Nuestra Realidad: Colonial Oversight, Fiscal Control, and the Fight for Financial Stability in Puerto Rico's Higher Education System

by

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Dedication

To my sisters—this dissertation is dedicated to you and all that you have yet to become. May this work be a reminder to take up space, be bold, and never stop chasing your dreams.

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Abstract

Over the past decade, Puerto Rico has experienced a sustained period of instability marked by fiscal austerity, recurring disasters, and demographic decline. For colleges and universities, these pressures have translated into rising operational costs, declining public appropriations and tuition revenue, and intensified competition for a shrinking student population. While similar dynamics (e.g., decreases in state appropriations) appear elsewhere in U.S. higher education, their cumulative effects in Puerto Rico are inseparable from the archipelago's status as an unincorporated territory, producing a distinct and enduring form of financial precarity. Through three interrelated papers, this dissertation offers a theoretically grounded and empirically rich qualitative analysis of how Puerto Rico's compounded crises have shaped university operations, the financial strategies institutions adopt in response and their effectiveness, and the barriers faculty and administrators face in pursuing external funding under colonial oversight.

Chapter 2 (Paper 1) introduces a conceptual framework for examining how resources are distributed and made (in)accessible for postsecondary institutions within colonial contexts. This framework reconceptualizes Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) and administrative burdens through an anti-colonial lens by framing resource scarcities and the hurdles that arise in pursuit of external resources as intentional features of colonial governance. It concludes by outlining avenues for future research that leverage and adapt this framework to advance anti-

colonial scholarship on postsecondary education in Puerto Rico and across neocolonial, postcolonial, and settler colonial contexts.

Drawing on this framework, Chapter 3 (Paper 2) examines how compounding disasters have constrained institutional capacity at universities in Puerto Rico and evaluates the financial management strategies institutions adopted in response. Interviews with faculty and administrators across 11 universities reveal that these conditions severely disrupted university operations, strained budgets, and accelerated enrollment declines. Within this context of prolonged disruption, emergency aid played a decisive role in shaping recovery outcomes, with reimbursement-based models inhibiting recovery efforts, while more flexible and timely funding supported operational continuity and student needs. Finally, my findings indicate that fiscal oversight narrowed universities' financial responses, pushing them toward cost-containment strategies (e.g., hiring and salary freezes) over revenue-generating efforts (e.g., external funding), effectively prioritizing short-term stabilization over long-term growth.

Finally, Chapter 4 (Paper 3) provides a deeper analysis into one revenue-generating strategy (i.e., federal grant funding) employed by institutions in Puerto Rico to understand the challenges that arise in identifying, applying for, and managing these resources. Drawing on interviews with faculty, administrators, and external grant actors, this chapter highlights three key challenges: (1) insufficient access to grant knowledge and support infrastructure, (2) intensified compliance demands under fiscal and colonial oversight, and (3) the centrality of English as a linguistic barrier that amplifies learning, compliance, and psychological costs for institutional actors. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of federal grant funding in Puerto Rico depends on whether program design and procedural demands are responsive to the colonial realities and structural contexts under which universities in Puerto Rico operate.

Together, these studies demonstrate how colonial oversight constrains the financial resources and range of financial strategies universities in Puerto Rico can realistically pursue. By centering institutions long excluded from higher education finance research and policy discourse, this dissertation offers evidence to inform more responsive approaches to supporting institutional capacity and student success in Puerto Rico and comparable contexts.

Chapter 1 Introduction

"Higher education is under siege" has become a defining phrase in recent media and policy discussions, capturing widespread alarm over the Trump administration's aggressive use of federal authority to reshape higher education (e.g., Whistle, 2025). Since taking office in January 2025, Trump has issued a series of executive orders that have created widespread uncertainty across colleges and universities. The orders have temporarily suspended all federal grant programs, interrupting federally-funded research and student support initiatives (e.g., TRIO) nationwide (Blake, 2025; Treisman, 2025), and ultimately eliminated roughly $6.9 billion in federal grants and $350 million in funding earmarked for Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs; Bedekovics & Ragland, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This abrupt withdrawal of federal support has led institutions to adopt emergency cost-containment measures (e.g., hiring freezes) to offset lost revenue (Treisman, 2025). Beyond these immediate fiscal consequences, the withholding of federal funds has also become a tool for enforcing the administration's political agenda and influencing institutional decision-making (Nadworny, 2025). While these executive orders have garnered national outrage for their authoritarian overreach and bypass of constitutional safeguards (see Nadworny, 2025), similar dynamics have long defined Puerto Rico's higher education system. In Puerto Rico, higher education operates within the confines of colonial oversight and austerity, which translates to limited fiscal and institutional autonomy. These constraints have plunged universities into a constant state of financial precarity and survival in which they are forced to make impossible choices to remain operational. Left

unaddressed, this fiscal decline will accelerate campus closures and ultimately limit the educational opportunities of thousands of Puerto Rican students who depend on these institutions to pursue a postsecondary education.

As an unincorporated territory, Puerto Rico is subject to federal oversight without meaningful political representation: its residents (1) cannot vote in presidential elections, (2) lack voting members in Congress; and (3) have limited control over policy decisions that directly affect them, including those related to higher education (Atiles, 2024; Atiles-Osoria, 2018; Brusi et al., 2018; Jiménez, 2024). Within this framework of political exclusion, Puerto Rico's universities have long operated under the weight of external control. In fact, the first postsecondary campus, founded in 1900, was part of the United States' broader colonial project to "Americanize" Puerto Ricans through education (Caban, 2002). To this day, this legacy of external oversight remains. In 2016, Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability (PROMESA) Act, which established an unelected fiscal oversight and management board (FOMB) that holds full authority over Puerto Rico's public services, including education (Brusi et al., 2018; Brusi & Godreau, 2021; Zambrana, 2021).

Under FOMB's oversight, the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) system suffered cuts totaling more than half of its normal operating budget, while tuition costs for students have more than tripled (Brusi, 2022; University of Puerto Rico, 2021). These measures were followed by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the 2020 earthquakes, and the Covid-19 pandemic—each of which only compounded existing financial and administrative constraints. Institutions reported millions in damages, with many unable to access timely disaster relief due to cumbersome FEMA processes and layers of oversight imposed by PROMESA (Brusi & Godreau, 2021; United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024; Willison et al., 2022). These

sustained disruptions have placed immense financial and administrative pressure on institutions across Puerto Rico to mitigate budget shortfalls and find new ways to sustain their operations while continuing to serve their students.

Despite the scale and ongoing nature of these pressures, Puerto Rico's postsecondary system remains underexamined in the higher education literature (Sansone & Hernandez, 2021). This absence is particularly concerning given the depth of its fiscal crisis and the relatively large population its higher education sector serves. While Puerto Rico is small in terms of square miles—larger than only two U.S. states (Delaware and Rhode Island)—its population is greater than that of 20 states, and its higher education system is larger than those in 35 states (Santiago et al., 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Even after years of enrollment decline (a 31 percent drop between 2015 and 2022) its colleges and universities still educate more students than over a third of U.S. states, most of whom are Latinx and come from low-income backgrounds (Excelencia in Education, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023, 2024). This means that while Puerto Rico's postsecondary system holds a critical role in educating historically underserved students, it is doing so under extreme conditions of financial duress.

However, many studies explicitly exclude Puerto Rico from analyses on higher education finance and access to external funding, citing its unique political status, geographic isolation, or cultural distinctiveness as justification (e.g., Aguilar-Smith, 2021; Kelchen et al., 2024; Vargas, 2018). In other words, the very characteristics that underscore the urgent need to study these institutions are often used to rationalize their omission from higher education research—a practice that reinforces the invisibility of Puerto Rico within higher education policy conversations and policy design. As a result, existing research overlooks how these distinct

contexts may actively shape Puerto Rico's structural exclusion from and dependence on external funding.

This gap in the literature is particularly consequential amid the widespread federal disinvestment in higher education under the current Trump administration and the financial uncertainty it has created for many institutions. Public and private universities in Puerto Rico are predominantly funded through local government appropriations (for publics) and tuition revenue (for privates), yet PROMESA-imposed budget cuts and steep declines in enrollment have reduced these funding streams (Labandera & Santiago, 2021). With many equity-oriented federal grant programs now being targeted and terminated under the current administration, understanding how universities in Puerto Rico have historically sustained their operations is essential for informing policy responses grounded in the archipelago's institutional realities.

This dissertation examines how colonial oversight[1] and austerity[2] shape the financial stability and operations of universities in Puerto Rico, and how institutions have responded to ongoing fiscal uncertainty across three interconnected studies. The first study (Chapter 2) offers a conceptual framework to understand how colonial systems of governance shape how resources are distributed and accessed within postsecondary institutions like Puerto Rico by reframing Resource Dependence Theory (RDT; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and administrative burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2018) using an anti-colonial lens. In this study, I argue that dependence on external resources and the burdens that arise in accessing these resources are codified features of colonial governance. The second paper (Chapter 3) leverages this framework to empirically investigate (1) how institutional operations at universities in Puerto Rico have been shaped by

[1] The administrative and political systems established by a colonial power to manage its colonies and maintain control.

[2] The harsh economic measures imposed by colonial powers over its colonies.

colonial austerity and disaster, as well as (2) the types of financial management strategies that these campus have implemented in response. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 17 participants, it examines how colonial oversight, and disasters have constrained institutions' fiscal, material, human, and organizational resources and, in turn, shaped institutional priorities surrounding cost-containment and revenue-generation. The third paper (Chapter 4) provides a closer analysis of the burdens that arise for faculty and administrators when applying for and implementing competitive grants—focusing on the Title V, Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) grant program. Together, these studies advance a more critical and context-specific understanding of institutional capacity and the pursuit of external resources under colonial oversight and austerity.

Terminology, Word Choice, and Framing

Throughout this dissertation, I intentionally adopt specific terms and framings to reflect the colonial, political, and geographic complexities of Puerto Rico and their postsecondary system. This section outlines my rationale for these choices, particularly where commonly used language obscures power relations, imposes external frames of reference, or fails to reflect the lived realities of Puerto Rican students and their postsecondary contexts.

Table 1.1 Terminology and Rationale

Term	Rationale/Framing
Anti-Colonial	I use the term anti-colonial to signal a deliberate onto-epistemological approach to research that identifies and interrogates the colonial conditions under which Puerto Rico's postsecondary institutions operate and challenges the colonial systems that sustain those conditions. Anti-colonial, in this context, reflects a broader commitment to exposing how colonial power continues to shape institutional capacity, resource allocation, and educational opportunity as the central catalyst. This approach shapes how I frame each study, interpret and analyze data, present findings, and make policy recommendations. Rather than treating institutional challenges as isolated events, I situate them within the broader structures of United States colonial governance. I reject

	assumptions of neutrality and meritocracy in dominant theories and policy logics to foreground how laws, funding structures, and administrative processes are designed in ways that constrain autonomy and reinforce colonial subjugation.
Archipelago vs. Island	Puerto Rico is an archipelago with 144 islands. Of these, only three are inhabited: Puerto Rico (main island), Culebra, and Vieques. Although all postsecondary institutions are located on the main island, I intentionally use the term "archipelago" rather than "island" to more accurately reflect the region's geography and to resist reductive framings that collapse where Puerto Ricans reside. However, when presenting participant quotations, I retain their use of the term island when it appears to accurately reflect their own language and perspectives.
Institutions in Puerto Rico vs. HSIs in Puerto Rico	I use the terms "HSIs in Puerto Rico" and "institutions in Puerto Rico" interchangeably to refer to postsecondary institutions located in Puerto Rico that meet the federal definition of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI, i.e., are not for-profit). However, I intentionally minimize use of the term HSI when describing these institutions, unless referencing their eligibility for federal programs and funding mechanisms or when drawing parallels with HSIs, in the States. This decision is grounded in my conversations with participants and my own experiences with family members in Puerto Rico. Unlike in the States, the term "HSI" carries little local salience for administrators or faculty in Puerto Rico. Participants primarily referenced the designation in relation to external recognition, particularly its purpose in accessing federal funding. While the dominant nomenclature of the term signals a call for institutions to advance their efforts and mission for educating "Hispanic" students, institutions in Puerto Rico perceive serving Puerto Rican (i.e., "Hispanic") students as an assumed function of their normal operations. In this way, the HSI designation functions more as an externally imposed label than as a locally meaningful category. My selective use of the HSI label when referencing institutions in Puerto Rico reflects an effort to honor these distinctions and avoid re-inscribing federal designations that may not align with local self-understandings.
States/Stateside vs. Mainland	I refer to institutions located within the 50 states and the District of Columbia as "stateside" or "in the States," deliberately avoiding the term "mainland." The term "mainland" presumes a geographic and symbolic center from which all other regions are peripheral. This framing implicitly assigns power and centrality to the States. Such a framing reinforces colonial logics that marginalize Puerto Rico and other non-state territories. Moreover, "mainland" is a relative term; for Puerto Ricans living in the archipelago or diaspora, Puerto Rico often remains their

	cultural, political, and geographic center. While I avoid the term "mainland" in my own analysis, I preserve its use in participant quotations to avoid superimposing nomenclature that contradicts with their perceived positionality to the United States. Employing an anti-colonial analysis requires interrogating and disrupting the language that centers colonial authority and marginalizes local geographies and epistemologies. To analyze Puerto Rican issues in this way is to disrupt what and who is being centered in research and policy.
Unincorporated Territory vs. Colony	I use the terms "unincorporated territory" and "colony" interchangeably when referring to Puerto Rico's political status. While unincorporated territory is the official designation used by the United States' federal government, it is a deliberately vague and legally constructed category that functions to obscure the realities of colonialism. The term was codified through the *Insular Cases* (1901–1922), which established that territories like Puerto Rico "belong to, but are not part of" the United States. This status denies Puerto Ricans full constitutional rights and democratic representation while maintaining federal authority over the territory. In contrast, the term colony better captures the true extractive and asymmetric relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. By using both terms, I aim to connect the dominant legal framing (unincorporated territory) with the true material and political condition (colony) in order for readers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Puerto Rico's enduring colonial reality and the role of the federal government in obscuring this reality.

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Chapter 2 Resource Dependence by Design: Toward a Theoretical Understanding of the Role of Colonial Systems in Destabilizing Postsecondary Education in Puerto Rico

Introduction

Access to resources is a fundamental determinant of institutional stability in higher education. Colleges and universities must continually generate and diversify revenue to sustain their operations, support academic programs, and fulfill their educational missions (Namalefe, 2014). Yet not all institutions have the same capacity to secure or sustain new sources of revenue. This is because financial resources are deeply stratified within the United States' postsecondary system. Well-resourced, research-intensive universities that primarily enroll White students are typically well-funded, while those that overwhelmingly educate low-income and racially minoritized students are left with fewer resources with which to support their students and diversify their revenue (Hillman et al., 2024). In the case of Puerto Rico, these disparities are intensified by their long-standing colonial relationship with the United States that has shaped the very terms through which resources are allocated, withheld, or made conditional.

Puerto Rico is known today as the *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico*, and while both free (*libre*) and state (*estado*) are included in its name, it remains neither, codifying a modern era of colonial extraction and dispossession in the archipelago (Immerwahr, 2020). Since the United States took possession of Puerto Rico in 1898 from Spain, the federal government has engaged in a series of predatory legislative and judicial actions that have destroyed the local economy, eroded physical infrastructure, and manufactured the untenable standards of living that have displaced millions of Puerto Ricans to the States (Atiles, 2024; Atiles-Osoria, 2018; Immerwahr,

2020; Jiménez, 2024; Zambrana, 2021). Puerto Rico's economic downturn and infrastructural collapse are the direct consequences of prolonged colonial oversight and austerity, which have systematically weakened the archipelago's capacity to respond to crises. These structural conditions left Puerto Rico's postsecondary education system financially vulnerable, amplifying the impacts of the 2015 debt crisis, Hurricane Maria, the 2020 earthquakes, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The severity and quick succession in which each crisis occurred severely impacted institutional operations (Brusi, 2021; Brusi & Godreau, 2021; Santiago et al., 2023) and greatly disrupted the educational opportunities of Puerto Rican students (Garcia & Danek, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Szecsi et al., 2023). In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the three largest university systems reported over $144 million in damages, forcing many institutions to suspend instruction and essential services for more than a month (Brusi & Godreau, 2021; Santiago et al., 2023; Weissman, 2019). Because federal disaster relief and recovery efforts were slow and insufficient, many university facilities remained structurally compromised when a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck southern Puerto Rico in 2020, leading to further damage and operational interruptions (Allstadt et al., 2022; Santiago et al., 2023). Less than two months later, the Covid-19 pandemic forced all universities to abruptly transition their operations to a virtual environment. Amid these environmental and public health crises, government appropriations to public institutions were slashed by 50 percent (Velázquez, 2025), and system-wide student enrollment plummeted by 31 percent from pre-Maria levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Taken together, these events reveal the urgent need to revisit how we understand the way higher education resources are allocated and how universities respond to budgetary constraints, especially in colonial contexts like Puerto Rico.

As such, this paper focuses on how colonialism produces resource disparities in Puerto Rico's postsecondary system and the barriers that arise when these institutions pursue new sources of revenue. I use the case of Puerto Rico because, compared to all other United States colonial territories, Puerto Rico is the largest in terms of land, population, and the number of postsecondary education institutions it has (Digest of Education Statistics, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024). Moreover, Puerto Rico's postsecondary system is particularly impacted by colonial oversight after the installation of an unelected fiscal control and oversight board in 2016, which has since assumed complete autonomy over the financial decision-making of Puerto Rico's public education system. Since the Board was established, the public system has seen their normal operating budget cut in half and tuition has increased by three times prior levels, affecting both education quality and access. This makes Puerto Rico a compelling case for theorizing the relationship between coloniality, resource dependencies, and administrative burdens (i.e., the costs individuals incur when engaging with policy to access resources; Herd & Moynihan, 2018) in higher education funding. Yet, institutions in Puerto Rico are routinely omitted from dominant empirical and theoretical discourses in higher education (Hernandez & Sansone, 2021). Most higher education research on funding disparities in the United States focuses on institutions within the 50 states and D.C. (e.g., Kelchen et al., 2023), overlooking how colonial governance structures produce distinct forms of precarity in the territories. This exclusion allows for erroneous assumptions about how higher education systems operate in the United States' territorial possessions. It upholds Eurocentric systems of knowledge that marginalize colonial realities and undermines efforts to craft equitable and context-informed policy solutions.

This paper is organized into five main sections. The first section offers historical and legal context by examining the evolution of Puerto Rico's political status as an unincorporated territory and its economic relationship with the United States. It outlines how the United States capitalized on this juridico-political arrangement to govern through exceptional authority, imposing policies that erode Puerto Rico's economic stability and limit autonomy. The second section explores how states of emergency, like the natural disasters and economic crises experienced in Puerto Rico, are products of long-standing colonial neglect and are leveraged by the U.S. federal government to reinscribe the colonial condition through the withholding or extraction of critical resources. As such, Puerto Rico's broader colonial relationship with the United States perpetuates resource dependencies, specifically in higher education. This brings us to the third section which presents the conceptual core of the paper by situating Resource Dependence Theory (RDT)—a common theory within the higher education finance literature—within the context of colonialism. Here, the paper introduces two key subcomponents, institutional capacity and administrative burdens, to explain how resource scarcity and bureaucratic constraints systematically disadvantage institutions in Puerto Rico in their ability to secure the necessary funds to provide accessible, quality education. The fourth section presents the framework in its entirety, connecting the historical background presented in sections one and two with resource dependence theory and administrative burdens. Using this framework, the final section outlines anti-colonial pathways for higher education research, offering guidance on how scholars can use this framework to critically examine postsecondary institutions in colonial, neo-colonial, and postcolonial educational systems.

A Brief History of Puerto Rico: Setting the Stage for Colonial Administration in Postsecondary Education

More than a century after becoming a territory of the United States, Puerto Rico continues to be governed through colonial mechanisms that curtail its political and economic autonomy. Under this arrangement, the United States holds full plenary power to override any local legislation, freely intervene in Puerto Rican affairs, and determine whether, and to what extent, fundamental rights and protections apply to its territorial possession (Atiles-Osoria, 2018; Jiménez, 2024). This dynamic is visible in Puerto Rico's postsecondary education system, where federal oversight, austerity measures, and structural neglect reflect the broader logics of colonial subjugation. To fully understand the challenges facing Puerto Rico's postsecondary institutions, it is important to first understand Puerto Rico's broader colonial relationship with the United States. This section centers the actions of the U.S. federal government to underscore its role in producing and sustaining the conditions under which Puerto Rico's higher education system operates. While this analysis foregrounds the actions of the federal government, it is not intended to erase the long history of Puerto Rican resistance to colonial rule (see Atiles, 2022; Martinez & Garcia, 2018; Scaramutti et al., 2019). Key elements are referenced in text with a more detailed description and timeline of the relevant legislation and judicial rulings in Appendix Table A.1.

Codifying Empire: Colonial Legality and Exceptional Rule in Puerto Rico

Higher education funding and governance in Puerto Rico is deeply entangled with the archipelago's broader racial-colonial relationship with the United States. This relationship operates through what scholars describe as colonial exceptionalism or the colonial state of exception, a framework in which legal norms are not uniformly applied but strategically implemented to reinforce U.S. interests (Atiles, 2024; Atiles-Osoria, 2018). To fully grasp this

framework, it is useful to consider how it departs from conventional understandings of states of exception. Traditionally, states of exception are defined as periods in which the law cannot operate as normal and must be suspended to circumvent unexpected or particularly dire events such as a financial crisis or natural disaster (Agamben, 2005). In these circumstances, the government will take on special powers that allow them to respond to these events in ways that suspend democratic liberties in order to return to a previous or improved state of affairs (Agamben, 2005). Atiles-Osoria (2018) challenges this framework by contending that, within colonial systems, the state of exception is not a *temporary* suspension of the law but rather the very mode through which colonial law operates. In Puerto Rico, colonial exceptionalism describes the way in which "inclusive exclusion or exclusive inclusion" take place (Atiles-Osoria, 2018). In other words, the United States has the power to decide which laws apply to their colonial territory, to impose different legal systems, and to dictate the lives of their colonial subjects (Atiles-Osoria, 2018).

Atiles-Osoria's (2020; 2018) definition of colonial exceptionalism describes how colonialism functions through juridical mechanisms that institutionalize the ontological order of the racial "other" in Puerto Rico, rendering Puerto Ricans as less than fully human and therefore exploitable. Drawing from Mbembe and Meintjes' (2003) theorization of *necropolitics* and *necropower*, Atiles-Osoria (2020; 2018) conceptualizes colonial states of exception as legal and political systems that both manage and devalue life by deciding whose existence is protected, whose suffering can be normalized, and whose rights can be suspended in perpetuity. As a population of Black, Indigenous, and Spanish descent, Puerto Ricans were perceived by the U.S. government as racially mixed and unfit for full political inclusion into the nation. Atiles-Osoria extends this argument to contend that colonial exceptionalism transforms those ontological

hierarchies into material systems of economic control through austerity, debt enforcement, and privatization. Although Atiles-Osoria does not explicitly employ the vocabulary of racialized capitalism (see Robinson, 2000), his use of colonial exceptionalism aligns with its core arguments, with both contending that economic extraction depends on and furthers racial hierarchies established through colonial rule.

These forms of exceptional policymaking were first seen in the Foraker Act of 1900 and solidified during the Insular Cases (1901 to 1922), which provided the formative legislative and judicial groundwork for defining the political and constitutional boundaries of Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States. The Foraker Act held three formative consequences: (1) it changed the governance structure of Puerto Rico from military oversight to a civil government, (2) it started to define the archipelago's relationship to the United States, and (3) it incorporated Puerto Rico into the United States' economy (Atiles, 2024; Atiles-Osoria, 2018). Under the Foraker Act, the United States replaced military rule for a civilian governance structure with limited autonomy: "a colonial administration under a civil government (Zambrana, 2021, p. 59)." This structure created a liminal space of political inclusion and limited power for self-determination. For instance, while Puerto Rico was allowed to appoint a resident commissioner to Congress, this representative had no voting power, denying the archipelago any real influence in shaping their internal policies (Caban, 2002; Go, 2000). Moreover, the Foraker Act determined Puerto Ricans were considered "citizens of Puerto Rico," a status that recognized their governability but not their belonging (Jiménez, 2024).

The Foraker Act also structured Puerto Rico's economic relationship with the United States. The Act unilaterally imposed a 60:1 exchange rate between the Puerto Rican peso and the U.S. dollar, drastically devaluing local currency and effectively transferring economic power to

the United States (Atiles, 2024). This monetary shift enabled U.S. corporations to exploit the cheap land and labor available in the archipelago, displacing local farmers and businesses in the process. In addition, the Act implemented a temporary tariff on Puerto Rican imports, suppressing local commerce and deepening economic dependency. Importantly, the legislation exempted Puerto Rico from federal income taxes, which set the precedent for future tax exemption policies utilized to fuel U.S. capitalist interests (Zhang, 2025). Finally, the Foraker Act allowed the Puerto Rican government and its municipalities to issue bonds and other forms of debt, a practice that contributed to the archipelago's future fiscal crisis (Atiles, 2024). Originally framed as a means to repay the United States for disaster recovery efforts after Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899—one of the longest and deadliest hurricanes on record—this bond-centered financing model became a key mechanism of colonial control over Puerto Rico's public finances (Atiles, 2024; Schwartz, 1992). For this reason, Atiles (2024) argues that indebtedness, disaster, and emergency response policies have long been central to the U.S. colonial project in Puerto Rico. The Foraker Act not only instituted a system of colonial exceptionalism in which constitutional norms are selectively applied or withheld, but it also laid the foundation for economic dependency and established the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico that persists to this day (Atiles, 2024).

While the Foraker Act laid the initial statutory groundwork for colonial policymaking in Puerto Rico, it was the Insular Cases that formally codified it into constitutional law. Decided between 1901 and 1922, these cases legally defined the boundaries of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States (Jiménez, 2024; Ponsa-Kraus, 2022). The first and most consequential, *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), arose as a challenge of the constitutionality of the Foraker Act when merchant Samuel Downes contested an import duty imposed on oranges brought from Puerto

Rico to New York. He argued that treating Puerto Rico as a foreign entity violated the Constitution's Uniformity Clause, which requires all duties, imports, and excises be uniform across the United States. This seemingly banal dispute led to one of the most consequential cases in U.S. history.

Downes v. Bidwell (1901) distinguished between territories that were on the pathway to statehood (incorporated territories such as Hawai'i) and those that were not (unincorporated territories such as Puerto Rico). Prior to this case, the assumption was that all newly acquired territories would eventually be granted statehood with the full protections and rights of the Constitution (Immerwahr, 2020; Jiménez, 2024). During the United States' westward expansion, territories were deemed ready for statehood once a sufficient number of White settlers had firmly established themselves by displacing or eradicating the Indigenous communities who lived there (Immerwahr, 2020; Jiménez, 2024). It was under this same logic that put Hawai'i (also annexed in 1898) towards a different path than Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Although Hawai'i still had a large indigenous population in 1898, it had been receiving a large influx of European and North American settlers for more than a century before it was formally acquired by the United States, which made its pathway towards statehood more palatable for the United States (Jiménez, 2024). By contrast, Puerto Rico's Afro-Indigenous and Spanish-descended population was considered part of an alien race, leading the United States to create alternative spaces of legality that reinterpreted the Constitution to preclude Puerto Rico, and other territories (e.g., Guam and the Philippines) from full incorporation into the nation (Jiménez, 2024).

Downes v. Bidwell drew on the racial logics embedded in earlier Supreme Court decisions that sanctioned the legal exclusion of Native Americans and African Americans to formalize the doctrine of unincorporated territories (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Legal Court Cases that Set the Precedent for Downes v. Bidwell and the Creation of "Unincorporated Territories"

Year	Act/Court Case	Significance	How it informed *Downes v. Bidwell*
1823-1832	The Marshall Trilogy *Johnson v. M'Intosh (1823)* *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia (1831)* *Worcester v. Georgia (1832)*	The Marshall Trilogy refers to three court cases in the early 19th century that established the legal relationship between the United States and tribal nations. Together, they established that Native tribes possessed limited sovereignty as "domestic dependent nations," recognizing their right to self-govern while asserting the United States retained ultimate authority over their lands and political status. The cases left Native Americans in a legal limbo in which they were neither foreigners nor citizens.	The Marshall Trilogy set the precedent for partial incorporation under federal authority in that it recognized tribal sovereignty yet held that full plenary power over tribal nations remained under federal jurisdiction. Effectively this meant that Native Americans were neither full citizens nor completely foreign. This distinction was used in *Downes v Bidwell* to create the label "foreign in a domestic sense," which supported the withholding of Constitutional rights and protections to Puerto Rico, while enforcing U.S. intervention and authority.
1845	United States v. Rogers	The case involved William S. Rogers, a White man who had been adopted into the Cherokee Nation. Rogers was charged with murdering another White man on Cherokee land. He claimed that, because he was a member of the Cherokee Nation, the U.S. courts lacked jurisdiction to try him in federal court. The Supreme Court rejected Rogers's argument, holding that adoption into a Native tribe did not change his status as a U.S. citizen, reasoning that Native nations did not have the authority to naturalize U.S. citizens.	The decision reaffirmed and expanded federal supremacy over Native nations and narrowed their sovereignty by making clear that tribal membership could not override U.S. citizenship or law. The Court established that Congress held nearly limitless power to regulate tribal land, and it precluded the possibility of a judicial review of these unchecked powers. This case informed *Downes v. Bidwell* by legitimizing a legal order in which the United States could fully control populations it deemed "unfit" for self-governance indefinitely while denying them the means to alter that status.
1856	Guano Islands Act	This Act sought to monopolize control of guano (dried bird and bat droppings), which was determined to be extremely useful as fertilizer for farmers and agriculturalists. It allowed U.S. citizens to take possession of uninhabited and unclaimed islands for the purpose of extracting that resource. The Act provided the U.S. with the discretion to treat the islands possessed as "appertaining to the United States" up until all the guano had been extracted	The Act prompted questions of the legal definition of appurtenance and whether the islands temporarily acquired by the United States were considered "a part of" the U.S. insofar as the court of law applied to these acquisitions. In 1889, a labor riot broke out on the island of Navassa in protest of the abusive labor conditions Black laborers experienced when mining guano under the oversight of all White supervisors in the Navassa

		then the island would "revert and relapse out of the jurisdiction of the United States."	Phosphate Company. Five White men were ultimately killed, prompting a grand jury to convict three Black men of murder and sentenced to death by hanging. These men appealed these convictions to the Supreme Court arguing that the impermanent nature of the United States' control over Navassa meant that the island was not truly part of the U.S. and thus did not have jurisdiction over any disputes that occurred on the island. They contrasted the status of these islands with territories in the Northwest, which were permanently made a part of the U.S. While the Court did not formally define "appurtenance" and the precise legal apparatus that applied in these islands, it ultimately determined that Navassa was ultimately under the exclusive jurisdiction of the U.S. and the men's conviction would be upheld. The ambiguity in the legal boundaries of islands "appertaining to" the U.S. set the groundwork and flexibility for determining Puerto Rico's relationship to the U.S. in *Downes v. Bidwell.*
1857	Scott v. Sanford	In 1846, Dred Scott, an enslaved Black man, sued for his freedom on the grounds that his enslaver had taken him from Missouri, a slave state, into Wisconsin, a free territory. He argued that his time spent in a free territory (in which slavery was prohibited) granted him his freedom. However, in 1857, the Supreme Court ultimately ruled that Dred Scott was not entitled to his freedom because African Americans were not and could never be citizens of the United States (state citizenship did not equate to national citizenship). In this regard, Dred Scott did not have the right to sue in federal court because he was not considered a U.S. citizen.	In *Downes v. Bidwell*, Justice Brown leveraged both the Guano Islands Act and Scott v. Sanford case to determine the applicability of the U.S. Constitution in Puerto Rico and the other territories acquired after the Spanish-Cuban-American war (e.g. Guam). Brown determined that the Constitution was "operative" in these overseas territories but not necessarily "applicable." This argument was made using the logic that Puerto Rico was "appurtenant to and belonging to the United States, but not a part of the United States" (Guano Islands Act) and the idea that the inhabitants of Puerto Rico were not "people of the United States" when the Constitution was first drafted (Scott v. Sanford) and thus would not be extended the full rights and protections granted to citizens.

Source: Making Never Never Land by Monica A. Jimenez

The Marshall Trilogy (1823–1832) defined tribal nations as "domestic dependent nations," recognizing a limited form of sovereignty while asserting Congress's absolute authority over them (Jiménez, 2024). This classification relied on racial hierarchies that cast Indigenous peoples as uncivilized and unfit for self-governance, legitimizing their subordination under federal control. Together, this set of cases set a precedent for partial incorporation, which *Downes v. Bidwell* would later invoke to define Puerto Rico's status as "foreign in a domestic sense (Jiménez, 2024)." Two decades later, *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) codified racial exclusion by declaring that individuals of African descent, whether enslaved or free, could not be citizens of the United States and therefore stood outside the protection of the Constitution (Jiménez, 2024). Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Taney argued that African Americans were never meant to be included as "people of the United States," asserting that they were an inferior race with no claim to citizenship (Jiménez, 2024). This logic resurfaced in *Downes v. Bidwell*, where Justice Brown similarly argued that the inhabitants of Puerto Rico were not considered "people of the United States" when the Constitution was written, and thus not entitled to its full rights and protections—creating a form of second-class citizenry that remains to this day (Jiménez, 2024).

Despite the passage of new legislation in the twentieth century, the racialized foundations of Puerto Rico's exclusion continued to persist. Later legislation such as the Jones Act of 1917 and Public Law 600 of 1950 made revisions to this structure (e.g., extended U.S. citizenship, allowed Puerto Ricans to draft a constitution and elect their own governor), but the core colonial dynamic remained unchanged (Atiles, 2024). Puerto Ricans still do not have voting representation in Congress, cannot vote in presidential elections, and are not provided the full protections of the U.S. Constitution. Notably, when Puerto Rico was permitted to draft their own constitution in 1950 (went into effect in 1952), Congress conditioned their approval on the

removal of a section on Puerto Rican's social and economic rights, which include rights to basic social welfare (e.g., right to work, to receive healthcare; Powell, 2024). In present day, this translates to lower wages and Medicaid benefits. In Puerto Rico, the average weekly wage is nearly half that of the United States—$718 compared to $1,507 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Moreover, while more than 40 percent of Puerto Rico residents live below the poverty line, Puerto Rico (and other U.S. territories) receives only a 55 percent Federal Medicaid Assistance Percentage (FMAP)—two-thirds of what they would receive if they were a U.S. state (Rapfogel, 2022). Congress also added the "eternity clause" which precludes Puerto Rico from making any amendments without congressional approval, effectively solidifying Puerto Rico's colonial status in perpetuity (H. Powell, 2024). These adjustments unveil the limits of the so-called *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico* ("free associated state") conferred by Public Law 600 (Atiles, 2024). However, the passage of the PROMESA Act in 2016 was the final nail in the coffin—imposing an unelected fiscal control board with full authority over the archipelago's finances. This action dispelled any notion that Puerto Rico ever had the right to self-determination. Higher education in Puerto Rico inherits this colonial framework operating within a system of fiscal oversight and constrained autonomy.

Colonial Profiteering: The Colonial State of Exception and Economic Dependency

The United States' colonial project in Puerto Rico created an economic system dependent on U.S. capital investment rather than self-sustaining economic growth. In 1917, the federal government passed the Jones Act, which is most recognized for imposing U.S. citizenship on Puerto Ricans. However, less widely acknowledged is its financial provision that established a triple tax exemption for bonds issued by the Puerto Rican government (United States Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018; Zambrana, 2021). Under this exemption, the

interest earned on these bonds is not subject to federal, state, or local taxes, which makes them particularly attractive to investors even as Puerto Rico's economy began to deteriorate (Dick, 2015). By 2015, Puerto Rico's debt had reached critical levels, surpassing $70 billion in outstanding bond debt and accumulating more than $50 billion in unfunded pension liabilities (GAO, 2018). Although dominant narratives often centralize the blame for the debt crisis on local corruption and fiscal mismanagement (Rosario et al., 2022), these discourses only serve to absolve the United States for its role in constructing and sustaining the legal, political, and economic systems that created these conditions of economic dependence in the first place (Atiles, 2022).

One example of this economic dependence is the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, which regulates shipping between U.S. ports. Specifically, this act requires that all vessels transporting goods between U.S. ports must (1) have been built in the U.S., (2) be owned by U.S. citizens or companies, (3) contain a crew of U.S. citizens, and (4) be registered in the U.S (GAO, 2018). While the act was designed to protect United States maritime industries, it significantly increased shipping costs for Puerto Rico. As an archipelago, Puerto Rico is reliant on imports for essential goods such as medicine, food, and petroleum—one of the principal resources used to power Puerto Rico's electrical grid (GAO, 2018). As a result, the cost of living and operating local businesses in the archipelago is substantially more expensive than in the States. A 2019 economic assessment found that this legislation imposes an annual burden of $1.1 billion in increased expenses and results in an estimated $1.5 billion in lost economic revenue for Puerto Rico (John Dunham & Associates, 2019). These rising costs and diminished revenue make it challenging for local economic growth and development.

The cumulative impact of these economic constraints intensified over the following decades as the United States implemented a series of industrial policies aimed at shifting Puerto Rico's economy from agriculture to manufacturing. Beginning in the 1940s, Operation Bootstrap offered United States corporations generous tax exemptions and financial incentives to establish manufacturing operations on the archipelago (Caraballo-Cueto & Lara, 2017). These policies initially generated economic growth: unemployment declined, wages rose, and living standards improved (Caraballo-Cueto & Lara, 2017). Puerto Rico's infrastructure also underwent significant development that included paved roads, expanded electrical grids, and modernized building projects (Ficek, 2018). However, the industrial momentum generated by Operation Bootstrap provided only temporary economic growth tied to U.S. corporate investment. Shortly after, the United States passed the Tax Reform Act in 1976, which sought to incentivize U.S. businesses to conduct operations in Puerto Rico (GAO, 2006). This Act introduced the possessions tax credit, which provided federal tax breaks on profits generated by U.S. corporations that conducted their operations in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories (GAO, 2006). However, 98 percent of these tax benefits were claimed by U.S. firms based solely in Puerto Rico (GAO, 2006). Like Operation Bootstrap, the possessions tax credit stimulated short-term economic growth in Puerto Rico but deepened its dependency on external corporate investment, leaving Puerto Rico vulnerable when these incentives were later withdrawn.

The federal government repealed the possessions tax credit in 1996 (completely phasing out the program by 2006), marking the beginning of a severe economic decline. Employment opportunities quickly diminished as United States corporations began closing their operations and relocating back to the States (GAO, 2006). The complete elimination of the tax credit occurred just as the Great Recession began, pushing Puerto Rico into a prolonged period of

economic instability. Neither Operation Bootstrap nor the Tax Reform Act addressed the long-standing economic needs of Puerto Rico. Instead, they created a short-lived economic boom tethered to predatory tax incentives that rerouted profits toward U.S. corporations. These two industrial initiatives, which were originally positioned as the pathway to economic growth and modernization in Puerto Rico, are now widely recognized as key contributors to the 2015 debt crisis (GAO, 2006, 2018).

Following the phase out of the possessions tax credit, the Puerto Rican government created the Puerto Rico Sales Tax Financing Corporation ("COFINA", for its Spanish acronym) as an attempt to pay off rising debt, address their budget deficits, and continue to finance essential public projects (Atiles, 2024; GAO, 2018; Zambrana, 2021). Because these bonds were tax-backed, they were granted a higher credit rating and could be issued at lower interest rates (Andrew, 2022). This structure portrayed them as a low-risk investment, suggesting that the Puerto Rican government had the capacity to meet its repayment obligations—which it did not (Andrew, 2022). In practice, however, COFINA bonds ultimately worsened the debt crisis by locking the government into rigid, long-term repayment commitments (Atiles, 2024).

Collectively, these acts illustrate how Puerto Rico's economic relationship with the United States is one built on economic dependency, dispossession, and indebtedness. The triple tax exemption under the Jones Act paved the way for the lucrative investment in Puerto Rico's debt, trade restrictions limited economic growth and raised expenses for essential goods, and short-term industrial projects led to increased economic dependence. Together, they produced the economic instability that set the stage for Puerto Rico's debt crisis and forced the government to divert spending away from critical infrastructure and toward debt repayment (Ficek, 2018). This long-term erosion of infrastructure and public investment left the archipelago increasingly

vulnerable to fiscal and environmental shocks, which would later have far-reaching consequences for its postsecondary system.

Manufacturing Crisis: Procedural Vulnerability and States of Emergency in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rican scholars and advocates have long asserted that Puerto Rico's multilayered crises are a product of their colonial legacy (Atiles, 2024; Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019; Zambrana, 2021). To examine how colonial power shapes governance during states of emergency, scholars draw on the concept of procedural vulnerability (Hsu et al., 2015; Rivera, 2022; Rivera et al., 2022). Procedural vulnerability shifts the focus away from blaming marginalized communities for their own vulnerabilities to instead interrogate how policies, procedures, and systems create and maintain the conditions that make specific groups more susceptible to harm. Drawing from Indigenous scholarship, procedural vulnerability provides an anti-colonial lens to examine "peoples' relationship to power…and the ways power is exercised" during states of emergency (Hsu et al., 2015, p. 309).

This section illustrates how procedural vulnerabilities (Hsu et al., 2015) materialized during Puerto Rico's multilayer crises as outcomes of colonial governance and policy design. I focus on the debt crisis and Hurricane Maria that, while they were significant events on their own, reached catastrophic levels through U.S. (in)actions that exacerbated pre-existing financial instabilities and obstructed recovery. I further examine how procedural vulnerability manifests within Puerto Rico's postsecondary education system, shaping its institutional resources and overall stability. Within this section, I make two arguments regarding states of emergency and Puerto Rico's postsecondary system: (1) Puerto Rico's greater colonial history with the United States set the stage for the financial and infrastructural precarity of institutions in Puerto Rico, magnifying the consequences of each crisis and disaster, and (2) during these states of

emergency, the United States' exploited their control over resources and Puerto Rico's dependence on these resources to further destabilize postsecondary education in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico's Debt Crisis and the PROMESA Act

Even before the onset of the debt crisis, Puerto Rico's postsecondary system was already grappling with significant challenges. This included underfunding, outdated infrastructure and deferred maintenance projects, rising operational costs, and declining enrollment; all of which hinder a university's ability to deliver a quality education (Labandera & Santiago, 2021; Navarro-Rivera, 1999). These systemic issues left the archipelago's postsecondary education system vulnerable, making it even more difficult to withstand the financial pressures and austerity measures brought on by the debt crisis.

In 2015, the Puerto Rican governor publicly declared Puerto Rico's $123 billion debt[3] as unpayable, making it the largest municipal debt[4] in United States history (Whiteside, 2019; Zambrana, 2021). Due to Puerto Rico's status as an unincorporated territory, its government was unable to file for bankruptcy to restructure their debt.[5] As a result, the federal government passed the Puerto Rican Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) in 2016, which installed an unelected fiscal oversight and management board (FOMB) tasked with restructuring Puerto Rico's debt. FOMB possesses the full authority to enact policies at their discretion and override any local decisions, effectively hollowing out Puerto Rico's remaining autonomy (Atiles, 2024; Cabán, 2018). Since 2016, FOMB has made draconian cuts to Puerto

[3] $74 billion in bond debt and $49 in pension obligations

[4] Detroit previously held the largest municipal debt in the United States at $18 billion (Bomey et al., 2013)

[5] In 1984, Congress amended the federal bankruptcy code to explicitly exclude Puerto Rico from filing for Chapter 9 relief, which allows municipalities (like cities or counties) to file for bankruptcy protection. Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Franklin California Tax-Free Trust* (2016) determined Puerto Rico could not file for bankruptcy and struck down Puerto Rican legislation that had attempted to create its own municipal debt restructuring process.

Rico's public service budget including healthcare, pensions, and education (Brusi, 2021; Brusi & Godreau, 2021; Financial Oversight and Management Board, 2019).

The education system has been one of the clearest casualties of PROMESA's austerity measures. More than 250 public K–12 schools were permanently closed, which limits educational access to students, particularly those in rural areas as these closures result in longer commutes and higher transportation costs (Yedidia et al., 2020). Moreover, the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) system—the leading public postsecondary system—has undergone unprecedented budget cuts (Redden, 2019; Renta et al., 2021), including over half of its operating budget (Velázquez, 2025). During the same period, tuition for students nearly tripled, shifting the financial burden onto those least able to absorb it (Brusi, 2022; Ernst & Young LLP, 2019; Puerto Rico Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority, 2024). These trends have far-reaching consequences for both the UPR system and the students it serves. For institutions, the drastic reduction in government funding has forced university leaders to make difficult decisions, including cutting academic programs, implementing hiring freezes, consolidating departments, deferring maintenance, and reducing student services (Honker, 2020; Renta et al., 2021). For students, the steep increase in tuition from $57 per credit to $165 per credit between 2017 and 2024 (a 396% change), creates a significant barrier to access and affordability (University of Puerto Rico, 2021). Many students in Puerto Rico come from low-income households (77% of Puerto Rican students receive the Pell Grant; Nour, 2023), and with the archipelago's ongoing economic challenges, these added costs can make higher education unattainable for students.

Importantly, the budget cuts to Puerto Rico's public university system are occurring alongside FOMB's endorsement of the privatization of essential public goods, most notably the

archipelago's electric power grid. This policy shift has significantly increased overhead costs for institutions (Renta et al., 2021). Electricity in Puerto Rico costs nearly twice as much as that in the States, which is in part a byproduct of the high import costs created by the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 (GAO, 2018). Under FOMB-approved plans, those rates are projected to rise even further by as much as $986 per year for customers (Renta et al., 2021). For institutions, this spike in utility costs has significant consequences, especially when compounded by the deep budget cuts imposed by PROMESA. With already reduced operational budgets, institutions must now allocate a greater share of their limited resources to cover basic energy expenses, diverting funds away from essential student-facing services.

Instead of prioritizing accessible, quality education that responds to the needs of Puerto Rican students, scholars posit that the plan reorients the UPR system toward a model focused on profitability and market efficiency (Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023). For instance, in their analysis of FOMB's fiscal plans for the UPR system, Rodríguez-Vargas and Collins (2023) found that FOMB has largely modeled its goals for the UPR system after postsecondary institutions in the States. They argue that doing so blatantly disregards the asymmetrical political relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. and the structural inequalities that shape higher education in the archipelago. In this way, the austerity measures imposed by FOMB is a form of procedural vulnerability; power is exercised through top-down decision-making (FOMB) that systematically exclude those most affected by its decisions (Puerto Rican staff, faculty, and students).

Hurricane Maria and FEMA Disaster Funding

When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017—one year after FOMB was formed—the postsecondary system was already in a fragile state. Institutions faced depleted resources and a large backlog of deferred maintenance projects, which had only worsened under PROMESA-

induced austerity measures (Brusi & Godreau, 2019; Ficek, 2018). Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, had wind-levels of over 155 mph and contributed to torrential rainfall that lasted for days—marking it as one of the deadliest storms to hit Puerto Rico in over 80 years (Cortés, 2018; Garriga-López, 2019). The destruction was catastrophic. The storm triggered widespread mudslides and flash floods, especially in rural and mountainous areas, contributing to an estimated $43 billion in damages (Cortés, 2018). Communities across the archipelago endured the longest blackout in U.S. history, lasting nearly 11 months, with many lacking access to clean water, food, shelter, or basic medical care (Cortés, 2018; Negrón-Muntaner, 2018). These conditions extended into the higher education system. The UPR system alone sustained over $132 million in infrastructure losses (Brusi & Godreau, 2021). Major private university systems also reported significant financial impacts, with Universidad de Interamericana and Ana G. Méndez incurring $2.3 million and $10 million in damages, respectively (Weissman, 2019). These damages were severe and long-lasting, making it difficult for postsecondary institutions to resume operations and retain their students. Many campuses were forced to suspend operations for over a month (Nelson et al., 2020; Santiago et al., 2023), and upon reopening, students returned to campuses with no electricity, unstable internet, and classrooms that were no longer safe or functional to learn in (Cleveland, 2018; Weissman, 2019). While the storm itself was devastating, the true catastrophe emerged in its aftermath, as U.S. inaction and neglect transformed a natural disaster into a prolonged humanitarian crisis, stalling Puerto Rico's pathway towards recovery.

Compared to its response to similar disasters in the States, disaster relief efforts after Hurricane Maria were markedly delayed and less comprehensive (Bonilla, 2020; Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019; Willison et al., 2019). For example, within the first nine days after landfall, the

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) distributed $100 million in aid to both Florida and Texas, which were also hit by hurricanes around the same period. In contrast, Puerto Rico received about $6 million, despite facing greater damages and loss of life (Willison et al., 2019). Moreover, the FEMA funding provided to Puerto Rico was subject to additional bureaucratic oversight. Due to the archipelago's ongoing debt crisis, the Puerto Rican governor was required to submit both 12-month and 24-month recovery plans, which had to be reviewed and approved by FOMB in order to access these funds (Willison et al., 2019). This conditional approval process imposed layers of administrative review that slowed the flow of critical resources during a time of acute need.

The incomparable distribution of aid and the length of time it took to receive it reflects the deep-seated systemic inequities resulting from Puerto Rico's colonial status. Unlike Florida and Texas, Puerto Rico lacks voting representation in Congress, meaning Puerto Rico does not have the political power to shape federal disaster policy (Willison et al., 2022). Although FEMA operates as a federal agency, its funding comes from the Disaster Relief Fund which is ultimately determined and overseen by Congress (Congressional Research Service, 2024). This means that post-Maria disaster policies were crafted and enacted by decision-makers with no direct accountability to Puerto Rico, leading to inadequate and delayed relief efforts. Empirical evidence of this pattern appears in Willison and colleagues' (2022) analysis of congressional floor debates after Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. They show that members of Congress expressed bipartisan support for Texas and Florida, invoking narratives of "deservingness" to justify immediate aid, whereas only Democratic representatives used similar language for Puerto Rico. Republican speeches, when they occurred, largely consisted of symbolic condolences toward Puerto Rico rather than substantive advocacy for federal support. This power imbalance

is further highlighted by the Trump administration's handling of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 during the Maria relief efforts, which requires goods shipped to Puerto Rico to be transported on U.S.-flagged vessels. While suspending the Act could have allowed for faster and less-costly aid by non-U.S. ships, the administration approved a waiver for only 10 days and did not grant an extension despite the scale and urgency of the crisis (M. A. Baker, 2022; Rodriguez-Díaz & Lewellen-Williams, 2020).

Similar funding inequities occurred in the distribution of emergency aid to postsecondary institutions and their students. Despite the extensive damage sustained by institutions in Puerto Rico, the federal government allocated significantly less recovery aid to them than it did to similarly impacted institutions in the States following disasters like Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey (Brusi et al., 2018; Brusi, 2021; Brusi & Godreau, 2021; E. V. A. Sansone & Hernandez, 2021). After Hurricane Maria, the U.S. Department of Education allocated $41 million to support students at colleges and universities in Puerto Rico impacted by the hurricane (Brusi et al., 2018). At the same time, institutions in Louisiana and Mississippi were provided approximately $190 million, following Hurricane Katrina (Brusi et al., 2018). The gap in disaster relief once again underscores the unequal treatment of institutions in Puerto Rico that, unlike many in the States, are constrained by PROMESA-imposed austerity and have no substantial endowments or emergency reserves to fall back on (Brusi & Godreau, 2021; Nour, 2023).

Notably, the vast majority (80%) of the aid designated for Puerto Rican students was directed to institutions in the States that received displaced students, rather than to the institutions in Puerto Rico where those students were originally enrolled (Brusi & Godreau, 2019; Garcia & Danek, 2023; Kreighbaum & Redden, 2018). This decision sent a clear message: investing in stateside institutions was a more worthwhile use of federal resources than supporting

Puerto Rico's own postsecondary system. The redirection of post-disaster funding away from Puerto Rican institutions reflects a broader perception of these institutions as inferior or less deserving of support. This treatment underscores how the selective allocation or withholding of critical resources function as a form of procedural vulnerability in which the federal government's discretion of disaster relief policies further weakens postsecondary education in the archipelago.

Collectively, the debt crisis and Hurricane Maria provide apt examples of how the United States exercise their colonial powers (i.e., colonial exceptionalism) through procedures, processes, and policy (i.e., procedural vulnerability) to both exploit pre-existing structural inequities and deepen them. Well before the debt crisis and Hurricane Maria, institutions in Puerto Rico were already entrenched in patterns of unequal treatment and systemic neglect: underfunding, outdated infrastructure, and high operational costs. These conditions stem from Puerto Rico's larger colonial legacy. For over a century, the United States has capitalized on Puerto Rico's liminal status to enact policies that have left Puerto Rico and their postsecondary system highly vulnerable to external shocks. The PROMESA Act and post-Maria disaster relief policies enacted by the federal government amplified these vulnerabilities by gatekeeping critical sources of funding for postsecondary institutions in the archipelago. As Puerto Rico continues to experience aftershocks from these crises and those that have followed (e.g., 2020 earthquakes, Covid-19, Hurricane Fiona), the archipelago's postsecondary education system remains in a precarious position. This pattern of compounding crises and constrained recovery shapes the resource environment within which Puerto Rico's colleges and universities make their financial and operational decisions.

Resource Dependence by Design

As outlined above, the ways resources are distributed and accessed in Puerto Rico and their higher education system are deeply shaped by colonial structures of governance. Therefore, while conventional organizational theories (e.g., Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), administrative burdens) offer useful insights about how institutions respond to financial constraints or bureaucratic complexity, they were not designed to account for the legal and political exclusions imposed through colonial rule that create these pressures. Meanwhile, theories that do center racial-colonial systems of power (i.e., colonial exceptionalism and procedural vulnerability) tend to focus on broader legal and humanitarian contexts and rarely focus on higher education or institutional behavior in its analysis. As a result, neither strand of scholarship, on its own, fully captures how colonial governance shapes the financial operations and strategic decisions of universities in Puerto Rico. This section bridges these strands together. Here, I conceptualize resource dependence in Puerto Rico's postsecondary education system as a deliberate mechanism of colonial design that is sustained through engineered scarcity and regulated by how resources are distributed (i.e., who gets access). I therefore developed a framework I term *Resource Dependence by Design* that integrates colonial exceptionalism (Atiles-Osoria, 2018) and procedural vulnerability (Hsu et al., 2015) with Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), institutional capacity (Hillman et al., 2024), and administrative burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Ray et al., 2023).

Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), originally developed in the management and organization literature, broadly theorizes how organizations respond to their external environments to secure the resources they need to survive. (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). For instance, RDT has been widely used to explain how public universities navigate reductions in

state funding by pursuing alternative revenue streams that lessen their financial dependence on state resources and sustain their operations (e.g., Bennett & Law, 2020; K. K. Powell & Rey, 2015; Santos, 2007). Other studies examine these same behaviors in private institutions responding to declines in enrollment and tuition revenue (e.g., Good, 2024; Shaffer, 2021). RDT posits that when institutions face declines in critical financial sources, particularly when they rely on a narrow set of revenue sources, they will adopt adaptive behaviors to offset these losses such as pursuing new revenue streams and/or containing costs (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Santos, 2007). In this regard, the first and most responsive strategy for ameliorating losses in revenue is by cutting costs incrementally through hiring and salary freezes, deferring maintenance projects, or cutting course sections (Altundemir, 2012). Simultaneously, institutions will explore alternative funding streams like philanthropic giving, federal grants, or market expansion (Hearn, 2013; Namalefe, 2014). However, under-resourced institutions with low endowments and limited operating budgets will experience greater hurdles in diversifying their revenue and will be more likely to defer to more drastic cost-containment measures, including campus consolidations or mergers (Facione, 2009; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021). These large-scale measures come at the expense of educational quality, access, and long-term institutional stability.

While RDT is useful for explaining how institutions respond to resource volatility, it remains limited in its theoretical scope. Namely, it operates from a race-neutral and ahistorical position, which can erroneously contribute to meritocratic assumptions of how resources are accessed: with the right strategies, institutions can compete for and secure the resources they need to alter their circumstances (Elliott, 2019; Pusser & Marginson, 2013). While RDT acknowledges power, it does so primarily in relation to the concentration and control of resources. While this aspect of RDT is relevant for the purposes of this framework, it does not

explicitly examine the ways power is embedded in sociohistorical and political structures designed to maintain racial-colonial hierarchies. Explicitly naming these structures *and* tracing how they operate (e.g., overtime, within particularly legislation) positions theory as an act of epistemic responsibility. Without this work, researchers risk reproducing Eurocentric distortions of how power is concentrated, legitimized, and sustained, and for whose benefit these hierarchies are designed to serve.

In colonial contexts such as Puerto Rico, this omission is particularly consequential. RDT fails to account for how Puerto Rico's postsecondary institutions are embedded within a colonial legal framework that constrains autonomy, enforces austerity, and perpetuates dependency through mechanisms of oversight and control. Colonial exceptionalism describes how the United States administers legal conditions and policies that circumvent local decision-making to reinscribe the colonial condition (Atiles-Osoria, 2018). This logic is most evident in the exceptional policies that manufactured Puerto Rico's economic crisis and indebtedness, conditions later invoked to justify the PROMESA Act and expand colonial oversight. Similar dynamics play out during states of emergency like Hurricane Maria where the policies and procedures governing the allocation of resources was designed to perpetuate vulnerability and sustain dependency (Hsu et al., 2015). Therefore, RDT alone cannot account for the ways in which dependence is weaponized within colonial systems of power to constrain institutional autonomy and reproduce systemic precarity.

In what follows, I further ground this conceptualization of *Resource Dependence by Design* by examining how colonial governance shapes institutional capacity (i.e., the resources and structures institutions need to operate) and the conditions under which universities in Puerto Rico pursue resources. I first define *institutional capacity* before examining how Puerto Rico's

colonial conditions and relationship to the United States have constrained the ability of its universities to build and sustain this capacity. I then describe what others term *administrative burdens* to explore how the bureaucratic processes tied to securing and maintaining external resources further restrict institutional decision-making, reinforcing a cycle of dependence and limited autonomy.

Institutional Capacity

Understanding how universities in Puerto Rico seek out and manage external resources requires examining their institutional capacity—the internal resources and infrastructure they rely on to pursue new sources of revenue and maintain operations. RDT suggests that colleges and universities that experience higher resource volatility or constraints in their institutional capacity are more reliant on external resources like government or philanthropic funding to fulfill institutional needs (Namalefe, 2014; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). This dynamic is especially significant for Puerto Rican institutions, which have long endured economic extraction and austerity imposed by the United States. While the term institutional capacity is utilized across a variety of contexts and with varying interpretations, I draw from Hillman and colleagues' (2024) definition which describes institutional capacity as comprising four types of capacities that are necessary for colleges and universities to carry out their educational objectives: human capital, organizational capacity, structural capacity, and material capacity (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Types of Institutional Capacity in Postsecondary Education

Types of Institutional Capacity	Example
Human Capital	Sufficient personnel equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and experience to carry out their responsibilities
Organizational Capacity	Institutions are comprised of various individuals that are organized across multiple levels (e.g., departments, offices).

	Organizational capacity refers to how these individuals operate and communicate with one another and to external stakeholders (e.g., federal agencies, state policymakers)
Structural Capacity	Formal or informal processes, procedures, and practices that are normalized within the institution
Material Capacity	Financial resources, physical infrastructure, and technological resources needed to deliver educational services or perform other necessary functions

Note: this is modification of the table included in Hillman and colleagues' (2024) report.

All colleges and universities have institutional capacities that are shaped by internal (e.g., leadership) and external factors (e.g., federal policy), albeit to different extents. Additionally, Hillman and colleagues (2024) contend that all institutions will engage in capacity-building efforts to improve their ability to perform daily operations and fulfill their institutional mission. However, an institution's existing capacity greatly shapes the success of these efforts. This contributes to one of higher education's greatest paradoxes: institutions with the greatest institutional capacities are best positioned to continue to build their capacity while those with the least capacity encounter the greatest barriers in improving it (Hillman et al., 2024). Financial resources and other types of material capacities, in particular, represent the most critical types of resources an institution needs to remain operational and provide a quality education (Hillman et al., 2024). This means that institutions with limited capacity will be more reliant on securing external forms of funding to survive yet less likely to receive this funding.

Institutions in Puerto Rico operate with constrained capacities rooted in their colonial relationship with the United States, leaving them especially vulnerable to external changes that deplete or limit access to resources. This is evidenced by onslaught of disasters and emergencies these institutions have encountered in the last 10 years that have significantly constrained Puerto Rican institutions' fiscal stability, deteriorated equipment and infrastructure, and disrupted

administrative operations. When universities face these types of fiscal or environmental shocks, they often adapt by reducing costs or seeking new revenue sources (Altundemir, 2012; Namalefe, 2014). Yet for institutions in Puerto Rico, whose institutional capacities are already constrained by decades of colonial austerity (see Navarro-Rivera, 1999), the range of viable options is limited.

For instance, institutions in Puerto Rico lack financial reserves, such as sizable endowments (61% have no endowments), which can act as a buffer by absorbing unexpected fiscal constraints (Nour, 2023). The size of an institution's endowment is widely regarded as a key measure of an institution's overall financial health and long-term stability (Baum & Lee, 2019). Without these types of financial resources and in the face of ongoing budget cuts under PROMESA, institutions in Puerto Rico will be more likely to respond quickly through less-favorable, cost-cutting measures. Reducing payroll expenses is among the most prevalent cost-containment strategies, as personnel costs constitute the largest share of expenditures for labor-intensive institutions like colleges and universities (Baumol, 1967; Dodson, 2023; Dorantes, 2014; Harrison, 2019). These cost-saving strategies often include furloughs, hiring freezes, layoffs, or the reduction of tenure-track positions in favor of adjunct or lecturer positions (Altundemir, 2012). According to a report by the University of Puerto Rico (2021), the university system plans to reduce their total number of faculty, staff, and administrative positions by nearly a quarter (24%) by FY 2026 to cut costs. However, the short-term relief gained from these measures comes at the cost of long-term financial stability and capacity-building efforts like pursuing external funding because these efforts often require extensive administrative bandwidth to pursue and maintain (Cole, 2010; Good, 2024; Shaffer, 2021).

Institutional survival depends on securing a steady and diverse stream of revenue capable of meeting ongoing operational and programmatic demands (Hearn, 2013; Namalefe, 2014). However, as Hillman and colleagues (2024) note, institutions with fewer resources and limited capacity face greater challenges in securing the very resources needed to build that capacity. Common revenue-generating sources include external grants (e.g., research, institutional), market expansion (e.g., increasing online offerings), auxiliary services (e.g., dining, housing), or philanthropic fundraising (Facione, 2009; Hearn, 2013). In Puerto Rico, where universities operate with limited financial and administrative capacity, many of these strategies can become difficult to pursue, let alone sustain. For example, declining population levels restrict opportunities for market expansion, while the absence of on-campus housing at most universities in Puerto Rico limits the feasibility of generating revenue through auxiliary services like housing and dining. Therefore, to illustrate how capacity shapes access to and management of new revenue streams, I focus on two types of revenue sources in higher education that are applicable to Puerto Rico's postsecondary context: philanthropic fundraising and external grant funding.

Philanthropic fundraising is highly stratified across higher education, reflecting and reproducing long-standing inequalities in wealth and capacity. Well-resourced, predominantly White institutions disproportionately access these resources because they possess the administrative personnel, donor networks, and development infrastructure needed to sustain large fundraising campaigns (Capone, 2023; Drezner, 2025; McClure & Anderson, 2020). By contrast, under-resourced institutions are more likely to operate with limited staffing capacity and fewer personnel with experience working with donors, making it difficult to maintain donor relationships or align institutional priorities with funder expectations (Drezner, 2025; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Mills Campbell, 2017). In addition to resource constraints, philanthropic funding is

also shaped by trust factors, where under resourced institutions may be scrutinized by funders for their perceived inability to manage and allocate funds appropriately (Bartlett, 2014).

Similar disparities shape access to competitive external grant programs, such as those administered by the National Science Foundation or the U.S. Department of Education. For instance, studies demonstrate that applying for and securing external grant funding relies on the coordination of multiple offices (i.e., organizational and structural capacity) and specialized personnel (i.e., human capital) to support grant-related activities (e.g., grant writing, annual reports, budgeting; see Gant et al., 2024). These institutional supports are critical as many external grant programs impose extensive reporting demands and compliance requirements (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020; Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Pasachoff, 2020). When labor-intensive and resource-intensive revenue sources intersect with already limited capacity, it can produce burdens that can divert time and labor away from other institutional priorities.

Administrative Burdens

Studies show that external resources (e.g., philanthropic funding, grant programs corporate partnerships) often come with strict rules and regulations designed to align institutions' spending with the goals of the funder (Namalefe, 2014; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Resources tied to accountability structures (e.g., funder expectation) may strip institutions of their internal control and discretion by strongly influencing their mission, priorities, and processes (Namalefe, 2014; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). For example, when the Charles Koch Foundation pledged $25 million to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) in 2014, the donation sparked widespread backlash among faculty, alumni, and civil rights organizations. Critics argued that the Koch brothers' well-documented support for anti-affirmative action policies and austerity measures stood in direct contradiction to the values and mission of HBCUs (Jaschik, 2014). For

institutions in Puerto Rico where local control is already limited, the imposition of externally defined priorities may further diminish institutional agency and curtail the ability for these institutions to effectively meet the needs of their students and local communities. Additionally, navigating these requirements imposes significant burdens, on already-overworked faculty or staff to manage complex bureaucratic processes to identify, secure, and maintain this funding.

These challenges can be understood through the concept of administrative burdens. The term administrative burdens first emerged in the public administration literature to describe how individual's interactions with policy implementation is onerous—especially when it involves accessing financial resources (Burden et al., 2012). Herd and Moynihan (2018) expand upon this definition to describe administrative burdens as an individual's experience of three types of costs in the public setting: learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs. Learning costs arise when people seek information about the existence and eligibility criteria of programs, public goods, or individual rights. For example, residents affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita experienced substantial barriers receiving FEMA disaster aid because they did not fully understand what was required of them to access it (Raker & Woods, 2023). Compliance costs refer to the steps individuals must take to access and maintain benefits; these are in relation to the rules and requirements (both explicit and implicit) embedded within programs that individuals must adhere to. For instance, the WIC program, which provides supplemental nutrition for women, infants, children, has complex requirements that are frequently updated, making it hard to remain enrolled and access these benefits (Herd et al., 2023). Finally, psychological costs represent the emotional burdens that manifest in individuals' interactions with these policies and programs, including the stigma, stress, or loss of agency associated with accessing or maintaining benefits. In the university setting this may include the stress associated

with balancing courseloads, community service, and agency expectations. Importantly, these costs are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often compound (Gándara et al., 2024; Herd & Moynihan, 2018).

The administrative burdens framework has been applied across various contexts such as welfare programs, immigration policy, health care, and voting rights (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Ray and colleagues (2023) expand this framework by incorporating Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations to reframe burdens as mechanisms through which racial violence is maintained under the guise of ostensibly neutral bureaucratic processes. Notably, the racialized burdens framework illustrates how administrative burdens arise when racialized beliefs shape how resources are distributed, perpetuating structural disadvantages for racially marginalized communities. In higher education, researchers have studied how administrative burdens manifest in a variety of contexts, including those that impact students (D. J. Baker & McCloud, 2023; Gándara et al., 2024) and faculty (Bozeman et al., 2021; Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). Given the focus of this framework on resources and institutional capacity, I expand on how administrative burdens arise within the process of seeking additional forms of funding and generate burdens for the faculty and staff pursuing these resources.

Learning costs. Learning costs can produce barriers in identifying, securing, and maintaining external funds (e.g., philanthropic funds, federal grants). These costs may include identifying appropriate funding opportunities, navigating complex eligibility criteria, and interpreting funder priorities to be competitive in the application process. This may also include understanding how to maintain positive relationships with donors or grant agencies (Johnson & Thompson, 2020; Rankins, 2017). These represent skills that faculty or staff at more resourced

institutions often develop through mentorship or access to sponsored research or external funding offices (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Rankins, 2017).

In Puerto Rico, these challenges are magnified by both their institutional capacity (e.g., sufficient staff, robust external funding offices) and language politics. Institutions in Puerto Rico are severely under resourced, which may mean that they lack sufficient or experienced staff to support the identification of external funds, their preparation, and ultimately their submission (Haynes, 2022). Moreover, most funding sources within the United States (e.g., philanthropic funding, federal grants) are administered exclusively in English. While both English and Spanish are considered co-official languages of Puerto Rico, English is not commonly used in everyday interactions and is not the predominant mode of communication within the archipelago's education systems (Carroll, 2016). This may amplify the burdens staff and faculty encounter as they pursue these sources of funding and make sense of funder expectations.

Compliance costs. Compliance costs further compound these difficulties. The bureaucratic requirements tied to both securing funds and maintaining them (e.g., meeting word-count limits, submitting annual reports) demand significant institutional support and coordination (Gant et al., 2024; McClure & Anderson, 2020). These challenges are compounded by the archipelago's colonial context. Following the debt crisis and implementation of the PROMESA Act, corruption discourses have been increasingly utilized to position the Puerto Rican government and Puerto Ricans as fraudulent and susceptible to financial mismanagement (Atiles et al., 2022). Within this context, institutions in Puerto Rico may encounter added pressure to demonstrate fiscal transparency and compliance. In response, they may adopt overcompliance practices by imposing stricter internal protocols than federally required in order to avoid jeopardizing funding or drawing accusations of corruption and mismanagement (Bozeman &

Jung, 2017). In turn, overcompliance can create internal bottlenecks and exacerbate staff and faculty workloads by creating extra secretarial work that hinders their abilities to pursue external funds (Escobar et al., 2023; Haynes, 2022; Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017; Wilson & Chavela Guerra, 2021). These dynamics are particularly detrimental in Puerto Rico, where faculty typically teach four or more courses per semester and lack administrative support (Bernal & Ortiz-Torres, 2009). Without sufficient infrastructure to manage these requirements, faculty and staff may have to divert time away from other responsibilities to perform compliance-related tasks like preparing progress reports or managing budgets. These types of tasks are often outsourced at well-resourced institutions that have fully staffed external resource offices to help manage grant requirements (Gant et al., 2024).

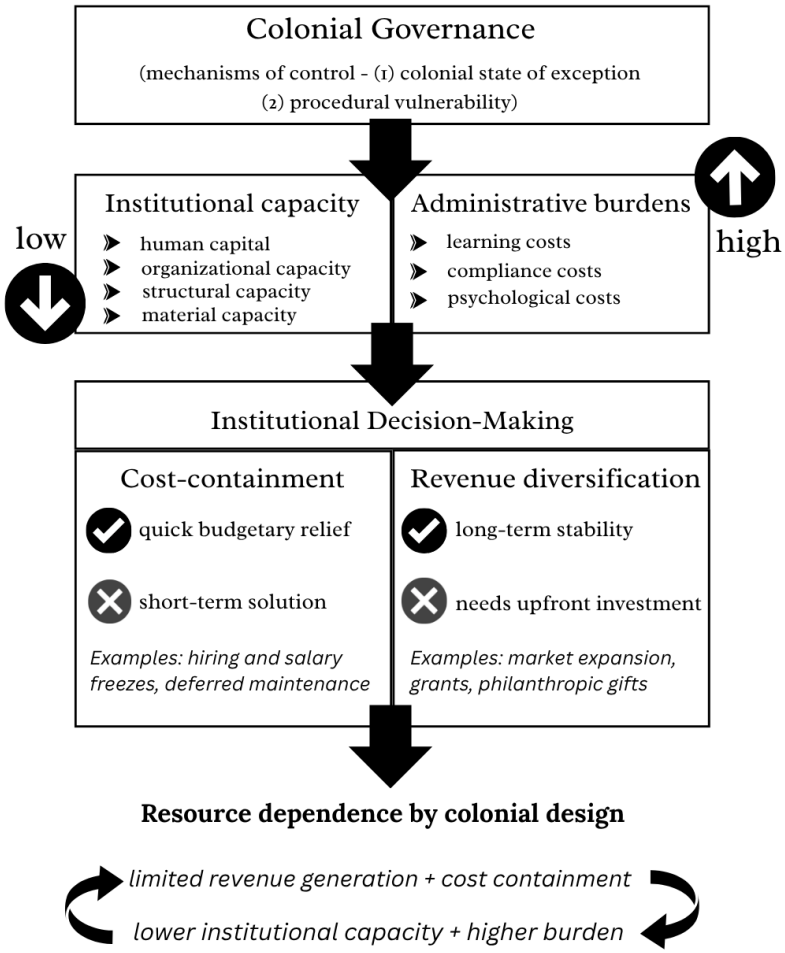
Finally, the psychological costs that arise in the pursuit and management of external funding may include stress, burnout, loss of agency, or stigma (D'Anna et al., 2023; Rankins, 2017). Time constraints emerge as one of the most frequently cited barriers to pursuing external funds and are often compounded by perceptions of stigma and marginalization (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Bozeman et al., 2021; Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017). In her study, Haynes (2022) documents that Puerto Rican faculty internalized beliefs that grant agencies viewed their proposals as inferior due to cultural and linguistic differences, leading to lower self-efficacy and a reluctance to reapply. Parallel dynamics appear in studies of HBCUs, where faculty describe their institutions as being perceived by funders as inferior (Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017) or less competitive than Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs; Johnson & Thompson, 2020). Together, these costs expose how systems of funding are structured to privilege certain individuals, or in this case institutions, while marginalizing others. Funders' decisions about where and how to invest are shaped by racialized and colonial notions of credibility, trust, and

worth. Institutions in colonial or historically marginalized contexts are often presumed to be higher risk or less capable of managing funds (Atiles et al., 2022; Fernandez & Burnett, 2020), while resource-rich, predominantly White institutions are viewed as stable and deserving of investments.

Advancing a Theoretical Framework on Resource Dependence and Administrative Burdens in Postsecondary Education in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico's colonial relationship to the United States fundamentally shapes its exclusion from policy, practice, and research in higher education. As an unincorporated U.S. territory, Puerto Rico is subject to federal laws and funding structures but lacks the political power and representation to influence them. These colonial conditions have profound implications for how postsecondary education in the archipelago is funded. For this reason, this paper offers a conceptual framework for understanding how colonialism shapes the conditions of higher education in Puerto Rico, with particular attention to the interplay between colonial governance, resource dependence and the administrative burdens that arise in the pursuit of external resources. Puerto Rico offers a critical case for exploring this interplay: it is the largest U.S. territory in both square miles and population, has the most postsecondary institutions, and has experienced intensified forms of colonial control since the creation of a federally imposed fiscal control board under the PROMESA Act in 2016. By centering Puerto Rico's colonial condition, this framework reveals how the entanglement of federal policy, resource dependency, and administrative burdens works to destabilize postsecondary education in the archipelago and reproduce colonial violence (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Resource Dependence by Design: Advancing a Conceptual Framework on Colonial Resource Dependence and Administrative Burdens in Postsecondary Education



Colonial Governance

As depicted, each element of the framework is nested within Puerto Rico's sociopolitical and historical context as a colony of the United States (i.e., colonial governance). At the foundation of this framework is the concept of colonial exceptionalism, which captures the legal and political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. Specifically, colonial exceptionalism describes policymaking that operates through what scholars have termed

"inclusive exclusion" and "exclusive inclusion." It interrogates the legal practices that determine whether and to what extent Puerto Rico is afforded the same constitutional rights and legal protections as U.S. states. A central feature of this colonial arrangement is how it produces economic dependency. Puerto Rico's liminal status provides the federal government with the power to impose policies that serve imperial interests and create economic dependence (e.g., extracting land, labor, and resources). Within the realm of higher education, this colonial structure manifests in disproportionate federal oversight, austerity, and systematic underfunding that severely limits the institutional resources, physical infrastructure, and educational quality of Puerto Rico's postsecondary institutions.

Another mechanism through which colonial governance operates is procedural vulnerability: the use of bureaucratic and administrative processes or the restriction of self-determination to reinforce dependency. During periods of crisis, such as hurricanes or fiscal emergencies, these mechanisms become especially visible. The federal government's inequitable distribution of aid, slow disbursement of recovery funds, and complex reimbursement procedures—like those seen in FEMA disaster relief—serve to delay recovery and maintain U.S. control over the pace and terms of recovery. Similarly, under the PROMESA Act, the U.S. capitalized on the archipelago's debt crisis to impose stricter forms of oversight, prioritizing debt repayment over social welfare. The next level of this framework examines how these systems give rise to resource dependencies in higher education through constrained institutional capacity and heightened levels of administrative burden.

Institutional Capacity & Administrative Burdens

Institutional capacity refers to the type of human capital, organizational capacity, structural capacity, and material capacity that colleges and universities need to carry out their

core functions (e.g. teaching, research) while adapting to changing environments. In Puerto Rico, institutional capacity has been systematically eroded by decades of colonial neglect and violence (see Navarro-Rivera, 1999). Institutions with limited or particularly constrained capacities become more reliant on external resources yet are poorly equipped to pursue these resources. In this regard, institutions in Puerto Rico often operate without the infrastructure necessary to effectively pursue and manage external sources of funding.

Lower institutional capacity is closely linked to high administrative burdens, creating a feedback loop. The institutions that are least equipped to manage administrative demands face the greatest procedural obstacles to diversifying their funding streams. Faculty, staff, and administrators tasked with securing and managing external resources often lack the time and institutional support needed to perform these activities. The burdens associated with pursuing external resources (i.e., learning, compliance, and psychological costs) may prompt institutions to forgo these opportunities altogether due to the high cost of participation or encounter steep challenges to securing them. Moreover, compliance demands from funders can delay or derail project objectives. In some cases, institutions, like those in Puerto Rico, may over-comply due to heighted fear of scrutiny or loss of funding, which can compound burdens and slow project timelines. These dynamics can ultimately jeopardize future funding when implementation challenges are interpreted as evidence of institutional mismanagement by agencies. Such interpretations are especially consequential in Puerto Rico, where racialized and colonial narratives cast these institutions as mismanaged or corrupt. Through this lens, administrative burdens reinforce racial-colonial hierarchies by fostering mistrust, restricting autonomy, and imposing compliance measures that ultimately weaken long-term capacity.

Institutional Decision-Making

In contexts where institutional capacity is constrained and administrative burdens are high; the range of feasible financial decisions narrows considerably. With diminished capacity, institutions lack the human, material, and organizational resources needed to implement forward-looking financial strategies. When institutions experience steep budget shortfalls (e.g., PROMESA) or rising costs (e.g., damages from Hurricane Maria) university leaders are forced to prioritize short-term solvency over long-term investment. Simultaneously, high administrative burdens consume the limited institutional bandwidth available for pursuing and managing funding. Together, low capacity and high burden converge to create a constrained decision space. Under these conditions, cost-containment becomes the most accessible response, where university leaders can employ incremental cost-saving measures (e.g., hiring freezes, layoffs) to provide the financial buffer to pursue more advantageous financial management strategies (i.e., generate revenue). Conversely, revenue diversification (e.g., grants, philanthropic fundraising, market expansion) offers the potential for long-term stability but requires significant upfront investment. For universities in Puerto Rico, whose institutional capacity has been eroded by decades of colonial austerity and oversight, incremental cost-saving measures may not serve as a sufficient buffer to pursue new revenue streams, especially if those measures involve reducing the very personnel needed to manage and secure external funds.

Collectively, this framework illustrates how colonialism shapes the financial and operational realities of universities in Puerto Rico by producing a cycle of dependency. Colonial oversight, externally imposed austerity, and procedural barriers constrain institutional capacity and heighten administrative burdens. These intersecting pressures leave institutions in Puerto Rico with a narrow set of financial strategies. They can contain costs as a short-term measure or attempt to diversify revenue through long-term, resource-intensive efforts. For universities in

Puerto Rico cost containment becomes the most feasible choice, even as it further reduces the staffing and infrastructure needed to generate new revenue. Over time, this dynamic reinforces a feedback loop in which limited revenue generation, and recurring cost-containment strategies reproduce institutional scarcity and increase the administrative burdens associated with pursuing new revenue streams. These patterns demonstrate how dependency is structurally designed and maintained through colonial governance, leaving universities in Puerto Rico in a state of financial precarity and limited autonomy.

Implications for Anti-Colonial Research on Postsecondary Education in Puerto Rico and Other Neocolonial, Postcolonial, and Settler Colonial Higher Education Contexts

This framework provides a foundation for advancing anti-colonial scholarship on postsecondary education in both Puerto Rico and other structurally marginalized contexts. Researchers can use this framework to analyze how universities in Puerto Rico navigate external pressures across different domains (e.g., disaster recovery, federal policy, local policy) and how their responses might reproduce or resist cycles of dependency. Quantitative studies might examine longitudinal changes in institutional finances, staffing, or enrollment before and after major policy interventions (e.g., PROMESA), while qualitative work could explore how administrators and faculty experience administrative burden or negotiate resource scarcity in their daily practice. Beyond Puerto Rico, this framework can be adapted to study other higher education systems within the U.S. operating under similar colonial dynamics to that of Puerto Rico (i.e., other unincorporated territories like Guam) or those embedded within the broader settler-colonial structure of the U.S. As a settler-colonial empire, higher education institutions within U.S. borders occupy different structural locations in relation to this system. Some (i.e., land-grant universities) were established through the expropriation of Indigenous lands and

function as instruments of settler expansion (see Stein, 2020). Others (e.g., Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)) emerged as counter-institutions to this racialized-colonial order, created by communities excluded from or exploited by the settler-colonial project itself (e.g., Goslee, 2023; Stull-Hunter, 2017). This framework lends itself well to these latter contexts. The legal and political structures that once codified the exclusion of Black and Indigenous populations also structured the establishment and funding of these institutions, which continue to remain underfunded today.

Beyond the United States, this framework can be adapted to study higher education institutions operating under constrained sovereignty or external fiscal control, such as postcolonial states grappling with IMF or World Bank oversight (e.g., Ghana, Uganda) and its implications for higher education. For instance, in the case of Uganda, their higher education system established under British rule continued largely unchanged after their independence, evolving into new patterns of dependency shaped by international financial institutions. In their study, Muganga and colleagues (2024) trace how neocolonial structures such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank-led structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s reinforced colonial legacies through new financial mechanisms that capitalized on Uganda's rising debt. British imperialism had tied Uganda's economy to global markets controlled by Western powers (Britain included), and when those markets collapsed, Uganda's mounting debt allowed international lenders to impose privatization and austerity as conditions for assistance (Collins & Rhoads, 2010; Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, 1992; Muganga et al., 2024). These financial institutions (IMF and World Bank) catalyzed the privatization of Uganda's higher education system through various austerity measures such as tuition hikes, downsizing of the public sector, and reduced government appropriations (Muganga

et al., 2024). In this sense, while Uganda's universities appear self-governing, the IMF and World Bank operate as neocolonial authorities, that enact financial conditionalities to determine the boundaries of institutional autonomy and state investment. While Uganda's relationship with Britain differs from that of Puerto Rico and the United States, both contexts illustrate how higher education systems can be constrained by external powers. In Uganda (and other postcolonial countries), colonial influence persists through economic dependency and policy conditionality driven by Western financial institutions; in Puerto Rico, colonial control remains formalized through U.S. colonial governance, producing similar limits on institutional autonomy, access to resources, and financial management strategies.

Conclusion

This paper advances an anti-colonial reframing of Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) by demonstrating how dependency, scarcity, and burden are central features of colonialism. In Puerto Rico, the legal and fiscal mechanisms established and exploited by the United States, ranging from the Insular Cases to the PROMESA Act and disaster relief, have produced a cycle in which institutions operate with fewer resources and greater administrative burdens. These structural arrangements translate into a narrowed choice set in which universities are often forced to prioritize cost-containment strategies and short-term relief over long-term investments in revenue growth. This cycle traps institutions in a repeating and self-reinforcing pattern: limited capacity leads to greater dependence on external resources, which in turn increases administrative demands, making it harder to generate new revenue, and so on. Taken together, this framework shows how constrained capacity and heightened burden intersect under colonial governance to limit institutional agency and ultimately the extent to which universities within colonial contexts can remain operational and educate students.

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Chapter 3 Operating Under Pressure: University Decision-Making Amid Fiscal Austerity and Recurrent Disasters in Puerto Rico

Introduction

As an unincorporated U.S. territory (i.e., colony), Puerto Rico is directly impacted by federal policy but has little power to influence it, lacking both voting representation in Congress and the right to vote in presidential elections (Atiles-Osoria, 2018; Jiménez, 2024). That limited autonomy was further entrenched in 2016, when Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), installing an externally appointed Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) to restructure Puerto Rico's debt (Cabán, 2018; Lluch, 2021; Renta et al., 2021). Under PROMESA, the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) became the only public system under U.S. jurisdiction that is unable to control its own finances, creating a form of oversight that extends beyond typical state control (Brusi & Godreau, 2021; Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023). Since the board was installed, the UPR's operating budget has been cut by half (Velázquez, 2025).

The literature demonstrates that when institutions are confronted with increasing budgetary constraints or sudden financial setbacks, they will typically respond with a combination of cost-saving (e.g., hiring freezes) and revenue-generating strategies (e.g., external grants) to balance their budget (Brint, 2022). While strategies under both approaches provide budgetary relief, not all are equally viable nor sustainable solutions. Institutions with limited financial reserves are less able to absorb unexpected costs and often rely on temporary stopgap measures like hiring freezes, which offsets immediate losses but can result in stagnant or

declining finances over time (Kelchen et al., 2024; Nietzel & Ambrose, 2023). In contrast, revenue-generating options such as securing external grants, expanding auxiliary income, and growing philanthropic fundraising hold greater potential for long-term financial stability but require greater upfront resources and administrative capacity to pursue (R. L. Clark & d'Ambrosio, 2006; Drezner, 2025; Gant et al., 2024).

This study examines Puerto Rico's postsecondary system as an instrumental case for understanding how disasters shape institutional operations and financial strategies under conditions of limited autonomy. Amid ongoing budget cuts under PROMESA, institutions have endured a cascade of disasters in the last decade: Hurricanes Irma and Maria, a series of high magnitude earthquakes, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Hurricane Fiona. Together they caused widespread damage, contributed to temporary campus closures, and led to the mass outmigration of Puerto Ricans to the United States (Borgobello et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2020; Santiago et al., 2023; Vargas Torres, 2025). With some of the smallest endowments in the nation (60 percent have no endowment, compared to about 20 percent nationwide; Nour, 2023), colleges and universities on the archipelago lack the financial cushion to absorb these shocks, leaving them especially prone to large-scale operational disruptions. Given these contexts, this study asks:

(1) How have Puerto Rico's overlapping crises affected universities' capacity to sustain operations?

(2) What financial management strategies have institutions taken in response to these challenges, and how effective have these strategies been?

This study advances our understanding of Puerto Rico's higher education system by foregrounding how institutions navigate fiscal and operational challenges under colonial oversight. Existing research on Puerto Rico often focuses on the broader economic and social

impacts of fiscal austerity and disaster recovery (e.g., Atiles, 2024; Lluch, 2021; López-Santana, 2022; Willison et al., 2022; Yarimar Bonilla & Marisol LeBrón, 2019), but limited work examines their consequences for colleges and universities (e.g., Brusi & Godreau, 2019, 2021; Haynes, 2022; Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023). Most existing studies on Puerto Rico's higher education system focuses on PROMESA's budget cuts and cost-containment strategies in the public sector (Brusi & Godreau, 2019, 2021; Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023), offering only a partial view of institutional responses in the archipelago. This study expands that understanding by including private institutions and providing a more comprehensive account of the financial management strategies universities pursue (including both cost-saving and revenue-generating approaches) and how these strategies are shaped by colonial governance.

Literature Review

I organize this literature review into two sections. The first draws on the existing scholarship on the impact of disasters within higher education, examining how disasters affect students and the colleges and universities that serve them. Following this section, I explore the literature on the types of strategies institutions employ when faced with unexpected or enduring financial strain.

Impact of Disasters on College Students and Institutions

While this study is primarily situated at the organizational level (i.e., disasters impact on university operations), the broader literature on disasters in higher education is largely centered on students and the immediate supports institutions provide (Breen et al., 2023). Although the student experience is not the central focus of this paper, these studies offer important insight into how institutions function as intermediaries in crisis contexts by shaping how students access aid, information, and support. When institutions are the focal point, studies predominantly examine

their role in advancing disaster preparedness and shaping disaster education initiatives (Alburo, 2025; Choudhury & Wu, 2023), whereas only a few examine how disasters impact university operations (Akbar & Sims, 2008; Hedges et al., 2018; Johnson, 2011; Santiago et al., 2023). In regards to emergency disaster relief, the majority of articles focused on their implications for communities or counties more broadly, indicating that the distribution of federal emergency aid often reproduces income and racial disparities (e.g., Dyson, 2007; Miao et al., 2025; Rivera et al., 2022; Willison et al., 2019, 2022). Only a scant number of studies have examined these inequities in emergency aid distribution for colleges and universities (Brusi & Godreau, 2019; Devarics, 2006; Garcia & Danek, 2023; Johnson, 2011). As a result, this section will synthesize the research on student impacts and the role of institutions in supporting students before focusing on the more limited work on institutional impact and emergency aid in higher education.

Student Impact. The literature shows that disasters affect students across three interrelated areas: personal safety and stability, psychological and mental well-being, and academic experiences and outcomes. During disasters, students may encounter immediate threats to their safety and stability, with some experiencing housing displacement, loss of belongings, financial strain, and shortages of food, water, and electricity (Breen & Meyer, 2021; Carales & López, 2022; Garcia & Danek, 2023; Szecsi et al., 2023). In some cases, students experience frequent relocations (e.g., between shelters, hotels; Breen & Meyer, 2021) with some choosing to permanently relocate to another area, as many Puerto Rican students did after Hurricane Maria (Garcia & Danek, 2023; Szecsi et al., 2023). The accumulation of these material hardships and disruptions will often contribute to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress among students (e.g., Capone et al., 2020; Chirikov et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2010; Díaz Quintana, 2022; Garcia & Danek, 2023), which are disproportionately experienced by those from

low-income communities and racially minoritized backgrounds (e.g., Chirikov et al., 2020; Errisuriz et al., 2022; Ibarra-Mejia et al., 2022; Szecsi et al., 2023).

Threats to students' physical safety and mental well-being can, in turn, make it challenging for students to concentrate and fully engage in their coursework (Breen & Meyer, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many studies reported how students had difficulty completing assignments and participating in class discussions due to a combination of physical and social isolation, limited technology usability, and unstable internet access (e.g., Bell et al., 2022; Errisuriz et al., 2022; Martinez Jr et al., 2022; Mshigeni et al., 2022). Studies also point to the "digital divide" that occurred during the pandemic where students from lower-income households, rural areas, or racially minoritized backgrounds were more likely to have limited access to broadband internet or the appropriate technology than their counterparts (Bell et al., 2022; Jaggars et al., 2021). Other academic challenges include problems transferring credits for students that relocate, declines in performance, delayed graduation, and some students discontinuing their education entirely (Di Pietro, 2018; Ladd et al., 2007; Szecsi et al., 2023).

Role of Institutions. In times of crisis, colleges and universities serve as critical sources of stability and have the potential to ease students' transition back to campus by supporting students' academic continuity, offering emergency support, and fostering a sense of community (Akbar & Sims, 2008; Carales & López, 2022; Davis et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2015; Santiago et al., 2023). Richardson and colleagues (2015), for example, found that a perceived sense of community with other students and teaching staff was essential in helping nursing students readjust following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2010. Other studies pointed specifically to the role of faculty in easing students' concerns and creating a learning environment grounded in collective support during these learning disruptions (e.g., Carales &

López, 2022; Martinez Jr et al., 2022; Santiago et al., 2023). Colleges and universities also serve a role in supporting students' well-being and meeting their basic needs through expanded mental health services, food pantries, and emergency aid (Loudd et al., 2018; Santiago et al., 2023). Finally, studies have also underscored that flexible academic policies can help students remain enrolled and create a smoother transition into the classroom (Carales & López, 2022; Loudd et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2015; Santiago et al., 2023). For instance, colleges and universities worked proactively during Hurricane Harvey to extend registration deadlines, delay midterms, secure free copies of textbooks, and offer flexible attendance and grading policies to accommodate those facing housing instability and job loss during this time (Carales & López, 2022; Loudd et al., 2018).

Institutional Impact. However, major disasters can also severely interrupt college and university operations and produce prolonged financial instability. Institutions may experience extensive damages to their physical infrastructure including classrooms, administrative offices, student housing, and other facilities (Akbar & Sims, 2008; Hedges et al., 2018; Johnson, 2011; Santiago et al., 2023). This prompts some campuses to have to adjust their operations (e.g., establish offices at other campuses) or temporarily close their doors (Akbar & Sims, 2008; Hedges et al., 2018), contributing to student attrition and future declines in enrollment (Akbar & Sims, 2008; Hedges et al., 2018; Santiago et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). Jones and colleagues (2008) found that large scale operational disruptions (e.g., student advising, financial aid, student records) contributed to steep enrollment declines following Hurricane Katrina. Declines in enrollment drives losses in tuition revenue, which can immensely impact university budgets, particularly for institutions with minimal financial reserves with which to absorb these shocks. This was particularly the case for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) after

Hurricane Katrina in which multiple campuses formally declared financial exigency (Akbar & Sims, 2008)—a recognition that an institution cannot sustain normal operations and must undertake significant restructuring (Nietzel & Ambrose, 2023).

Role of Emergency Aid. This is where federal disaster and emergency relief programs can provide crucial, albeit short-term, buffers that allow institutions to absorb costs and stabilize their budgets. Following the Great Recession, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) helped states offset losses in higher education budgets, enabling colleges to avoid undesirable cost-saving measures like layoffs or tuition hikes (Douglass, 2010). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Higher Education Emergency Relief (HEER) funds allowed colleges and universities to replace lost tuition and auxiliary revenue, maintain payrolls, and invest in remote-learning infrastructure (Daniels et al., 2024). However, emergency aid often reinforces existing inequities (e.g., Dyson, 2007; Rivera et al., 2022). In particular, several studies on Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster aid documents how funds have been inequitably distributed across institutions, resulting in disparities in how quickly and fully campuses can resume instruction (Brusi & Godreau, 2019; Garcia & Danek, 2023; Johnson, 2011).

Following Hurricane Katrina, HBCUs (located in high-risk areas) suffered greater physical damages than local Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs); however, FEMA allocated funds based on enrollment losses and tuition revenue rather than actual damages (Johnson, 2011). This formula disproportionately benefited PWIs given their larger student bodies and higher tuition levels (Johnson, 2011). Moreover, access to this aid required extensive documentation, further delaying funding for HBCUs which were already operating with limited administrative capacity after the hurricane (Devarics, 2006). While these types of emergency funds can provide vital financial relief, its temporary nature can also produce “funding cliffs” that can destabilize

campus budgets unless institutions supplement this aid with other financial management strategies (Kelchen et al., 2021).

Institutional Responses to Financial Pressures

When colleges and universities face unexpected or compounding fiscal shocks (e.g., economic recessions, natural disasters, declining enrollment), they turn to cost-saving and revenue-generating strategies to stabilize their finances. I first outline common cost-saving actions, then turn to revenue-seeking approaches. The section closes by highlighting how the practicality of these approaches varies by institutional context.

Cost-Saving Trade-offs. One of the most common responses to fiscal crises focuses on containing costs, most often through personnel and organizational restructuring (Altundemir, 2012; Dodson, 2023; Dorantes, 2014; Walling, 2021). Because payroll is one of the largest operational expenses, institutions typically act quickly to impose hiring freezes, conduct layoffs, delay salary increases, or reduce benefits to curb recurring obligations (Dodson, 2023; Dorantes, 2014; Harrison, 2019; Kelchen et al., 2021; Yang, 2011). Hiring freezes are attractive because they generate immediate savings without the legal and reputational risks of layoffs and can provide institutions with the temporary relief to pursue long-term strategies (Dodson, 2023). However, these efforts can quickly become unsustainable and contribute to higher faculty courseloads and workload demands for administrative staff (Dodson, 2023; Pavlov & Katsamakas, 2020). Higher teaching loads mean that faculty are responsible for more students per class, which studies show can pose negative consequences for students' ability to absorb course materials and can ultimately impact their grades (Harrison, 2019; Monks & Schmidt, 2011). This effect is intensified when hiring freezes are paired with cuts to course sections, further increasing the student-to-faculty ratio (Yang, 2011). Studies have also pointed to other

incremental cost saving measures such as deferring maintenance and other capital projects to provide immediate buffers (Altundemir, 2012; Douglass, 2010; Harrison, 2019; Yang, 2011).

However, these types of incremental cost-saving measures will not suffice on their own, especially for universities experiencing large scale budgetary setbacks (Swindlehurst, 2015). In these cases, institutions will often turn to implementing vertical cuts in which they eliminate entire departments, academic programs, or non-essential services (Altundemir, 2012; Dorantes, 2014; Harrison, 2019; Jake, 2023; Smith, 2011; Swindlehurst, 2015; Walling, 2021). Oftentimes these cuts will target academic programs with lower enrollments or programs and departments deemed non-essential (Altundemir, 2012; Dorantes, 2014; Harrison, 2019; Jake, 2023; Walling, 2021). Amid declining state budgets, Jake's (2023) dissertation examines the financial management strategies of five university leaders at two HBCUs. He found that leaders eliminated low-enrollment majors to redirect resources toward high-demand areas such as STEM and health sciences. In this regard, participants framed these cuts as a means of modernizing curricula and aligning institutional offerings with evolving workforce needs. Other strategies have involved cutting back or downsizing student support services and student-life activities (Altundemir, 2012; Bakhit, 2014; Chacón, 2013; Douglass, 2010; Freels, 1982). However, such reductions can undermine students' academic progress and sense of belonging. A study on Latino/a students at a California community college found that budget cuts led to fewer counseling opportunities, shorter library hours, and reduced outreach, and work study (Chacón, 2013). Students saw these reductions as a sign that low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students were not valued by the institution, leaving them feeling pushed out of higher education entirely.

Finally, some of the most extensive cost-saving measures involve college mergers, consolidations, and acquisitions (Castrejón, 2025). These large-scale restructuring efforts are often positioned as a strategy to improve organizational efficiency and reduce redundancies in university operations. The literature on the effectiveness of these strategies is mixed with some studies showing promising results in terms of student outcomes (Boling et al., 2017; Russell, 2019), greater organizational efficiency (Boling et al., 2017), and improved financial stability (Boling et al., 2017; Russell, 2019). This was particularly evident in the consolidation efforts of the University of Georgia system between 2013 and 2018 as a result of low enrollment levels (Boling et al., 2017; Hagler, 2021). Other studies demonstrate more negative results, pointing to heightened levels of uncertainty and stress among faculty and students (Carter, 2022; Durand et al., 2025; Lyerly, 2017; Ribando & Evans, 2015; Watson, 2020), organizational disruptions (Carter, 2022; Lyerly, 2017), and minimal changes in the financial circumstance of the institution (Hicks, 2021; Lyerly, 2017) or in student outcomes (Hicks, 2021). Studies demonstrate that some of this variation in the success of these restructuring efforts are a result of multiple factors: whether these changes were mandated (e.g., by the state) or voluntary (Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021), the alignment in mission and institution type between the campuses (horizontal vs. vertical mergers; Boling et al., 2017; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021), and how well academic offerings at each institution satisfy the gaps of the other (Azziz et al., 2019; Castrejón, 2025).

Revenue-Generating Trade-Offs. Colleges and universities cannot rely on cost-containment strategies alone and will often seek to diversify their revenue streams (Hearn, 2013; Leuhusen, 2017; Namalefe, 2014). Increasing tuition is a common response in the face of declining state appropriations and rising costs, shifting more of the financial burden onto students and families (Delaney & Doyle, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2016; Rosinger et al., 2022). But

in periods of declining enrollment and fiercer competition for students, tuition increases have become a much riskier strategy, especially for colleges (e.g., open access) that enroll a large share of low-income students (Mihopoulos, 2022). This is because demand for higher education is highly price elastic (enrollment tends to fall as tuition rises) so even modest increases can reduce net revenue (Mihopoulos, 2022). State governments often reinforce this constraint by enforcing caps on tuition growth at public institutions (Swindlehurst, 2015).

With tuition growth limited, many institutions have turned toward increasing enrollment through market expansion and financial discounting (Copley & Douthett, 2020; Dorantes, 2014; Jake, 2023; Pratt, 2015; Shaffer, 2021). These strategies often involve targeting adult learners, international students, and transfer students, while tailoring program offerings to meet their needs (Copley & Douthett, 2020; Dorantes, 2014; Jake, 2023; Pratt, 2015). For instance, some institutions have expanded their online courses, launched new graduate programs, established satellite campuses, or provided micro-credential programs (Copley & Douthett, 2020; Dorantes, 2014; Good, 2024; Jake, 2023). In particular, many universities have increased online and career-oriented programs to attract working adults and reach older student markets (Copley & Douthett, 2020; Hearn, 2013; Jake, 2023). While these strategies can offer more stability in the long-term, they require substantial upfront investment and planning to be successful. Institutions may also pursue auxiliary infrastructure projects (e.g., renovating residence halls, dining facilities, recreation centers) as a way to attract new students with these services (Hearn, 2013; Shaffer, 2021; Yang, 2011).

Finally, some institutions will pursue funding through philanthropic fundraising, business partnerships, and federal grants (Dodson, 2023; Douglass, 2010; Good, 2024; Harrison, 2019; Hearn, 2013; Jake, 2023; Kelchen et al., 2024; Namalefe, 2014; Pratt, 2015). While these sources

can provide critical support, they are typically administratively demanding, time-limited, and better suited as long-term strategies rather than immediate solutions (Harrison, 2019).

Differences in Financial Management Strategies Across Institutional Contexts. The literature emphasizes that institutional context shapes both the feasibility and the effectiveness of financial management strategies. Institutions with stronger financial reserves (e.g., endowments) and greater administrative capacity depend less on cost-cutting measures and are more effectively pursue revenue diversification. For instance, these institutions are more likely to succeed in pursuing revenue-generating activities like philanthropic fundraising, corporate partnerships, or federal grants (Gant et al., 2024; Good, 2024; Kelchen et al., 2024). By contrast, under-resourced institutions face narrower options and will depend more heavily on hiring freezes, benefit reductions, or program consolidations, even when these measures negatively impact academic and student services (Bakhit, 2014; Chacón, 2013; Dodson, 2023; Dorantes, 2014). At the same time, efforts to diversify revenue at these institutions are often constrained by smaller donor networks, lower fundraising capacity, and fewer grant-writing supports (Bakhit, 2014; Gant et al., 2024; Jake, 2023; Pratt, 2015).

Conceptual Lens

This study draws on the framework outlined in Chapter 2, which offers an anti-colonial reframing of Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) to examine how Puerto Rico's multilayered crises (i.e., fiscal austerity, environmental disasters, and colonial governance) shape institutional operations and in turn, their financial management strategies. RDT emphasizes that institutional decision-making is shaped by the availability and type of financial resources an organization can access (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Institutions that already have an abundance of financial reserves (e.g., endowments) or diverse revenue streams retain greater autonomy in determining

how those funds are allocated. In contrast, institutions that rely heavily on a narrow set of external revenue sources are more vulnerable to volatility, as declines in any single source can quickly compromise financial stability. Thus, an institution's degree of dependence on external sources of funding significantly influences how it responds to financial uncertainty and external pressures to remain operational and serve its student population (Sansone, 2023).

This dynamic is particularly salient for institutions in Puerto Rico, where their colonial relationship to the United States generates economic dependency and severely limits local autonomy. Yet, traditional RDT assumes a race-neutral and ahistorical playing field where institutions can strategically adapt their internal processes to effectively compete for resources. This assumption represents a critical oversight in the case of Puerto Rico, as it disregards how decades of colonial violence and austerity produce and sustain precarity. To reposition RDT within colonial systems, this framework conceptualizes resource dependence as a structurally imposed condition maintained through the systems and practices that sustain colonial control. This is enacted through two interrelated mechanisms: (1) colonial exceptionalism (Atiles-Osoria, 2018), which determines when and in what capacity laws and constitutional rights are extended to colonial territories; and (2) procedural vulnerability (Hsu et al., 2015), which refers to the ways bureaucratic systems embed structural disadvantage through opaque or exclusionary processes (particularly during states of emergency) that obstruct decision-making and access to resources.

In leveraging these concepts, my framework situates Puerto Rico's postsecondary institutions within a condition of sustained emergency. Unlike episodic crises with defined periods of recovery, these institutions operate under conditions where disaster, austerity, and exclusion are chronic and compounding (Bonilla, 2020; Hsu et al., 2015; Rivera, 2022; Yarimar

Bonilla & Marisol LeBrón, 2019). In this sense, I draw from Maldonado-Torres's (2019) assertion that colonialism is the foundational catastrophe that produces and intensifies all others. Puerto Rico's colonial status denies its institutions access to political mechanisms that could advocate for more equitable funding or protections, such as congressional voting power and its influence over federal disaster legislation (Atiles, 2024; Lluch, 2021; López-Santana, 2022; Willison et al., 2022). In this way, coloniality legitimates delay and denial within the colony in ways that would not be legally permissible in the States.

Within this colonial landscape, institutions in Puerto Rico operate under conditions of extreme fiscal duress, which may make it difficult to diversify funding streams or invest in long-term financial planning. As a result, these institutions may be more likely to adopt immediate cost-saving measures that provide short-term relief at the expense of long-term stability. In this context, pursuing new sources of revenue becomes a high-stakes, resource-intensive endeavor. I frame this as the central tension of colonial dependency where the very systems that compel institutions to seek external support are the same systems that obstruct their ability to access them. These conditions raise important questions about what types of strategies are employed by universities in Puerto Rico and the extent to which these strategies are effective in addressing their financial precarity.

Methodological Approach

An Instrumental Case Study Design

This study employs an instrumental case study design, which is primarily utilized to gain insight into a broader issue or theoretical construct (Mills et al., 2010). In this study, the phenomenon of interest is twofold: (1) how disasters impact university operations and fiscal stability, and (2) what strategies institutions pursue to manage and adapt to these pressures. I

further leverage this design to challenge traditional applications of RDT by addressing its limitations in explaining institutional behavior within structurally racialized and colonial contexts. In this study, Puerto Rico is positioned as an exemplary case through which theory (and policy) can be refined and challenged (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hysa, 2022). As an unincorporated territory with a long history of colonial subjugation, Puerto Rico occupies a structurally distinct position within the U.S. higher education system. For this reason, Puerto Rico offers a particularly revealing case for testing the limits of federal disaster relief, the theoretical assumptions of RDT, and the extent to which various financial management strategies are viable within these contexts.

Site Selection

This study is part of a larger qualitative project examining capacity building efforts at universities in Puerto Rico, where Title V funding served as its central focus. For this reason, site selection for this study was determined by whether an institution located in Puerto Rico applied for a Title V grant between FY2009 and FY2022, regardless of award outcome. To identify eligible institutions, I submitted a FOIA request to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in February 2023 for a list of all Title V applicants during that period. Due to delays, the data was not received until April 2024.

In the interim, I used publicly available Title V grant abstracts from ED's website to identify institutions. Abstracts listed funded institutions, award years, project descriptions, and occasionally the principal investigator. After receiving the FOIA data, I prioritized institutions that applied but did not receive funding, as these cases were absent from the public abstracts and

may offer distinct insights into capacity building strategies. The final sample included 11 four-year institutions (five public, six private not-for-profit [See Table 3.1]).[6]

Table 3.1 Institutional Profiles

Institution Pseudonym	Sector
Universidad del Sur	Public, four-year
Universidad del Sol	Public, four-year
Universidad del Mar	Public, four-year
Universidad de las Palmas	Public, four-year
Universidad Central del Borikén	Public, four-year
Universidad del Pueblo	Private, four-year
Universidad de Bosque	Private, four-year
Universidad de Costa	Private, four-year
Universidad del Barrio	Private, four-year
Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Private, four-year
Universidad del Norte	Private, four-year

Participant Recruitment

From the selected institutions, I identified individuals with direct experience applying for and/or managing federal grants or with deep knowledge of their institution's external funding priorities. These included faculty, grant project directors, university leaders, and administrators or directors within the university's sponsored research office. To identify eligible participants, I conducted targeted searches through university websites, LinkedIn, and Google. For instance, I searched institutional webpages to identify whether an institution had a Sponsored Research Office or External Funding Office, and if so, I identified relevant personnel, including directors

[6] Two additional external entities involved in grant-seeking were identified for the larger project but are excluded from this study due to the project's focus on institutional capacity-building strategies.

and pre- and post-award staff (if available). When primary investigators were listed in grant abstracts or the FOIA data, I used LinkedIn to assess their current and prior roles. In cases where only the grant project name and institution were available, I searched for related news articles or webpages to identify project personnel.

After compiling a list of potential participants, I sent out email invitations[7] to request interviews (see Appendix B). Those who expressed interest were provided the interview questions in both English and Spanish and asked to complete a brief Qualtrics survey, which collected demographic and background information, including their current role(s) and responsibilities at their institution, and whether they identified as Puerto Rican, Latinx (not Puerto Rican), or another racial/ethnic group. Information on participants' roles was used to tailor interview questions to their institutional perspectives and areas of responsibility, while collecting self-identification data helped situate how participants' social and cultural positioning might shape their understanding of Puerto Rico's higher education system. The survey also included a copy of the IRB consent form in which participants could indicate their consent to participate (see Appendix C).[8] I also used snowball sampling to strengthen credibility, enhance trust, and improve outreach within institutions (see Sadler et al., 2010). My final sample included 17 participants from 11 institutions (see Table 3.2). Nearly all participants (n=16) held multiple roles at their institution and most identified as Puerto Rican or Latina (n=16) and as a woman (n=13).

[7] Emails were provided in both English and Spanish.

[8] Participants were again requested to provide their consent to be interviewed and recorded at the start of the interview.

Table 3.2 Participant Profiles

Participant Pseudonym	Institution Pseudonym	Current Role(s)	Identifies as Puerto Rican	Gender Identity
Marisa	Universidad del Pueblo	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
David	Universidad del Pueblo	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Man
Cecilia	Universidad del Sur	Grant administrator	Yes	Woman
Nicolas	Universidad del Mar	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Man
Elena	Universidad del Sol	Faculty, grant project director	No, Other Latina	Woman
Teresa	Universidad del Sol	Faculty, grants administrator	Yes	Woman
Miguel	Universidad del Norte	University president	Yes	Man
Nelly	Universidad de las Palmas	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Isabel	Universidad de las Palmas	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Maria	Universidad de Bosque	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
José	Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Man
Natalie	Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Carolina	Universidad del Barrio	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Leticia	Universidad Central del Borikén	Administrator, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Sri	Universidad Central del Borikén	Faculty, grants administrator	No, Indian	Woman
Silvia	Universidad Central del Borikén	Faculty, grant project coordinator	Yes	Woman
Marcela	Universidad de Costa	Faculty, grant project director	No, Other Latina	Woman

Data Collection

Data were collected in Spring 2024 through institutional documents and semi-structured interviews. Institutional documents provided contextual information on financial resources, organizational changes, and external funding priorities. These included budget and accreditation reports, strategic plans, organizational charts, and annual evaluations. For public institutions, I also reviewed the annual fiscal evaluations from the Fiscal Control Board, which detailed baseline revenues, expenditures, and operating deficits and surpluses. All institutional documents were collected and reviewed prior to each interview to provide additional context and following the interviews to corroborate participant descriptions.

Interviews served as the primary data source. Between March and May of 2024, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews (eight in person and nine via Zoom) based on participant preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and participants received a $50 Amazon gift card for their time. Interviews began with questions about the participant's role and responsibilities, followed by discussions of institutional changes and challenges over the past decade related to the fiscal crisis, natural disasters, and the Covid-19 pandemic (see Appendix D). Follow-up questions explored material and organizational shifts (e.g., leadership turnover, hiring, infrastructure), changes in instruction and services (e.g., academic offerings, class sizes), and impacts on students and faculty (e.g., basic needs, mental health). All participants were also asked how these events shaped their institution's financial strategies and priorities. Because Spanish is my second language, I informed participants in my outreach email that interview questions would be asked in English to ensure clarity and flow. However, participants were encouraged to respond in the language they felt most comfortable using (English, Spanish, or

Spanglish).[9] All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated using services provided by the University of Michigan.

Analytic Approach

I began the analytic process inductively to center participants' experiences and allow meaning to emerge from the data rather than impose external categories in advance (Datta, 2018; Mertens, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). This approach resists colonial tendencies to universalize or predetermine realities based on Eurocentric discourses and ways of knowing (Brooks & Leckenby, 2006; Mignolo, 2007). I used Dedoose qualitative software to code the interviews. Early codes such as "hurricanes," "earthquakes," "economic crisis," "pandemic," "FEMA," "PROMESA," and "colonial contexts" pointed towards discussions of emergency conditions and federal response, while codes like "institutional impact," "student impact," and "faculty impact" marked who was affected. From these initial codes, I engaged in selective coding to create thematic and conceptual categories that coincided with my conceptual framework (e.g., states of emergency, institutional capacity, institutional response; Saldaña, 2016). I also used parent and child coding to capture organizational relationships within the data. For example, the parent code "institutional capacity" included subcodes like "physical infrastructure," "budget," and "academic offerings."

To strengthen trustworthiness, I engaged in extensive memoing throughout the entirety of the research process (e.g., outreach, interviews, site observations) and drew on these reflections during analysis to contextualize participant narratives within broader institutional and colonial dynamics. For example, one participant described how federal grant funding enabled campus

[9] Most participants chose to conduct their interview in Spanglish (13), two chose to do so in English, and two in Spanish.

renovations that created student gathering spaces; my observation notes from that site visit documented stark differences in maintenance between grant-funded renovations and non-renovated facilities. I also triangulated interview data with institutional documents and site observations, as well as conducted member-checking by sharing interview transcripts with participants for their review (McKim, 2023).

Positionality of the Researcher

My identity as a Boricua-Mexicana scholar born in the continental United States largely informs how I chose to conduct this study. As part of the Puerto Rican diaspora, I am strongly committed to advancing the educational opportunities available in Puerto Rico and identifying the existing mechanisms (i.e., external funding) that can support their postsecondary institutions and the students enrolled. At the same time, I am cognizant of how my upbringing in the United States may preclude me from fully understanding the contexts and conditions that influence postsecondary education in Puerto Rico and, in turn, the experiences of Puerto Rican faculty, administrators, and students. To more comprehensively engage with participants and community members in Puerto Rico, I lived with family in Guaynabo during the entirety of my outreach and data collection (8 months). Moreover, I grew up with English as my first language and Spanish as my second, which affects my ability to speak Spanish fluently. For this reason, I chose to enroll in-person at a local language school in both individual and group Spanish courses to improve my comfortability with the language and ability to engage with participants.

Because my perspective inevitably shapes how I collect and interpret data, I incorporated several checks to strengthen the reliability of this project. Rather than relying solely on interviews, I gathered additional materials, including accreditation reviews and institutional budget documents, to triangulate with what participants shared (Patton, 1999). After each

conversation was transcribed, I returned the transcripts to the interviewees and invited their feedback (McKim, 2023). They could clarify points, remove statements, or elaborate on ideas to ensure that the record reflected their intent. When interviews were conducted in Spanish or Spanglish, I provided both the original text and an English translation so participants could examine the translation itself and recommend changes that preserved meaning across languages.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, this study stems from a broader qualitative project focused on the Title V program, and site recruitment was primarily determined by publicly available Title V grant abstracts. This means the sample is skewed toward institutions that successfully secured Title V funding between 2009 and 2022, potentially overrepresenting those with greater institutional capacity to pursue external resources. Participants were also selected based on their current involvement in grant-funded programs or administrative roles with insight into their institutions' external funding strategies. This likely overrepresents individuals that are more likely to view federal grants as capacity-building tools. Future research should include a broader range of institutions and administrators to capture more diverse perspectives and strategies for navigating fiscal instability and disaster recovery.

Second, institutional review board (IRB) requirements in Puerto Rico posed challenges for participant recruitment. In Puerto Rico, external researchers are required to obtain IRB approval from each institution where they recruit participants, regardless of home institution approval. As a local contact of mine based at a Puerto Rican institution explained, the stringent IRB requirements are a product of the extensive oversight and austerity measures institutions are subject to as an unincorporated territory. I initiated the IRB process with each institution in my sample and communicated directly with their IRB administrators; however, differences in IRB

classifications and procedures between my home institution and those in Puerto Rico created an administrative impasse that could not be resolved. I received the advice from this local partner to continue recruitment with solely my IRB approval. This decision was made with thoughtful consideration and transparency, and all participants were informed that this study was reviewed and approved by my home institution's IRB. As a result, the sample may overrepresent individuals who were more comfortable participating under this approach and who may hold more critical perspectives on bureaucratic oversight and federal revenue sources.

Finally, my level of Spanish proficiency has implications for participant recruitment and interview accessibility. While all outreach and interview materials were provided in both English and Spanish, and participants were encouraged to respond in the language of their choice, I posed interview questions in English. This decision, while intended to preserve the fluidity and consistency in posing questions, may have discouraged some individuals from participating in the study or shaped how participants expressed themselves during the interview.

Findings

"We are a territory, and we live in the consequences of being a territory."

—Isabel, Universidad de las Palmas

I organize the findings for this study into two sections. The first examines the impact of Puerto Rico's multilayered crisis on institutional operations and the role of emergency aid in mitigating financial pressures. Institutional operations include, but are not limited to, those related to financial stability, administrative services, campus safety and security, instruction, and facility maintenance. The second section examines the financial management strategies of institutions in response to the repeated emergencies and their implications for long-term stability.

Crisis as Governance: How Disasters and Austerity Collide in Puerto Rican Higher Education

Between 2016 and 2022, colleges and universities in Puerto Rico faced overlapping fiscal crises, natural disasters, and the Covid-19 pandemic, making recovery and a return to normal operations extraordinarily difficult. In what follows, I begin with the environmental and public health crises, which affected both public and private institutions, before turning to the additional constraints imposed by the PROMESA Act on public universities. While I end with PROMESA, this act was established in 2016 (a year prior to Hurricane Maria) and its fiscal measures began the same year Maria struck, continuing through subsequent crises and remaining in effect today.

Hurricane Maria. In September 2017, Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, swept through Puerto Rico as the most destructive environmental disaster in the archipelago's modern history (Cortés, 2018). Universities suffered severe damage and prolonged operational disruptions due to extensive flooding to campus facilities, collapsed ceilings, mold-infested buildings, and roads rendered impassable. Teresa at Universidad del Sol described the destruction as extensive:

> Some of the buildings were really damaged… Maria was so big that she took the generator out and made a hole in the ceiling…the water entered through the roof…all the cables and all the pipes were disconnected…[because of] all the water, that building was unused for three years…[it was] closed because of all the mold, the humidity, there was no equipment.

Severe and prolonged infrastructure damage can force institutions to temporarily close buildings and classroom spaces, which, in turn, can substantially disrupt routine academic and administrative activities. These disruptions were intensified by rising construction costs driven by new building codes after the hurricane, which Elena (Universidad del Sol) noted had made rebuilding five to six times more expensive.

To help cover the costs of the damages, colleges and universities turned to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the primary funder of disaster recovery in the U.S. Yet despite the extensive damage, several participants described FEMA's disaster relief process as slow and inefficient (n=8, 47%), with others noting the lack of transparency around how funds were distributed or when they might arrive (n=7, 41%). Sri (Universidad Central del Borikén) recounted losing close to $60,000 in research equipment and being told by her dean to document the losses for FEMA support. Yet, despite FEMA collecting the estimates, she said she "never saw any of the money" and was left wondering "where the money went or if it came at all." Nicolas at Universidad del Mar explains that the inefficiencies of the program can be largely attributed to its reimbursement process:

> We're still getting FEMA money…Sometimes we see this renovation in the university and say, "No, that was from the hurricane. That was FEMA grants." It's been like five, six years and there's still FEMA money coming in…FEMA uses this system where you use the money and then you just ask for the money back. But it's hard when you don't have the money. They'll say…"Well, you have $2 million worth of damage. You fix it and then you bill us." But if I don't have that money, I can't bill you.

FEMA's reimbursement model added layers of documentation and bureaucracy to a program intended to provide immediate relief. Because institutions were required to pay for repairs upfront, despite lacking the financial capacity to do so, many were effectively barred from accessing recovery funds when they were most needed. It is important to underscore that these administrative barriers were compounded by Puerto Rico's ongoing debt crisis and the imposition of the PROMESA Act the year prior. In contrast to Texas and Florida, which received disaster aid in the form of *grants* following Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, Puerto Rico was offered a disaster *loan* to finance their recovery, yet was quickly denied the loan due to their

accumulated debt (Willison et al., 2019). Puerto Rico was finally allocated the funds in February 2018 (five months after Maria struck) contingent on the governor of Puerto Rico submitting a 6-month and 12-month recovery plan approved by FOMB in addition to submitting monthly reports on all FEMA expenditures (Willison et al., 2019). As a result, while most campuses resumed instruction within a month or two, they did so with damaged or inoperable facilities, forcing them to adapt instruction and daily operations around unfinished repairs.

During this time, participants emphasized (n=14, 82%) that the most pressing obstacle was the fragility of Puerto Rico's power and water systems. Nelly explained that it took nearly 18 months for her institution, Universidad de las Palmas, to resume normal operations because the electricity and water systems were so unreliable. During this time, she described instruction as taking place "outside, in the streets, in different places outside the university…[and] under tents." While universities attempted to quickly resume operations in order to provide continuity in students' learning, participants like Carolina (Universidad del Barrio) recalled how difficult it became to keep students engaged when many lacked access to necessities:

> [In this area], we went without electricity for two months.…we were teaching outside… Most of the students were without food or water, so we offered students food and water. The university became somehow like a safe haven…[students] came to the campus to have Wi-Fi and charge their phones and things like that, because they don't have electricity in their houses. In my case, we didn't have electricity or running water …at one point, we thought about putting up showers for [students], but we never did.

During this time, faculty became first responders and emotional anchors for students whose lives had been upended. Students were coming to campus to meet their basic needs: access to clean water, electricity, and food. Meanwhile, faculty had to quickly pivot to holding classes outdoors, organizing clothing drives, distributing grocery vouchers, even as they themselves went without

electricity or reliable water for weeks or months. To recover lost instruction time, some campuses compressed their academic calendars so severely that semesters ran back-to-back, leaving students and faculty a week or two (for one campus, only Christmas Day) before the next term began.

Earthquakes. Universities were still repairing damages from Hurricane Maria, when a 6.4 magnitude earthquake hit the southern region of Puerto Rico in January 2020, causing an estimated $800 million in infrastructure damages (Allstadt et al., 2022). The main shock was followed by months of aftershocks, with a 5.4 magnitude quake in May 2020 contributing to another $150 million in damages (Allstadt et al., 2022). The scale and long-lasting nature of the shocks contributed to widespread structural failures and a deep sense of instability. Many students and faculty again lost their homes, shifting the focus away from instruction to personal safety. Marcela at Universidad de Costa describes that after Hurricane Maria, the earthquakes further blurred the lines between teaching and crisis management:

> The earthquakes happened within a few miles from this campus, so most of our students were directly affected by them. There was a lot of concern about the structural integrity of the buildings. So, there was a few weeks where we were just trying to make sure that the buildings were stable… Many students again left for the United States because it's like, I cannot cope with this instability… I remember students reporting to me that they were not sleeping in their houses or they were sleeping in their cars…probably you would say, "Oh, it's just an earthquake." But when you put that after the trauma that we had for months after Maria, and it was months of going to bed with no lights… not sure if you had water or transportation or [gas].

Marcela further explained that it became impossible to maintain the continuity of instruction and administer course materials, as faculty now had to dedicate time to learning emergency protocols and supporting students through anxiety and PTSD.

Covid-19. Just two months after the earthquakes (March 2020), campuses faced yet another disruption with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants (n=14, 82%) described their institution as quickly moving operations online to continue instruction. They noted that this rapid shift was made possible by emergency aid provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which provided funds to higher education institutions through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). Unlike FEMA, which was widely described as slow and burdensome, participants (n=10, 59%) emphasized that CARES and HEERF resources arrived more quickly and allowed for investments their institutions could not otherwise have afforded: antennas to expand campus Wi-Fi, laptops for faculty and students, monitors, and other equipment to support virtual learning. While most participants focused on the technology and equipment upgrades funded by these resources, a smaller subset (n=4, 24%) noted that their institutions also used CARES and HEERF funds to provide faculty training on remote instructional platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard. David at Universidad del Pueblo reflected on how CARES offered a rare window of opportunity to improve university equipment and facilities:

> In the beginning we didn't have [much infrastructure for distance-learning], but [with] the federal funds, [our institution] quickly started updating the system and they provide [faculty] a lot of training...Otherwise, the university cannot afford this, they barely get the money to pay salaries.

While David's account demonstrates the magnitude of support this emergency aid provided, it also underscores the depth of deferred facility and equipment improvements that had accumulated over time. At one point, David remarked, "thank God to Covid," a comment not made to minimize the devastation of the pandemic but to convey how dire the fiscal conditions at his institution had become—so much so that it took a global crisis for his university to access

critical funds. He elaborated, “with [these funds] we will try to solve and balance the budget, but now that the money's almost gone, we are facing that challenge [of] how we can balance [our budget].” The fact that his institution could only address basic upgrades and long-standing budgetary needs through emergency aid highlights how colonial systems sustain chronic resource scarcity, making it difficult for universities to invest in the tools and equipment needed to carry out essential operations or plan beyond their immediate needs.

Although CARES and HEERF funds underscored the potential of federal emergency aid, the support was constrained by Puerto Rico’s ongoing infrastructural challenges.[10] In Puerto Rico, large-scale power outages are routine events (C. Clark, 2025), what Miguel (Universidad del Norte) described as part of the “theme of Puerto Rico.” Alongside these outages, many residents also lack reliable internet connections or have no internet access at all. In this regard, some participants (n=8, 47%) made note of the limitations of these funds within the infrastructural realities of Puerto Rico, as Isabel at Universidad de las Palmas explained:

> I think CARES was effective because the money came. [But] I think what was not very effective is the communication among the administrators and the faculty. For example, they provided us computers, but we didn’t need computers we needed better access to internet, and especially students that were in rural areas, I would say 60% of our students are in very rural Puerto Rico…they didn't have internet…the Department of Education has some rules that the dean has to follow, and they were not flexible. I think if something like that happens again, you have to have more flexibility…[in order for us] to provide really what they needed…they think everybody has internet, but in rural areas in Puerto Rico [we] don't have internet.

[10] To help finance their rising debt, several Puerto Rican governors had decreased expenditures in infrastructure and deferred maintenance projects during their time in office (e.g., roads, power grid; (Ficek, 2018).

Isabel's account illustrates how emergency relief programs, even when well-intentioned, can fail to meet institutional needs when they are filtered through federal assumptions that do not reflect the lived realities of Puerto Rican students and faculty. To adapt, participants (n=7, 41%) noted that many students attended classes from their cars in campus parking lots to access Wi-Fi, while others relied on cell phones, which made sustained engagement in coursework difficult.

Altogether, Hurricane Maria, the earthquakes, and the Covid-19 pandemic pushed many families to leave the archipelago in search of greater stability, fueling a sharp and ongoing decline in student enrollment. Nicolas describes this decline at Universidad del Mar:

> It is estimated that maybe more than 100,000 Puerto Ricans left during Maria, during the pandemic. And that also has had an impact in recruitment and university numbers. I told you maybe 10 years ago, we're at 4,000 [students] Five years ago, we're at 3,000. And now we're at 1,800. And we're not seeing how we're leveling out yet. We don't know if we've hit rock bottom. Every year, it goes down a little bit more.

Faculty across both public and private institutions (n=17, 100%) described the extent of these enrollment declines as having a devastating impact on their institutional budgets, leaving them with fewer resources to sustain their core functions.

PROMESA. Alongside steep drops in tuition revenue, public universities also faced prolonged budget cuts during this time frame. Of the 11 institutions in my sample, five were public, and nine of the 17 participants were affiliated with these campuses. Participants from these institutions described PROMESA as the primary catalyst for the fiscal and administrative instability their universities now confront. Under PROMESA, participants described how their institutions are now operating with less than half of their original budgets, with even deeper cuts projected in the coming year ($100 million less according to Teresa). Sri at Universidad Central del Borikén explained that the public system has reached a point where "many basic functions

[are] difficult for the institution to sustain." Sri went on to describe that these ongoing cuts have made it increasingly difficult for university leadership to engage in long-term planning:

> [Campus leadership] knew cuts were coming, but I remember asking in June, July about something that—will [we] be able to do this, and they were like, 'Oh, we don't know. We have to wait until the new budget comes in to know how much we are getting, and then we will be able to see.' So, we were always like—we don't know what will be the size of the cut, if there will be a cut…[university leaders] don't know if they are going to be able to hire the contract people. People don't know if they're going to be hired next semester. And in a way, it creates problems with planning, right? So, you have this entire summer, and you can't really plan much…because you don't know how much funds you will have.

Without stable and predictable funding streams, it becomes difficult for universities to plan ahead, which in turn has a negative ripple effect on other critical functions like faculty hiring and course planning as Sri indicates. This unpredictability undermines the administrative infrastructure needed to run a university and can lead to overly cautious budget decisions (e.g., hiring freezes) that ultimately limit strategic growth.

In addition to slashing institutional revenues, PROMESA has also increased operating costs through the privatization of Puerto Rico's electrical grid. In June 2021, control of the power grid shifted to the private company LUMA Energy, whose management has led to higher electricity costs and frequent outages (Martínez Mercado et al., 2024). Puerto Ricans already pay nearly twice as much for electricity compared residents in the States, yet further increases under PROMESA suggest that customers could pay nearly $1,000 more per year (Renta et al., 2021). Elena illustrates the significance of these pricing hikes at her institution, Universidad del Sol:

> The other problem with PROMESA is all the bills…For example, our bills from LUMA and all the utilities are very expensive right now…probably in the future we will not be able to pay the utilities…It is close to being inoperable for us.

Together, these accounts demonstrate how FOMB's austerity agenda under the PROMESA Act has created conditions where institutions are expected to function with limited budgets despite rising operational costs (e.g., electricity). These conditions stem from the Board's complete control over the public university system's budget, allowing it to fully oversee and determine the financial decisions the university is permitted to make, as I discuss in the next section.

Strategizing Under Constraint: Financial Management in Colonial Systems

In the wake of compounded disasters and ongoing austerity, colleges and universities in Puerto Rico have adopted a range of cost-saving and revenue-generating financial management strategies to remain operational (see Table 3.3).

Cost-Saving Strategies. Nearly all institutions in my sample, employed more than one cost-containment strategy (n=9, 82%). Private universities (n=6, 55%) largely connected these actions to enrollment declines, while public universities (n=5, 45%) highlighted both enrollment pressures and the mandated budget cuts and restructuring efforts by FOMB. In this section, I describe both the cost-saving approaches institutions utilized and their consequences for campus operations and student experiences.

Administrative and Programmatic Restructuring. To reduce costs, some university systems have consolidated key administrative activities (e.g., finance, human resources) under a single "shared services" model, eliminating these offices and personnel at individual campuses. Almost three-fourths of the institutions in my sample (n=8, 73%) had undergone large-scale administrative restructuring, with many tied to the same multi-campus university system. Of the participants at these campuses (n=13, 76%), six explicitly spoke about the impact of these efforts, which I discuss here.

Table 3.3 Financial Management Strategies in Response to Budgetary Shortfalls

		Cost-Saving Measures				Revenue-Generating Measures	
Institution Pseudonym	**Sector**	**Hiring freezes/ lay-offs**	**Stagnant salaries**	**Administrative consolidations/restructuring**	**Academic/ programmatic reductions**	**Targeted recruitment/ expanding recruitment**	**External grants**
Universidad del Sur*	Public, four-year	X	X	X	X		X
Universidad del Sol*	Public, four-year	X	X	X	X		X
Universidad del Mar*	Public, four-year	X	X	X	X		X
Universidad de las Palmas*	Public, four-year	X	X	X	X		X
Universidad Central del Borikén*	Public, four-year	X		X	X	X	X
Universidad del Pueblo	Private, four-year	X	X			X	X
Universidad de Bosque	Private, four-year	X	X			X	X
Universidad de Costa	Private, four-year	X			X	X	X
Universidad del Barrio	Private, four-year	X		X		X	X

Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Private, four-year	X	X	X	X	X	X
Universidad del Norte	Private, four-year			X		X	X

Source: This table was compiled using participant interviews and institutional budgetary documents, accreditation reports, and fiscal/strategic plans. All information gathered outside of participant interviews reflects the available documentation from FY2016/FY2017 through the period I concluded data collection, Spring 2024.

Note: The information provided in this table solely reflects the cost-saving and revenue-generating efforts that were positioned as an intentional strategy to address financial instabilities. As a counterexample, some institutions had "improving recruitment efforts through targeted outreach" as a part of their strategic plans, but in reviewing these documents across multiple years, this objective was a continual, standard goal of the institution. As such, I did not include "targeted recruitment" as a strategy for these institutions in my table.

*While outside the scope of my data collection, all five public institutions in my sample have announced (in 2025) that they will push to increase recruitment efforts to attract Puerto Ricans in the diaspora to offset declines in enrollment and tuition revenue.

While consolidations are often promoted by university leadership as a mechanism to streamline administrative processes and reduce redundancies, participants described these changes as inefficient. Approvals that were once handled internally now required inter-campus approvals, creating bottlenecks and slowing daily operations, as Elena (Universidad del Sol) articulates:

> We are suffering [from] the situation that the university called "shared services" that means we are with [two other institutions] sharing a lot of resources and this situation has a big impact in our regular operation because right now the [staff at my campus], depends [on the other campuses]…I have a lot of requisition[s], a lot of purchase order[s] that are almost stopped because [staff at my campus] don't have the [same] level of authorization.

Universidad del Sol is one of the five public campuses in my sample for which this "shared services model" was externally mandated by FOMB as part of the Board's larger budgetary restructuring plan for the public system. FOMB has framed this consolidation strategy as a means to reduce operational expenditures and create a more efficient structure for improving student outcomes (Financial Oversight and Management Board, 2018). However, according to Elena, these efforts have in practice brought daily operations nearly to a halt. Later in the interview, she expressed concern that these delays were also starting to affect the ability of faculty to act quickly on external funding opportunities, which often depend on timely action from these offices (e.g., human resources, procurement, finance).

José, who worked at a private institution (Universidad de la Isla Borinquen) that opted to consolidate campuses as part of a rebranding effort, highlighted how these consolidations affected his campus's autonomy over its curriculum:

> Now, it's much more difficult [to make curricular changes]…For example, in my case, I wanted to implement DBR [design-based research] in this grant, so the students [can]

> start taking a protagonist role on their education…[however] if I wanted to change some of the lab experiments in general biology courses, I [now] have to convince the other two campuses [to do so]…[but the other campuses] didn't want to, or didn't approve of changing the curriculum.

This example illustrates how consolidated governance structures can preclude faculty from developing innovative pedagogical strategies in their course materials if these changes are not approved system wide. For José, the centralization of curriculum decisions limited his ability to shape learning experiences that prioritized student agency and hands-on research.

Finally, the five public institutions in my sample have also undergone reductions in student services and programs as part of broader cost-cutting efforts under PROMESA. Leticia, at Universidad Central del Borikén, traced the gradual dismantling of these resources at her institution:

> When I was hired here, we had a Cultural Activities Office… that provided many activities, extracurricular activities for students, concerts. That was cut. Each time [there are budget cuts], we see less of the activities that are important for students to have a whole experience in the university… The library [would] open from 7:30 AM to almost 12:00 at midnight…But now, we only open Monday to Fridays, 8:00 to 8:00.

While these service reductions can offer short-term fiscal relief, they come at the expense of students' university experience. The loss of cultural activities, library services, and other student-facing programs diminishes opportunities for academic support and campus engagement.

Hiring and Salary Freezes. Among the various strategies institutions used to contain costs, hiring and salary freezes emerged as the most widespread approach across both public and private institutions (n=11, 100%). Participants observed that vacancies created by retirements or attrition were deliberately left unfilled to reduce payroll costs, producing heavier workloads for remaining personnel and contributing to administrative slowdowns across departments. For

instance, Sri (Universidad Central del Borikén) described how she regularly orders materials for her research lab from Fisher Scientific, but recent staffing shortages have made it challenging for her to get materials:

> I had placed orders in December. In January, I found out that [our institution's] account was frozen in Fisher, and the reason it was frozen was because the university owed them $10,000 and the university hadn't paid it. So, I started digging…and then I find out that we have $10,000, thank God, but we don't have anybody to write a check.

Sri's experience demonstrates how hiring freezes can interrupt normal administrative workflows, turning routine financial tasks like writing a check into obstacles that delay other university activities (e.g., ordering research materials).

Participants also pointed to long-term salary freezes (n=7, 41%) as another cost-saving measure implemented by their institution, with some noting they had not received a raise in over a decade (David, Maria, José). At public universities, these pressures were compounded by pension reforms imposed under FOMB, which have left faculty, like Isabel (Universidad de las Palmas) uncertain about the stability of their retirement benefits:

> You know how much money the [faculty] make in Puerto Rico? Per month, it was 1,700. That was a salary. They increase it now to 2,700 per month, which is a little bit better, but it is only for three years. Maybe next year they go back to 1,000… I lose all my benefits…health insurance…they are saying they're going to take it away. My retirement, every year they try to touch it. I don't know if I will have a retirement.

Low salaries combined with reduced benefits and pension uncertainty create deep financial insecurity for university employees, who bear the immediate burden of these austerity measures. To cover basic expenses, participants (at both public and private institutions) described that some faculty are choosing to take on part-time jobs at other universities just to receive a livable wage.

With fewer faculty and declining enrollments, institutions have started reducing the number of class sections and expanding class sizes, as David (Universidad del Pueblo) describes:

> Before [faculty] were dealing with let's say 25 students, now suddenly we have 50 students in one section, and we have to teach five courses. So that's 200, 250 students.

He notes that faculty have started to cut back on assignments and exams in their classes because they no longer have the capacity to grade everything themselves. These conditions raise concerns of whether faculty may ultimately leave Puerto Rico to pursue a more stable and "better paying job in the United States (Marcela, Universidad de Costa)."

Revenue-Generating. Alongside cost-containment efforts, all universities in this study had implemented new strategies aimed at generating revenue. These efforts centered primarily on reversing the steep enrollment declines that have occurred in the last decade. Participants described two main avenues to address the loss in tuition revenue: (1) targeted recruitment strategies designed to attract new students, including adult learners and students from the diaspora, and (2) increasing external funding, particularly federal grants, to improve student retention.

Recruitment. The financial viability of many institutions depends significantly on tuition revenue, especially private universities that are more heavily dependent on enrollment-driven income (Delaney & Doyle, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2016). However, raising tuition and fees is not a feasible solution for institutions in Puerto Rico. The archipelago is densely populated with colleges and universities, and with the ongoing outmigration of Puerto Rican residents, institutions are left competing for a shrinking pool of prospective students. David, at Universidad del Pueblo, describes this tension:

> Since there are many universities here, there's competition. So, you cannot increase your tuition, because that student will switch to another one, because it's easy to move from one institution to another. [It is] not like in United States [where] you have to get accepted. The student decides I don't like [it] here; I don't like one course and then they move to, let's say, [to X institution]. They can move easily.

David underscores that Puerto Rican students have many alternatives and may quickly transfer to lower-cost options. Most students in Puerto Rico are considered low-income and while they qualify for the Pell Grant to help cover tuition expenses, studies show that students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to be influenced by changes in tuition pricing (Mihopoulos, 2022). While public institutions were forced to raise their tuition prices under the PROMESA Act (an increase of 300% according to Isabel), participants at these institutions similarly expressed concerns that these hikes were only going to deter students from enrolling at their institution.

For this reason, several institutions (n=7, 64%) have adopted new recruitment tactics to increase enrollment levels. Miguel shared that while his institution (Universidad del Norte) has historically centered graduate education, it is now introducing select undergraduate offerings. He described this change as a strategic effort to create "a pipeline" into the university's graduate programs, explaining that the goal was to "take those [new undergraduate] students and encourage them to move on to graduate-level studies." By enrolling students earlier in their academic trajectory, this approach helps stabilize tuition revenue by creating a more consistent and predictable stream of enrollments across degree levels.

Other institutions (n=6, 56%) have shifted their focus to adult learners or students outside the archipelago. For instance, both Silvia (Universidad Central del Borikén) and David (Universidad del Pueblo) described the growing senior population in Puerto Rico as an opportunity to offer

micro credentials or even just "hobby courses." They also emphasized their institutions' push toward expanding recruitment to Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and nearby Spanish-speaking countries to increase enrollment. While Silvia's institution has sought to expand their online offerings to attract these demographics, David's has started establishing satellite campuses in areas with large Spanish-speaking communities (e.g., Florida, Latin America). However, David described these strategies as requiring significant investment:

> We have one program offered in [a Latin American country], but [it's] small. [And] like 225 students from [two satellite campuses in the States], they're trying to get students from other places, but again, you don't have that many funds to promote those programs or to make it more functional… I believe it's not that cost-effective.

These types of recruitment strategies require cross-unit coordination to sustain marketing campaigns and rely on an institution's financial and administrative resources. As a result, these initiatives may demand more resources than they ultimately generate, particularly in institutional contexts like Puerto Rico where institutional budgets are already tight.

External Funding. In addition to recruiting new students, many institutions have turned to external grant funding to support retention efforts and stabilize enrollment, as well as address their campus' long-standing infrastructure needs. Given the prolonged disruptions caused by Puerto Rico's multiple crises, students have needed more robust forms of academic and non-academic support to remain enrolled. Marcela shared that these growing demands have led her institution, Universidad de Costa, to be more proactive in securing grants to meet students' evolving needs:

> There's a lot of drive to develop a sense of belonging that Maria, the earthquakes, Fiona, the pandemic shattered…There is a huge emphasis [that] is on that. Another emphasis in

providing basically the basic needs of the students, like electricity in case of an emergency and developing wraparound services.

The literature demonstrates that crises like hurricanes and earthquakes impact students across multiple dimensions: access to basic needs, mental well-being, and academic continuity (e.g., Breen & Meyer, 2021; Garcia & Danek, 2023). By using external funds to maintain or expand the programs and services that address these needs, institutions are actively working to keep students enrolled and mitigate further attrition.

In addition to improving wraparound services, participants also cited renovating campus facilities as one of the most urgent needs on their campus. In fact, nearly all participants (n=16, 94%) emphasized that one of the most valuable aspects of certain types of capacity-building grants (i.e., Title V[11], PPOHA[12], and HSI STEM[13]) was their ability to fund physical improvements like renovations, construction, and technology upgrades, which are typically excluded from other federal programs. Carolina (Universidad del Barrio) explains that "the types of activities you can do with these types of grants is not common in other calls," contrasting them with grant programs offered by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH), which rarely support infrastructure or technology improvements. Recipients of these grants described these funds as essential for supporting long-deferred infrastructure projects—especially in the context of unmet disaster aid and shrinking budgets.

[11] Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program - Title V: https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-special-populations/grants-hispanic-students/developing-hispanic-serving-institutions-program-title-v

[12] Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA): https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-special-populations/grants-hispanic-students/promoting-postbaccalaureate-opportunities-hispanic-americans

[13] Hispanic-Serving Institutions - Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics and Articulation Programs (HSI STEM) =: https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-special-populations/grants-hispanic-students/hispanic-serving-institutions-science-technology-engineering-or-mathematics-and-articulation-programs

While participants acknowledged the value of external grant funding, they expressed concerns (n=12, 71%) about the outsized role these programs have begun to serve in sustaining core operations. In this regard, Nicolas (Universidad del Mar) explains that it is nearly impossible for his institution to fund student support services or renovations without external funding:

> We're a small campus...60% [of our budget] just goes towards personnel. So, we only have a small chunk to do maintenance and electricity, and I am not even talking about making major renovations…[Title V grants] is our way to do it. If you want to establish a peer mentoring program, if you want to remodel the chemistry labs, if you want to remodel any part of the university, if you want to expand an activity, this is, for us, the only way to do it. There is no other way because there is no way I can go to my chancellor and say, 'Hey, I need $50,000 for a mentoring project.' [because] he'll say, 'Well, I need $50,000 to pay electricity.' What are going to do? You want to pay electricity or you want your mentoring program?

Nicolas' reflection captures how external funding like Title V are being used to fund activities and operations that these institutions would normally support through stable government appropriations. But with deep budget cuts imposed under PROMESA, his campus leadership is now forced to make the impossible trade-off between covering basic operational costs like electricity and sustaining student support services. In this sense, the defunding of Puerto Rico's public universities exemplifies how colonial governance weaponizes scarcity to reproduce institutional dependence on limited and conditional revenue streams.

Several participants (n=11, 65%) also raised concerns about the temporary nature of these grants, noting the risks of depending on time-limited funding for core university operations. Elena at Universidad del Sol emphasized this tension directly:

> We depend on this kind of money that is not permanent and not within our regular budget for the basic things, and this situation will be much worse in the future…we depend [on these grants] for a lot of activities and a lot of services…This is the reality of the university.

The precariousness of depending on these resources is intensified by the unpredictability of grant cycles. Not all grant programs open every year and most are allocated on a competitive basis, which makes it challenging for institutions to include these sources of revenue in their financial planning. Even successful grantees are often left uncertain about future calls for proposals and how to continue their grant-funded efforts. For instance, Sri, Leticia, and Silvia at Universidad Central del Borikén described how their team had already begun to meet with the dean to prepare contingency plans in case Title V was not reoffered in the coming year. Participants with current grant projects were also concerned about how their institution was going to sustain the grant-funded initiatives once the grant ended. This is because many federal agencies (e.g., ED, NSF) expect grantees to "institutionalize" grant-funded initiatives after the award period ends and the agencies use this as a measure for whether they will fund an institution for a similar project in the future. Sri explains that "many times [federal agencies] want to see a commitment…but [her institution] just doesn't have the money to cover these costs." This expectation, while common for institutional grant programs, fails to acknowledge the structural austerity that makes such institutionalization almost impossible in Puerto Rico's context.

Finally, participants emphasized that not all external grant programs are practical options for institutions in Puerto Rico. In fact, participants (n=11, 65%) perceived MSI-targeted funding

(e.g., MSEIP[14], Title V, PPOHA) as the only grant opportunities where they had a real shot at success. Marisa at Universidad del Pueblo describes that for MSI-targeted grant programs, institutions in Puerto Rico are not "competing with the big guys" such as Ivy Leagues or other well-resourced, research-intensive institutions. She believes that MSI-targeted funding is where "[institutions in Puerto Rico] can be successful." Marisa's perspective was echoed by other participants, who emphasized that in MSI or HSI-targeted competitions, their institutions' role in educating Latinx and low-income students was more likely to be viewed as a strength.

In contrast, some participants (n=8, 47%) felt their institutions were marginalized in general grant competitions not tailored to MSIs. They conveyed that the dominant narratives portraying Puerto Rico as corrupt and fiscally irresponsible have seemed to intensify since the debt crisis. They believed that these narratives negatively influence how grant agencies evaluate their proposals as Natalie at Universidad de la Isla explains:

> We are more likely to get approved [for funding] in minority programs than regular programs just because we're in Puerto Rico… The island has a shadow of corruption… and so the agencies are very cautious at times of granting awards to universities in Puerto Rico because of that. And that is something that is really a concern for us.

Natalie's comments reflect a broader concern shared by participants that institutions in Puerto Rico may be subject to heightened scrutiny when applying for federal grants outside of MSI-specific programs. By saying "just because we are in Puerto Rico," she implies that simply being based in Puerto Rico is enough to trigger suspicion and feed into broader narratives of corruption

[14] Minority Science and Engineering Improvement Program (MSEIP): https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-higher-education/improvement-of-postsecondary-education/minority-science-and-engineering-improvement-program

tied to the archipelago. This perceived stigma has tangible consequences as it narrows the set of funding opportunities colleges and universities in Puerto Rico are willing to pursue.

Discussion

Through semi-structured interviews with faculty and administrators across 11 campuses, this study examined how Puerto Rico's multilayered crisis has impacted university operations and how these institutions have responded to this ongoing financial precarity through both cost-saving and revenue-generating strategies. This study draws on my anti-colonial reframing of Resource Dependence Theory in Chapter 2 to analyze how these compounding disruptions have affected university operations and constrained institutional decision-making. Under this framework, resource scarcity is positioned as a procedural mechanism of colonial governance where the concentration of financial resources and how they are administered sustain U.S. authority and limit local autonomy.

RQ 1: Colonial Oversight and Compounding Crises Have Constrained Institutional Capacity and Recovery

The literature on disasters has long documented their far-reaching effects on both university operations and student experiences (e.g., Dyson, 2007; Ibarra-Mejia et al., 2022; Wang, 2024). These effects are often magnified in regions repeatedly exposed to large-scale disasters (e.g., the Gulf Coast), where recovery is slow and financial instability endures long after the initial occurrence (Liu et al., 2025). In my study, participants described extensive physical damages to campus infrastructure, unreliable electricity, and prolonged delays in repairs that made it difficult to sustain instruction and support students' mental and physical well-being. The compounded disruptions led to steep enrollment declines as students left the archipelago in search of greater stability. These findings align with prior scholarship documenting the effects of disasters on student safety and well-being (e.g., Deil-Amen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021),

outmigration (e.g., Shelton & Thompson, 2020; Szecsi et al., 2023), and university operations (e.g., Brusi & Godreau, 2021; D'Amico et al., 2022).

My study contributes to this body of work by examining the timeliness and effectiveness of federal emergency aid in disaster recovery within contexts of fiscal and colonial oversight. While prior research has documented the inequitable distribution of FEMA funds to Puerto Rico (e.g., Willison et al., 2019, 2019), there has been little examination of how these funds were distributed to universities, their effectiveness, or how institutional actors experience these processes. Moreover, studies of FEMA funding in higher education remain limited, with just one other known study focused on HBCUs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Johnson, 2011). Similarly, although scholarship on the use and effectiveness of CARES and HEERF funding at colleges and universities has expanded since the Covid-19 pandemic, it is primarily centered on stateside institutions (e.g., Cummings, 2020; Sansone, 2023), leaving those in Puerto Rico largely absent from this literature (Santiago et al., 2023).

My findings reveal notable differences in the effectiveness and timeliness of federal emergency aid following Hurricane Maria and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants consistently described FEMA's reimbursement model as slow, opaque, and ineffective. When asked about the status of recovery funds, many said they were unaware of where FEMA dollars had gone or what projects they had supported, pointing instead to visibly damaged facilities and equipment still awaiting repair nearly six years after the hurricane. Participants emphasized that the reimbursement structure of these funds disadvantaged universities in Puerto Rico, which lacked the financial reserves to front these expenses. This was particularly true for the public university system that had undergone substantive reductions to their general operating budget under PROMESA during this time. While participants did not directly attribute delays to FOMB,

prior research demonstrates that delays in FEMA funding were exacerbated by the additional restrictions imposed by FOMB, which required Puerto Rico's government to provide detailed recovery plans and documentation before funds could be released (Willison et al., 2019, 2022).

By contrast, participants viewed the emergency funds distributed through the CARES and HEERF programs during the pandemic as comparatively swift and impactful. These funds allowed institutions to make overdue upgrades to technology infrastructure, expand Wi-Fi access, and support the transition to remote learning. Yet, several participants also critiqued the limited flexibility of these funds, explaining that federal guidelines failed to account for the archipelago's infrastructural realities: unreliable internet connectivity and frequent power outages. These differences in aid delivery between FEMA and CARES underscore how the processes and procedures embedded in disaster relief can function in ways that either reproduce or relieve structural constraints. These findings align with my conceptual framework (Chapter 2) by demonstrating how institutional capacity in Puerto Rico is shaped not only by resource scarcities (e.g., limited budgets), but by the bureaucratic systems (e.g., disaster aid) through which resources are delivered, withheld, or made conditional in colonial contexts.

While this study highlights important differences in how these two emergency aid programs functioned and their relative effectiveness, this study cannot fully explain the policy mechanisms that produced them. Both programs operated under the continued oversight of FOMB, raising questions about why FOMB's constraints appeared less obstructive during the pandemic than after Hurricane Maria. One possibility lies in the programs' structural differences: FEMA funds primarily operate through a reimbursement model requiring upfront investment (United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2024), while CARES and HEERF combined direct allocations with partial reimbursements allowing for quicker allocation in funds

(U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). It may also be that the FOMB's administrative infrastructure was more established by 2020 or that the Department of Treasury's distribution process for CARES funding entailed less oversight. Future research should examine these policy design differences to better understand how aid delivery structures intersect with fiscal oversight and institutional capacity in colonial contexts like Puerto Rico.

RQ 2: Colonial Austerity Shaped the Scope, Effectiveness, and Limits of Universities' Financial Strategies

The findings from this study extend existing literature on institutional responses to budgetary constraints by demonstrating how universities operating under conditions of limited autonomy (i.e., Puerto Rico) make financial decisions during compounding crises. Prior research shows that when confronted with economic shocks or natural disasters, colleges and universities often employ a combination of cost-saving and revenue-generating strategies to sustain operations (e.g., Leuhusen, 2017; Namalefe, 2014; Walling, 2021; Yang, 2011). Cost-saving measures are typically implemented first and often begin incrementally, through hiring and salary freezes or furloughs (Altundemir, 2012). If financial conditions worsen, institutions may turn to more drastic actions such as cutting programs, reducing services, or pursuing campus consolidations (Altundemir, 2012; Kelchen et al., 2024). Both public and private universities in my sample reported implementing incremental cost-saving measures (i.e., hiring and salary freezes), which heightened faculty workloads and prompted some to take on additional part-time roles at other institutions to make ends meet. Participants at public universities also pointed to threats to retirement and health benefits tied to FOMB-mandated pension reforms, reflecting how the board's primary focus on debt repayment comes at the expense faculty, staff, and students' well-being.

As conditions worsened, both sectors moved toward more extensive forms of cost containment, such as program reductions and administrative consolidations. While private universities often adopted these changes as a rebranding strategy, participants at public institutions emphasized that such consolidations were mandated under FOMB's restructuring plans. Prior research has shown that consolidations and mergers can, in some cases, promote operational efficiencies and stabilize budgets when they are internally initiated and strategically planned (Castrejón, 2025; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021). However, for public institutions this decision was implemented through top-down mandates imposed by FOMB, leaving university leaders with little power to influence or contest them. For example, since 2023, the Board has withheld $20 million from the public university system's budget contingent on the university president's implementation of a pilot program to consolidate the administrative operations of three of their campuses (Velazquez, 2025). This use of conditional funding not only constrains institutional agency but also raises doubts about whether such externally enforced measures can genuinely advance the long-term stability FOMB claims to pursue.

Finally, the literature on institutional decision-making during periods of extensive instability emphasize the importance of institutions' ability to generate revenue from alternative sources to provide long-term stability (Hearn, 2013; Leuhusen, 2017). In Puerto Rico, institutions sought to address steep enrollment declines caused by successive disasters through a combination of recruitment and grant-seeking strategies. Private universities pursued new recruitment efforts aimed at Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and adult learners, though several participants noted that these efforts yielded limited results. At the same time, institutions across both sectors turned to external grants to sustain operations and retain their students. Participants viewed these funds as essential for maintaining basic services, student support programs, and

long-deferred infrastructure repairs. Yet they also expressed unease about the long-term sustainability of relying on soft money to fund core operations. Several administrators described this tension when referencing federal agencies' requirement that universities "institutionalize" grant-funded initiatives after the award period ends when they lack the operating budgets to pursue these efforts. Despite these challenges, participants consistently identified MSI-targeted programs such as Title V and PPOHA as the federal funding opportunities where their institutions had a true chance of success. They attributed this not only to the programs' focus on capacity building for institutions serving racially minoritized students, but also to the barriers they face in broader federal competitions, where they believed being from Puerto Rico was perceived by agencies as a signal of mismanagement or corruption.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate how colonial governance structures constrain institutional decision-making by shaping what is realistically possible in the first place. For both public and private universities, years of infrastructural decline, rising costs, and sharp enrollment losses, exacerbated by multiple disasters, have made it challenging to engage in long-term planning. Rather, cost-containment has become a central strategy for maintaining university operations. These options seem to be even more narrowed for public institutions where FOMB's top-down mandates have aggressively pursued both incremental cost-containment strategies (e.g., hiring and salary freezes) and large-scale restructuring efforts (e.g., consolidations). Within this context of increasingly constrained budgets and administrative bandwidth, seeking external resources has become a necessity. Universities are compelled to pursue new funding streams to compensate for structural disinvestment, even when such funding is short-term and challenging to maintain. This cycle reinforces the colonial condition in which dependence is engineered through ongoing austerity, constrained autonomy, and inadequate infrastructural support.

Policy Implications

This study underscores the need to understand institutional decision-making not only in terms of the strategies employed, but also within the structural conditions that constrain what strategies are possible. One of the clearest examples of these constraints emerged in my findings on the disbursement of emergency funds following Hurricane Maria and the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants noted clear differences between the timeliness and impact of aid provided through CARES funding compared to FEMA. While FEMA funds primarily operate through a reimbursement model requiring institutions to front costs (GAO, 2024), CARES and HEERF combined direct allocations with partial reimbursements, allowing for quicker deployment of aid (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). This suggests that for institutions with limited financial reserves, reimbursement-based models may exacerbate delays and impede their ability to address urgent repair and recovery needs.

To improve the accessibility and impact of emergency aid, federal agencies should replace reimbursement-driven models with upfront, flexible disbursements that do not assume the availability of cash reserves. In tandem, they should streamline application and reporting requirements to reduce redundant approvals, excessive documentation, and inconsistent reporting requirements across federal agencies that slow access to funds (see GAO, 2022). Reforms could include building inter-agency data-sharing systems, aligning application timelines, and expanding multilingual technical assistance (GAO, 2022). The proposed FEMA Act of 2025 seeks to address several of these shortcomings by creating a universal application portal, improving multilingual communication, and shifting the Public Assistance program toward a direct grant model (Ors, 2025). Though still under review, the bill represents a promising step

toward more equitable and timely disaster recovery for Puerto Rico and its higher education institutions.

Given Puerto Rico's compounded disasters and ongoing fiscal crisis, this study also examined how universities have sought to sustain operations amid these disruptions. I found that institutions pursued a range of measures, from cost-containment to revenue generation. This section focuses on the latter, as studies indicate that the diversification of revenue sources is essential for long-term operational stability (e.g., Hearn, 2013; Leuhusen, 2017; Namalefe, 2014). Facing steep enrollment declines, several institutions expanded their reach through targeted recruitment of adult learners and Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, while one university introduced undergraduate programs for the first time. Yet, prior literature demonstrates that such recruitment and program expansion strategies require significant upfront investment and administrative capacity to succeed (e.g., Copley & Douthett, 2020; Phillips & Jones, 2025). Despite these constraints, increasing enrollment levels will continue remain central to the survival of these universities amid ongoing outmigration and growing competition for a shrinking pool of students.

For this reason, I offer two areas for strategic enrollment growth. First, universities in Puerto Rico should leverage and tailor their existing structures and programs to attract new students to minimize additional costs. For example, universities could leverage the technological infrastructure developed through CARES funding to expand flexible online learning options across the archipelago and diaspora—a strategy adopted by other institutions post-pandemic (see Hart et al., 2025). Second, initiatives that require greater investment, such as developing new short-term certificate programs or expanding degree offerings, should be guided by data-driven, evidence-based practices to maximize their success (e.g., Good, 2024). This may include

aligning new credential programs with high-demand career fields. Finally, institutional leaders should ensure that all recruitment and market expansion efforts remain consistent with their university's mission to avoid mission drift, where financial pressures risk pushing institutions away from their core purpose (Jaquette, 2013).

Findings from this study also highlight the critical role of federal grant funding, specifically Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) programs, as a source of revenue. Institutions relied on these grants to address long-standing infrastructure needs left unresolved by FEMA aid and to strengthen student retention. However, since taking office in January 2025, the Trump administration has terminated approximately $6.9 billion in federal grant funding and an additional $350 million earmarked for programs supporting MSIs within the U.S. Department of Education (ED; Bedekovics & Ragland, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). The termination of ED's MSI-specific funding streams raises serious concerns about whether similar cuts will extend to other federal agencies (e.g., NIH, NSF) that also fund similar capacity-building programs for MSIs (e.g., NSF's Improving Undergraduate STEM Education: Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program; U.S. National Science Foundation, 2022). Abrupt cuts of this magnitude jeopardize ongoing projects, particularly for institutions in Puerto Rico without the financial capacity to absorb such losses.

To mitigate these consequences, Congress should establish contingency funds for institutions that had active awards at the time of the cuts to prevent large-scale operational disruptions and ensure project continuity. Through these corrective legislative measures, Congress would be upholding its fiscal responsibility as these funds had already been appropriated by Congress for these programs and incorporated into institutional budgets (Weissman, 2025). Furthermore, ED lacks the legal authority to determine the constitutionality

of these programs and unilaterally eliminate them, warranting Congressional intervention (Weissman, 2025). Finally, while the future of MSI funding remains under litigation, university leaders in Puerto Rico should proactively engage with national organizations such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) and *Excelencia* in Education involved in ongoing advocacy and research efforts to ensure their interests are represented in continuing policy negotiations.[15]

Finally, one of the most revealing findings of this paper was the role of FOMB in overriding and dictating the institutional decision-making of public institutions. My findings demonstrate how FOMB has enforced deep austerity measures that prioritize debt repayment and market efficiency over the needs of students, faculty, and staff. Participants described government appropriations to the university system being cut in half, and tuition tripling in cost. Now, 64 academic programs face potential closure (Velazquez, 2025). These measures have created an externally mandated form of retrenchment that leaves institutions with little capacity to respond in ways that center the needs of their campus communities. While the use of externally appointed fiscal boards to respond to rising municipal debts are not new (e.g., Detroit, Philadelphia; see Arbasetti & Journalism, 2017), the scale of Puerto Rico's debt crisis and its colonial relationship with the United States complicates traditional understandings of the overreach and anti-democratic orientations of these boards, particularly as it affects the future of higher education as a public good. One of the main areas of concern is how the Board's decisions for restructuring of the public system's finances have been shaped by comparisons to stateside

[15] See HACU's webpage "Defending the Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program" https://hacu.net/advocacy/defending-the-hispanic-serving-institutions-program/ and *Excelencia* in Education's webpage "A Call to Action: Supporting Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)" https://www.edexcelencia.org/research-policy/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis/a-call-to-action-supporting-hsis

public universities without accounting for Puerto Rico's vastly different socioeconomic conditions (Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023). For example, Puerto Rico's median household income ($19,775) is roughly one-third that of the U.S. median, while the poverty rate (44%) is over three times the U.S. national average (12%; Redden, 2019) What appears as "low tuition" from a stateside perspective represents a substantial financial burden for Puerto Rican students and their families.

As FOMB enters its tenth year of oversight, there is an urgent need for safeguards that protect the long-term financial stability of Puerto Rico's largest public system. A practical first step would be for Congress to set a baseline funding floor that prevents any further reductions in government appropriations to the public system, with a statutory goal of incremental increases tied to revenue growth or inflation. The central government has already signaled its intent to stabilize UPR's budget, proposing in its 2021 Revised Fiscal Plan to hold appropriations steady at roughly $560 million (about 63 percent of traditional levels; University of Puerto Rico, 2021). Yet FOMB has continued to mandate additional reductions (University of Puerto Rico, 2024). This ongoing tension between local decision-making and the Board's expansive authority under PROMESA, reinforces the need for Congressional intervention. With the temporary financial relief provided through the CARES Act now expiring, and the recent termination of Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) programs in the U.S. Department of Education, it will be critical for public institutions to have a stable source of funding to offset the losses of these resources and invest in the tools needed to pursue new revenue options.

Conclusion

This study examined how fiscal austerity and compounding disasters affect university operations in Puerto Rico and inform financial decision-making. Drawing on interviews with 17

institutional actors across 11 public and private institutions in the archipelago, the findings reveal how decreases in government funding, rising costs, and declining enrollments have narrowed the set of viable options available to institutions. In this constrained environment, cost-containment and short-term revenue streams (e.g., external grants) have become central strategies for staying afloat, which makes it challenging for institutions to prioritize long-term growth. Importantly, this paper shows how colonial governance structures both shape the availability of resources and restrict institutional autonomy. These findings contribute to broader conversations about resource dependence by showing how these dependencies are structurally designed in colonial contexts. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing more equitable policy responses that acknowledge both the structural limitations institutions in Puerto Rico face and the systemic conditions that produce them.

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Chapter 4 Colonial Burdens: An Anti-Colonial Examination of Administrative Burdens in Federal Grant Participation at Institutions in Puerto Rico

Introduction

Colleges and universities across the United States leverage federal grants to sustain and expand their core functions. Federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education (ED), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) offer grant programs that allow institutions to expand student services, fuel research and innovation, and in some cases repair outdated equipment and infrastructure (Ordway, 2025). Every year, billions of federal dollars are invested in colleges and universities in the form of grants and contracts (USA Facts, 2025). These federal investments strengthen an institution's reputation, its operational capacity, and, most importantly, its ability to serve students (Godreau et al., 2015; Hillman et al., 2024; Sims et al., 2025).

Despite its transformative potential, these grants consistently advantage well-resourced institutions by structuring access to funds around resource-driven factors (Hillman et al., 2024). This advantage stems from the fact that competing for and managing grants is a complex, time-consuming process. Identifying opportunities, meeting agency requirements, crafting competitive proposals, and administering awards all require specialized knowledge and sustained institutional support—investments that well-resourced institutions are better positioned to make and sustain over time (Endemaño Walker et al., 2025; Manyibe et al., 2017). Such investments include well-staffed sponsored research (or external grant) offices and specialized staff (e.g., grant writers) that guide grant development and administration. This robust grant-seeking infrastructure allows

resource-rich institutions to absorb the demands of the grant process and divert more time and resources into the quality of the grant proposal itself (Fukumoto, 2018; Gant et al., 2024; Taggart, 2017). Without such infrastructure, each stage of the grant cycle becomes more labor-intensive, leaving under-resourced institutions at a clear disadvantage in applying for and securing these funds (Endemaño Walker et al., 2025).

This study investigates how these capacity constraints unfold in Puerto Rico, where the federal grant process is complicated by the archipelago's complex political and financial realities as an unincorporated territory. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens but cannot vote for president and lack voting representation in Congress (Atiles, 2024; Ayala & Bernabe, 2007). For over a century, the United States has exploited this status to impose restrictive fiscal and social policies, most recently through the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which has cut government appropriations to the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) by half since 2017 (Velázquez, 2025). These cuts coincided with a series of devastating disasters. Hurricanes Irma and Maria alone caused an estimated $144 million in damages to colleges and universities,[16] followed by 6.4 magnitude earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic that further disrupted university operations (Cleveland, 2018; Weissman, 2019; Willison et al., 2019, 2022). In response to these emergencies, many institutions have cut costs by suspending new faculty and staff hires and deferring maintenance (see Chapter 3)—actions that, while fiscally necessary, weaken their capacity to pursue federal grants.

Drawing on interviews conducted in spring 2024, this paper investigates the barriers Puerto Rican faculty and staff encounter when applying for and managing Title V and other

[16] This estimate reflects the damages reported by the three largest university systems on the archipelago: University of Puerto Rico, Ana G. Mendez, and Inter American University. Total damages across Puerto Rico's higher education system are therefore likely higher.

Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) grants. As an HSI-targeted program, Title V has long served (since 1998) as one of the few federal funding streams through which universities in Puerto Rico (nearly all of which qualify as an HSI) could strengthen their infrastructure, student services, and long-term fiscal stability. Yet, similar to other federal programs, these funds are allocated on a competitive basis such that only 30% of HSIs have ever been awarded a Title V grant (Aguilar-Smith & Yun, 2023). Moreover, a recent study found that HSIs in Puerto Rico were less likely to apply for these funds (90% lower odds) than their stateside counterparts, even though their success rate is comparable when they do apply, suggesting barriers to entry (Aguilar-Smith & Yun, 2023). As such, this study asks:

1. What challenges do Puerto Rican faculty and staff encounter in the process of securing and implementing federal grants (specifically Title V grants)?
2. To what extent are these challenges reflective of Puerto Rico's colonial context as an unincorporated territory of the United States?

This research is particularly timely given the current policy environment. In September 2025, the U.S. Department of Education announced the discontinuation of multiple Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) programs including Title V (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Although the specific programs studied are no longer active, the findings from this study remain consequential. The removal of HSI-targeted competitions means that institutions in Puerto Rico will now vie directly with even better-resourced, research-intensive institutions for federal funds. By examining the factors that shape access to Title V, this study provides insight into the broader structural barriers that will continue, and likely intensify, as Puerto Rico's institutions compete in a post-HSI funding landscape. Although there is a large body of literature that has examined the challenges MSIs encounter when vying for competitive grant programs (e.g., Aguilar-Smith,

2022; Rankins, 2017), only two have explicitly explored these barriers at universities in Puerto Rico (Bernal & Ortiz-Torres, 2009; Haynes, 2022). Bernal and Ortiz-Torres (2009) identified capacity-related constraints that shape faculty's experience applying for research grants at a single public university, emphasizing issues such as high teaching loads, limited grant infrastructure, and limited incentive-structures for faculty research. Haynes (2022) examined Puerto Rican faculty's self-efficacy in applying for federal STEM education grants, highlighting how language, culture, and inadequate institutional support influenced their confidence and willingness to compete for these funds. This study builds on and extends their work by (1) analyzing the challenges that arise in both the grant-writing *and* implementation stages; (2) incorporating a broader and more diverse set of institutional actors beyond faculty that include grant administrators and external grant professionals; and (3) situating these experiences within the archipelago's distinctive colonial context, including an examination of how the PROMESA Act has shaped federal grant participation at these institutions—an area that was not examined in either of the prior studies.

Guiding Conceptual Lens and Review of the Literature

To better understand the barriers universities in Puerto Rico face in accessing and managing federal grants, I draw on two conceptual frameworks as a foundation: administrative burdens and racialized burdens. In the next two sections, I first examine how these frameworks have been used in prior research before extending them in the third section to Puerto Rico's colonial context through the anti-colonial framework introduced in Chapter 2.

Administrative Burdens

Herd and Moynihan (2018) describe administrative burdens as the bureaucratic rules and procedures built into policy design and implementation that make it harder for intended

beneficiaries to access public resources and services. These burdens manifest as learning, compliance, and psychological costs (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Types of Administrative Costs

Type of Cost	Definition
Learning costs	The effort individuals must expend to determine that a program exists, understand its eligibility criteria, and navigate the steps to apply and remain enrolled.
Compliance costs	The time and labor individuals spend on completing paperwork, providing proof of identity or legal status, waiting in lines, or meeting bureaucratic requirements.
Psychological costs	The emotional toll of participation, including stress, frustration, anxiety, feelings of stigma, or a loss of agency and personal autonomy over one's time.

Because these hurdles are presented as routine administrative safeguards (e.g., additional paperwork or reporting requirements), they often avoid public scrutiny. Herd and Moynihan (2018) describe this as "policymaking by other means," in which the administrative design of the program (i.e. the burdens embedded) serves political objectives without the need for formal legislative action (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). For instance, policymakers who support a program will streamline procedures to broaden its access, while opponents discreetly add hurdles to discourage participation, particularly if it involves accessing public funds like federal grants. Burdens also vary depending on who stands to benefit. Political actors may impose stricter requirements on groups they perceive as less deserving, which often reinforces existing racial hierarchies and inequities (Ray et al., 2023).

Racialized Burdens Framework

Ray and colleagues (2023) extend the administrative burdens framework by demonstrating how these costs are racialized. They contend that racialized burdens connect the distribution of resources with racialized beliefs in ways that systematically disadvantage marginalized racial groups. They further argue that these burdens arise "via intentional (but plausibly deniable) rules or facially neutral rules" that allow policy actors to dispel claims of racial discrimination by using coded language to justify policy design and procedures (p.139). This type of language may include an emphasis on deservingness and merit or claims about corruption and fraud, which serve to obscure racialized intent.

Using this logic, federal grant criteria may appear neutral and uniformly applied; yet in practice, they disproportionately benefit well-resourced, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and White faculty (Chen et al., 2022; Ginther et al., 2018, 2018; Katz & Matter, 2020; McCambly & Colyvas, 2022). Research-intensive PWIs have far greater institutional capacity (i.e., human, organizational, structural, and material) than Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to compete for these resources (Hillman et al., 2024). They employ specialized staff to handle complex grant requirements (human capacity), maintain long-standing relationships with funding agencies (organizational capacity), have well-established internal policies and procedures to manage grants (structural capacity), and possess the financial resources to invest in faculty training and other supports (material capacity; Harding & Lee, 2024; Hillman et al., 2024). In contrast, studies on federal grant participation at MSIs shows that these institutions operate with limited staff, weaker agency connections, less formal grant management systems, and tighter budgets (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Escobar et al., 2023; Haynes, 2022; Rankins, 2017; Wilson & Chavela Guerra, 2021).

These differences in capacity are themselves racialized and become reproduced in the ways administrative burdens are experienced by individuals across these institutions. In what follows, I examine the learning, compliance, and psychological costs MSI faculty experience in competitive grant programs, illustrating how institutional capacity can heighten or ease these burdens and how such dynamics sustain racial inequities in federal funding. While I discuss each cost on their own, they often occur simultaneously and can arise throughout the entire grant cycle (Gándara et al., 2024).

Learning costs. Learning costs in competitive federal grant programs can emerge at any stage of the grant cycle. Early on, faculty may need to search for suitable opportunities, determine eligibility, interpret application instructions and deadlines, and learn the language and content expected in a strong proposal. These costs can resurface after an award, when grantees need to understand agency terms and conditions, track financial transactions and spending restrictions, and keep up with required progress reports. Studies document that MSI faculty encounter steep learning costs throughout the grant process, a challenge they associate with the limited grant-seeking infrastructure at their institution (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Escobar et al., 2023; Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017; Wilson & Chavela Guerra, 2021).

For instance, Wilson and Chavela Guerra (2021) found that MSI faculty applying for NSF funding struggled to align their research objectives with grant requirements and to identify programs for which they were eligible, leading to poorly evaluated proposals or missed opportunities. Faculty in their study described that, without institutional guidance, it was challenging to navigate grant requirements effectively. Other studies show similar patterns: MSIs have few opportunities or supports for faculty to develop grant-writing experience (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Escobar et al., 2023; Haynes, 2022), while heavy teaching loads and service

obligations leave faculty at MSIs with little time to learn the grant process on their own (Escobar et al., 2021; Manyibe et al., 2017; Toldson, 2017).

Other studies demonstrate that faculty can mitigate learning costs by developing personal and professional connections such as forming peer-mentorships and building rapport with grant agencies (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Haynes, 2022; Rankins, 2017). In their dissertation, Rankins' (2017) found that applicants from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) could gain a competitive edge in NSF grant competitions by building direct relationships with program officers. These interactions exposed informal cues that would not normally be shared in standard workshops (e.g., preferred language, key documents), which enabled faculty to craft proposals more closely aligned with agency expectations. However cultivating such relationships is not easy, particularly for those without prior access to such networks (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Haynes, 2022; Rankins, 2017; Sims et al., 2025; Toldson, 2017). Forming these relationships is more feasible for well-sourced institutions with a strong Sponsored Research Office, which serves as an intermediary between researchers, funding agencies, and campus administration, streamlining communication and managing paperwork throughout the grant process (Aguilar Palencia, 2020; Leyland et al., 2020).

Compliance costs. Compliance costs represent the time and administrative work required during the grant cycle, including personnel hiring and management, equipment purchases, financial reporting, mandatory progress reports, IRB protocols, among others (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020; Decker et al., 2007). Compliance costs may emerge for faculty when working directly with grant agencies or from within their own institutions. In her dissertation, Villareal (2014) details how agency grant criteria can generate compliance costs by requiring extensive materials (e.g., comprehensive development plan, logic models) on a short turnaround, forcing

faculty and administrators to meet heavy administrative deadlines. This is where Sponsored Programs Offices and pre-award staff can alleviate these pressures by assisting with proposal development, tracking required components, and managing the final submission (Manyibe et al., 2017; Taggart, 2017). This assistance is particularly important for MSI faculty, who already juggle heavy teaching and service loads. These demands limit the time available to manage complex grant requirements and may, as a result, discourage faculty from applying. (Haynes, 2022; Yanagihara et al., 2009). Indeed, most MSIs are teaching-intensive, with faculty often responsible for four or more courses per semester, making it difficult to balance instructional responsibilities with the administrative demands of grant activities (Bernal & Ortiz-Torres, 2009; Escobar et al., 2021, 2023; Rankins, 2017; Yanagihara et al., 2009)

Grant knowledge and prior experience can also reduce the compliance costs in applying for funds by enabling faculty to anticipate agency expectations and prepare materials in advance. In her study of Title V competitiveness, Aguilar-Smith (2022) found that "perennial winners" at HSIs credited their success to strong institutional knowledge of the program, which allowed them to draft key documents and budgets ahead of the call for proposals and quickly tailor them to each new competition. By contrast, administrators at HSIs that were unsuccessful or had never applied described the process as nearly impossible. They pointed to extensive documentation requirements, short application windows, and weak grant-seeking infrastructure as key barriers. They also observed that the growth in the number of HSIs has intensified competition for these funds, increasingly allowing better-resourced campuses to crowd out the very institutions the program was intended to support. This pattern demonstrates how resources shape administrative burdens: well-resourced institutions can delegate complex grant requirements to specialized staff and are thus, more likely to submit competitive proposals, while those at under-resourced

campuses must absorb these costs themselves. Although Aguilar-Smith's study focuses on Title V, a program limited to HSIs, it highlights dynamics that are only intensified in broader federal grant programs, where resource disparities are deeper and structurally racialized.

While Villareal (2014) and Aguilar-Smith (2022) point to compliance costs that arise when applying for funds, other studies demonstrate that these costs may arise throughout the entire grant cycle (Bozeman et al., 2021; Bozeman & Youtie, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2014). To avoid losing grant opportunities or receiving excessive punishment for non-compliance, universities may over-comply by employing stricter regulations than what is outlined by funding agencies for faculty and staff to adhere to (Bozeman & Jung, 2017). This can create internal bottlenecks and force faculty to navigate additional rules and procedures within their own institution (Bozeman & Jung, 2017). This is particularly salient at MSIs, specifically HBCUs and universities in Puerto Rico, which often receive exuberant levels of scrutiny by accrediting bodies (Seltzer, 2019; UNCF Federick D. Patterson Research Institute, 2019). This scrutiny incentivizes institutional overcompliance, creating extra secretarial work for faculty that hinders their abilities to focus on proposal writing or implementing grant activities (Escobar et al., 2023; Haynes, 2022; Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017; Wilson & Chavela Guerra, 2021).

Psychological costs. Finally, psychological costs often emerge as a product of the learning and compliance costs faculty experience when pursuing competitive grant funding. These costs include the stress, stigma, low self-confidence, and loss of agency that arise in grant participation. One of the most widely reported psychological costs is a feeling of lost agency (Bozeman et al., 2021; Escobar et al., 2021; Haynes, 2022; Rockwell, 2009). As faculty try to meet heavy instructional responsibilities while managing the extensive paperwork and deadlines of grant competitions, they may experience constrained agency—a lack of control over how they

can spend their time or alter their circumstances (Ray et al., 2023). This ongoing time pressure may prompt some faculty to question whether pursuing grants is worth the effort (Feller et al., 2009). Other studies demonstrate that MSI faculty may also experience severe stress (Rankins, 2017) or stigma when applying for grant funding (Haynes, 2022; Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017). For instance, faculty at HBCUs often indicated that they felt as though federal agencies perceived their institutions are being inferior and less capable of successfully implementing grant-activities (Rankins, 2017; Toldson, 2017).

Moreover, Haynes' study on Puerto Rican faculty's self-efficacy in federal grant participation shows how these costs may take on unique forms in colonial contexts. Haynes (2022) interviewed five STEM faculty in Puerto Rico that had applied to NSF and Department of Education grant programs and found that participants believed U.S. agencies viewed their proposals as inferior because of Puerto Rico's cultural and linguistic context. Her study described how faculty felt dependent on U.S. resources and insecure about presenting their ideas in English, which lowered their sense of self-efficacy in competing for funds. Haynes' study points to stigma rooted in colonial history and linguistic difference, producing a sense of inferiority that current theories of racialized burdens capture only in part. For this reason, I expand on Ray's theory of racialized burdens to better reflect Puerto Rico's colonial realities.

Extending Racialized Burdens Framework to Colonial Systems

While the racialized burdens framework is useful for examining the racialization of federal funding and the burdens associated with securing and managing these funds, this theoretical scope is inapt for understanding how colleges and universities within colonial systems like Puerto Rico navigate competitive grant programs. For this reason, I extend racialized burdens, drawing from the multi-dimensional framework presented in Chapter 2. This

framework interrogates how colonial systems engineer and sustain resource dependencies. It views resource scarcity as a deliberate outcome of colonial design, deployed to limit institutional autonomy. Within this context, I argue that the administrative burdens embedded in the pursuit of federal funding function as a colonial mechanism of control and subjugation.

This framework positions Puerto Rico's postsecondary system within the United States' colonial project, where colonial exceptionalism (see Atiles-Osoria, 2018) permits the selective application of federal laws and policies, enabling the federal government to create alternate legal and political realities that entrench Puerto Rico's dependence on United States' resources. The framework shows how the United States employs exceptional policymaking to foster their control over resources through economic profiteering and extractive policies (e.g., triple tax exemptions) that weaken institutional infrastructure and fiscal stability, leaving institutions vulnerable to external shocks such as the debt crisis or Hurricane Maria. The framework also leverages procedural vulnerability to describe how states of emergency in Puerto Rico serve as a site for further dispossession through the policies and procedures embedded in federal disaster recovery and the management of fiscal crises. This includes the withholding or delaying aid (e.g., FEMA), imposing bureaucratic oversight (e.g., PROMESA), and adding administrative hurdles (e.g., extensive FEMA reimbursement documentation) that slow recovery and disrupt operations. Together, these dynamics deepen institutional dependence on federal resources, while the administrative burdens embedded in these grant programs make it challenging for institutions in Puerto Rico to secure, manage, and ultimately benefit from those very resources.

In addition to deep constraints in institutional capacity, the framework identifies two features of Puerto Rico's colonial context that heighten administrative burdens: (1) corruption rhetoric and hyper surveillance, and (2) linguistic and cultural exclusion. Scholarship on Puerto

Rico shows how anti-corruption narratives operate as tools of colonial governance, casting Puerto Rico as inherently suspect and justifying heightened federal oversight (Atiles, 2023; Atiles et al., 2022; Jiménez & LeBrón, 2022). This intensified scrutiny is especially pronounced at public universities, which since the PROMESA Act, are controlled by a federally appointed fiscal board that can override campus financial decisions and enforce rigid fiscal rules. Studies demonstrate that this level of hyper surveillance can prompt institutions to over comply by adopting additional processes and procedures (see Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). This kind of oversight creates a uniquely restrictive environment that limits autonomy and sets universities in Puerto Rico apart from other institutions in the federal funding landscape, which have greater autonomy through state governance and congressional representation.

Language politics compound these burdens. Federal grant programs operate primarily in English while Puerto Rico's universities function largely in Spanish, heightening costs by reinforcing feelings of exclusion and the need to demonstrate legitimacy within a system not designed for them (Haynes, 2022). The dominance of English in federal funding reflects a long history of U.S. "Americanization" policies in its territories, where English has signaled legitimacy and worth (see Caban, 2002; Go, 2000; Hsu, 2015). In this way, English has long functioned as a signal of competence and credibility in the United States. Federal grant materials assume English proficiency and provide minimal support for non-English speakers (Administrative Communications System, 2017). Together, these contexts may result in a uniquely complex set of administrative burdens within federal grant participation for institutions in Puerto Rico that warrant further exploration.

Methods

To understand the extent to which Puerto Rican faculty and administrators encounter administrative burdens in securing and implementing federal grants, I employ critical qualitative inquiry (CQI). CQI is rooted in the identification and dismantling of power relations, which makes it an effective tool for engaging in scholarly work situated in emancipatory objectives (Denzin, 2017). CQI uncovers and critiques dominant ways of thinking through the interrogation of whose interests are being served and who has the power to enact change (Merriam, 2002). Moreover, CQI is well-suited for using inquiry as a site for critical self-reflection, activism, and influencing policy environments that uphold racial-colonial systems of power. In employing CQI, I rely on the expertise of individuals both internal and external to institutions in Puerto Rico to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences participating in federal grant programs, particularly the Title V program.

Site Selection

From January to April 2024, I utilized grant abstracts publicly available on the ED website[17] between fiscal years 2009 to 2022[18] to construct a list of all the institutions that received a Title V grant by fiscal year, their institutional sector, and the type of grant they received. I then focused on institutions listed as awardees from 2016 to 2022 to increase the likelihood that those involved in the application and implementation process would still be employed at the institution and able to recount their experiences in greater detail. At the same

[17] List of past Title V grant abstracts by fiscal year: https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-special-populations/grants-hispanic-students/developing-hispanic-serving-institutions-program-title-v#past-awards

[18] The Title V program was first implemented in 1995 and was later reauthorized under the Higher Education Act in 2008. For this reason, I drew from all Title V grant competitions 2009 and later for consistency. I also limited my analysis to this timeframe because the only publicly available information on the ED website such as the maximum award amounts and awardees' proposal abstracts was recorded during this time frame when this study was conceptualized in 2022.

time, I had requested administrative data on Title V grant applicants from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) - HSI Division through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in February 2023. The request consisted of data on all Title V grant applicants between fiscal years 2009 and 2022, the outcome of their application (received the grant or not), the type of grant they applied for (individual development or cooperative agreement grant), and the principal investigator listed on the submitted application. When I ultimately received the FOIA requested data in April 2024, I focused on identifying institutions that had applied but *had not* receive a Title V grant in order to interview participants from institutions with varying levels of grant success.

My final sample consisted of 11 four-year institutions that were eligible and *applied* to a Title V grant at least once between fiscal years 2009 and 2022, as well as two external entities (see Table 4.2).[19] Of the institutions included, six were private, non-profit and five were public. Because I largely leveraged the grant abstracts of Title V recipients to identify participants, most of my sample consists of institutions that received a Title V grant between FY 2009 and 2022 (n=9). Of the nine institutions that received a Title V grant during the sample period, five institutions received the grant once and the remaining four received the grant twice.

Table 4.2 Institutional Profiles and Title V Grant Participation (FY2009 - FY2022)

Institution Pseudonym	Sector	# of times applied to Title V	# of times received Title V	Received an HSI STEM grant or PPOHA grant*
Universidad del Sur	Public, four-year	3	0	
Universidad del Sol	Public, four-year	5	2	
Universidad del Mar	Public, four-year	4	1	

[19] These external entities included the Department of Education and a consulting company that provides grant writing and evaluation support to Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the states and Puerto Rico.

Universidad de las Palmas	Public, four-year	6	1	
Universidad Central del Borikén	Public, four-year	6	2	
Universidad del Pueblo	Private, four-year	5	1	X
Universidad de Bosque	Private, four-year	6	1	
Universidad de Costa	Private, four-year	7	1	X
Universidad del Barrio	Private, four-year	8	1	X
Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Private, four-year	15	2	X
Universidad del Norte	Private, four-year	10	0	X
External organization	–	–	–	-

Note: The Hispanic-Serving Institutions Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics and Articulation (HSI STEM) Program is allocated through Title III, Part F to support activities related to STEM education and improving transfer pathways. The Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans Program (PPOHA) is allocated through Title V, Part B to expand or improve postbaccalaureate programs at HSIs.
Source: This table was constructed using FOIA requested administrative data on Title V applicants and publicly available Title V, PPOHA, and HSI grant abstracts from the Department of Education's HSI Division webpage: https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ope/hispanic-serving-institutions-division--home-page.

Participant Recruitment

From the 11 institutions selected, I identified participants that currently served or had previously served in roles that positioned them to have first-hand knowledge of the grant-seeking practices and priorities at their institution. Such participants included faculty, grant project directors, campus leadership, or administrators at external funding or sponsored research offices. Prior to receiving the FOIA requested administrative data from ED on Title V applicants, I identified participants by scanning institutional webpages for individuals employed in their institution's Sponsored Research Office or a related office. I also conducted searches via

LinkedIn and Google using the name of the grant-funded project listed in the grant abstract and the name of the institution to identify grant project directors or coordinators. After receiving the ED data, I used the list of principal investigators provided in the data to continue my outreach. I also identified individuals employed within external entities that served in an intermediary role, supporting the application and/or grant implementation processes at institutions in Puerto Rico using similar recruitment methods. Participants in these roles included grant writers and/or evaluators and grant program specialists. My final sample included 19 participants—17 of which worked at one of the 11 institutions sampled, one worked as a consultant for a grant writing and evaluation company, and one worked as a grant program specialist within the U.S. Department of Education (see Table 4.3)

Table 4.3 Participant Profiles

Participant Pseudonym	Institution Pseudonym	Current Role(s)	Identifies as Puerto Rican	Gender Identity
Amanda	External	Grant writer & evaluator	No, American	Woman
Iris	External	Grant program specialist	Yes	Woman
Marisa	Universidad del Pueblo	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
David	Universidad del Pueblo	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Man
Cecilia	Universidad del Sur	Grant administrator	Yes	Woman
Nicolas	Universidad del Mar	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Man
Elena	Universidad del Sol	Faculty, grant project director	No, Other Latina	Woman
Teresa	Universidad del Sol	Faculty, grants administrator	Yes	Woman
Miguel	Universidad del Norte	University president	Yes	Man
Nelly	Universidad de las Palmas	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman

Isabel	Universidad de las Palmas	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Maria	Universidad de Bosque	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
José	Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Man
Natalie	Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Carolina	Universidad del Barrio	Faculty, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Leticia	Universidad Central del Borikén	Administrator, grant project director	Yes	Woman
Sri	Universidad Central del Borikén	Faculty, grants administrator	No, Indian	Woman
Silvia	Universidad Central del Borikén	Faculty, grant project coordinator	Yes	Woman
Marcela	Universidad de Costa	Faculty, grant project director	No, Other Latina	Woman

After identifying potential participants, I invited them via email to participate in my study. All outreach emails were provided in both English and Spanish (see Appendix B). I also engaged in snowball sampling to improve credibility, build trust with potential participants, and increase the number of participants I spoke with at a given institution (see Sadler et al., 2010). Participants that expressed interested were given a short Qualtrics survey to complete, which included information such as whether they identified as Puerto Rican, gender identity, current role(s) and responsibilities, and prior experience applying for external grants. These data were gathered to help contextualize participants' perspectives and experiences during the interviews and in their responses. For example, gender identity was collected to acknowledge and make visible potential gendered patterns in participation as prior research indicates persisting disparities in federal grant access and experiences across gender (e.g., Hunt et al., 2012; Lauer & Roychowdhury, 2021). Identifying whether participants are Puerto Rican offers additional

context for understanding their relationship to Puerto Rico and the United States, as this may inform their responses in the interviews. Finally, questions about participants' current roles and prior grant experience were used to tailor interview questions and follow-up prompts to their specific institutional positions and experience with federal grants. The survey also included a consent form for participants to complete prior to the interview (Appendix C). All participants were provided the interview questions in advance in both English and Spanish (see Appendix D).[20] Interview questions were constructed in alignment with my conceptual framework and included questions surrounding the contexts and conditions of the institution (e.g., consequences of natural disasters, PROMESA Act), the grant-seeking infrastructure available at the institution (e.g., whether there was a grant office, how it was staffed), and participants' experiences with grant activities (e.g., gathering materials, processing purchase orders).

Data Collection

During the spring of 2024, I collected data from two sources: participant interviews and institutional documents. Participant interviews served as the primary data source while institutional documents (e.g., budgetary summaries, accreditation reports, external funding newsletters via institutional webpages) served to provide context for the interviews and were used for triangulation purposes. For public institutions, I additionally gathered the fiscal plan documents from the Fiscal Control Board website, which provided information on projected budget cuts to public institutions and external funding objectives.

I conducted in-person and virtual semi-structured interviews, depending on the preferences of the individual (8 were in-person, 11 were via Zoom). Interviews were approximately 60 to 90

[20] All materials (outreach email, interview protocol, consent form) were translated using services provided through the University of Michigan.

minutes in length and all participants were compensated with a $50 Amazon gift card for their time. Participants were instructed prior to the interview that the questions would be asked in English during the interview, but they could choose to respond in either English or Spanish.[21] Interviews were then translated using services provided through the University of Michigan.

Analytic Strategy

To analyze the data, I first employed an open-coding strategy in which I assigned initial words or phrases to the data using Dedoose qualitative software (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This strategy aligns with the objectives of CQI by allowing the interview data to generate initial themes without the limits of using preconceived codes that may obscure emerging patterns. During this process, I read through each transcript and simultaneously recorded words and phrases that captured both their experiences and perceptions of grant participation such as "process for gathering grant materials" and "bureaucratic." Then, I reviewed the list of open codes, refining and reorganizing the words and phrases and how they interacted with one another to create a preliminary codebook (Strauss & Corbin, 2005). In refining codes, I turned to my conceptual framework and research questions to form thematic categories, focusing predominantly on those related to administrative burdens.

In developing these codes, I used parent and child codes to help organize my data. For instance, under the parent code "learning costs," I included child codes such as "incorporating grant-specific language" or "learning about calls for proposals." I also coded for excerpts that described the grant-management infrastructure of the institution, which prior literature indicates is important for supporting grant activities. These included "external funds or sponsored research

[21] Most participants chose to conduct their interview in Spanglish (13), four chose to do so in English, and two in Spanish.

office," "pre-award personnel," or "grant-writer." I also recorded codes that reflected Puerto Rico's unique colonial contexts such as "English language," "geographic isolation," "oversight," and "biases." Throughout coding, I engaged in extensive memoing, taking note of any excerpts that did not fit within an existing code, including how I was understanding its meaning in relation to other codes, within the context of the transcript, and in tandem with my conceptual framework. Once the codes were labeled and applied to all 19 transcripts, I reviewed all codes for emerging patterns across participants and continued to refine my codebook until no new codes emerged.

Researcher Accountability

In alignment with CQI and an anti-colonial research agenda, I reflect on how my intersecting identities influence this work. I identify as a Mexicana and Boricua scholar who grew up in the continental United States. As part of the diaspora, I hold myself accountable for accurately representing Puerto Rico in my work in a way that respects the experiences and expertise of the administrators and educators in the archipelago. It is also important to acknowledge that I grew up with English as my native language and Spanish as my second language. Given that Spanish remains the dominant language in Puerto Rico, my level of Spanish fluency greatly shaped the way I navigated this study. During the academic year in which I collected my data (2023-24), I lived with family in Puerto Rico and enrolled in in-person Spanish courses at a local language school to improve my engagement with participants.

Cognizant of my positionality to this work, I engaged in multiple practices to ensure the trustworthiness of this study and its findings. First, I collected more than one form of data to triangulate my findings (see Patton, 1999). While this study focused on the qualitative data gathered from interviews, institutional data such as accreditation reports and budgetary

documents were also gathered to corroborate participant's responses. I further engaged in member checking in which I shared all transcribed materials with participants for their review (see McKim, 2023). During this time, participants could change, remove, or add any information they believed would more accurately capture their experiences. For participants that conducted their interview in Spanish or Spanglish, they were provided the interview transcripts in both Spanish (or Spanglish) and in English so that they may review the translated script and make any necessary changes to improve its authenticity.

Limitations

The limitations of this study generally concern sampling and interview accessibility. First, due to delays in obtaining FOIA-requested administrative data from ED, I relied on publicly available Title V grant abstracts to select sites. As a result, the sample overrepresents institutions that successfully secured Title V funding between 2009 and 2022. Consequently, the findings may reflect the experiences of faculty and administrators at institutions with comparatively stronger grant-seeking infrastructures or greater institutional prioritization of external funding.

Second, bureaucratic and regulatory barriers in IRB practices in Puerto Rico made it challenging to secure participation. Despite securing IRB approval from my home institution, I was asked to complete separate approvals for each campus. In consultation with a senior local administrator employed at Puerto Rican campus, I learned these policies are often rooted in responses to colonial narratives of corruption and heightened scrutiny from federal agencies and accreditors. To comply with these regulations, I sought IRB approval from each institution in my sample and communicated directly with their IRB administrators. However, differences in IRB classifications and procedures between my home institution and those in Puerto Rico prevented

my completion of their IRB paperwork. As a result, my local connection advised that I proceed using my home institution's IRB approval, while ensuring transparency about risks, benefits, and confidentiality protections were communicated to participants throughout recruitment. I also employed snowball sampling to build trust and expand participation. Still, some individuals were precluded from participating due to these institutional constraints, which may have resulted in a sample more willing to navigate or defy bureaucratic barriers.

Finally, while I possess intermediate Spanish proficiency, I conducted interviews in English to ensure clarity in question delivery. This may have dissuaded some potential participants from opting into the study or influenced their responses. To mitigate this, I provided all recruitment and consent materials in both Spanish and English, emphasized that participants could respond in the language of their choice, and reiterated this at the beginning of each interview. I also communicated my comfort with receiving responses in Spanish to encourage participants to use the language they preferred.

Findings

The findings from this study summarize the challenges that institutions in Puerto Rico encounter in federal grant programs and how their unique context informs these challenges. I identified three key themes that detailed the barriers faculty and administrators at institutions in Puerto Rico encounter when preparing a competitive grant application: *Grant Knowledge and Experience as Credential, Reproduction of Colonial Bureaucracies in Institutional Processes,* and *English as Linguistic Colonialism*. To recount the experiences articulated in the interviews, I use pseudonyms to refer to participants and their institutions.

Grant Knowledge and Experience as Credential

Most participants (n=16, 84%) described prior experience and general grant knowledge as a necessary tool to be successful in competitive grant programs. This is because most institutions in Puerto Rico do not have a robust infrastructure to support the preparation and implementation of federal grants. In fact, nearly all (n=18, 95%) participants described the offices and individuals involved in the grant-seeking and implementation process at their institution as understaffed and overburdened. While 10 of the 11 institutions had an external resources or sponsored programs office to coordinate between faculty, leadership, and federal agencies, only four had dedicated pre-award staff, and just five regularly employed grant writers to support with preparing grant-materials (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Institutional Infrastructure for Supporting Grant Activities

Institution Pseudonym	Sector	Has an external resource or sponsored programs office	Has a "pre-award" official to support grant applications	Regularly employs grant-writers (for institutional grants)
Universidad del Sur	Public, four-year	Yes	No	No
Universidad del Sol	Public, four-year	Yes	Yes*	No
Universidad del Mar	Public, four-year	Yes	Yes	No
Universidad de las Palmas	Public, four-year	Yes	No	No
Universidad Central del Borikén	Public, four-year	Yes	No	Yes
Universidad del Pueblo	Private, four-year	Yes	No	Yes
Universidad de Bosque	Private, four-year	No	No	Yes
Universidad de Costa	Private, four-year	Yes	Yes	No

Universidad del Barrio	Private, four-year	Yes	No	No
Universidad de la Isla Borinquen	Private, four-year	Yes	No	Yes
Universidad del Norte	Private, four-year	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Universidad del Sur allocates 3 credits of release time to a faculty member to support "pre-award" activities

Iris, a grant program specialist for the U.S. Department of Education (ED), argued that the ability of institutions in Puerto Rico to secure these types of "key" personnel is vital for preparing a competitive Title V grant application:

> It's very critical to have a good grant writer. And for some of these institutions [in Puerto Rico], [they] don't have or have a very small office of sponsored research…Really getting that key person or persons to be able to submit a competitive proposal…has been a challenge…Based on the number of grants that we have been making in Puerto Rico, I think that that's something that the higher education community over there is getting better at. However, if you look across the board and you just crunch the numbers, like what percentage of [institutions] in Puerto Rico are actually getting grants. The need is much greater than the applications that are being funded.

Iris's reflections underscore the mismatch between institutional need and program design. Although Title V is intended to support under-resourced institutions, its competitive format favors those already equipped with specialized staff (e.g., grant writers, pre-award personnel) and a level of administrative capacity that many institutions in Puerto Rico have been unable to maintain under years of fiscal austerity.

Without a robust grant-seeking infrastructure and support staff, several participants (n=13, 68%) explained that the responsibility of preparing a competitive application largely "depend[ed] on the initiative of the professors (Teresa, Nicolas, Leticia)." While all participants

had prior grant-writing or management experience, the extent of this experience varied, shaping how they navigated the demands of the grant process. Silvia, a faculty member and grant project director at Universidad Central del Borikén, noted that the faculty at her institution do not have sufficient grant-writing experience, which makes it challenging to navigate how to write a compelling proposal:

> I will say that [the biggest challenge is] we don't know how to write [a grant proposal]...The government gives a lot of webinars and everything. [But the reason] why we don't receive more grants here is because [our proposals] don't say what [they're] supposed to say.

This sentiment is echoed by Marcela, a faculty member and grant project director at Universidad de Costa, who was recently awarded two HSI grants from ED following multiple unsuccessful applications. Marcela described grant proposal writing as having "a special language" and "a special structure." She argued that "the language can be ambiguous if you're not an expert in writing those grants [Title V]." After successfully being awarded both a Title V and PPOHA[22] grant, she came to understand the extent to which these grant programs act as gatekeepers for inexperienced faculty:

> At some point [I recognized that] this is like a little club that you need to know how to get into. Once you get into it, [it] gets a little bit easier, and the language becomes more familiar. You can take more advantage of the webinars they offer, the information that is available…Once you [get a grant], you discover all this sea of help or support [that] you have…[but] if you're inexperienced it's very hard to get that support.

[22] PPOHA stands for the Promoting Post-Baccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans program designed to support HSIs in areas that advance post-baccalaureate opportunities for Latinx students and expand programmatic offerings.

Together, Silvia and Marcela illustrate how limited grant-writing experience creates steep learning costs that can hinder success in competitive funding programs, which mirrors what was shared by other participants (n=16, 84%). Applicants need to know how to effectively align grant proposals with agency requirements and expectations (Silvia), while incorporating the type of specialized language and structure agencies are looking for (Marcela). Although grant programs like Title V often provide technical assistance and webinars to share information on grant requirements and criteria, Marcela explained that it was only after successfully securing a grant that she became aware of these tools. This suggests that access to competitive grants tends to advantage those who are already familiar with the system.

Participants (n=14, 74%) further explained that these learning barriers were compounded by high faculty workloads. Most institutions in Puerto Rico are teaching-focused, where faculty are expected to teach 15 credits or roughly five courses each semester. Even those at more research-oriented institutions reported high teaching loads of 12 credits (four courses) per semester. As Teresa (Universidad del Sol) remarked: "it is very hard [for faculty] to teach four classes and do all the things [they have to] do to write proposals." A few participants (n=6, 32%) also noted that their institutions did not offer release time for faculty to prepare grant applications, which often discouraged them from pursuing such opportunities. Teresa went on to explain that without these supports, many faculty at her institution "do not dare" apply because it is not worth the all the time and energy, adding that if obtaining external funds is to remain an institutional priority, the administration must "look for funds to really compensate the people who [apply for external grants]." Given the extensive teaching responsibilities and lack of institutional support, it is unsurprising that participants overwhelmingly cited lack of time (n=16, 84%) as a key obstacle to pursuing these funds.

These time constraints were further exacerbated by federal timelines in proposal submissions. Participants reported (n=12, 63%) that the limited time between a call for proposals and the submission deadline made it challenging to prepare competitive, high-quality applications, as Natalie, a faculty member at Universidad de la Isla Borinquen, noted:

> The biggest challenge here is time. We don't have time to do all this stuff…And some of it has to do with the deadlines too…for the U.S Department of Education, they'll give you a month and [then] ask for a 50-page proposal. That's a lot for a month.

Although Natalie specifically referred to the length of the application to describe the demands of the proposal, other participants added (n=15, 80%) that the content required in these applications (e.g., comprehensive development plan, logic models, collecting institutional data, preparing construction plans) was nearly impossible to prepare within the time allotted. This challenge was especially acute for those proposing renovation or construction projects. Teresa at Universidad del Sol, who was drafting a PPOHA proposal at the time of our interview, described how unrealistic these proposal deadlines were for projects involving renovations:

> I think the most difficult thing really is the timeline. These types of projects usually have construction funds, [but] it is difficult for an engineer to prepare a [construction] plan for you in a month, you know? That's very difficult…But doing the construction is important [for our institution] to be able to use the funds [for]…right now, I'm going to submit a [construction] design [in the proposal], but I don't really have the complete plans, the architectural plans. I have an idea, so I'm going to submit with that.

Taken together, these accounts reveal how administrative burdens are multi-layered and compounding. Limited institutional resources constrain the ability of universities to provide faculty with the time, support, and infrastructure needed to develop competitive proposals, while strict submission windows imposed by federal agencies intensify the workload required to meet

proposal requirements. As faculty attempt to manage these demands within already overextended schedules, they face overlapping compliance and psychological costs, spending significant time gathering necessary documentation and materials while simultaneously feeling a loss of control (agency) over the process.

Although most participants struggled under these time constraints, those who possessed more robust experience and knowledge of the grant process drew on this insight to mitigate some of the administrative burdens that arose in the grant-writing process (n=4, 21%). For instance, Natalie emphasized the importance of developing credential with agencies, explaining that building a track record with a given agency can improve one's chances of success. She noted that "if an agency already know[s] you, it gets easier," and advised that it's more strategic to apply to agencies that one already has an existing relationship with. As supported in other studies, this type of rapport-building can mitigate learning costs by helping applicants better understand the key language and buzzwords agencies are looking for (see Rankins, 2017).

While Natalie focused on relationship-building with federal agencies as a strategy to reduce time-related pressures and learning costs, Carolina (grant project director, Universidad del Barrio) highlighted the importance of preparing grant proposals well in advance of the official call:

> I usually start planning for these types of [grants], if I can, basically six months in advance…in the case of Title V, I have people here that somehow know when it's coming out…[and] in the case of NSF and NIH, they have everything written with the [deadlines] for 2026 …So you can plan and say, 'I will run for this grant, for this proposal in 2025, and it's due in January 2026.' You can plan ahead of time. So, that's usually what I do.

Carolina further explained that because of her background as a dean at her university, she felt very well-connected and knew "who to call and who to ask" when she needed to gather

information for the proposal. This emphasis on advance planning was echoed by Nelly, a faculty member and project director at Universidad de las Palmas, who argued that waiting for the formal invitation to be released puts institutions at a disadvantage. This is particularly true for institutional grants like Title V that require "buy-in" from campus leadership. Instead, she stressed that faculty must begin drafting their proposals early, scheduling meetings with administrators and securing institutional support before the guidelines are even released. That way, once the call is issued, only minor adjustments are needed to align the proposal with updated grant priorities. Together, Carolina and Nelly demonstrate how insider knowledge can lessen administrative burdens by restoring a degree of agency over a process otherwise defined by rigid timelines and complex requirements. By planning ahead and leveraging institutional networks, experienced faculty can (1) minimize learning costs by anticipating proposal requirements, (2) reduce compliance costs by avoiding institutional bottlenecks, and (3) alleviate psychological costs (e.g., stress) through greater control over the grant-writing process.

The value of having prior grant knowledge and experiences becomes even more pronounced when situated within Puerto Rico's broader colonial context. As the next two sections will demonstrate, institutions in Puerto Rico face added structural hurdles that extend past under-resourced grant offices and high faculty workloads. These include bureaucratic inefficiencies embedded in Puerto Rico's colonial status and the gatekeeping function that English plays in federal grant programs. In this sense, while prior grant experience is beneficial across many underfunded MSIs, it becomes an essential tool for navigating federal grants in contexts shaped by colonial governance structures.

Reproduction of Colonial Bureaucracies in Institutional Processes

Puerto Rico's postsecondary system operates under conditions of limited autonomy and heightened oversight, which are products of its colonial relationship with the United States. The bureaucratic structures imposed through federal mechanisms like PROMESA or non-governmental organizations such as accrediting agencies extend beyond governance or quality assurance into the internal operations of postsecondary institutions, often manifesting as additional layers of red tape. This dynamic, what studies describe as overcompliance, refers to the ways institutions under intense surveillance adopt even more stringent internal controls to avoid the appearance of mismanagement or noncompliance (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). Within this context, many participants (n=17, 89%) described their institutions' grant-seeking processes as reproducing the very bureaucracies that are embedded in colonial systems of governance, generating significant compliance costs for faculty and staff. José, a faculty member and grant project director at Universidad de la Isla Borinquen, provides a good example of this, expressing at length all the forms of approval faculty need before they can submit their grant proposal:

> Either you find [the grant yourself] or the external resource office sends you a link…Then, you go to the department head, in this case, our director. You discuss it with [them] and [they] give you the thumbs up. Then, you have to do a summary, a mini proposal of the grant [and] present it to the academic dean, and then to the vice chancellor. If they agree, then [it is shared with] the external fund office. If they agree and they see that there are more benefits than costs, then they give you the heads-up and you start writing the proposal. After you write the proposal, before you send it, they have to approve it again, and the president has to see it. It's a long process.

José added that his institution's excessive compliance requirements often prevented faculty from submitting proposals before agency deadlines. In the past year alone, he lost four grant opportunities because university leaders did not review his proposals in time to approve submission. José also noted that his prior grant-writing experience and familiarity with these

internal delays gave him confidence to push back against administrators to advocate for his projects. While this barrier has not deterred him from continuing to apply, he acknowledged that colleagues with less experience might forego such opportunities.

Participants further described that the inefficiencies and delays they experienced during the grant-writing stage persisted throughout the entirety of the grant cycle, specifically in implementing their grant-funded projects. This was particularly the case for institutional grants like Title V, which require sustained administrative support. One of the most salient implementation challenges across institutions concerned the excessive administrative processes involved with using Title V funding on renovation or construction related projects, even though such projects are critical for addressing long-standing infrastructure needs (see GAO, 2024). In fact, nearly all the participants in my sample described the importance of using Title V for construction-related purposes (n=17, 89%). Iris, a program specialist familiar with these projects, noted that "most of our grants are…renovating something, they're refurbishing [an institution's] library, they're redoing [an institution's] lab," but administrative delays can often obstruct implementation. She explained:

> When [institutions in Puerto Rico are] doing construction especially, or renovations, getting permits from the corresponding government authorities, like the construction permit, or if they have to go through an architectural review—oh my goodness—it takes forever and a day. It puts them behind on their work, which means the money is sitting in their account, which means that they have a large available balance, which has other repercussions. So again, working through the bureaucracy and the red tape on some of these things.

These procedural hurdles create added compliance costs that can slow or jeopardize project goals, particularly when institutions are held accountable for delays outside their control. Large unobligated balances can signal to federal agencies that projects are mismanaged or stagnating,

which may prompt additional layers of oversight. While Iris explained that this type of red tape occurs across HSIs, in her experience, they are particularly pronounced for those in Puerto Rico.

Participants (n=7, 37%) also pointed to the geographic constraints specific to Puerto Rico. As an archipelago, institutions face inflated costs and limited access to vendors as a byproduct of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, which restricts trade within the U.S. Elena, a Title V project director at Universidad del Sol, described how logistical challenges, limited inventory, and shipping constraints significantly increased her operational costs and created basic delays in procurement:

> With the new cost in the market… and the problem with inventory, sometimes you can't execute all your tasks in the time that you planned…These things increase the kind of hard work we need to do and the time we need to invest to spend the money… because we are an island, we have limitations in inventory and accessibility to building companies.

These delays require faculty to provide additional justification to federal agencies for rising costs and extensions to their project timelines. As Elena later suggested, "[we need to] extend the time for these kinds of grants because [of] the situation in Puerto Rico… [we have] a lot of limitations that the States don't have." Together, these accounts illustrate how the compliance costs that arise in grant implementation are shaped by Puerto Rico's colonial context and geographic isolation, where projects are slowed by administrative red tape, logistical hurdles, and the continual need to explain why their realities do not align with the norms that are set by institutions in the States.

Of the participants at public institutions (n=9), most (n=7, 78%) attributed the administrative inefficiencies they encountered when implementing grant activities as specific to their status as a public institution. Puerto Rico's public postsecondary system is highly

politicized in that each change in the governing party often brings a new slate of university leaders, producing administrative turnovers as frequently as every four years. This creates the need for grant project directors at these institutions to repeatedly attain institutional buy-in from incoming leadership to justify any current or future grant projects. Leticia, a Title V director at Universidad Central del Borikén, shared that since 2020, her institution has cycled through two chancellors, six academic affairs deans, and two administrative affairs deans. This instability, she explained, made it difficult to maintain consistent support: "each time that a new person is hired [she] has to go to that person [and] explain the project again to receive their support." Her colleague Sri, who works in the external resources office, added that this ongoing leadership turnover discourages faculty from applying for grants at all.

Moreover, studies have shown that public universities in Puerto Rico experience greater levels bureaucratic oversight by the federal government and accreditation agencies (see Seltzer, 2019; Sewall, 2010). Nicolas, Title V grant director at Universidad del Mar, described the extent of this oversight when purchasing equipment for his Title V project:

> If I wanted to buy a pencil, I had to write 10 letters justifying why the pencil…the university has a lot of processes in place to make sure everything's done right, but [for] all these federal agencies [it] has to be quick. I don't have six months to get a pencil.

As Nicolas indicated, the extensive rationale required by his institution functions as a form of overcompliance making it challenging to bring his grant project's goals to fruition. These extra hurdles also substantially delay his project timeline. Although it is common for project delays to occur when implementing federal grants, recurrent impediments that inhibit the grant's core objectives may dissuade agencies from funding future proposals. This was further expressed by Elena, a faculty member and project director at Universidad del Sol, who works at a public institution in the same university system as Nicolas. She asserted that the PROMESA Act has

only exacerbated issues of overcompliance, leading to stricter documentation, which prompts many vendors to not want to provide services to her institution:

> Because [of] PROMESA it's so hard to produce a purchase order…because we need to have a lot of documentation...It's almost impossible to find vendors that provide us a service because we need to process a payment not two weeks, but two months, three months [beforehand]. Nobody wants to sell to [our university system] or be a good vendor for us because [of] corruption… we need to follow the laws and the rules that PROMESA has.

The PROMESA Act was purportedly established to help Puerto Rico restructure its debt and regain fiscal stability. However, this legislation has served to rearticulate the United States' authority over Puerto Rico by embedding colonial bureaucracies into everyday practices. It has also heightened public scrutiny of Puerto Rico's governance, evidenced by institutions' difficulty securing vendors. The austerity measures public universities are held to by PROMESA is subsequently reproduced in the extensive oversight and documentation faculty experience within their own university's practices as articulated by Nicolas and Elena.

English as Linguistic Colonialism

Finally, several participants (n=11, 58%) identified language as a challenge in the grant-seeking process. Although English is a co-official language in Puerto Rico and taught as a compulsory subject throughout K–12 education (Mari & Carroll, 2021), proficiency and comfort with the language varies widely. Yet, Iris explains that in the U.S. Department of Education (ED) "all of [the agency's] documents, including [it's] grant funding documents, everything is in English." This creates a unique layer of compliance for institutions in Puerto Rico that, unlike those in the States, English is *not* the primary language of daily operations or conversation. Cecilia, a grant administrator at Universidad del Sur, emphasized that while her office manages

documents in English, the language barrier remains significant. She argues that ED has a responsibility to help institutions in Puerto Rico navigate these linguistic barriers:

> I think that the Department of Education has to have people that speak Spanish that can address our concerns in Spanish, because every webinar, everything, is in English, and I get it, you know we get it, but that is not our first language. We are trying our best to write a proposal in English and everything. But here in Puerto Rico we don't speak English like never, *never*. And here in the office I manage everything in English. We manage all the documents and all, but I think the language is difficult for us since we don't speak English all the time.

Cecilia's reflection shows how language functions as an added burden, much like the bureaucratic hurdles discussed earlier, that are specific to Puerto Rico's context. Although institutions in Puerto Rico must use English to comply with federal grant requirements, it is not the language of everyday communication, making these grant-related tasks more cognitively demanding. As a result, learning costs such as interpreting federal grant instructions or crafting compelling narratives are intensified, which can compound the stress of pursuing grants or increase the risk of errors. Moreover, readily available resources provided by ED such as webinars are also administered in English, which can negate the usefulness of such services in ameliorating learning costs in the same ways that they may do for institutions in the States.

A few participants (n=3, 16%), including José, a project director at Universidad de la Isla Borinquen, noted that not all grants present the same linguistic challenges. José describes technical grants (e.g., NSF) as being more straightforward to write, while narrative-driven proposals (e.g., NIH, Title V) were more difficult due to their more elaborate prose:

> For NSF you can use more technical language… But NIH, it's more poetic. It's more flowery. NIH and Title V, for example, take into consideration a lot of social aspects,

> psychological aspects… my principal roadblock is that it's in English, so I have to get into that mindset to write in English.

José's reflection underscores that narrative-heavy grants, like Title V, may demand a more nuanced level of fluency to connect grant objectives with the broader mission and goals of the institution. These variations in grant structure or content may influence who applies and which opportunities feel within reach, warranting closer attention to how different grant formats produce burdens depending on one's level English-language fluency.

Participants further expressed concern that, while English fluency is not formally scored in grant criteria, it nevertheless functions as an informal signal of both proposal quality and the perceived worthiness of the applicant (n=8, 42%). Marisa, a faculty member and project director at Universidad del Pueblo, explained how she believed that agencies may implicitly use English fluency as a proxy for a project's likelihood of success:

> I know that my English is not on par with more fluent, well-read people who have been educated from the beginning in their English language. I can write [in English] …[But] when we have to talk about those introductions, motivations [in the grant proposal], that's where it gets harder…[the agency might] see that this is written so poorly, [and they] might believe that it's going to be faulty in some ways because the person cannot write as nicely…And then the whole thing may just be poorly evaluated.

Although Marisa can speak and write in English, she believes native fluency is still implicitly valued by agencies, where minor grammar or spelling errors may be conflated with her ability to execute her proposed project, rather than a product of writing in a second language. This is further supported by Nicolas, a faculty member and grant project manager at Universidad del Mar, who explained that the faculty who had spent considerable amounts of time in the States attending college or working were more likely to be successful in grant competitions because

they had more immersion into the English language. These examples illustrate how English fluency serves as a form of informal gatekeeping and a marker of legitimacy in grant programs, which can lead to a sense of discouragement and self-doubt.

In response to the linguistic burdens that arise in pursuing federal grants, several participants (n=11, 58%) described that faculty with limited English-fluency will often seek language-specific supports to improve their competitiveness. Some participants (n=5, 26%) described how their institution will often reach out to English faculty to have them read through proposals and double check grammar and syntax before anything gets submitted. Although these in-house supports can help reduce burden and fix errors, they require additional time and labor that is rarely compensated. Others (n=9, 47%) turned to external consultants to improve their competitiveness and mitigate linguistic costs. Amanda, a grant writer and evaluation consultant often employed by institutions in Puerto Rico, pointed to how consultants like herself are filling a language gap that should not exist in the first place. Amanda recounted a situation in which a Puerto Rican faculty member reached out to a grant program specialist for clarification on the application process. However, the specialist's use of English colloquialisms was so opaque it led to misinterpretations:

> The program officer said something that the person that I was working with from Puerto Rico, so fundamentally misunderstood…It was almost a figure of speech…I realized if I wasn't sitting here they would not understand that they're being asked for X, and they're trying to deliver Y…And then I realized that that made me a key to their success and that's not how that should go. They should be able to have a conversation with a program officer without someone to interpret the figures of speech and the jargon.

The fact that Amanda became a "key to their success" by interpreting English jargon illustrates how these types of federal resources can become linguistically gated. One participant even

described that some faculty avoid interacting with grant specialists altogether because of the language barrier, which can hinder the type of support they can get from agencies throughout the grant cycle. It is also important to recognize that while it can be an effective strategy to employ grant writers, it is extremely costly and does not guarantee the success of a proposal.

While participants recognized English as a standard requirement in federal grant programs, they viewed its consequences as part of a broader pattern of exclusion shaped by Puerto Rico's sociopolitical context as a colony of the United States. Carolina, a faculty member and project director at Universidad del Barrio, illustrated this:

> I think [the challenges we experience in writing grants] are mostly a product of us being a territory of the United States, our political situation in relation to the United States and all the baggage that comes with racism…we are basically second-hand U.S. citizens…It is part of our story, our colonial history, and our political history. That's one of the things that I will try to do in the next proposal that I write [write about Puerto Rico in an asset-based language] because it's something that has to happen [for the agency] to see the value of our students and the people of Puerto Rico in the States.

Several participants (n=8, 42%) emphasized the visibility of Puerto Rico's colonial status in the pursuit and management of federal grants, while also acknowledging their limited power to alter these conditions. This is illustrated by both Carolina and Cecilia. Carolina spoke of reframing her proposals in asset-based language to counter deficit views of Puerto Rico, while Cecilia pushed for the Department of Education to offer more bilingual support to make the process of pursuing grants more navigable. Other participants brought in English professors or grant-writers as attempt to offset the costs of their linguistic mismatch altogether, yet these too came with added costs (money and time). Together, these accounts show how federal grant programs reproduce colonial dynamics by shifting the burden on faculty and administrators in Puerto, who must devise individual strategies to navigate structural barriers beyond their control.

Discussion

My conceptual framework suggests that in colonial systems such as the United States, both the concentration of resources and the terms of their distribution operate as mechanisms of imperial control. Resource scarcity becomes a deliberate outcome of colonial design imposed to undermine autonomy and tether institutions' financial viability to federal priorities. Within this context, administrative burdens in competitive grant programs function as instruments of imperial policymaking, by superimposing the norms and contexts of stateside institutions onto those in Puerto Rico, even within race-conscious programs like Title V. These "standardized" requirements add additional layers of burden for Puerto Rican faculty and administrators yet can be dismissed as routine features of federal grantmaking. The findings from this study illustrate how these dynamics play out in practice. Drawing on interviews with 19 institutional actors and grant professionals across 11 public and private institutions in Puerto Rico and two external entities, the findings highlight three interrelated themes: grant knowledge and experience as credential, reproduction of colonial bureaucracies in institutional processes, and English as linguistic colonialism.

In particular, prior grant knowledge emerged in the interviews as a critical resource for navigating the technical demands of grant competitions—as widely documented in prior research (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Escobar et al., 2023; Rankins, 2017). Prior scholarship has emphasized the value of institutional supports (e.g., sponsored research offices, grant writers) in reducing the burdens associated with pursuing and managing grants (Aguilar-Smith, 2022; Escobar et al., 2023; Rankins, 2017). However, in their absence, grant knowledge becomes indispensable for navigating federal programs and securing funding. In this study, participants explained that grant proposals require specialized language and structure that are not always clearly defined, making it hard to align proposals with agency expectations. And although agencies offer webinars and

technical assistance, navigating this “sea of support” is difficult for newcomers without the time or support structures to seek them out. These conditions left less experienced faculty struggling to learn the nuances of grant writing and comply with agency requirements under tight deadlines, while more experienced faculty were able to anticipate requirements, tap into networks, and prepare months in advance.

The importance of prior knowledge is further underscored in contexts of colonial oversight and hyper surveillance, where institutions will be more likely to adopt stricter internal processes and documentation to avoid additional scrutiny (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). Under these conditions, prior grant knowledge could be especially impactful for anticipating administrative bottlenecks and navigating delays more effectively. In this regard, my study found that both private and public institutions imposed additional layers of internal approval and paperwork before proposals could move forward, which made it more difficult for faculty to meet agency deadlines. For the public sector, these compliance costs seemed to become even more pronounced due to their ties to local politics and the fiscal control they are subjected to under the PROMESA Act. Participants noted that leadership turnover following changes in political administration frequently slowed decision-making and complicated efforts to secure institutional approvals. And under PROMESA, FOMB imposed additional requirements and justifications that made it challenging for faculty and staff to pursue funds and bring grant projects to fruition, especially those involving construction or renovation. Renovation projects often became stalled for months, leaving funds unspent which can affect future funding opportunities and reinforce perceptions of financial mismanagement.

Alongside these structural and logistical barriers, faculty and administrators in Puerto Rico also confronted the added challenge of having to navigate grant materials in English. My

findings illustrate that while faculty felt accustomed to engaging with documents in English, they rarely use the English language in everyday speech. Consequently, faculty expressed concern that small grammatical or syntactic errors could negatively shape reviewers' assessments of their competence. This perceived bias carried an emotional toll, a pattern consistent with Haynes' (2022) findings. It reinforced the sense that faculty were competing on unequal terms and magnified the burdens of an already demanding grant process. Importantly, these challenges extended beyond proposal writing itself. Some participants noted that faculty with limited English proficiency were reluctant to contact federal agencies with questions, which effectively precluded them from accessing support and magnified learning costs. Several others depended on English faculty or external grant writers to help review and edit grant materials, labor that was either uncompensated or required additional financial investment. These dynamics illustrate how the centrality of English in federal grants serves as an added form of compliance for universities in Puerto Rico, effectively requiring that applicants have a certain level of English fluency or have the financial and organization bandwidth to employ grant-writers or bring in English faculty.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study are especially urgent within the current policy landscape. In June 2025, Tennessee sued the U.S. Department of Education (ED), claiming that the 25 percent Latinx enrollment threshold used to identify Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) was unconstitutional (Weissman, 2025). A few months later, after the Department of Justice declined to defend the HSI designation, Education Secretary Linda McMahon ended all discretionary funding for HSIs and other enrollment-based Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) within ED (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This decision carries far-reaching consequences for

colleges and universities in Puerto Rico and across the United States, threatening the viability of federal grants as a means to strengthen institutional operations and long-standing financial disparities (Santiago, 2025). The Title V program has long represented one of the few hard fought federal funding streams aimed at mitigating the chronic underfunding of institutions that disproportionately educate racially minoritized students (Valdez, 2013). In these programs, universities in Puerto Rico could compete against a smaller pool of similarly under-resourced campuses rather than the resource-rich institutions that dominate most federal grant competitions (Hillman et al., 2024). Yet even within this relatively equitable structure, this study revealed that universities in Puerto Rico faced compounded barriers in both accessing and managing grant funding. The elimination of Title V will now force these institutions to compete in broader, resource-intensive grant arenas where these existing obstacles will likely amplify, further constraining their ability to sustain basic operations and pursue long-term institutional growth.

Addressing these challenges within the evolving policy environment will require coordinated efforts, beginning at the federal level. To mitigate the financial instabilities of these cuts, ED, along with other agencies, should strengthen their existing capacity-building grant programs or establish new ones that focus on supporting institutions with the most constrained financial resources—metrics could include endowment levels, expenditures per student, cash flow analyses, among others (see Kelchen et al., 2024; Sokol, 2025). Programs like NIH's Institutional Development Award (IDeA)[23] provide useful models for building research capacity in regions that historically receive limited NIH funding like Puerto Rico and includes support for developing future grant applications. However, most existing capacity-building programs are still

[23] National Institute of Health Institutional Development Award (IDeA): https://www.nigms.nih.gov/Research/DRCB/IDeA/Pages/default

awarded on a competitive basis, which, as this study suggests, disadvantages institutions with fewer administrative resources. To close this gap, federal agencies should supplement these programs with short-term, noncompetitive planning grants (one to two years in duration) to support institutions in growing their fiscal and staffing capacity to apply (see Santiago & Martinez, 2021). These funds could be used to hire grant writers, enhance data infrastructure, or develop institutional research plans that improve competitiveness in future cycles. Agencies should also expand their translation, applicant-assistance, and technical-support services to reduce linguistic barriers that disproportionately affect applicants from Puerto Rico. Expanding these resources could help institutions redirect limited administrative capacity toward strengthening their programs and infrastructure rather than spending scarce funds on external consultants for translation support.

Beyond federal action, philanthropy represents another potential avenue for institutional support, though its reach in Puerto Rico has historically been limited. Like competitive federal grant programs, philanthropic funding follows funder-driven priorities and tends to favor institutions with stronger administrative infrastructures (Capone, 2023; Drezner, 2025). Consequently, aside from post-Maria relief efforts, philanthropy has played only a modest role in supporting higher education on the archipelago (Argilagos et al., 2018; Polanco, 2025). Nevertheless, the current moment, marked by widespread mobilization against the termination of MSI programs, presents an opportunity for advocacy organizations, philanthropic entities, and university consortia to coordinate more intentionally. National organizations like *Excelencia* in Education and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) could leverage their existing networks to cultivate partnerships between major funders and universities in Puerto Rico. For example, *Excelencia's* ongoing engagement with large philanthropic networks

interested in supporting Latinx student success could be leveraged to facilitate targeted discussions on institutional recovery and capacity building in Puerto Rico. Increased participation by universities in Puerto Rico in *Excelencia's* E-Action network[24] and in HACU's membership[25] could amplify their visibility and inclusion in these funding conversations.

Finally, universities in Puerto Rico must also take proactive steps to strengthen their internal grant infrastructures to increase their competitiveness in federal grant competitions. Although meaningful progress will be limited without broader financial relief or the restoration of MSI funding, several actions can still improve preparedness. University leadership should begin by conducting comprehensive assessments of their pre- and post-award processes and take measure of the current structures and resources they have in place to support securing and managing grants. Doing so will allow campus leaders to identify areas for improvement (e.g., procedural bottlenecks). As resources become available, institutions should prioritize filling critical grants administration and finance positions as studies, including this one, have shown that these personnel are critical in supporting grant activities across the grant cycle (e.g., Gant et al., 2024; Leyland et al., 2020). Institutions could also develop concise internal grant guides summarizing agency deadlines, program contacts, and upcoming webinars to lower informational barriers. In light of my findings the extensive bureaucratic hurdles involved in construction-related grant activities, universities may benefit from establishing long-term vendor partnerships (see Connors, 2021) that can streamline compliance processes and mitigate implementation delays. Where feasible, universities might explore collaborative funding models,

[24] *Excelencia* in Action (E-Action) network is a group of university presidents, chancellors, and program leaders committed to transforming their campuses to better serve Latinx, and all, students. https://www.edexcelencia.org/leadership/excelencia-in-action

[25] HACU's membership is comprised of higher education institutions (HSIs and non-HSIs), as well as organizations, corporations, and individuals committed to supporting students at HSIs and emerging HSIs. https://hacu.net/membership/

such as a local higher-education grant consortium modeled on California State University's HSI Equity Innovation Hub[26] or expand existing intermediaries like Ciencia PR[27] to coordinate cross-campus training and technical assistance.

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges that Puerto Rican faculty and administrators experience when applying for and implementing competitive grant funding, specifically Title V grants. Drawing on interviews with 17 institutional actors, an external grant writing and evaluation consultant, and a grant program specialist from the U.S. Department of Education, my study identified three overarching barriers that limit universities' ability to secure and manage these awards. These included (1) inadequate infrastructure and specialized personnel to support grant activities coupled with faculty's limited grant experience; (2) bureaucratic procedures and processes within universities that are exacerbated by the PROMESA Act and Puerto Rico's geographic isolation; and (3) the linguistic challenges of navigating grant competitions in a second language (i.e., English). Given the recent termination of Title V and other MSI-targeted programs, future research should examine how universities in Puerto Rico navigate broader federal grant programs to identify context-specific barriers and potential supports. Understanding these dynamics is critical for informing federal policies that continue to marginalize institutions in Puerto Rico within U.S. postsecondary education.

[26] California State University's HSI Equity Hub is a public-private partnership between the California State System, state of California, and Apple: https://www.hsiequityinnovationhub.org/

[27] CienciaPR is a non-profit organization with a network of individuals across public and private universities in Puerto Rico and the United States: https://www.cienciapr.org/

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Conclusion

The field has long positioned Puerto Rico's postsecondary system at the margins of higher education research (Sansone & Hernandez, 2021), routinely excluding its institutions from the national datasets, empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and policy conversations that define higher education in the United States. Yet in this dissertation, I demonstrate how it is at these very margins where the deeper challenges of our nation's postsecondary system become most visible. My work grapples with what dominant higher education theories miss when they fail to account for the colonial conditions that produce fiscal precarity; what becomes visible when disaster recovery and capacity-building at universities is examined within contexts of colonial oversight; and how our understanding of racial equity in federal grant programs shift when viewed through the barriers produced by colonial governance and exclusion. Across three interconnected studies, I broadly examined how colonial oversight and austerity shape institutional operations and access to resources at universities in Puerto Rico. In what follows, I outline the key findings from each study and their contributions to the field before describing areas for future research.

Key Findings and Contributions

In Chapter 2 (Paper 1), I theorize how Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States structures the material and political conditions that produce resource dependencies and limit university decision-making. Through an in-depth analysis of judicial and statutory law (e.g., Insular Cases, Foraker Act), fiscal policy (e.g., Operation Bootstrap), states of emergency (e.g.,

Hurricane Maria), and the postsecondary finance literature, I identify the structures through which scarcity is actively constructed and maintained within Puerto Rico's higher education system. Specifically, the framework shows how dependency emerges from two interconnected mechanisms: colonial exceptionalism (J. Atiles-Osoria, 2018, 2020), which allows the federal government to selectively apply constitutional rights and policymaking authority; and procedural vulnerability (Hsu et al., 2015), which describes how bureaucratic and administrative processes are strategically created, particularly during states of emergency, to obstruct access to critical resources and maintain racial-colonial hierarchies.

These mechanisms also illustrate why it is necessary to bridge this work with organizational theories commonly used in higher education research. Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) is frequently employed to explain how institutions respond to declining revenues by diversifying income streams (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), while administrative burdens scholarship illuminates the learning, compliance, and psychological costs individuals incur when navigating policies—particularly those tied to funding (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). While both theories contend with issues of power, they do so in relation to the concentration of resources and control over how various resources are distributed or made accessible. By placing colonial exceptionalism and procedural vulnerability in conversation with RDT and administrative burden theory, this framework pushes the field to recognize that resource dependence and organizational behavior in colonial contexts cannot be understood without attending to the racial-colonial systems that manufacture that dependence. It offers an anti-colonial approach for understanding institutional capacity-building and decision-making in U.S. territories and other contexts shaped by colonial power. For instance, this framework can be adapted to study higher education systems where sovereignty is constrained or where external fiscal control (e.g., international

financial institutions in postcolonial contexts) shapes the boundaries of institutional decision-making.

In Chapter 3 (Paper 2), I apply this framework to empirically analyze how recurrent crises and colonial austerity have constrained the operational capacity of universities in Puerto Rico and narrowed the financial management strategies available to them. Drawing on interviews with 17 participants across 11 public and private institutions, I found that these conditions have contributed to widespread infrastructure failure, instructional disruptions, intensified basic needs and mental health concerns, deep budget cuts, and sharp declines in student enrollment. My findings also illustrated the limits of emergency aid for mitigating crises when these formulas and distribution procedures are embedded in colonial assumptions rather than tailored to the needs of Puerto Rican students, faculty, and staff.

Within this context, participants described how their institution quickly employed cost-saving strategies to respond to the immediate budgetary pressures of these compounded events. These strategies included hiring and salary freezes, reductions in benefits, cutting student-facing activities, reducing available course sections, and administrative consolidations. Importantly, the findings reveal that for public institutions, these strategies were largely determined by the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) established through the PROMESA Act. This raises concerns over the effectiveness and longevity of measures mandated externally without the buy-in of students, faculty, and staff, or any grounding in the specific needs of campuses and their surrounding communities. To this point, many participants described these measures as producing operational inefficiencies and undermining the universities' role in providing quality and accessible educational opportunities. While all institutions in my sample supplemented these measures with revenue-generating strategies, many questioned their sustainability. This was

especially true for federal capacity-building grants like Title V and PPOHA, which participants described as playing an outsized role in sustaining operations. Yet the competitive, temporary nature of these programs limited long-term planning, and many feared their campuses could not maintain the activities once funding ended. Importantly, many noted that MSI-targeted grant programs, such as Title V, were the only funding opportunities perceived as realistically accessible due to broader perceptions that Puerto Rico is corrupt and prone to fiscal mismanagement. This study reveals how institutions in Puerto Rico rely on short-term cost-containment strategies and temporary federal resources to sustain operations, raising concerns about the potential of these strategies to provide the type of stable, long-term support needed to truly build capacity.

This study contributes to several strands of higher education research. First, it extends work on disasters and higher education, which has largely emphasized student outcomes or institutional preparedness (e.g., Alburo, 2025; Breen et al., 2023; Choudhury & Wu, 2023), by interrogating the (in)effectiveness of emergency disaster relief. Second, it builds upon scholarship analyzing the effects of colonial austerity and the PROMESA Act on Puerto Rican higher education (Brusi & Godreau, 2019, 2021; Martinez & Garcia, 2018; Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023) to examine how these structures of fiscal control collide with recurrent disasters to shape institutional financial strategies across campus sectors. Existing studies tend to only concentrate on public-sector austerity and cost-cutting (Brusi & Godreau, 2019, 2021; Rodríguez-Vargas & Collins, 2023), offering only a partial view of institutional responses in the archipelago, which this study addresses.

In Chapter 4 (Paper 3), I focus on a single strategy for generating revenue (i.e., federal grants) to explore the challenges that arise for universities in Puerto Rico in both securing and

implementing federal grants. Drawing from the experiences of 19 participants across 11 institutions, an external grant writing and consultant agency, and the U.S. Department of Education, this study focused on the ways in which limited institutional capacities and bureaucratic grant structures produce administrative burdens for Puerto Rican faculty and administrators. It further analyzes the extent to which these burdens are product of or exacerbated by Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States. My findings indicate that many participants navigated the complexities of federal grants largely on their own, often without the support of dedicated grant offices or skilled grant writers and administrative personnel. In the absence of these forms of support, inexperienced faculty struggled to prepare competitive grant applications whereas more experienced faculty with prior grant success were able to tap into the special networks and resources available to them. Once funded, faculty and administrators encountered significant bureaucratic demands internal and external to their institution, including institutional compliance requirements that strained limited time and staffing, as well as tight agency timelines and rigid FOMB oversight. Finally, participants also emphasized the difficulty of engaging with English-dominant grant systems, noting that critical documents, forms, and trainings were administered in English, which is not the dominant language spoken in Puerto Rico. This paper illustrates how administrative burdens can function as mechanisms of exclusion and reinforce colonial hierarchies by limiting equitable access to federal funding.

This study advances the literature on the administrative burdens that under-resourced institutions and MSIs experience when applying for and implementing competitive federal grant programs. The principal contribution of this study is its focus on universities in Puerto Rico. Specifically, this study builds off the work of Bernal and Ortiz-Torres (2009) who document

how limited infrastructure, heavy teaching loads, and weak institutional incentives inhibit grant success on the archipelago; and Haynes (2022) who illustrates how language, culture, and institutional support shape faculty self-efficacy in pursuing federal STEM grants. My study extends this work in three ways. First, it examines how administrative burdens unfold across the entire grant cycle from identifying opportunities and preparing proposals to navigating post-award implementation. Second, it contributes towards a more comprehensive view of these challenges by integrating perspectives from faculty, administrators, and institutional leadership across both public and private campuses, alongside the expertise of an external grant-writing and evaluation consultant and a grant program specialist. Finally, it extends both prior studies on Puerto Rico and the broader literature on competitive grant-seeking by situating these challenges within the archipelago's distinctive colonial context, including an examination of how the PROMESA Act has shaped federal grant participation.

Future Research

Taken together, the three studies in this dissertation open several pathways for future research that can deepen, refine, and extend our understanding of colonial governance, institutional capacity, and resource access in Puerto Rican higher education and similarly situated systems.

Developing and Empirically Applying the Framework: Paper 1

Future research should continue to develop and empirically apply the Resource Dependence by Design framework. The conceptual model in Chapter 2 (Paper 1) provides the field with a foundation for theorizing how coloniality shapes resource allocation, administrative processes, and institutional decision-making. However, applying this framework to empirical studies can further test and refine its applicability across other areas of inquiry within Puerto

Rico's postsecondary context and outside of it. In this paper, I identified comparative contexts in which researcher could explore its significance in other territorial, postcolonial, or externally regulated higher education systems (e.g., Guam, international cases shaped by IMF/World Bank oversight). Such work can assess the transferability of the framework and identify important variations in how different forms of sovereignty constraints shape institutional behavior.

Expanding on Empirical Studies: Paper 2

Building on my findings from Chapter 3 (Paper 2), scholars should examine more closely the structural, procedural, and contextual differences between emergency aid programs such as FEMA and CARES/HEERF. My findings indicate that the effectiveness of these programs diverged sharply for universities in Puerto Rico, yet the reasons behind these differences remain insufficiently understood. Future studies could assess whether the design of each aid program was responsive to the nature and scale of the emergencies they sought to address. This may include examining policy features such as eligibility rules, disbursement models, documentation requirements, timelines, and oversight structures. Such research is essential for informing federal policy on emergency aid, particularly as climate-related disasters increase in frequency and severity (CRED & UNDRR, 2021). A more detailed understanding of why CARES/HEERF funding provided timely relief while FEMA's reimbursement process did not would offer critical insight into how emergency aid can be structured to avoid reproducing the forms of procedural vulnerability documented in this dissertation.

Scholars should also further explore the full range of financial management strategies universities in Puerto Rico may employ beyond those captured in this paper. Because sites and participants for this study were selected based on their involvement in Title V and their prior knowledge of institutional grant priorities, participants may have been more likely to emphasize

federal grant programs as a revenue-generating strategy. This may obscure other viable strategies these institutions may be pursuing to diversify their revenue streams. Expanding this research becomes even more urgent in light of the Trump administration's termination of MSI-targeted grants, which the participants in my study indicated were the programs they believed they had the greatest likelihood of success in. As such, federal grants may no longer be a strategy their institution will continue to pursue. For this reason, research may also explore how institutions are adapting to this funding loss and how it is informing their financial management strategies.

Expanding on Empirical Studies: Paper 3

Finally, future research should expand the inquiry initiated in Chapter 4 (Paper 3) by identifying and assessing viable avenues for strengthening grant capacity and research infrastructure at universities in Puerto Rico. My findings show that institutions face significant gaps in personnel, training, and administrative support, suggesting a need for research that examines what forms of capacity-building are most effective and feasible in this context. Scholars could explore the potential of developing and strengthening cross-institutional collaboratives (e.g., CienciaPR) to pool expertise, share grant-writing resources, and offer workshops and training on writing specific components of grant applications (e.g., logic models, budgets). Additional work might explore the potential effectiveness of non-competitive planning grants as a mechanism for facilitating grant preparedness and test different metrics that agencies can use determine which institutions qualify for this capacity-building resources.

Ultimately, I hope this work does more than document the structural violence and neglect that Puerto Rico and its postsecondary system have endured for decades, but rather mobilize the action required to change the policies and practices that produce these conditions. By tracing how colonial governance continues to shape institutional capacity, access to resources, and the

conditions under which teaching and learning take place, this dissertation aims to make these dynamics impossible to ignore and harder to excuse. My hope is that the analyses offered here equip scholars, policymakers, and advocates with the knowledge to challenge these structures and to support the creation of policies and practices that are attune to the needs of universities in Puerto Rico. If this work encourages deeper accountability and fuels the collective efforts needed to strengthen Puerto Rico's higher education system, then it will have done everything I hoped it could do.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Tables and Figures

Appendix Table A.1 Key Legislative and Judicial Events in Defining Puerto Rico's Status and Economic Decline

Year	Name of Legislation/ Court Case	Purpose	Significance for Restricted Autonomy and Economic Dependence in Puerto Rico
1900	Foraker Act	Established a civic government in Puerto Rico	Did not extend the same protections under the US Bill of Rights and did not permit Puerto Rico to make their own Bill of Rights. This governance structure was fully administered by top-down oversight by the federal government.
		Incorporated Puerto Rico into the U.S. monetary system	Allowed the U.S. to define the exchange rate in Puerto Rico, devaluing the Puerto Rican peso (60:1). Allowed the U.S. to define the exchange rate in Puerto This prompted investors to buy land from small land-owners unable to afford the rising costs and take advantage of cheap labor.
		Established trade regulations	Puerto Rico could not negotiate commercial treaties with other nations nor determine taxes and duties. The tariff system treated Puerto Rico as foreign and thus subject to duties, which hindered trade and contributed to Puerto Rico’s economic dependency on the U.S.
		Created the conditions for and defined the limits of issuing bonds and other obligations in Puerto Rico.	Puerto Rico was granted the ability to issue bonds to offset the expenses incurred following Hurricane Ciriaco and rebuild. Doing so set the precedent for normalizing

			the accumulation of debt in the municipality as a strategy for economic recovery during states of emergency.
1901	Insular Cases *Downes v Bidwell*	Created and defined the boundaries of unincorporated territories	Ruled that the federal government has the power to keep and govern territories indefinitely without ever admitted them into statehood or granting sovereignty. It gave the federal government the power to decide when and in what extent the Constitution applied to Puerto Rico.
1917	Jones Act of 1917	Imposed citizenship on Puerto Ricans, extended a Bill of Rights to Puerto Rico, established a bicameral legislature in Puerto Rico	Imposing citizenship on Puerto Ricans further entrenched Puerto Rico into the United States, contributed to mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the states, and extended a "second-class" status in which citizenship did not guarantee Puerto Ricans the full rights of a citizen in the States.
		Created the triple tax exemption on bonds issued by the Puerto Rican government	Puerto Rico's municipal bonds were attractive to investors because interest on the bonds was not subjected to federal, state, or local taxes, regardless of where the investors resided. This prompted corporations to view purchasing municipal bonds from Puerto Rico as a lucrative investment and contributed to Puerto Rico's fiscal debt crisis in 2015.
1920	Merchant Marine Act of 1920	Established trade regulations that mandates that only American ships can carry good between U.S. ports	These regulations drove the price on imported good to Puerto Rico. As an archipelago, Puerto Rico relies heavily on importing goods, which has contributed to Puerto Rico's economic decline and increased the cost of living.
1940's-1970's	Operation Bootstrap	A series of development policies enacted in Puerto Rico after WWI to industrialize the archipelago's economy	Offered tax breaks and incentives to U.S. companies to prompt them to establish factories in Puerto Rico and take advantage of the "cheap labor."
1950 - 1952	Public Law 600 - Estado Libre Asociado (ELA)	Allowed Puerto Rico to create their own Constitution while permitting its territorial status to maintain intact	Congress required the addition of a disposition where no future amendments could be added to the constitution that would alter the relationship with the US. This effectively

1976	The Tax Reform Act under Section 936 of Internal Revenue Code (IRC)	Established the possessions tax credit with the goal of supporting economic grown and development in insular areas (e.g., Puerto Rico, Guam) by providing federal tax exemptions on profits generated in these territorial possessions for eligible U.S. corporations.	Contributed to a significant economic boom in Puerto Rico and increase in manufacturing production. Shifted Puerto Rico from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy.
1996 - 2006	Section 936 repealed	Repealed the possessions tax credit for U.S. companies; the repeal was gradually repealed over a 10- year period.	Led to a significant decrease in investment and job creation in Puerto Rico. Many U.S. corporations left the archipelago when the tax credits were repealed, which contributed to Puerto Rico's economic decline. The repeal of the tax credit occurred right as the U.S. was entering into the Great Recession in 2007, which further magnified its repercussions and contributed to an increase in bond issuance.
2012	Act 20 & Act 22 (later consolidated and expanded under Act 60 in 2019)	Act 20 offered tax exemptions for export services while Act 22 provided tax benefits to individuals relocating to Puerto Rico with the purpose of creating local job opportunities and stimulating the local economy.	Together, these tax exemptions have contributed to exploitation by wealthy individuals and corporations seeking to avoid paying federal income taxes. They have also driven up housing costs, displacing Puerto Ricans from their homes.
2016	PROMESA Act	Established a fiscal control and management board to restructure Puerto Rico's debt.	Has full authority to override decisions made by the local government. The PROMESA Act has contributed to massive cuts in Puerto Rico's public spending budget including healthcare, pensions, and education.

Note: This table was compiled from a number of resources: Atiles, 2024; Jiménez, 2024; Ponsa-Kraus, 2022; Schwartz, 1992; United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2006, 2018; Zambrana, 2021, 2021

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Email [English]

SUBJECT LINE: Research Study on the Federal Grant Seeking Practices at Universities in Puerto Rico

Dear *{Name}*,

My name is Cassandra Arroyo, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan. For my dissertation, I am interested in understanding the grant-seeking practices of colleges and universities in Puerto Rico. To learn more about this topic, I am interviewing university administrators, faculty, and/or grant managers at multiple campuses in Puerto Rico whose position provides them insight into the strategic practices at their institution for seeking external funding.

{Name of Institutional Contact} recommended that I reach out to you to learn more about your institution's practices for seeking external funding. More specifically, I would like to speak with you about your institution's eligibility for Title V grants given that your institution meets the federal definition of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). [Note: I do not hold any formal affiliation with the Title V grant program, participation in this study will not affect your institution's likelihood of being awarded a Title V grant].

Interview Details:

- Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes and be held in person at a place of your choosing or via Zoom.
- I will ask the interview questions in English, but you may respond in either Spanish or English.
- All interview materials including the consent form and interview questions will be provided in both English and Spanish prior to the interview.
- With your permission, interviews will be audio recorded for accuracy.
- I am offering all interviewees a $50 Amazon gift card for their participation.

If you are willing to participate in this study please respond to this email by _____. In your email, please note whether you would prefer to have your interview in person or via Zoom. Once I receive confirmation of your desire to participate and interview preferences, I will reach out to schedule the interview. If you have any questions, please email me at carroyo@umich.edu.

Thank you for considering my request,
Cassandra

Recruitment Email [Spanish]

ASUNTO: Estudio de Investigación sobre Prioridades en la Búsqueda de Subvenciones Federales en las Universidades en Puerto Rico

Estimado/a {*Nombre*},

Mi nombre es Cassandra Arroyo, y soy candidata para un doctorado en la Universidad de Michigan. Para mi tesis, me interesa comprender las prácticas de la búsqueda de subvenciones en universidades en Puerto Rico. Para obtener más información sobre este tema, estoy entrevistando a administradores universitarios, profesores y/o gestores de subvenciones en varias instituciones en Puerto Rico, cuyas posiciones les proporcionan conocimiento sobre las prácticas estratégicas de su institución para buscar financiamiento externo.

Querría aprender más sobre las prácticas de su institución para buscar financiamiento externo. Más específicamente, me gustaría hablar con Ud. sobre la elegibilidad de su institución para las subvenciones Title V, dado que su institución cumple con la definición federal de una Institución de Servicio a Hispanos (HSI). [Nota: No tengo ninguna afiliación formal con el programa de subvenciones Title V; la participación en este estudio no afectará la probabilidad de que su institución reciba una subvención Title V].

Detalles de la Entrevista:

- Las entrevistas tendrán una duración aproximada de 60 minutos y se llevarán a cabo en persona en un lugar de su elección o mediante Zoom.
- Haré las preguntas de la entrevista en inglés, pero usted puede responder en español o inglés.
- Voy a compartir todos los materiales de la entrevista en ingles y español, incluidas las preguntas de la entrevista y el formulario de consentimiento antes de la entrevista.
- Con su permiso, las entrevistas se grabarán en audio para mayor precisión.
- Ofrezco a todos/as los/las entrevistados/as una tarjeta de regalo de Amazon de $50 como compensación por su participación.

Si Ud. está dispuesto/a a participar en este estudio, por favor responda a este correo electrónico antes del _____. En su correo, indique si prefiere tener la entrevista en persona o mediante Zoom. Una vez que reciba la confirmación de su deseo de participar y sus preferencias para la entrevista, me pondré en contacto con Ud. para programarla. Si Ud. tiene alguna pregunta, por favor envíeme un correo electrónico a carroyo@umich.edu.

Gracias por considerar mi solicitud,
Cassandra

Appendix C: Consent Forms

Consent Form [English]

IRB NUMBER: HUM00247471

Principal Investigator: Cassandra Arroyo, University of Michigan
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Charles H.F. Davis III, University of Michigan

Study Information
You are invited to participate in a study on the grant-seeking practices at universities in Puerto Rico. For my dissertation, I am interested in learning more about the external and organizational challenges currently impacting your institution and your institution's priorities in pursuing external funding to mitigate these challenges. I am specifically interested in your institution's eligibility for the Title V, Developing Hispanic-Serving Institution federal grant program.

Study Participation
If you agree to be part of this study, you will be asked whether you would like your interview to be conducted via Zoom or in-person at a location of your choosing. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and you will receive $50 Amazon gift card for your participation. Interviews will be audio recorded for accurate record keeping but will be kept in a secure location and only accessible by the researcher.

Benefits of the Research and Risks
Your responses will help generate important knowledge on the challenges the universities in Puerto Rico encounter and can inform policy on federal funding to universities in Puerto Rico. As part of their review, the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has determined that this study is no more than minimal risk and exempt from on-going IRB oversight.

Participation and Confidentiality
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. Confidentiality will be maintained by redacting your name from all interview transcripts and/or replacing your name with a pseudonym. You will not be identified in any published material about this study, and research records will remain private.

Consent to Participate in the Research Study
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study.

I understand what the study is about and agree to take part in this study.

Print Legal Name: _____
Signature: _____
Date (mm/dd/yy): _____

If you have questions about this research study, please contact: carroyo@umich.edu

Consent Form [Spanish]

NÚMERO DEL CEI: HUM00247471

Investigadora Principal: Cassandra Arroyo, Universidad de Michigan
Asesor Académico: Dr. Charles H.F. Davis III, Universidad de Michigan

Información del Estudio
Se le invita a participar en un estudio sobre las prácticas de la búsqueda de subvenciones en las universidades en Puerto Rico. Para mi tesis doctoral, me interesa saber más sobre los desafíos externos y organizativos que actualmente afectan a su institución y las prioridades de su institución al buscar financiamiento externo para mitigar estos desafíos. Estoy específicamente interesada en la elegibilidad de su institución para el programa federal de subvenciones Title V, Desarrollo de Instituciones de Servicio a Hispanos.

Participación en el Estudio
Si Ud. acepta participar en este estudio, se le preguntará si prefiere que su entrevista se realice a través de Zoom o en persona en un lugar de su elección. La entrevista durará aproximadamente 60 minutos y por su participación Ud. recibirá $50 en forma de una tarjeta de regalo de Amazon. Es posible que se le contacte a usted después de la entrevista para responder a preguntas adicionales para asegurar que su perspectiva se refleje con precisión.

Beneficios de la Investigación y Riesgos
Sus respuestas ayudarán a generar conocimiento importante sobre los desafíos que actualmente enfrenta las universidades en Puerto Rico y pueden informar sobre las políticas de financiamiento federal para universidades puertorriqueñas. Como parte de su revisión, el Comité de Revisión Institucional de Ciencias de la Salud y Ciencias del Comportamiento de la Universidad de Michigan ha determinado que este estudio no conlleva más que un riesgo mínimo y está exento de supervisión continua por parte del comité.

Participación y Confidencialidad
La participación en este estudio es completamente voluntaria. Incluso si Ud. decide participar ahora, puede cambiar de opinión y detenerse en cualquier momento. La confidencialidad se mantendrá removiendo su nombre de todas las transcripciones de entrevistas y/o reemplazando su nombre con un seudónimo. No se le identificará en ningún material publicado sobre este estudio, y los registros de investigación permanecerán privados.

Consentimiento para Participar en el Estudio de Investigación
Al firmar este documento, usted acepta participar en este estudio.

Entiendo de qué trata el estudio y acepto participar en él.

Nombre Legal en Letra de Molde: _____
Firma: _____
Fecha (mm/dd/aa): _____

Si tiene preguntas sobre este estudio de investigación, por favor, póngase en contacto con:
carroyo@umich.edu

Appendix D: Interview Materials

Interview Protocol [English]

Note: This script will be used to set up each interview conducted for IRB# _____.

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me. As I described in my email outreach, this study is part of my dissertation research and includes interviews with administrators and campus leadership across universities in Puerto Rico such as yourself. The goal of this work is to learn more about the practices that universities in Puerto Rico use to improve their institutional resources to serve their campus community. This may include financial resources, staffing changes, infrastructure maintenance/improvements, academic programming and support services, and others. We are specifically interested in understanding whether your institution pursues external grants to improve these resources.

This interview will take about an hour of your time. The first part of the interview will include questions related to your role and responsibilities. The following section will include questions about your institution, including the factors that currently shape its institutional resources. For the remaining sections, I will ask questions regarding your institution's strategic practices to improve its institutional resources, including grant seeking and grant management practices.

In order to accurately capture our conversation, we would like to ask your permission to record the interview. Before doing so, we want to clarify that:

- This audio file will be kept in a secure location and only I will have access to it as the principal researcher.
- When the audio file is transcribed for analysis, your name and the name of your institution will be omitted and replaced with a pseudonym.
- I may reach out to you with follow up questions to ensure that I have accurately captured your perspective. All additional interviews are optional and will be compensated.
- Your participation in this study is completely free and voluntary. At any point in the interview process you may decline to respond to a question, and you may leave the interview at any time.
- You will receive a $50 Amazon gift card for your time.
- I will share a copy of the takeaways gathered from our conversation before they are incorporated into my dissertation for your review.

When I turn on the recorder, the first question I will ask is whether you give me permission to record our conversation. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

Turn on recorder.
Do you give me permission to record our exchange?
Obtain verbal consent.

Interview Questions for Title V Applicants

Participant Background:

- What is your position at [institution]?
- What are your core responsibilities in this position?

Section 1: Current contexts and factors shaping institutional resources
To begin, I will ask a few questions regarding your institution's organizational structure and the external factors that may affect it.

- Has your institution undergone any recent changes in its organizational structure? This may include changes in leadership, hiring practices, academic offerings, and others.
    - As a result of these changes, have there been any challenges with the resources needed to function day to day?
    - How have these changes impacted your campus' ability to serve its students, administrators, and/or faculty?
- In 2016, the Obama Administration established a fiscal control board to restructure Puerto Rico's debt under the PROMESA Act. As part of this restructuring, the board has reduced public support to the University of Puerto Rico system: (1) by consolidating campuses, (2) reducing UPR employee pensions, (3) increasing tuition, (4) and lowering the overall budget of the UPR system.
    - As a result of these measures, have there been any challenges with the resources your institution needed to function day to day?
    - How has the debt restructuring impacted your campus' ability to serve its students, administrators, and/or faculty?
- In the last five years, Puerto Rico has experienced a number of natural disasters such as Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Fiona and a series of high magnitude earthquakes.
    - As a result of these natural disasters, have there been any challenges with the resources needed to function day to day?
    - How have these natural disasters impacted your campus' ability to serve its students, administrators, and/or faculty?
    - What types of federal support did your institution receive during this time? Was this support sufficient?
- In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down in-person instruction requiring institutions to quickly pivot to remote learning and services.
    - As a result of the pandemic, have there been any challenges with the resources needed to function day to day?
    - How has the pandemic impacted your campus' ability to serve its students, administrators, and/or faculty?
    - What types of federal support did your institution receive during this time? Was this support sufficient?

- Have any of these recent changes and challenges impacted how your institution views external funds? If so, in what ways?

Section 2: Structures in place for pursuing grant funding
The next series of questions will ask you to describe the structures in place at your institution to pursue grant funding.

- Given that time and resources are often limited, how would you describe the way your institution prioritizes which types of funds to pursue?
- Does your institution have a grant office or specific staff members tasked with applying for and/or managing institutional grants? *[if speaking to someone in a grant office skip this question]*
    - Would you consider [the office or individuals] understaffed?
    - What types of support mechanisms or resources are in place to help [this office or these individuals]?
- Do you employ grant writers? If so, what are their core responsibilities in the grant preparation process?

Section 3: Participation in the Title V program
The Title V program is a competitive federal grant competition designed to improve the institutional resources at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) to improve their operational activities and ability to serve their students. To be eligible for this program, institutions must have at least a 25% Latinx student enrollment, a high proportion of low-income students, and low expenditures (spending) on areas such as instruction, research, and student services.

Given that your institution meets this criteria, I will now ask questions specifically about your institution's participation in the Title V program.

- Can you describe the process at your institution for applying to external grant programs?
- What do you perceive as the biggest challenge your institution faces when submitting a competitive Title V application? (e.g., language, resources, knowledge of grant program)
    - Do you believe these challenges are similar across institutions in Puerto Rico?
- Why did (does) your institution apply for a Title V grant(s)?
- Each year, the number of institutions eligible for Title V increases, meaning that more colleges and universities in the U.S. are becoming eligible to apply for these funds. Have these trends changed the way your institution approaches applying for Title V?
- Given your institution's past experience(s) participating in Title V, do you expect your institution will continue to pursue Title V funding? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that the Title V program is a viable funding source for improving your institution's ability to perform its day to day functions and serve its students? Why or why not?
- Thinking about all HSIs in the states and in Puerto Rico, which types of institutions do you believe are the best positioned for receiving Title V funds?
- *[If they named HSIs in the states]* Thinking about HSIs only in Puerto Rico, which types of institutions do you believe are the best positioned for receiving Title V funds?

- If you could change any part of the Title V program, such as, which institutions are eligible, the application requirements or timeline, the duration of the grant funding, or others, what would you change? Why?

Interview Protocol [Spanish]

Nota: Este guion se utilizará para preparar cada entrevista realizada para la IRB# HUM00247471

Muchas gracias por aceptar hablar conmigo. Como mencioné en mi correo electrónico, este estudio forma parte de mi investigación de tesis e incluye entrevistas con administradores, profesores y gestores de subvenciones en universidades de Puerto Rico, como usted. El objetivo de este trabajo es saber más sobre las prácticas de la búsqueda de subvenciones que utilizan en universidades en Puerto Rico para mejorar sus recursos para servir a su comunidad universitaria.

Esta entrevista tomará aproximadamente una hora de su tiempo. La primera parte de la entrevista incluirá preguntas relacionadas con su rol y responsabilidades. La próxima sección incluirá preguntas sobre su institución, incluyendo los factores que actualmente moldean sus recursos institucionales. Para las secciones restantes, haremos preguntas sobre las prácticas de la búsqueda de subvenciones de su institución. Específicamente, haremos preguntas sobre la elegibilidad de su institución para los fondos del Title V.

Para capturar con precisión nuestra conversación, nos gustaría solicitar su permiso para grabar la entrevista. Antes de hacerlo, quiero aclarar lo siguiente:

- Este archivo de audio se mantendrá en un lugar seguro y solo yo tendré acceso a él como investigadora principal.
- Cuando el archivo de audio se transcriba para analizarse, su nombre y el nombre de su institución se omitirán y se reemplazarán con un seudónimo.
- Es posible que me comunique con usted con preguntas de seguimiento para asegurarme de haber capturado con precisión su perspectiva. Totas las entrevistas adicionales son opcionales y serán compensadas.
- Su participación en este estudio es completamente gratuita y voluntaria. En cualquier momento durante el proceso de la entrevista, Ud. puede optar por no responder a una de las preguntas y puede abandonar la entrevista en cualquier momento.
- Ud. recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de Amazon de $50.
- Compartiremos con Ud. una copia de las conclusiones obtenidas de nuestra conversación para su revisión antes de incorporarlas a mi tesis.

Cuando yo encienda la grabadora, la primera pregunta que haré es si Ud. me dará permiso para grabar nuestra conversación. Antes de comenzar, ¿tiene alguna pregunta para mí?

Encender la grabadora.

¿Me da Ud. permiso para grabar nuestra conversación?
Obtener consentimiento verbal.

Interview Questions for Title V Applicants [Spanish]

Antecedentes del/de la Entrevistado/a:

- ¿Cuál es su posición en [institución]?
- ¿Cuáles son las responsabilidades centrales de esta posición?

Sección 1: Contextos actuales y factores que moldean los recursos institucionales

Para comenzar, haré algunas preguntas sobre la estructura organizativa de su institución y los factores externos que puedan afectarla.

- ¿Ha experimentado su institución cambios recientes en su estructura organizativa? Esto puede incluir cambios en el liderazgo, prácticas de contratación, ofertas académicas y otros.
    - Como resultado de estos cambios, ¿ha habido desafíos con los recursos necesarios para funcionar día a día?
    - ¿Cómo han impactado estos cambios en la capacidad de su campus para atender a sus estudiantes, administradores y/o profesorado?
- En 2016, la Administración Obama estableció una junta de control fiscal para reestructurar la deuda de Puerto Rico bajo la Ley PROMESA. Como parte de esta reestructuración, la junta ha reducido el apoyo público al sistema de la Universidad de Puerto Rico: (1) consolidando los campus, (2) reduciendo las pensiones de los empleados de la UPR, (3) aumentando el costo de la matrícula y (4) disminuyendo el presupuesto general del sistema de la UPR.
    - Como resultado de estas medidas, ¿ha habido desafíos con los recursos que su institución necesitaba para funcionar día a día?
    - ¿Cómo ha impactado la reestructuración de la deuda en la capacidad de su campus para atender a sus estudiantes, administradores y/o profesorado?
- En los últimos cinco años, Puerto Rico ha experimentado varios desastres naturales como los huracanes Irma, María y Fiona, y una serie de terremotos de gran magnitud.
    - Como resultado de estos desastres naturales, ¿ha habido desafíos con los recursos necesarios para funcionar día a día?
    - ¿Cómo han impactado estos desastres naturales en la capacidad de su campus para atender a sus estudiantes, administradores y/o profesorado?
    - ¿Qué tipo de apoyo federal recibió su institución durante este tiempo? ¿Fue este apoyo suficiente?
- En 2020, la pandemia de Covid-19 cerró la instrucción presencial, obligando a las instituciones a cambiar rápidamente a la enseñanza y servicios remotos.
    - Como resultado de la pandemia, ¿ha habido desafíos con los recursos necesarios para funcionar día a día?
    - ¿Cómo ha impactado la pandemia en la capacidad de su campus para atender a sus estudiantes, administradores y/o profesorado?

    - ¿Qué tipo de apoyo federal recibió su institución durante este tiempo? ¿Fue este apoyo suficiente?
- ¿Alguno de estos cambios y desafíos recientes ha impactado la forma en que su institución ve los fondos externos? Si es así, ¿de qué manera?

Sección 2: Estructuras establecidas para conseguir subvenciones

La siguiente serie de preguntas le pedirá que describa las estructuras existentes en su institución para obtener subvenciones.

- Dado que el tiempo y los recursos a menudo son limitados, ¿cómo describiría la forma en que su institución prioriza los tipos de fondos a buscar?
- ¿Tiene su institución una oficina de subvenciones o miembros específicos del personal encargados de solicitar y/o gestionar subvenciones institucionales? [*si estás hablando con alguien en una oficina de subvenciones, omite esta pregunta*]
    - ¿Consideraría que [la oficina o las personas] está sin personal suficiente?
    - ¿Qué tipos de mecanismos de apoyo o recursos existen para ayudar a [esta oficina o estas personas]?
- ¿Contratan a redactores de subvenciones? En caso afirmativo, ¿cuáles son sus responsabilidades principales en el proceso de preparación de la subvención?

Sección 3: Participación en el programa Title V

El programa Title V es una competencia de subvenciones federales diseñada para mejorar los recursos institucionales en Instituciones de Servicio a Hispanos (HSIs) para mejorar sus actividades operativas y su capacidad para atender a sus estudiantes. Para ser elegibles para este programa, las instituciones deben tener al menos un 25% de inscripción de estudiantes hispanos, una alta proporción de estudiantes de bajos ingresos y bajos gastos en áreas como la instrucción, la investigación y los servicios estudiantiles.

Dado que su institución cumple con este criterio, ahora haré preguntas específicamente sobre la participación de su institución en el programa Título V.

- ¿Puede describir el proceso en su institución para solicitar a programas de subvenciones externos?
- ¿Cuál es el mayor desafío que usted percibe para presentar una solicitud competitiva a Title V en su institución? *(por ejemplo, idioma, recursos, conocimiento del programa de subvenciones)*
    - ¿Ud. considera estos desafíos similares a los de otras instituciones en Puerto Rico?
- ¿Por qué su institución solicitó o solicita subvenciones Title V?
- Cada año, aumenta el número de instituciones elegibles para Title V, lo que significa que más colegios y universidades en los EE. UU. son elegibles para solicitar estos fondos. ¿Ha cambiado esta tendencia la forma en que su institución aborda la solicitud de Title V?

- Dada la experiencia pasada de su institución en la participación en Title V, ¿espera que su institución continúe buscando financiamiento de Title V? ¿Por qué sí o por qué no?
- ¿Ud. cree que el programa Title V es una fuente de financiamiento viable para mejorar la capacidad de su institución para realizar sus funciones diarias y atender a sus estudiantes? ¿Por qué sí o por qué no?
- Considerando las HSIs están en EE. UU. y en Puerto Rico, ¿Qué tipos de instituciones Ud. cree que están mejor posicionadas para recibir fondos Title V?
- [si mencione instituciones en EE. UU.]. Considerando las HSIs que están solamente en Puerto Rico, ¿Qué tipos de instituciones Ud. cree que están mejor posicionadas para recibir fondos Title V?

Si Ud. pudiera cambiar alguna parte del programa Title V, como, por ejemplo, qué instituciones son elegibles, los requisitos o plazos de solicitud, la duración de la financiación de la subvención, entre otros, ¿qué cambiaría y por qué?