Agustín Rullán – Chancellor, University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez (UPRM)



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Dr Agustín Rullán, the newly appointed chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico Mayagüez (UPRM) and former dean of the university's College of Engineering, outlines the main priorities in his new position. He highlights the need for strong collaboration between academia and industry and the progress UPRM has made working with universities on the US mainland.

You were nominated as the chancellor of UPRM in April 2019, after serving as the dean of the College of Engineering, arguably the university's most prestigious college, for 6 years. What have you identified as the main priorities in your new position?

Our main priority as an institution is to have sustained growth by doing research. A large share of this growth will come from contract research projects with the local industry, which is something we already have been doing in the previous year; however, we significantly want to ramp up the volume of these projects in the upcoming years.

We also would like to further grow our graduate programs, especially in areas which are relevant to the local industry. Three years ago, we started a new graduate program in bioengineering and the first students graduated in this course at our ceremony last week – a very important milestone for UPRM. This is a multi-disciplinary program, with professors of other departments contributing to give our students the best academic experience possible and prepare them to work in different

areas of the industry. Additionally, we recently began offering PhD programs in more traditional engineering disciplines like electrical engineering, and mechanical engineering, where we have also graduated the first students this year. We want to continue to provide the high quality of our programs, which has made us a trusted partner for employers around the world, hiring our students.

What is your approach to strengthening the connection with the industry?

We learnt that the best way is to develop personal ties with these companies to be successfully collaborating with them. UPRM is very successfully in the pharmaceutical field, thanks to our Center for Pharmaceutical Engineering Development and Learning (C-Pedal), led by Dr. Carlos Velazquez, collaborating with big pharma companies like Janssen, for example in the field of continuous manufacturing. We have to know and meet the people in charge, understand their operations and the issues they are facing, to be able to send our students and faculty there and solve them. Amgen is another partner of our university, with who we have a close collaboration and many of our students from the biotechnology program are working there today. With Lilly, we have also student programs at their factory in Carolina.

How difficult is it to find internships in the industry for your students?

All mentioned companies do have internship opportunities, so our students usually stay one year to work in the industry, which gives them a great first experience in a professional environment. UPRM is organizing two job fairs per year, with almost 100 company being present and showing their opportunities to our students. These companies are from the island, the US and even from Europe, for example from Germany, so it really shows that we have a great reputation around the world.

When we met with UPRM in 2015, the previous chancellor Dr John Fernández Van Cleve highlighted the university’s ambition to create a more entrepreneurial mindset amongst students and support innovation. How has the situation developed since then?

There have been many challenges in finding the right formula for this goal. Despite implementing entrepreneurial concepts in many of our courses, it took us a while to develop a culture of

innovation here at UPRM. We initially delegated this task to our business school, which ultimately was the wrong approach. In my previous role as the Dean of the College of Engineering, we collaborated with Stanford University through a program that is called “Pathways to Innovation”, which seeks to change the mindset of engineering students to think in a more entrepreneurial way. This collaboration has been very successful; as an example, one of our champions, who is now the vice president of the university, Dr Ubaldo Cordova, has been part of this program. He also has been the leader of a university-wide network “UPRM E-Ship”, to facilitate collaboration between different entrepreneurial initiatives on campus. Previously, engineering students have been very shy to think about the operational side of a business, for example, finances or business plans, while business students have been well prepared in this area, however, they lacked business ideas and motivations. By joining efforts and fostering interaction between these schools, we have made significant progress in entrepreneurship at UPRM.

We have also developed a program called “New Venture Design Experience”, which includes a sequence of four courses, with the aim to form groups of students from different academic backgrounds, to think about new products, market needs, potential customers and marketing. Some of the students that went through that program have already started their own companies in areas such as information technology as well as software and app development. One of our students, Alondra Toledo Febus, even went to participate with her application in a competition in China, where she won the Global Student Entrepreneur Award.

It is also important to have great relationships with other stakeholders in this ecosystem, to have more innovation in Puerto Rico. Particularly the Puerto Rico Science, Technology and Research Trust is giving a lot of assistance, by offering legal aid, accelerator programs and by helping start-ups to find investments. The trust is also helping us in terms of intellectual property development, which is an area where UPRM has only limited expertise.

What is UPRM’s strategy to ensure the university is recognized not only in Puerto Rico but also on a regional and federal stage?

This indeed is a major challenge, as the political status of Puerto Rico presents a barrier when it comes to participating in the academic ecosystem of the US. Looking at academic rankings, for example, UPRM is not ranked in any of them, as Puerto Rico is seen by them like a foreign country despite being part of the US. For us, it would be very beneficial to be ranked and to see how our programs compare to others in the nation, but the response we have received, to our efforts of

being included, have not been very encouraging so far. One of my priorities is to increase branding activities in magazines and news articles, to get our name out there and show the high quality of education we offer here in Puerto Rico.

We have been gaining some ground in this area recently, as we are participating in research programs on a federal level, for example at the NSF Engineering and Research Center, for a program called C-SOPS in partnership with Rutgers University. Before C-SOPS, there was the impression that we have only been participating because we are an ethnic minority, without including us in the actual research activity. This has changed today, as we also got invited to participate in another research centre called the Center for Cell Manufacturing Technologies, in partnership with Georgia Tech, where a professor from Mayagüez is leading some of the trust areas. Today we are seen as a real partner in these initiatives.

With UPRM having a reputation for academic excellence, your students and alumni are highly sought by companies also outside of Puerto Rico. What is your strategy for retaining talent on the island?

We need to further develop the local industry, by diversifying, creating an environment for entrepreneurship and bring in interest from other industries. The university needs to rethink its role in economic development. Traditionally we are an institution for education, but our aspiration needs to go beyond that, by placing our students in the economic environment here on the island. There will always be students who will pursue other options abroad, but our goal is to retain a major part of our alumni on the island by providing them with attractive opportunities after graduation.

How do you see the potential of your alumni acting as ambassadors for the high quality of education here in Puerto Rico to attract more foreign students?

This is certainly one of our goals, as we are proud of the career paths of our students, which work in multinational companies all over the world. Unfortunately, we have not been able to stay in close contact with them during the last few years. We know our alumni are proud of the “Colegio”, as we are known as, but we have to find a solution to engage them more in current activities here on campus and transform into ambassadors.

What is your vision for the future of the university when we came back in 5 years?

I would love to see UPRM as a hub for innovation, where students have a highly entrepreneurial mindset and companies are looking to approach us to find solutions for the issues they face.

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