want to emphasize that my education at the University of Puerto Rico has been fundamental to my success. It is important to recognize that the UPR produces highly competitive students in the academic market and it is necessary to protect and support this institution."

Diana M. Perales Macedo ^[15], is pursuing a master's degree at the Mayagüez campus ^[5]: "Receiving this scholarship represents an extraordinary opportunity for me. It is not only a financial support to continue my studies in a doctoral program, but it is also a recognition of my academic trajectory and an endorsement of my potential as a researcher. This scholarship will not only open doors for my continuing education, but will also allow me to develop as a Latina scholar, thus contributing to diversify and enrich the academic field. "I am grateful for the support of my PI, Dr. Locke, as well as professors Dr. Diaz, Dr. Santos, Dr. Puente, and Dr. Preston, the parasitology lab, the Biology department (UPRM), my classmates and my family. And I am committed to make the most of this help to achieve my goals and contribute to knowledge in my field of study." Diana considers herself "Peruvian-Puerto Rican," because although she grew up on the island, her parents are Peruvian.

Pedro E. Rivera Cardona ^[16], is completing his PhD in Physics at the University of Illinois Physics, Urbana-Champaign ^[17]: "I am very grateful and proud to have received such a prestigious assistantship as the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program (NSF-GRFP) to continue my graduate studies in the field of physics. It is worth mentioning the role that the Physics Department of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez (UPRM) played in preparing me during all my years as an undergraduate student in the research field. Specifically, I would like to thank Professors Sudhir Malik and Freddie Santiago for their mentoring and continuous support in my undergraduate career. In addition, I would like to thank the Department of Physics at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, to professors Jessie Shelton, Yoni Khan and student Abhinaya Sinha. I will use the NSF-GRFP as well as the GEM, GCF and SURGE fellowships, and the Sloan scholarship to continue my studies in theoretical physics and continue demonstrating the abilities that Puerto Ricans have to continue contributing to the field of science."

Gabriel Romero Agosto ^[18], graduate student at Harvard Medical School ^[19]: "I am incredibly proud of this achievement! Being a graduate student is not an easy thing to do because you don't know if you are on the right path or not. For me, winning the NSF is like a recognition of all the sacrifice and effort it took on my part to get to this point. With that said, winning the NSF doesn't change much, I will continue to work in the sciences and enjoy the experience. I owe thanks to the RISE program at UPR-Cayey, that program was essential for my development as a scientist. Finally, I give my congratulations to the other Puerto Ricans who won and my support to those who plan to apply!"

Isis Paola Carmona Sepúlveda [20], is pursuing her PhD in Chemistry at Penn State [21]: "If I have to sum up my feelings with one word it would be "thankfulness". I always saw it so far away and impossible to win an award as prestigious as this one and I am proud that I, a Puerto Rican woman, was able to win it after so many years of hard work and dedication. I am so grateful for all the support I have received in my career from UPRRP, my mentors and family. This reaffirms my commitment to help and inspire the rising generation to reach their goals and make them see that it is possible and that Puerto Ricans have a place in the sciences".

Stephanie Ann Bernadette Colón Rodríguez, graduate student at the University of Michigan [22]: "Honestly, at first I wasn't even going to apply because I didn't think I would have the opportunity to be chosen. With the help of my mentors and colleagues, I am extremely happy that I took the risk and trusted myself during the process. Now the goal is to continue to work for representation and equality in geoscience education."

Amanda Conde Del Moral [23], who will soon graduate from high school and start her PhD in Materials Science and Engineering at Georgia Tech [24]: "When I saw my name on the list I felt very happy, but the most beautiful thing was being able to share this great achievement with my brother." Amanda also mentions that "Leaving the island will be one of the most important challenges of my life, but I am excited to be able to demonstrate the full potential of a UPR product."

Orlando A. Conde Del Moral [25], soon to graduate from the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras [26] with a B.S. in Chemistry: "I found out in the morning right after waking up and it was like an instant shot of happiness. Afterwards, I was even happier to see that friends from IUPI were also selected. I owe this achievement to so many mentors who have helped and inspired me throughout my baccalaureate, and to my parents and sisters for all their support."

Félix Javier Berríos Ortega [27], who will soon begin his doctoral studies at the University of Connecticut [28]: "When I saw the results I couldn't believe it since I knew how competitive the scholarship was so I had to refresh the page multiple times before celebrating. The results came out at midnight and when I saw and made sure it was true I notified all my mentors, friends and family. Receiving this scholarship will help me feel a little more confident and secure to begin my doctoral studies at the University of Connecticut (Go Huskies!)."

Diego Andrés Pomales Matos [29], is completing his undergraduate studies Cellular and Molecular Biology and a Minor in Portuguese at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras [26]: "The day the scholarship winners were announced I woke up to a call from my mentor. It took me a while to process the news because I was just getting up, but I was overjoyed when I realized what had happened. It's an accomplishment that makes me proud because it reflects all my hard work and determination these past few years as an undergraduate student. But the thrill is even greater when I see the name of the University of Puerto Rico present among so many other institutions in the United States."

Nitza V. Falcón Cruz [30] who will soon complete his first year of his PhD in Chemistry at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) [31]: "I am very excited to have been awarded this scholarship and what it means for my professional development. It is a very competitive scholarship and I am very proud of this achievement. I am grateful for the preparation I received

at UPRH, and the opportunities and training I received as part of the PREM research program. The help I received from my mentors at both UPRH and CWRU was key in creating a competitive proposal. As a Puerto Rican woman studying in the United States, it is an honor to put Puerto Rico and UPR on high."

Carlos Ortiz Quintana, who will soon begin his Ph.D. in planetary sciences at the University of Central Florida [32]: "It was very gratifying to have received the news that I was one of the few students island-wide to receive the scholarship. I had been working on this application non-stop for the past month of November in order to propose a research project in astronomy worthy of support. So, when I heard the news I was thrilled. This grant means a lot to me as it provides me with the unique opportunity to perform theoretical research on exoplanet atmospheres independently throughout my PhD. The field of astronomy lacks Puerto Rican representation and these fellowships are opportunities for people like me to expand that representation to serve as an inspiration for scientific development.

Selymar Pena-Rivera, who is completing her PhD at the University of Wisconsin - Madison [33]: "It is an honor to receive the NSF GRFP and to be an active part in the visibility of Boricuas in STEM graduate studies. Having Puerto Rican representation in fields such as Microbiology is essential for young people interested in STEM to know that there is room for them in these careers. Although every day my environment reminds me of the diaspora I feel, being able to show other minorities that if I can do it, they can too, makes the effort worthwhile. I am grateful for the support of my mentors throughout my bachelor's, post-baccalaureate program, and currently my PhD. Especially my family for believing that I would be successful in whatever I do. Pa' lante y sin miedo."

Pedro Rafael Trinidad Pérez [34], Penn State [21] graduate student: "I am filled with excitement and gratitude for this opportunity presented to me. I am honored to be recognized for my work and I am more motivated than ever to continue exploring, discovering and contributing to the world of science. I have achieved this thanks to my mentors who supported me throughout my studies and research at UPR-RP. This scholarship is a financial support and a vote of confidence in my potential and my ability to make a difference in the field of materials chemistry. I hope to be an inspiration to other Puerto Ricans who are thinking of starting a career in science. Proud to be Boricua!"

Krystal Marie Santiago Colón [35], graduate student at the University of Michigan [36]: "I am honored to receive this prestigious scholarship! When I received the notification I could not believe it but I remembered all the effort it took me to complete the application. It fills me with great pride to be able to represent PR and especially UPR Cayey. This would not have been possible without the support of my graduate school and high school mentors, my friends and colleagues who read the essays multiple times, my cats and family who supported me emotionally during the process. I share this accomplishment with everyone who has supported me up to this point."

Rachel Cruz Pérez [37], who is completing her PhD in Ecology and Biogeochemistry at Penn State [21]: "I first learned about the GRFP during my junior year of high school and since then I started attending workshops to familiarize myself with the requirements and the application process. However, I never dared to apply because I recognized that the chances of receiving the

scholarship were low given its high competitiveness. At Penn State, my advisor encouraged me to apply and, with the support of a group of mentors and collaborators, I developed an attractive proposal. When I learned that I had received the scholarship, I couldn't believe it. I felt a great joy that overcame the anxiety of waiting. Receiving the NSF GRFP is not only a personal honor, but also an opportunity to make an impact and serve as a source of inspiration for others. Coming from a background where recognition of this nature is not always accessible, I hope to demonstrate that with dedication, resilience, and alongside a supportive community, we can achieve great things, regardless of where we come from or the obstacles we encounter along the way. This fellowship also gives me the opportunity to be able to continue conducting research in my homeland of Puerto Rico. I am very honored and incredibly grateful for this recognition."

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