

Displaced by Disaster: How UCF and the Puerto Rico Research Hub are Helping Puerto Ricans Rise



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**Puerto Rico
Research Hub**

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Post-Maria Odyssey

Surviving Hurricane Maria has proven to be one of the most difficult challenges we and our families have had to survive. Dealing with lack of electricity, food, and water, no access to the internet, no communication for weeks, and the uncertainty of what the future held for all of us took a heavy toll on both our physical and mental health. Stories of the unorthodox application process for hurricane-affected students varied greatly from student to student, yet all of them have a sense of gratitude to the state of Florida, and especially UCF. UCF undergraduate admissions and the Puerto Rico Research Hub (PRRH) made themselves visible and available to students who required guidance during this time of great need. The tuition relief program allowed students who could not afford out-of-state tuition the chance to attend a mainland institution and expand their educational opportunities.



How UCF came to the rescue?

Coming to the University of Central Florida the following semester after the hurricane was difficult and mentally straining, yet UCF and the Puerto Rico Research Hub opened their doors and tried to help us find a way through the aftermath of the storm. Throughout our experience, we faced certain challenges. The process of acculturation was difficult due to the fact that we moved to a new environment. Students reported feeling alone throughout the process of transferring and felt they had little help finding housing that was both available, affordable and within the area. Some courses from their previous universities were not transferred to UCF. Other issues included finding a part-time or full-time job and transportation. The language barrier made everything challenging since there was not enough staff to help displaced students throughout the procedure and in classes.



Statistics

UCF's main help following the hurricane was allowing hurricane-displaced students, both from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to pay tuition as in-state students.

Fee Name	In State Rate	Out of State Rate
Tuition	105.07	105.07
Non-Resident Fee	0.00	511.06
Capital Improvement Fee	6.76	6.76
Financial Aid Fee	5.16	5.16
Non-Resident Financial Aid Fee	0.00	25.55
Activity & Service Fee	11.67	11.67
Transportation Access Fee	9.10	9.10
Health Fee	10.84	10.84
Athletic Fee	14.32	14.32
Tuition Differential*	44.20	44.20
Technology Fee	5.16	5.16
Tuition and Fees Total for 1 Credit Hour	212.28	748.89

The difference between instate and out of state is that of \$511.06. Allowing out-of-state students to pay for in-state tuition gives them the opportunity to study at an institution which they probably they could not have afforded. Originally established for just one year after hurricane María, UCF's Board of Trustees extended the waiver until Spring 2023 to allow any student that enrolled after the hurricane to have enough time to complete their program. In total, 581 displaced Puerto Rican s students enrolled in 2018.

Semester	Enrolled
Spring 2018	199
Summer 2018	142
Fall 2018	240
Total	581



What to do now?

We must prepare ourselves for when disaster strikes again. In order to do this, protocols must be developed that facilitate help and provides relief to victims. Possible ideas to help include:

- Target underserved areas (in Puerto Rico, outside of the metropolitan area).
- Increase education on and exposure to disaster relief policies
- Create programs with recurring service trips to affected areas on a long-term basis, not just on the occasion right after the disaster occurred.
- Mentoring programs targeted towards displaced students.
- Professors and staff member cultural sensitivity training.
- Increase amount of faculty fluent in at least two different languages

Leaving one's home is always a difficult decision, especially when coming from a disaster-torn area. The university should continue developing professionals prepared to assess the myriad of needs of incoming, displaced students. These needs include: Affordable housing, create full-time/part-time jobs opportunities, priority status for enrollment and attempt to assess any possible language barrier existing between displaced students and university staff. These students could be guided, step by step, in this transition to a new university, especially when a language change is involved. It's an overwhelming experience and students frequently feel lost.



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Puerto Rico Research Hub

Created by Dr. Fernando Rivera, Puerto Rico Research Hub is the center of activities dedicated to PR at UCF. The Hub's scope includes four main areas:

- Research-engage in research activities to themes related to Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Current projects include:
 - Puerto Rican Population Trends
 - Puerto Rican Health
 - Disaster Response and Recovery
- Students
 - The Hub is vital to provide opportunities for students to conduct research and help create the next generation of research scholars.
- Outreach
 - A central point of the Hub is to propagate the gained knowledge and share it with all communities interested in Puerto Rican issues.
- Partnerships
 - These partnerships are essential to the sustainability and success of the Hub. These include partnerships with other academic institutions and centers, community and business groups.

The Hub has guided students of different majors into the world of sociological research, therefore, nurturing professional and academic growth.

However, UCF opened its door to us and attempted to make Orlando our new home. UCF helped us in a variety of ways, most prominently by:

- **Tuition relief program**
- Website exclusively for the displaced students in order to facilitate the admissions process
 - in both English and Spanish
- Education opportunities
 - Course variety (both in-person and online)
 - Clubs and Student Associations
 - Pre-professional fraternities, career-oriented clubs
 - Student-oriented help offices
 - CAPS - Counseling and Psychological Services
 - iACE - Integrative Academic Center for Engagement
 - Transfer Student Advising
 - UCF CARES
- Resources for improving grades
 - SARC & SI tutoring, discussion sessions, and professor availability, All Knight Study
- Knights Pantry - provides free food