

**Report to Faculty, Administrators, Trustees, Students
of**

**University of Puerto Rico-Ponce
Ponce, PR 00732-7186**

Prepared following analysis of the institution's
Periodic Review Report

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Section I. Introduction

The University of Puerto Rico-Ponce (UPRP) is a public four-year institution that belongs to the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) system. Established as Ponce Regional College in 1969 and first accredited by Middle States in 1970, UPRP was originally authorized to offer associates degrees and transfer programs, but added a number of baccalaureate degree programs beginning in the 1980s.

The Ponce campus was granted autonomy in 1998, and adopted its current institutional title in 2000. The 2005 Middle States Visiting Team report describes the relation of UPR-Ponce to the UPR system as follows:

UPR-Ponce is one of eleven units governed by the Board of Trustees of the University of Puerto Rico. The Board of Trustees sets the overall mission of the units, with each unit providing a yearly plan, which amplifies the system's goals and objectives.

Section II. Responses to Recommendations from the Previous Decennial Evaluation

The 2010 UPRP PRR reflects UPR-Ponce's progress toward mission clarification and institutional effectiveness since the 2005 Middle States Visiting Team Report. UPR-Ponce is to be commended for the thoroughness with which its PRR addresses a total of 40 recommendations, including seven from the 2005 Visiting Team Report, and 33 from its own 2005 Self-Study, as laid out in PRR Table 2.1 below:

Table 2.1
Number of Recommendations Discussed by Standard/Grouping of Standards

STANDARDS	MSCHE	UPR-Ponce
Standard 1: Mission and Goals	1	3
Standards 2 and 3: Planning, Resource Allocation, Institutional Renewal and Institutional Resources	1	7
Standards 4, 5, and 6: Leadership, Governance, Administration, and Integrity	0	4
Standard 7: Institutional Effectiveness	4	6
Standards 8 and 9: Student Admissions and Student Support Services	1	3
Standard 10: Faculty	0	2
Standards 11/12/13: Educational Offerings/Gen Ed/Related Educational Activities	0	2
Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning	0	6
Total recommendations addressed	7	33

Standard 1: Mission and Goals

The 2005 Middle States visit was first since the institution achieved autonomy in 1998. Building on UPR's 2006-16 strategic plan, UPR-Ponce developed a new strategic plan, with new mission and vision statements, in 2006-07. A corresponding set of new campus goals was approved in 2008-09. The Visiting Team found that UPR-Ponce handled autonomy well and practiced inclusive and effective institutional renewal processes.

The new mission statement reads:

The University of Puerto Rico in Ponce is a public institution that is committed to the development of professionals with comprehensive academic preparations by means of effective and challenging teaching techniques. This process is aided by the creative and research activities which the institution disseminates. The university fosters community service, enriching educational experiences, and student support services.

The new mission statement is appropriate and clear, but still appears somewhat generic, as the MSCHE Visiting Team commented about its predecessor. What is it besides location that distinguishes Ponce from other UPR campuses? What contributions does UPR-Ponce make and aspire to make to the Puerto Rican economy and society? Does the institution's mission include being a leader in the growth and development of Ponce and southern Puerto Rico? Asking these and similar questions might help the institution formulate a more distinctive campus mission statement next time around.

Suggestion 1: As it enacts its newly revised mission and goals over the next several years, the campus should evaluate whether the current mission statement can be reformulated to convey its distinctive campus mission as the unit of UPR serving southern Puerto Rico.

UPR-Ponce has also developed "strategies to enhance faculty and student knowledge" of institutional mission and goals. In 2009-10 each department and program reviewed its individual mission and goals with a view toward how well they articulate with those of the campus as a whole.

Standards 2 and 3: Planning, Resource Allocation and Institutional Renewal

In response to the system-wide planning document, *University of Puerto Rico: Ten Challenges 2006-2016* (familarly known as *Ten for the Decade*), the campus developed its own strategic plan, and the PRR documents the success with which UPR-Ponce has followed and executed it.

As recommended by the Visiting Team, the campus has systematically linked assessment, planning, and resource allocation by establishing an Executive Committee for Institutional Renewal (ECIR), led by the Chief Executive Officer, and charged with alignment of planning, assessment and budgeting.

Another milestone was the opening of a “stunning and utilitarian” new library building, the Adelina Coppin Library, which satisfies the Middle States recommendation concerning student study space. The campus is in the process of addressing the findings of the recent assessment of the library by the Association of College and Resort Libraries, findings that were generally very positive, particularly in relation to the quality of the staff, but also include a number of important suggestions.

Suggestion 2: The library should implement the ACRL review findings that it participate in the Lib Qual+ survey, develop a new mission statement, develop a new strategic plan, and reduce paper/electronic redundancy.

Two additional self-study recommendations, that the UPR System administration and Board of Trustees periodically increase the institution’s budget and student tuition rates, are not under campus control. However, UPR-Ponce has taken necessary steps, which need to be continued, to increase private funding and other sources of non-state revenue. Finally, the UPR-Ponce Administrative Board has approved a campus Information Technology Strategic Plan, in response to another self-study recommendation.

Standards 4, 5, and 6: Leadership, Governance, Administration, and Integrity

The 2005 MSCHE team report’s executive summary notes that “UPR-Ponce has a well-defined organizational structure with clear lines of organization and authority,” and that “one of the institution’s strengths lies in its clear rules, regulations, and policies for providing appropriate direction and facilitating the effective governance and functioning of the institution.” Finding that the campus clearly met the institutional integrity standard, the team therefore made no recommendations in these three areas.

Despite recent changes in leadership, the PRR shows that UPR-Ponce has continued to implement its own self-study recommendations to increase the effectiveness of its leadership, governance, and administrative processes.

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment

The Middle States team made four recommendations regarding this standard, more than for the other standards combined. The team recommended that the institution:

1. Allocate appropriate resources to conduct assessment and fund the changes suggested by assessment results
2. Better support the Institutional Research Office
3. Systematically and temporally link assessment, planning, and budgeting processes, and assign responsibility for using assessment findings to personnel who can also allocate resources
4. Use assessment results to prioritize strategic planning goals

The institution’s Chancellor leads the new Executive Committee for Institutional Renewal (ECIR). Its membership, responsibilities (PRR Appendix 5.1), and institutional position

(PRR Figure 5.1) suggest that it will be successful in linking the budget allocation, planning, and assessment processes. Further discussion of the campus response to these four recommendations will be discussed in Sections V and VI below; the three UPR-Ponce recommendations under Standard 7 will be also be referenced as necessary in Section V.

Standards 8 and 9: Student Admissions and Student Support Services

UPR-Ponce currently offers 12 bachelor's degree programs (which account for most of its enrollment and degrees granted), four associate degree programs, and over fifty articulated transfer programs. The five-year average headcount enrollment of 3438 is more than 90% full-time. The five-year average first to second year retention is 81% and trending upward. The six-year graduation rate is currently at an institutional high of 42%. There are about 200 faculty and 250 staff, with faculty-student ratio of 17:1.

An important UPR-Ponce Self-Study recommendation is to increase graduation rates. The strategies implemented in response to this recommendation appear to have paid off. After hovering around 30% for 2005 and 2006, six-year graduation rates increased to 35% in 2007 and 41% in 2009. These are impressive gains and institutionalization of student-service activities begun under a Title V grant should encourage this upward trend. As a next step, the institution may want to put more emphasis on four-year graduation rates, to reinforce the expectation that students should graduate in four years of full-time study.

Suggestion 3: Given increasing student debt and difficulty in funding a college education, the institution should consider a stronger focus on four-year graduation as the norm.

The Visiting Team's final recommendation stipulates that student satisfaction results should be part of the linkage between assessment results and strategic planning and budgeting. A related self-study recommendation looks to increase student satisfaction ratings by improving student support services.

Suggestion 4: In responding to NSSE results, the institution should consider how to add enriching educational experiences and improve academic support services for students beyond their first year.

To implement its final recommendation in this area, the campus has established a protocol, which provides for the evaluation and approval of student transfer credits *before* enrollment.

Standard 10: Faculty

The Self-Study's two recommendations, whose implementation the PRR also documents, provide for strengthening faculty development activities to increase teaching effectiveness, and enhancing student engagement efforts, both of which may also positively affect retention and graduation rates.

Standards 11, 12, 13: Educational Offerings, General Education, and Related Educational Activities

The first in-house recommendation, concerning the prompt implementation of academic assessment findings, will be dealt with under Standard 14 below. The other recommendation calls for articulating UPR-Ponce’s “general education philosophy, structure, and learning goals” and using them to develop “a well-defined approach to their assessment.”

The campus has made a smart move by aligning the graduating student profile with student learning goals, thereby meeting one of the institutional recommendations under Standard 14. A number of surveys and other indirect assessment means are already in place; the institution is concentrating on identifying and using existing classroom best practices for direct assessment. Implementing direct assessment is key and building on existing practices is a sound plan. However, an intermediate step seems lacking:

Recommendation 1: The campus should operationalize and consolidate its 18 general education attributes by reformulating them in terms of student learning outcomes and integrating them with major program assessment.

In the process of operationalizing these 18 attributes, the campus might profitably explore whether it can group them as objectives under a smaller number of more general student learning outcomes. Developing rubrics and a simple assessment mechanism, perhaps online, would help advance this process.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

Of the five remaining institutional recommendations under this standard, the following have either been commented on already or will be discussed further in Section V below:

- Increasing assessment support
- Strengthening instructional research
- Educating the university community about assessment, and
- Revising assessment guidelines and practices

Recommendation 2 below addresses general education assessment.

Section III. Major Challenges and/or Opportunities

This report responds only to the PRR document and does not address the recent student strike settlement, which will pose a major challenge to UPR-Ponce.

That said, most of the challenges and opportunities the PRR cites are not unique to UPR or the Ponce campus, but characteristic of contemporary public higher education in the US, viz. declining public support, and the expectation to do more with less, in a context of ever

stricter accountability. Keeping up with technology; facilities maintenance and expansion; academic program development; and faculty development, research, and scholarship are all cited by the PRR, and all belong to this context.

Thanks to its prudent and efficient planning and fiscal management, UPR-Ponce seems to have weathered the financial downturn well. Internal reallocation has increased the percentage of the budget allocated to the academic programs from 35% in AY 2004-2005 to 45% in AY 2008-2009, a truly remarkable achievement. UPR-Ponce's successful track record, together with its plans to continue this reallocation, suggest that at the time of the PRR, the campus was well positioned to cope with continued economic instability.

The first recommendation above addresses general education, another perennial challenge identified by the PRR. On another front, the institution has responded strongly to the 2005 Visiting Team's recommendation to enact "a clear system for allocating resources to both conducting assessment and funding the necessary changes that have been identified as needs and actions the institution indicated it would like to pursue." However, the Visiting Team further recommended that the institution also "use its assessment results for prioritizing goals."

Recommendation 2: The campus should explore how to further concentrate institutional improvement efforts by using assessment results to help prioritize the goals, objectives, and action steps articulated in its strategic plan and other planning documents.

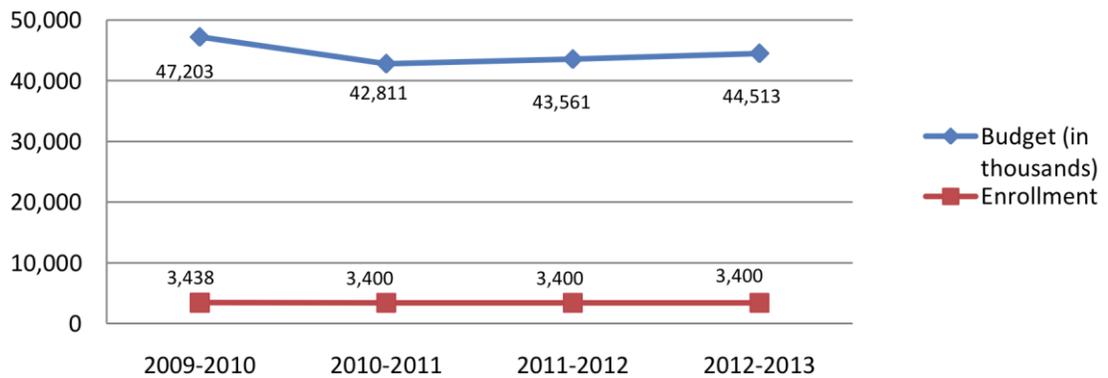
Section IV. Enrollment and Finance Trends and Projections

This section is also based on the PRR as written. Middle States has convened another team to review the consequences of the recent student strike and settlement on enrollment and finance projections.

Enrollment, which had dipped to around 3200 students for AY 2006-07 through AY 2008-09, returned to the 2005-06 level of 3400 students in 2009-10. Given the unpromising resource picture, the campus does not intend to increase enrollment over the next five years. However, the institution should be prepared for an enrollment decrease, as students find it increasingly difficult to finance their educations, a concern underscored by the recent student strike.

The current UPR-Ponce budget is \$47.2 million, almost three-quarters of which is furnished by legislative appropriation. Despite the recession, UPR-Ponce has successfully managed to internally reallocate resources from the administrative to the academic sector, a trend that the campus wisely intends to continue. PRR Figure 4-5, reproduced below, illustrates the relation between budget and enrollment, which appears to be sustainable over the next five years:

Figure 4.5
UPR-Ponce's Budget (in thousands) and Enrollment Projections
Academic Years 2010-2011 to 2012-2013



Finally, PRR Table 2.4 indicates the increasing importance of non-state funding, which the campus should continue to pursue with all possible vigor. UPR-Ponce will also want to maintain an appropriate complement of full-time faculty and staff positions to support its retention initiatives.

Section V. Assessment Processes and Plan

As with governance, financial management, and several other standards, the 2005 Visiting Team gave UPR-Ponce high marks on assessment:

A noteworthy aspect of the assessment process at UPRP is the consistent inclusion of changes or other decisions made as a result of assessment findings. ... A culture of assessment has been embraced by all sectors of the community and there are already results that indicate that the university is 'closing the loop' in many actions.

The campus has implemented the corresponding Visiting Team recommendations and structurally reinforced an already vigorous process by reorganizing assessment into a pyramidal institutional structure (Figure 5.1), headed by the Executive Committee for Institutional Renewal (ECIR), with a broad base encompassing both the assessment of student learning and the non-academic sectors of the institution. PRR Appendix 5.1, *Composition and Functions of Assessment Committees*, further clarifies the organization and coordination of assessment activities at UPR-Ponce.

Reorganization and expansion of the Office of Planning and Institutional Research (OPIR) satisfies another MSCHE recommendation. The Institutional Assessment Document Map (Table 5.2), which keys various campus reports with the corresponding campus goals, outside benchmarks, and Middle States Standards, should prove very useful for the institution's planning and assessment efforts.

Suggestion 5: Where possible, the institution should expand its assessment document map to include a performance snapshot of every important institutional function.

A recommendation about general education assessment has already been made above. In terms of major program assessment, UPR-Ponce has met a UPR system mandate and adopted a best practice by having all eligible academic programs accredited and reviewed by their outside professional accrediting bodies. The campus is to be congratulated on this significant achievement.

Section VI. Linked Institutional Planning and Budgeting Processes

PRR table 6.1 makes clear how UPR-Ponce has integrated and institutionalized the planning-assessment-allocation linkage:

**Table 6.1
Planning-Budgeting Cycle Timeline**

<i>Process steps</i>	
Department and office chairs submit previous year departmental and assessment reports to the Deans; Deans submit deanship-consolidated reports to the Chancellor and to the OPIR.	May-June
Departments and office chairs and deans prepare and submit next year operational plans based on Assessment results and tied to budget request; chairs and deans review and revise budget petitions according to operational plans.	June-July
UPR Central Administration makes the budget available to UPR-Ponce.	July
OPIR compiles the UPR Ponce Annual Institutional Effectiveness Report; ECIR reviews reports and operational plans; ECIR revises institutional strategic priorities and reallocates resources accordingly.	July-August
UPR-Ponce Budget Office makes funds available to institutional units to implement the operational plans.	August
Departments and offices submit and implement annual assessment plans according to institutional timeline.	October
Distribution of planning and budgeting guidelines for next year (templates are provided integrating action plans).	December
Departments and offices carry out budget petition exercise for next year and submit completed budget forms to the Budget Office.	February
ECIR/Budget team review budget petitions and align them to budget allocation and institutional priorities.	March
UPR-Ponce Administrative Board reviews and approves budget distribution and final proposed budget for the institution.	April-May
Final budget distribution submitted to UPR Central Administration for approval.	June

Section VII. Conclusion

The 2010 University of Puerto Rico-Ponce *Periodic Review Report* builds on the strengths of the campus's 2005 Self-Study and helps make an already fine institution of higher learning even better. UPR-Ponce can be justly proud of its many accomplishments, and especially its continuing efforts to make institutional renewal a normal part of doing business.

The following recommendations and suggestions are intended as signposts to mark one possible route toward continuous improvement and the next Middle States Team Visit in 2015:

Recommendation 1: The campus should operationalize and consolidate its 18 general education attributes by reformulating them in terms of student learning outcomes and integrating them with major program assessment.

Recommendation 2: The campus should explore how to further concentrate institutional improvement efforts by using assessment results to help prioritize the goals, objectives, and action steps articulated in its strategic plan and other planning documents.

Suggestion 1: As it enacts its newly revised mission and goals over the next several years, the campus should evaluate whether the current mission statement can be reformulated to convey its distinctive campus mission as the unit of UPR serving southern Puerto Rico.

Suggestion 2: The library should implement the ACRL review findings that it participate in the Lib Qual+ survey, develop a new mission statement, develop a new strategic plan, and reduce paper/electronic redundancy.

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Suggestion 4: In responding to NSSE results, the institution should consider how to add enriching educational experiences and improve academic support services for students beyond their first year.

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