



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Statement as Prepared For Delivery  
Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities  
9th International Conference  
Plenary Session I  
“International Academic Collaboration: Promoting Best Practices”  
*February 24, 2011*

Good morning. *Buenos dias a todos.*

I would like to begin by thanking HACU for inviting me to your 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference. I am thrilled that you have chosen Puerto Rico as the location for this year’s event.

For those who are visiting Puerto Rico, welcome to our beautiful island. I will not assume that your choice of location had anything to do with the balmy weather, the golden beaches, or the piña coladas.

Putting aside those benefits, Puerto Rico’s true majesty derives from its countless natural and historic wonders, from our coral reefs, to our Spanish-era forts, to the tropical rain forest known as *El Yunque*. If you have not yet had the chance to snorkel or scuba dive along Puerto Rico’s coral reefs, or to visit the fort system in Old San Juan, or to bathe in *El Yunque*’s waterfalls, I strongly encourage you to do so.

This week’s conference is being held at an important moment for higher education. Changes in how our economy operates are having a profound impact on the type of education our schools must provide for our students to succeed. In the few minutes that I have, I would like to discuss the ways in which I believe higher education could be strengthened to best serve our students and our nation.

In the past, a young person could earn a high school degree, work at a job based in his or her hometown, and earn enough money to support a family. Those days are quickly vanishing, if not

completely gone in many parts of the U.S. Over the past half century, we have moved from a skills-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. Employment is no longer local or even national in scope, but rather international. Today, students compete for jobs not against their classmates but against students from across an ocean. Companies owe their allegiance not to a country but to whichever city, state, territory, or region offers a highly educated workforce. And despite our nation's high unemployment rate, several industries are experiencing a *shortage* of qualified workers!

The new world in which we live presents tremendous opportunities for Hispanic youth to obtain well-paying jobs—but only if we give them the training and support they need to take advantage of these opportunities. As a community and as a nation, we must adapt our system of higher education in at least two ways.

First, we must restructure the courses and curriculum offered by our colleges and universities so that each student graduates with the ability to work and lead teams, think critically, and solve problems. The type of work product expected by employers today is more advanced than it was 30, 20, or even 10 years ago. In the past, young workers could succeed by completing a series of individual job assignments. That no longer is true.

Today, workers are expected to think beyond their current project, to solve unexpected problems, and to work in teams to achieve larger goals. Instead of relying on one skill or one set of skills, workers must use all of the knowledge they have acquired during their lifetime to address issues and problems for which they were not specifically trained.

Colleges and universities must adapt to the changing needs of employers by ensuring that graduates of their schools possess these higher-level critical-thinking skills. By the time students graduate, they must be able to analyze complex fact patterns and ideas and to communicate their reasoning through clear and concise writing. In some instances, this will require institutions to alter their curricula and explore new approaches to classroom instruction. Colleges and universities cannot shy away from needed change but must embrace it if we are to provide students with the knowledge they need to succeed.

The second way in which our system of higher education must adapt is to advance the learning of languages. I would like to speak briefly about the importance of language training and then explain how I believe members of HACU can play an important role with this effort.

As national economies become more inter-connected, a worker who is fluent in multiple languages will have a decided advantage over a worker who knows only one language. An employee in the United States who is fluent in both English and Spanish can conduct business easily with companies located in Central and South America, whereas a worker who is fluent in only one of these languages is largely limited to working with businessmen and women who speak that language.

It is fitting that you have chosen Puerto Rico as the site of this year's conference because the Island embodies the promise of a bilingual society. Puerto Rico is a native Spanish-speaking island with a distinctly Latin culture and background. While we are an integral part of the

United States, we also share a long tradition and history with the Hispanic countries of the New World.

If anything, one of the challenges we face in preparing Puerto Rican students to participate in the global economy is to improve their English-language skills. Although English is taught in Puerto Rican schools, many on the island are ambivalent about the language, sometimes out of a fear that learning English will mean losing their Spanish heritage and, more often than not, because of the lack of well-prepared bilingual teachers.

This problem is not unique to Puerto Rico. In the states, many regions have experienced an influx of English language learners and lack a sufficient number of teachers who are fluent in Spanish and qualified to teach this student population. In other school districts, English is almost exclusively spoken; these districts often lack fluent Spanish-language teachers.

In Congress, I am trying to address the need for better-trained language teachers through legislation I am about to introduce with Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart that would provide federal funding for teacher exchange programs. Teacher exchanges would provide educators with the opportunity to learn new instructional techniques, to gain exposure to different learning cultures and student populations, and to impart the learning they acquire during the exchange onto other teachers in their home districts once they return.

Teacher exchanges would particularly benefit those teachers who seek to improve their language skills. For example, through an exchange, teachers in Puerto Rico would have the opportunity to strengthen their English-language abilities by spending a year in a native English-speaking state. In turn, a Spanish-language teacher from a school district where English is the predominant language spoken could spend a year in Puerto Rico where Spanish is the language spoken most widely. Puerto Rico's students would also benefit from an exchange by having the opportunity to be taught for a year by a native English-speaking teacher from the states.

Although teacher exchanges represent one way to improve the language skills of teachers and, ultimately, of students, many other worthy programs are being used in school districts across the world to develop students' language skills. For example, many elementary and secondary schools have implemented dual language programs, in which students spend part of the school day attending core subject classes in one language, and part of the day attending classes in a second language. These and other bilingual programs show promising results. However, their reach is limited by the lack of educators who are qualified to teach in these programs.

This is where all of you come in. Hispanic Serving Institutions in Puerto Rico and across our hemisphere are ideally positioned to address the need for rigorous bilingual curricula and well-trained bilingual teachers. Your schools should be at the forefront of the effort to prepare educators to teach in dual language programs. To be an effective instructor in such programs, one must not only have mastered the two languages taught in the program, but also understand

the pedagogy of teaching to students who are not bilingual themselves. Yet many college graduates who enter the teaching profession lack one or both of these skills.

When you return to your schools, I urge you to examine how well your teacher preparation programs are preparing graduates to teach in bilingual programs. I will note that President Obama's budget for 2012 includes funding for several initiatives to strengthen teacher preparation programs, including \$40 million for the newly created Hawkins Centers of Excellence. This program is designed to increase the number of effective minority educators by expanding and reforming teacher education programs at HSIs and other Minority Serving Institutions. Assuming Congress funds this program, I hope your schools will give serious consideration to submitting an application so that you may strengthen your teacher preparation programs. We will never achieve a bilingual workforce unless we ensure that all students have an effective educator in front of the classroom.

A second area in which HSIs can improve education is to conduct research on the effectiveness of bilingual programs. School districts from across the world have implemented a bilingual curriculum in some or all of their schools. However, most of these districts have limited access to research examining which bilingual programs are the most effective, and which programs may be best for their particular district. Colleges and universities can play an important role in identifying best practices and providing guidance to school districts as they choose the best bilingual program for their student population. I encourage you to collaborate with your colleagues and with neighboring school districts to expand the body of research on bilingual programs. The students of today and the students of tomorrow will be indebted for your efforts.

In closing, I want to thank HACU for giving me the opportunity to speak with you this morning. I hope you come away from this conference with new ideas for improving the instruction and programs offered by your school. I also hope you enjoy your time in Puerto Rico and that you have a safe trip back home.