

# Bilingualism in Puerto Rican Higher Education: Consequences of transnational mobility for language choices and identities

*Español, English, and Education in the Colony*

S. T. Bischoff  
Indiana-Purdue



Panel Participants

Background

A Shift in Identity



## CeIBA Panel Participants. . .

- Shannon Bischoff, Indiana-Purdue Fort Wayne

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- Catherine Mazak, University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez

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## Some Facts...

Puerto Rico is an Unincorporated Territory of the United States  
(this status is contested in Puerto Rico, the U.S., and the U.N.)





## Some Facts...

Puerto Rico was claimed by the U.S. after the Spanish–American War of 1898.



## Some Facts...

1902 English and Spanish became official languages of government in Puerto Rico.



## Some Facts...

Puerto Rican citizens were granted U.S. Citizenship in 1917 with a proviso that they **not** be required to know English.



## Some Facts...

At various times between 1898–1948 English was the de facto language of Government as most government officials were appointed by the U.S. However, at the local levels Spanish prevailed.



## Some Facts. . .

In 1948 Puerto Ricans were given the right to vote for Governor, after this point Spanish prevailed as the de facto language of government with the exception of Federal Courts.



## Some Facts...

- 3.5 million Puerto Ricans living on the island.
  - **95.7% Spanish speakers.**
  - **80.8%** claim to **speak English less than very well.**
- 4.4 million Puerto Ricans living on the mainland.
  - **81%** of those speaking **English proficiently.**

(2010 Census;López & Velasco 2011)



## Some Facts...

22% of Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico have a bachelor's degree.  
(2010 Census; López & Velasco 2011)



## Some Facts...

There are over 25 Colleges and Universities in Puerto Rico. The largest is the University of Puerto Rico with 11 campuses and over 61,000 students. Estimates put the number of students enrolled in colleges and universities on the island at 200,000.





## A brief history of language policy and public education

	<b>Instruction</b>	<b>Subject</b>
1898–1900	ENG All	
1901–1903	SPN Primary ENG Secondary	ENG Primary SPN Secondary
1903–1917	ENG All	SPN All
1917–1934	1–4 SPN 5 SPN/ENGL 6–12 ENGL	1–4 ENG 6–12 SPN
1934–1937	Reverts to 1901–1903 Policy	
1937–1945	1–2 SPN 3–8 SPN/ENG ENG Secondary	1–2ENG SPN Secondary
1949–Present	SPN All	ENG All



(de Gutierrez 1987)

## Language and Politics. . .

“... only through the acquisition of this language [English] will Puerto Rican Americans secure a better understanding of American ideals and principles.”

—President F.D. Roosevelt in letter to Puerto Rico Commissioner of Education 1937.



## Language and Politics. . .

“ . . . the official English language requirements of the Federal Government shall apply to Puerto Rico in the same manner and to the same extent as throughout the United States. . . [i]t is in the best interest of the [United States] for Puerto Rico to promote the teaching of English as the language of opportunity and empowerment in the United States in order to enable students in public schools to achieve English language proficiency by the age of 10.”

—Young Bill 1998 (on Puerto Rico Statehood), as approved by U.S. House of Representatives (did not pass US Senate).

\*NB There were no, and are no, federal official language requirements that apply to state governments.



## Language and Politics. . .

“As in any other state, you [Puerto Ricans] have to comply with this and any federal law. And that is that English has to be the main language. There are other states with more than one language as is the case in Hawaii, but to be a state in the United States, English has to be the main language.”

—Rick Santorum 2012 Republican presidential hopeful 14 March 2012 interview.

\*NB Again, there is no federal law designating English as the official language of the U.S.



## Language and Politics. . .

“We’ve had both languages as official languages for over 10 years. And that’s just the way it is. So to try to politicize what I believe should be a tool for opportunity for our kids is wrong.”

— Republican/Partido Nuevo Progresista de Puerto Rico Gov. Luis Fortuno responding to Santorum’s comments.



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- offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees;
- has a student population of 99% from the island and 1% from off the island;



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- is a bilingual, Spanish/English universit.



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- protest throughout December 2010–February 2011
- student strikes campus closures May 2010–June 2010
- renewed protests February 2011–March 2011



# Is there a shift in identity?

“A common theme of the protests was the fear that rising tuition would effectively privatize public higher education, making it inaccessible to a broad segment of the nation[’s] youth.”

—V.M. Rodriguez (2011)





## Is there a shift in identity?

According to Rodriquez (2011) and others, the austerity measures would exacerbate the increase in the number of poor students

- 1 attending private universities where graduation rates and quality of education are significantly lower,

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- 2 leaving university all together,
- 3 or simply not attending (estimates place this at 10,000 students).

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## Decline in student enrollments. . .

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- 2002–2007 34% increase in private university enrollments (Pell Grant figures suggest these are poor students) (Rodriguez 2011)
- 2007–2011 UPR Maygüez enrollments declined 28% (UPRM)



## Decline in student enrollments. . .

We looked at enrollments in required English language classes at UPRM to see if decreasing numbers would reflect the predicted change in demographics as English competence at the university level correlates with economic factors (Alvarez-González 1999). Like enrollments campus wide, enrollments in English language courses fell dramatically.



## The University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez...

Percentage of total enrollment per year...

Student Matriculation	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
(1) Remedial	15%	13.8%	12.8%	12.9%	12.3%
(4) Advanced	17%	19.2%	19.5%	21.1%	22.5%
Difference	2%	5.4%	6.7%	8.2%	10.2%





Thank you.  
Questions?



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