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Weaponizing Accreditation

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University of Puerto Rico students are on strike against austerity – and in retribution, officials might terminate their school's accreditation.

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hen I was a boy, my grandfather spoke to me about the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez with great esteem. And with good reason. It graduates many more Latino/a engineers than any other university in the world. Various departments on campus receive funding from NASA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and other respected institutions. 98 percent of enrollment is Latino/Hispanic, and over 60

percent receive Pell Grants.

But the Middle States Commission on Higher Education has threatened the UPR's accreditation in response to the university's ongoing student strike in protest of proposed brutal austerity measures. All eleven campuses in the UPR system have been occupied in recent weeks.

But the accreditation board should take a broader view of what is happening on the island. Like Detroit, Harrisburg, and Orange County, California, the Puerto Rican government approved a comprehensive bankruptcy package to relieve unpayable debt. But as US policy is to "make all needful rules and regulations" on the island, the bankruptcy protection was ignored and ultimately nullified.

Rather than respect a bankruptcy procedure similar to that of Argentina, Greece, or a US state, the US Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), a body of legislation that granted a seven-member board — known locally as *La Junta* — absolute plenary power to overrule the Puerto Rican legislature, governor, and public authorities.

La Junta is "a *de facto* government" said Carmen Beatriz Llenín Figueroa, who teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, "a farcical colonial apparatus wielding autocratic, absolute control of all Puerto Rican public institutions."

The mission of PROMESA is not unlike that of a bank: to protect the interests of bondholders. (One member of PROMESA has over \$250,000 in personal investment in Puerto Rican bonds.) Many economists agree that privileging shareholders at the expense of Puerto Rican public institutions — including health care, education, and utilities — is unsustainable and negligent, and may be illegal.

Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz said the board lacks “any understanding of basic economics and democratic accountability” and has a strategy that “makes a recovery a virtual impossibility.” Stiglitz’s analysis is clear: “People will experience untold suffering. And to what end?”

La Junta’s reach includes the University of Puerto Rico. And their demands — \$512 million in cuts — are as irresponsible and unethical as the existence of the board itself.

Our students are engaged in a struggle with the colonial apparatus that threatens their education. Their solidarity movement is a check on the power of PROMESA, one that seizes a collective, public, and democratic voice as an oppositional force to the absolutist power wielded by La Junta. Their demands include:

- That the UPR’s administration shall not penalize any student for expressing themselves and participating in this process of stoppage, manifestation, and conflict in defense of the UPR.
- That all sectors of the UPR community present a university reform plan that represents said community.
- That the Public Debt Auditing Commission and its funds be reestablished immediately, that the auditing process begin immediately, and that a moratorium on the debt be established before and during the auditing process.
- That no tuition increases or tuition exemption eliminations be considered.
- That no budget cuts to the UPR be considered.

Number three suggests that students believe — as do many Puerto Ricans — that much of the debt could be illegal; at the very least, the accounts must be audited before any cuts come into effect. If the budget reductions are engaged, they will bring to an end the university’s ability to attend to students. It will cease to function on the most basic level as an educational institution.

As an educator, I have a profound objection to Middle States’s legitimization of La Junta. Civil society is grounded in principles like democracy, equality, sovereignty, and representation, precisely that which PROMESA seeks to displace in Puerto Rico.

Middle States’s capitulation to the demands of the board concedes the integrity of our profession to a corporate transaction, one that privileges the pockets of those far from Puerto Rico over the severe human costs on the island.

Rather than posturing about rescinding accreditation, and thus redoubling the exploitation from La Junta, Middle States should uphold its own mission, one that is consonant with the student movement at the UPR: the Middle States Commission “assures students and the public of the educational quality of higher education.” In this case, such action can be done only in solidarity: voicing opposition to federal legislation that is intended to supersede democracy.

As Middle States has no policy on record for public institutions that have been seized by external powers, this is an opportunity to instate one: while PROMESA exists and until Puerto Rican debt has been audited, current accreditation certifications should stand in perpetuity. This action would at once contest the unethical nature of PROMESA and assure the existence (and thus quality) of higher education on the island.

Without doubt such a policy would be in effect in an analogous situation on the US mainland: if a Puerto Rican board with no US representation were to legislate unilateral cuts to a public university in Washington DC, Middle States would approach the circumstance in civil objection, not by penalizing the students or the institution through revoking accreditation.

La Junta will destroy Puerto Rican higher education. Our students know that. Middle States should act with the same shrewdness as the strikers — in support of education, democracy, and local control of public institutions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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