

Yale and University of Puerto Rico collaborate on M.D./Ph.D. studies ^[1]

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Dignitaries from Yale and the University of Puerto Rico, including Peter Salovey and UPR President Uroyoán Walker, met last summer to discuss a new program that would allow medical students from Puerto Rico to complete Ph.D. studies in New Haven. (Photo b

When Daniel A. Colón-Ramos, Ph.D., arrived from Puerto Rico to begin his Harvard undergraduate career in 1994, things didn't exactly go as planned. Moving to the campus early for a summer program, he took a taxi from Logan Airport into Cambridge. But once in his dorm room, he set down his bags and lay on the bed feeling dizzy—and by the time his roommate arrived, Colón-Ramos recalled, “I told him, ‘I’m dying. You have to take me to the hospital.’ ”

No one could figure out what was wrong. The hospital physicians suspected meningitis, but results of a spinal tap were negative. Eventually, said Colón-Ramos, now an associate professor of cell biology and neuroscience at the School of Medicine, they tracked down his family doctor: “It took my doctor from Puerto Rico calling the hospital to tell them these were all the symptoms of dengue fever. I was coming in with a tropical disease. They had no idea.”

This gap in medical knowledge was part of his inspiration for spearheading the new M.D./Ph.D. collaboration between the School of Medicine and the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). A global context, Colón-Ramos believes, is necessary for today's health care. In this new program, students from the M.D. program at UPR can apply to Yale's Combined Program in the Biological and Biomedical Sciences and will be assigned mentors while studying for their doctorates in New Haven. UPR students compete for spots along with Yale's regular applicant pool; the universities are looking for two or three students per class to enroll in the program.

After their first year in medical school at UPR, successful applicants will spend a summer at Yale completing an eight-week lab rotation to familiarize themselves with the campus. They'll return to Puerto Rico for two years of training, after which the students will conduct their Ph.D. research at Yale and then return to UPR for the final year of medical school. The first round of applications tagged for the program was due in December 2015. The process is open to students currently enrolled in their first year of medical school at UPR, as well as new students applying simultaneously to UPR and Yale for their M.D./Ph.D. degrees.

Training and mentoring at Yale will prepare the UPR students to create a new connected community on their return. "In Puerto Rico, we don't have many physician-scientists," said Marcia Cruz-Correa, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Office of Research for the UPR School of Medicine. "There are other programs that are trying to fill that void, but the gap is huge. The opportunity to grow is dramatic." Cruz-Correa hopes that the program will bring together medical professionals trained to think differently who will remain to serve Puerto Rico.

Dignitaries from UPR visited Yale last July to celebrate the new agreement. For members of the delegation, the trip was their first time to New Haven. They met with Yale President Peter Salovey after a whirlwind day of meetings and tours, finalizing the program, and brainstorming more ways to take advantage of the new connections. "It's a historical moment, but it's just the beginning," said Cruz-Correa.

The agreement is a first point of contact that could open up new opportunities for Yale's medical community. It may serve as a springboard for future interactions, perhaps encouraging students to gain medical experience in the tropics as well as connect more deeply with the New Haven community. "There are many changes going on, definitely in the United States, but also worldwide—think about Cuba," said Colón-Ramos. "Patients in Puerto Rico are similar to a whole continent that lies south of the United States. And really, not that different from communities five minutes down the road."

"We're all very excited and looking forward to the rewards that the students will bring after they finish," said Uroyoán Walker, Ph.D., president of UPR. He added, "We're training our next generation. And when I say ours, I mean the world's."

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