

How to address resource inequity in collaborative work: Reflections on partnerships between Vermont and Puerto Rico

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Abstract

This reflective essay details my experiences as a professor in a small land-grant university working with counterparts in Puerto Rico. Our work aimed at enhancing food resilience of both regions. While we forged lifelong friendships and learning partnerships, the structural legacies of colonialism and resource inequality created barriers and ultimately prevented further collaboration. I also discuss how compliance culture in my home institution is not only a nuisance but creates incentives in direct

opposition to the goals of our work. I conclude with implications for future partnerships between scholars in regions with different capacities and procedures.

Keywords

food resilience, partnerships, colonialism, land-grant university

Abstract

This reflective essay details my experiences as a professor in a small land-grant university working with counterparts in Puerto Rico. Our work aimed at enhancing the food resilience of both regions. While we forged lifelong friendships and learning partnerships, the structural legacies of colonialism and resource inequality created barriers and ultimately prevented further collaboration. I also discuss how compliance culture in my home institution is not only a nuisance but creates incentives in direct opposition to the goals of our work. I conclude with implications for future partnerships between scholars in regions with different capacities and procedures.

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Introduction

“If you have a chance to accomplish something that will make things better for people coming behind you, and you don’t do that, you are wasting your time on this earth.”

—Roberto Clemente (*National Portrait Gallery, n.d.*)

Puerto Rico (PR) is called the Island of Enchantment (in Spanish, *Isla del Encanto*). This place and its people enchanted me from the start. Working there has been perhaps the most rewarding part of a very rewarding career. Yet the challenges I faced were also among the most frustrating. I want to share my story in this reflective essay because I believe there are broader lessons to be learned for food systems scholars and others wishing to work in places scarred by colonial legacies, who wish to overcome lingering structural inequities in resources and wealth.

Literature Review

As outlined by Hernández-Acosta (2015), PR became a U.S. territory in 1898 as a condition of the end of the Spanish American War. Its people became American citizens to provide additional soldiers as part of World War 1 efforts in 1917; Rodríguez Vargas (2023) argues that U.S. federal money has been disbursed using norms and methods that are designed for the U.S. but fail to account for cultural differences in PR and thus are highly ineffective.

There is a large body of literature (e.g., Carro-Figueroa, 2002; Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Marrero et al., 2022; Hernández-Acosta, 2015) detailing the current and historical challenges of PR’s food system and its lack of resilience. Key themes are the prevalence of food insecurity and lack of healthful food access; the lack of production for local consumption and reliance on imported foods; the role of policy in creating these conditions; and proposed solutions. This review is far from comprehensive but provides background that underpins the work I detail below.

Carro-Figueroa (2002) provides an overview of the history of U.S.-Puerto Rico relations as it relates to food systems. It begins with the island’s aforementioned acquisition by the U.S. in the

Spanish-American War in 1898. It then discusses the industrialization policy which expanded food imports in the 1950s, the introduction of food stamps in 1974, a shift in 1978 to a tourism and high-tech industries and the steady decline of staple crop production in the 1980s and 1990s. Hernández-Acosta (2015) discusses the role of large mainland investments in sugar plantations in the 1930s, which led to decreased local food consumption and increased prices for the poor. The effects of these events are briefly summarized below.

One recent estimate measures PR’s food insecurity at 40% of the whole population and 56% of children (PR51st, 2022), this figure is far higher than the U.S. as a whole, recently estimated at 13.5% (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2023). There is also a historical and current the lack of healthful foods, and poor diets overall (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Marrero et al., 2022) as highly processed foods (sugar-sweetened beverages and foods, salty snacks, canned meats) are more available and widely consumed, leading to chronic diseases and poor health outcomes (Lane et al., 2024). The introduction of the supplemental nutrition (food stamps) program in 1974 led to greater consumption of processed foods purchased from supermarkets (Carro-Figueroa, 2002; Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017).

A related issue is the high reliance on imported food. It has been cited that 85% of PR’s food is imported (e.g., Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Lerman Ginzburg, 2022), a percentage similar to Vermont’s (Conner et al., 2020) despite the vast difference in climate and growing season. Much of the imported food is less healthful, leading to the aforementioned nutrition and diet problems. Similarly, there is a lack of production for local markets, and history of policies encouraging agricultural production of commodity monoculture of crops with high monetary value and reliance on agrichemicals (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Carro-Figueroa, 2002). The overall policy emphasis on industrialization on the island delinked local production and consumption; these policies accelerated farmland loss and food imports, made subsistence farming unviable, and encouraged urbanization and migration to the mainland (Carro-Figueroa, 2002).

As discussed above, several policies have led to

the current situation of reliance on this decoupling: production for export and reliance on cheap and unhealthful imported foods. One particularly pernicious policy is the Jones Act (U.S. Department of Transportation, Maritime Administration, n.d.), which requires cargo entering PR to be on ships built, owned and crewed by the United States. This law keeps food prices high overall and greatly delayed hurricane relief efforts (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017; Marrero et al., 2022). The policies, together with the colonial history and its enduring institutions and norms, contribute to PR's lack of food resilience.

Other scholars have highlighted the impacts colonial practices and legacies on education in PR. Rodríguez Vargas (2023) argues that U.S. mainland norms and values are too often imposed on PR's education system. The individualistic and profit-driven cultural norms of the U.S. often conflict with PR's more community-centric values. These differences are exacerbated by neoliberal governance structures and practices (Santiago-Ortiz, 2020). Research and community development projects are often imposed from the outside with little dialogue with or input from local stakeholders. Rodríguez Vargas (2023) further argues that the U.S. favors and forces on the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) system a hierarchical model based on complex relationships and bureaucracy, in conflict with PR cultural values and norms which favor horizontal relationships.

As discussed by Santiago-Ortiz (2020), these conflicts came to a head in 2016-2017, when it was declared that PR's debt was unpayable. The island's governance and thus autonomy was transferred to a Fiscal Oversight Management Board (known colloquially as *La Junta*). One effect was large (approximately \$500 million) budget cuts to the UPR system (Santiago-Ortiz, 2020). These events further imposed neoliberal logics such as transactional relationships and emphasis on return on investments on the UPR system. (Santiago-Ortiz, 2020; Rodríguez Vargas, 2023). While UPR faculty's strong community outreach ethic and participatory approaches to research and engagement attempt to mitigate these issues, the budget cuts and complex bureaucratic regulations (particularly around purchasing) create a profound lack of resources for

project completion and community engagement. This in turn creates extreme vulnerability for UPR and the people of PR as a whole (Rodríguez Vargas, 2023; Santiago-Ortiz, 2020)

The literature proposes a suite of solutions to improve the resilience of PR's food system (Carro-Figueroa, 2002; Diaz & Hunsberger 2018; Marrero et al, 2022; Rodríguez-Cruz et al., 2022; Stokes-Ramos, 2023). The central themes are fostering local production for local consumption, elevating local knowledge, and incorporating agroecological principles, all with the goal of increasing food security and food sovereignty. Santiago-Ortiz (2020) highlights the need for participatory research to address complex issues. These principles underpinned the work in PR which I discuss below.

My Work in Puerto Rico

I first traveled to PR in February 2019 as part of my first faculty sabbatical from the University of Vermont (UVM). To be honest, many of my reasons for traveling there were personal. The appeal of leaving Vermont (VT) in mid-winter and spending a week or so on a tropical island speaks for itself. I had long wanted to visit PR, as it was the birthplace and home of my childhood hero, Hall of Fame baseball player, humanitarian and civil rights activist Roberto Clemente. Even though Clemente died when I was a young child, his courage and commitment to improving the lives of those around him are ideals that I continue to embrace as an adult.

To prepare for my trip, I began to assemble a list of food systems scholars and practitioners working in PR. I had the great fortune that a rising star of PR food systems scholarship and practice, Luis, was a PhD student at UVM and had taken one of my classes the year before. I asked Luis for recommendations, and he provided me with several. At the top of the list were his advisors when he earned his MS degree at the land grant university (LGU) of PR, The University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez (UPRM): Robinson and Maria, a married couple, both professors at UPRM.

I reached out to Robinson and Maria and they graciously invited me to visit them at UPRM, meet other colleagues, and present a research talk on local and regional food systems, community

development and food resilience. After the talk, Robinson and Maria then invited me to their home for the afternoon, for lunch, and a swim at the beach.

After knowing Robinson and Maria for only a couple of hours, I knew that we would be friends for life. First, they are among the kindest, smartest, and most dedicated people I have ever met, people of the utmost ethical integrity. But what drew me to them was twofold. First, we had very similar approaches to education, scholarship, and practice: we both embrace community-based research and stakeholder engagement - “listen to the street” is how Robinson phrases it. Second, I was struck by despite the differences between PR and VT in language, culture, history, latitude, climate, and other factors, the community development challenges each of our home regions face—lack of access to services in rural mountainous areas, lack of opportunity for young people and the resulting brain drain, farm viability challenges due in part to competition with cheaper imported foods, and many others—are strikingly similar. We both realized as well that our regions share the greatest assets as well: the people and communities. I saw a great opportunity to engage and learn beside people in another region, hopefully to the benefit of all sides.

The Work

Later that spring, we saw a USDA grant opportunity calling for proposals addressing disaster preparedness. Given the horrific effect extreme weather effects (e.g., Hurricanes, such as Maria in PR and Tropical Storm Irene in VT) on agriculture, food, and communities in general, we responded and were funded. Thus began a four-year collaboration covering two grants, two visits to VT, and three visits to PR. While I believe the work we did was incredibly personally rewarding and hopefully had long lasting benefits to our communities, it also exposed deep systemic challenges that are important for all scholars and practitioners to note. I am relating this story from my personal standpoint. A list of UVM and UPRM scholars who collaborated on this work can be found in the author list in this article: Conner et al., (2023).

The Projects

I was the lead on two funded projects. Each worked to investigate and enhance the role of anchor institutions in fostering food resilience, seeing this as an entry point to the issues discussed in the literature review above. Each primarily used qualitative data collection methods, specifically focus groups: the subjects were farmers and other food systems stakeholders impacted by PR hurricanes and farm to institution (FTI) experts in Vermont. The first project was a partnership between UVM and UPRM resulting in a Food Resilience Toolkit in both English (Serrano-Cortés et al., 2022) and Spanish (Serrano-Cortés et al., 2023). This toolkit has four main sections. The first section defines food resilience and introduces the Community Capitals model (Flora et al., n.d.); the second section outlines various methods to engage stakeholders and guide decision-making; the third outlines action steps; and the fourth provides lessons learned from the two regions. Its purpose is to help community leaders and technical support professionals assess and build food system resilience in their regions.

The second project was a seed project, a partnership between UVM, UPRM and Clark University to collect more data on farm to institution (FTI) programs in the two regions and position us for future funding. While these data contributed to two Master of Science theses (Whitehouse, 2022; Desravins, 2024), one at each university, as will be discussed below, they did not result in another grant proposal as we originally intended.

What Went Well

The following sections will highlight successes, including funding, scholarship and information exchange.

Successful Funding

Given the difficult current grant funding environment, two successful grant proposals must be seen as a win. The topic, partnerships, and approach were seen favorably by the grant reviewers. Both UVM and UPRM were (and remain) Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) jurisdictions, which may have also been points in our favor. Our development of bilingual

(English and Spanish) outreach materials advanced USDA's commitment to underserved farmers.

The Scholarship

The teams had faculty with expertise and experience conducting research and advising graduate students. We shared a commitment to mixed methods research and community engagement, so our research approaches were well aligned. Three graduate students used this work as part of their master of science theses, one each at UVM and one at UPRM (Cunningham, 2022; Desravins, 2024; Whitehouse, 2022). We created the toolkits and one peer-viewed journal article on its application. Elements of the toolkit were utilized in symposia in VT and PR by our team. Recently, stakeholders in Vermont requested information on the asset mapping elements of the toolkit. Besides this, no other organizations specifically have employed the toolkit to my knowledge.

Exchange of Expertise

The grants funded a total of five trips for exchange of knowledge and expertise. Two of them were mainly for grant planning and management, but three were expert stakeholder exchanges, where a team of food systems stakeholders traveled with the university affiliates to teach and learn about food systems issues.

In March 2020, the UVM team brought three experts in FTI (institutional food service and local food procurement) to PR: a nutrition services director from a K-12 school and hospital, respectively, both known for success and innovation in FTI; and the executive director of a regional FTI advocacy and technical assistance organization. The UVM arrived in PR on March 11, 2020. After a tour of a regional hospital and university food service operation, and a day-long symposium at UPRM, the team made a hasty return to VT on March 14 as the Covid-19 pandemic was closing down schools and universities. The nutrition service director's phones were blowing up all day with urgent calls from home: how will we feed kids with schools closed? How do we feed patients if hospitals are overrun with Covid patients? Despite the looming pandemic threat, the VT and PR food service professionals were able to meet and brain-

storm ideas on how to increase local food procurement.

Due in part to travel restrictions associated with Covid-19, the next exchange did not take place until March 2022. While the purpose of this trip was mainly seed grant and toolkit composition planning, the UVM team (three faculty including me, a research associate, and a graduate student) visited two organizations, Fundación Bucarabón (FB) and Asociación Pro-Bienestar Barrio Marías de Aguadas Inc. (APBMA), the first focusing on rural economic development through agricultural entrepreneurship (especially for women), the second focusing on food access and food insecurity in western Puerto Rico. The morning of our departure, we had a tearful goodbye with Robinson where he expressed his deep gratitude that we were both the last collaborators before Covid and the first ones after.

The next exchange was in July 2022, when the UPRM team (three faculty and two graduate students) along with a livestock farmer and fisheries expert visited Vermont. In addition to a symposium at UVM, the teams visited a farm incubator and food hub, an artisan cheese maker, maple syrup maker and agritourism operation, specialty food manufacturer, food gleaning center, and UVM Dining. At each stop, the PR and UVM teams met with the VT stakeholders and learned and discussed goals, operations, and strategies for food resilience and community development. The most rewarding and impactful meeting, in my view, was at the UVM Medical Center (UVMC, our regional hospital) with their Executive Chef Manager and co-founder of the Culinary Medicine program, Leah. The meeting took place on a lovely sunny summer morning at UVMC's rooftop garden. As has been documented in other articles (e.g., Becot et al., 2016), UVMC is a role model for an anchor institution's contributions to food resilience and community development. Leah spoke of UVMC's work in purchasing from and investing in local farms and food vendors, healthful menu options, and empowering patients and community members to prepare and consume healthful foods.

For the final visit, before grant funds expired, I traveled to PR with Leah to meet with stakeholders from local hospitals, as well as UPRM faculty, and

School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration faculty from another UPR campus, UPR-Carolina.

Each Side Thinks They Benefitted and Learned More

As the author Anne Lamott says, “A good marriage is where both people feel like they're getting the better end of the deal.” Conversations between our teams suggest that each feels they learned and benefitted more. Each region has a strength that complements the other. Vermont has strength in formal institutions: it has a statewide strategic food systems plan and network, supporting state policies, well-connected and coordinated technical assistance providers, and FTI stakeholders, including UVM Extension. The UVM team is deeply engaged and connected with these formal institutions. PR, in contrast, lacks the well-organized and connected formal institutions. But PR has deep community ties, and the strength, relevance, and credibility of their organizations like ABPMA and FB. An interesting anecdote demonstrating the community ties is this: during the 2022 visit to PR, the two teams were traveling in two cars in western PR on winding mountain roads with few street signs. On two occasions, Robinson stopped in small towns for directions to FB, the agricultural development organization. In each case, the people were very familiar with FB and their work and were able to provide directions. The UVM team observed that it would be unlikely that people in rural Vermont would be as familiar with the work of the local UVM Extension office or know where it is located. Seeing how similar work with similar goals can be accomplished under very different methods was a valuable learning experience for both teams. For each to use the strength of the other to complement one's own would certainly accelerate efforts to improve food resilience.

Lending Legitimacy

Another benefit was the spotlight that visits and collaboration from the other region put in our own work. While I have no direct evidence to document it, I believe that these projects with partners from far away put a spotlight and legitimacy to the work in ways that projects from our own or adjacent regions may not. The visits and symposia drew

large crowds of interested stakeholders and were featured public relations articles from the universities. Local business owners and stakeholders were proud to showcase their work to visitors.

The legitimacy requires some reflection, however, on colonial legacies and wealth and resource imbalances. Was the URPM team able to showcase their work because a team of university researchers from the mainland came to visit? Did the events in VT draw big crowds because of exotic visitors from the south? While the net result, fostering conversations and new perspectives on food resilience, was overall positive, the underlying wealth and resource imbalances are troubling and reflect deeper issues that will be discussed below.

The Friendships

The greatest success, both for its own sake and its importance of the success of the work, was the friendships forged among the teams. The kind of deep community-based work that both teams do requires immense trust and commitment in and between teams and with the people and communities we engage. Issues like food resilience are immensely complex social issues with many stakeholders and interconnected parts. There are few, if any, “one size fits all” solutions. Rather, efforts to address these problems are highly context-specific, “one size fits one.” This requires profound trust with and understanding of our communities and its stakeholders, their assets and priorities. These relationships are the backbone of our work. Similarly, it takes time and effort for each team to learn about the others' work, the overlaps and the differences, and discern how our experiences apply in the other context. The friendships we forged were also essential to learning how to work together.

While the formal activities like the research debriefs, the symposia, the grant planning and writing were essential components, some of the best insights and ideas came in the informal moments like driving in the car, sharing a meal, and walking around campus. I cannot overstate how important it was to simply spend time together, to laugh and joke, to share success and failures, to be vulnerable, to be human. The friendships created not only deep trust but deep commitment to each other and

the work. They were essential to the work but also brought great personal joy and satisfaction.

What Was Challenging

If I had to sum up all the frustrations with the project and why the work ended when the grant funding ended, it would be bureaucracy. There were struggles navigating each university's procedures and regulations that created frustration and eventually, in many ways, inhibited future collaboration.

The first barrier, or at least frustration, from the VT and UVM side was the bane of academics - compliance culture. This played out in several distinct ways on the various trips when teams from one region visited another.

To be clear, compliance regulations have a purpose. They exist to prevent fraud and embezzlement, for example, and to ensure that taxpayer-funded grant money is spent responsibly. There are places, however, where "one-size-fits-all" rules can at best cost a great deal of time and effort and, worse, disincentivize actions which advance the implicit goals of the collaboration. I will detail the issues below and then discuss a few lessons learned.

The examples below came to my attention when my UVM purchase (credit) card was set to expire. On the first day of the expiration month on my card (May 2024), I got an email listing expenses that were out of compliance, which arose from my work in PR. The infractions were largely of three types: lack of itemized receipt; food expenses exceeding daily maxima; paying for meals with stakeholders with grant funds. I had to correct these before a new card would be issued. I had numerous research travel and other expenses (mainly for my graduate assistants to travel to collect data, meet with stakeholders or present their work at conferences) in June 2024. I was faced with the options of addressing these infractions in short order, paying for all expenses up front myself, or asking my graduate assistants (many of whom came from the Majority World and who struggle to pay for daily expenses on a graduate assistant income) to pay for expenses up front. As I discuss below, with a great deal of help from staff from my college, these issues were resolved and I was issued a new card at the very end of the

month, in time to use for June 2024.

During the visits to PR, we generally ate at restaurants chosen by our hosts Robinson and Maria. We shared meals because friendship and camaraderie are essential to forging relationship and doing the hard work of engaging with communities with different cultures. The restaurants were part of their small farm to table movement, ones that buy from local sustainable fisher people and farmers and support their communities. During the meals we often talked to the owners about their support of local vendors; the owners were rightfully extremely proud of these efforts (difficult as they are in a place like PR with decades of exploitative, colonial-style institutions and regulations that make PR dependent on the mainland, still in place as discussed above). As I state above, I believe that the attention of scholars and experts from the mainland legitimized and motivated these efforts to support their communities.

Meals at farm to table restaurants cost a bit more. Food in PR overall is very expensive because of the Jones Act and other colonial policies and practices that have created vulnerability for the people of PR. UVM auditors cited these expenses in violation of policy going over the daily limit for meals even though they were all paid for with grants I had written and were line items in the project budget.

These rules undermine the very food resilience efforts we were trying to promote and support the cheap food paradigm: the rules encourage eating at chain restaurants who keep food prices down by exploiting employees and buying the cheap imported food that prices out Puerto Rican farmers. There are plenty of Dunkin and other cheap fast-food chains there; I doubt they contribute to their communities and local farmers and fisher people like the places we ate do. (As an aside, I have no empirical evidence to measure the differences in community development impacts of chain versus farm to table restaurants, but it would be interesting to use this as a lens for a deeper dive comparing the VT and PR food systems). To be clear, the cost to me was time and convenience. I think, however, that incentives matter and regulations that work in opposition to stated project goals and university values must be examined.

I booked lodging for myself and the guests with a local entrepreneur who helps neighbors rent their apartments. The auditors similarly cited me for not having a perfectly itemized receipt. Compliance culture incentivizes me to stay in mainstream chain hotel owned by outsiders, one that is perfectly able to make a receipt to fit their standards, but where the profits leave the island and do not support the community.

Finally, despite writing funds into the grant budget for shared business meals among the teams in both locations for each visit, the UVM auditors objected to grant funds paying for the meals of the UVM team when in VT or the UPRM team when in PR. These meals were essential for discussing the day's events and lessons, planning the next day, reflecting and putting them into deeper context, and most critically, forging the friendships and mutual trust that underpin the work. Apparently, the preferred practice under compliance culture is to say, "so long suckers, go pay for your own meals." Such a sentiment is not only shockingly rude, in my view, and casts UVM in a terrible light, but also would rob us of countless team building and learning opportunities.

To their credit, my college's Dean's office staff helped me navigate these difficulties and request exceptions for the daily meal overruns and lack of itemized lodging receipts. I was able to use other funds to pay for business meals, but only after hours of poring over receipts trying to recall who ate what and allocating each to the grant versus other funds.

I frame and qualify the critique of compliance culture with the understanding that the cost was inconvenience and the opportunity cost of my time. I am incredibly grateful for the grant funds, experiences, and assistance. I also wish to express great gratitude for the staff that helped me navigate this issue and emphasize that those who enforce compliance culture rules are usually underpaid staff just doing their jobs, and I have no personal animosity. But I also believe it is important to point out how procedures disincentivize the goals of our work and reinforce colonial norms and structures.

In retrospect, here are actions I could have taken to prevent or mitigate some of these inconveniences. First, when working in places like PR, it

may have been helpful to negotiate with the funders and university grant administration the daily meal cost overruns. Second, writing more working business meals into budget line items may have allowed for time to debrief the day's events and build camaraderie. Third, sharing a sample compliant itemized lodging receipt (ideally translated into Spanish) maybe have helped the lodging agent create a compliant receipt for my stays.

The lack of administrative support and rigid structures were even more apparent at UPRM. Before I came to UVM, I worked at Michigan State University and before that was a PhD student at Cornell University. I noticed early on that UVM, a relatively small LGU, had many fewer resources to support research grants compared to the behemoth LGUs where I had previously worked. After working on and submitting the first grant application with UPRM, I realized how good I had it: the gap between UVM and UPRM was at least as large as that between UVM and the larger LGUs. In the spirit of the Roberto Clemente quotation to open this essay, I committed to using the relative wealth of expertise and resources at UVM to collaborate with UPRM.

As an outsider, I hesitate to criticize or even compare, but I will share a few observations on the differences as I saw them. First, UVM faculty are very much encouraged to seek external funding and granted a good bit of flexibility in time commitment as needed. At UPRM, there are more restrictions. UPRM faculty could not provide any in-kind match of effort and have been very cautious to commit to formal effort on grants. My sense is also that, while faculty at UVM certainly work long hours and in reality have workloads adding to much more than 1.0 Full-time equivalent by any measure, UPRM faculty are even more overloaded, have less time and opportunity to seek out new projects, and their time commitment is much more closely guarded.

Grant application approval through the chains of command at UVM tends to be fairly quick and efficient with faculty playing a small role once the process begins. Getting signatures and approvals of subawards at UPRM was much more time consuming and required faculty persistence and many reminders to move the process along. In at least

one, it required walking a written document to an administrator at the last minute to get approval.

The tasks of subaward management at UVM are handled mainly our Sponsored Program Administration (SPA). Faculty approve invoices and write reports but have little hands-on processing. At UPRM, these tasks fall more to faculty.

With every grant applied for and received, I reminded our SPA pre- and post-award specialists of the differences and possible difficulties of working with UPRM. I emphasized my view of the importance of the work and of our using the resources we have to work with those with fewer. It is, as I stated, the cost of working there and one we would bear.

UVM's greater management capacity has had a very perverse effect, however. The two grants we received were both based at UVM. That means the majority of the money and the majority of indirect costs went to UVM. The travel funds all came from the UVM budgets. UPRM has very restrictive rules on travel that made it easier to put these costs in the UVM budget. UPRM had no subaward at all on the first grant; they only had a line item as consultants for translation services. On the second grant, the UPR subaward paid for a small amount of summer salary and graduate student assistant funds. It totaled only about 20% of the budget and UPRM's indirect (F&A) rate was only 10%. The vast amount of the money and F&A costs went to the wealthier university (UVM) with more resources to manage grants.

The Conundrum

All this leads us to a present-day conundrum. I want desperately to continue the work. It is the most rewarding work, with some of the dearest friends and best people, I have ever done. As the seed grant expired, we discussed next steps. The UVM team noted the inequitable flow of funds and strongly desired that the next grant be based at UPRM, with the vast majority of money going to them, with only a small subaward to UVM. This seemed like the most equitable outcome. Yet discussions with the UPRM colleagues revealed they

simply lacked the capacity to submit and manage the grant, even if the UVM team took the lead in writing the narrative, creating the budget and other tasks. Given the choice of an inequitable grant with money flowing to UVM or no grant, we chose the latter. In the intervening time, Robinson took on a more administrative role, further limiting his ability to collaborate. Efforts to work with other UPRM faculty exposed the same barriers: lack of time, bandwidth, and institutional support to collaborate on external grants.

It is also troubling that the Toolkit has been used minimally in VT and not at all in PR once grant funds expired. It was clearly not relevant enough to be employed by others or in the absence of further funding. While one can critique the reliance on short-term competitive funding in the current environment, most of the blame clearly falls on me.

Implications and Conclusions

My experiences have led me to ponder the broader implications of this collaboration and how an institution with greater assets should engage with those with less. As I discuss above, neoliberal governance regimes across universities and the world exacerbate resource inequality and make food systems development work acutely needed but difficult to sustain. I am left with many questions but few answers. Most painful to ponder, did these partnerships really help Puerto Rico? To what extent and how did our collaboration just reinforce colonial structures and norms? How can we overcome them? How can scholars from wealthier universities, even those who enter with the best of intentions, as I believe we did, overcome this? How can we empower our partners in the face of and without recreating inequitable institutional norms and structures? In our home institutions, how can we overcome the petty and demoralizing specter of compliance culture, especially when its rules work directly against the goals of equity, inclusion and engagement that we seek? I hope that this reflective essay will help foster more equitable partnerships.



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