Strike disrupts research at Puerto Rico's top university [1]

Submitted on 23 May 2017 - 12:29am

Calificación:

CienciaPR Contribution:

No

Original Source:

Science [2]

By:

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A student strike at the University of Puerto Rico is part of an island-wide protest like this one in San Juan on 1 May urging authorities to rescind proposed austerity measures.

Last week molecular biologist Juan Ramirez-Lugo put all his coral samples in the freezer, locked the door of his lab, and told his six undergraduate assistants to stay home the next day. The assistant professor of biology at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) in San Juan wasn't happy about yet another disruption to his research on seasonal variations in how corals respond to thermal stress and his efforts to give undergraduates "authentic research experiences." But he felt he had no choice.

Ramirez-Lugo's campus has been shut down since late March, when students began a peaceful protest against proposed massive cuts to the territory's flagship university as part of a slew of austerity measures to address the territory's fiscal crisis [3]. On 10 May the strikers voted to ignore a judge's order to end their protest, raising concerns about possible violence if the authorities tried to enforce the court ruling.

That didn't happen, and the next day Ramirez-Lugo was able to return to work. However, he and the rest of the UPR faculty remain pawns in a larger battle over the U.S. territory. The fate of its 3.6 million residents rests in the hands of a federal judge who this week began hearing testimony from the government and those owed some $74 billion in bonds. (Puerto Rico also has $49 billion in unfunded pension obligations.)

This isn't the first student strike at UPR. But this time faculty members have been issued special research IDs for access to their labs, a concession by strike organizers to avoid the havoc wreaked when a 2010 student strike shut down the campus for 3 months.

Still, Ramirez-Lugo and other faculty members say the current protest has been very disruptive. Classes have been canceled, and Ramirez-Lugo says work on his federal training grant from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration has also been compromised. “Some students are coming into the lab, but the ones most active in the strike are not,” he says.

For UPR neuroscientist Carmen Maldonado-Vlaar, the strike has temporarily cut off her supply of lab rats. “The purchasing office isn’t open, so you need to arrange alternative deliveries,” she explains. “But no UPS or FedEx trucks can enter the campus, and the protocol doesn’t allow me to pick them up and transport them myself.”

The strike has also complicated the annual progress report that Maldonado-Vlaar must file next month on her training grant from the National Institutes of Health. “You want to comply, but the truth is that we’ve had to delay some of these projects,” she says. A few fortunate students work at the medical school in San Juan, which is not affected by the strike. But for the rest, she says, their education has been hit-and-miss for the past 6 weeks.

It’s an unprecedented situation for federal agencies, says neuroscientist Gladys Escalona, the acting vice president for research at UPR. “When I talk to program officers at the National Science Foundation and other agencies, no one has ever heard of such a pervasive and long-standing disruption to research,” Escalona says. “But they have been very understanding. They realize the situation is completely beyond our control.”

A transformative force

UPR may not be in the top tier of U.S. universities in terms of the amount of research it conducts—it stood 232nd in the National Science Foundation’s most recent ranking. But over its 110-year history it has been a major player in training the island’s workforce, fueling economic development, and providing social and cultural leadership across Latin America. It also has an outsized influence in fostering diversity within the U.S. scientific workforce: Its two research campuses, Río Piedras and Mayagüez, rank first and second in launching the next generation of Hispanic Ph.D. scientists and engineers.

That includes Escalona, who entered UPR in 1959 at the tender age of 15 and essentially never left. In addition to earning her undergraduate and graduate degrees from UPR, she has been a faculty member, department chair, dean, and ultimately chancellor of UPR before returning to the faculty and taking her current position. Her vast experience gives her a perspective she thinks is lacking among members of a presidentially appointed outside board created last year under a 2016 law designed to resolve the financial crisis.

“I don’t think the [Financial Oversight and Management Board] really understands the role that the university has played over the years in both transforming Puerto Rican society and in being a source of new knowledge,” she says, referring to the presidentially appointed body. “And there’s been little dialogue on the possibility of exchanging views and reaching some type of compromise that recognizes the value of the university.”

From bad to worse

Right now the university's value seems to be at a low point. On 1 July the government's contribution to the university will plunge by almost 20%, a cut of $149 million from current levels. And government support has been frozen at that level for 4 years as part of previous austerity budgets.

That cut precedes the latest massive retrenchment in all public-sector spending aimed at lifting Puerto Rico out of a decade-long recession. For UPR, the looming reduction is in the range of a half-billion dollars, although its actual size and over what period of time is yet to be determined. "So it's going from bad to worse," Escalona says.

Faculty hiring has ground to a halt, she adds. No new positions have been advertised for 3 years, and she says a handful of promising young researchers with federal grants have left UPR in the past year because of the dismal financial outlook.

The specter of major cuts is what triggered the current student strike. Protesters have also questioned the rationale for those cuts and proposed sources of revenue to obviate the need for cuts.

A more immediate problem for Escalona is the uncertainty over the school calendar—specifically, when school officials will declare an end to the academic year and the start of the shorter summer session. That's a critical decision for UPR faculty whose summer salaries are paid from research grants. Some 400 of the 700 faculty members conduct research over the summer, she estimates, but they can't tap those funds until the registrar certifies that summer has begun.

Resolving how the current academic year will be recorded could also affect hundreds of undergraduates planning to do summer research internships at institutions around the country. "It may be hard for them to get those internships" if their transcripts show they haven't finished the semester," Ramirez-Lugo says. Those internships are a stepping stone into graduate school, he notes, and disrupting that flow could jeopardize UPR's status as the top feeder school for Hispanic Ph.D. students.

Maldonado-Vlaar doesn't expect the crisis to be resolved anytime soon. And despite all the current bad news, she hopes that the strike will strengthen the university in the long run. "It's a social movement about issues that affect the entire country," she says about the student protests. "And sooner or later those issues must be addressed."

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