A Short History of a Long Commitment

The Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Centro, was founded in 1973, amid the era of the great wakening of demands for social justice for minorities of all types — by ethnicity, color, gender, physical ability, and age. Centro — with its base within the academy — was born as part of these efforts.

In those times, the concepts of open admission and ethnic studies were in their infancy, and the roles of ethnic research in universities were unsettled. The responsibility of the academy itself and its relationship to the community was in flux. New political and social perspectives were blossoming. And in this social ferment, Centro took root.

In 1971, two years prior to Centro’s opening, a group of CUNY professors drafted a proposal for a “Center for Research in Puerto Rican Studies” to be housed at the CUNY Graduate Division and funded by the Ford Foundation. A six-member committee — whose only Puerto Rican member was co-chair María Teresa Babin — proposed to found a research institution that would serve to aid and support the fledgling Puerto Rican Studies departments recently established on several CUNY campuses.

The proposed center was to comprise program subcommittees to oversee the research activities of participating faculty and graduate and undergraduate students. The focus was on Puerto Rican culture, Puerto Rican Studies programs at CUNY, and a cooperative research program with the University of Puerto Rico. In addition, the center’s projected activities included the translation of Spanish language Puerto Rican texts into English; the establishment of a library; curriculum planning and evaluation; and a research focus on Puerto Rican society and culture, both on the island and stateside.

Well intended as this proposal was, it met with great resistance from numerous sectors within the Puerto Rican studies community who favored a broader perspective for the
institute. A coalition of professors, students, educators, and activists calling themselves the Committee for Puerto Rican Studies and Research helped draft a new proposal for a Center for Puerto Rican Studies that attempted to take into account not only pedagogical factors, but also the historic and economic factors that contributed to Puerto Rican migration and thus their contemporary socio-economic standing. This new proposal made similar propositions to one drafted by the University Graduate Division Committee, also calling for a greater concentration on research on Puerto Rican topics, the establishment of a library and the exchange and connections between the island and the states.

What set the Committee for Puerto Ricans Studies and Research’s recommendations apart from all other proposals was its emphasis on community. And while all their recommendations were not included into the document formally establishing Centro, over the years they became integrated into the Centro mission.

On August 15, 1972 the Board of Higher Education approved the establishment of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies and Research at CUNY with funding from the Ford Foundation and CUNY. Frank Bonilla was selected to be the director, and in February 1973 Bonilla started his tenure, and Centro opened its doors.

In the early years, as Centro grew it moved from space to space. Its first location was in the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs at 535 East 80th Street; then 500 Fifth Avenue (Room 930) near the CUNY Graduate Center; then John Jay College, with an auxiliary space at 1692 Lexington Avenue in East Harlem. Finally, in 1983, Centro moved to its current location at Hunter College at the invitation of then-president Donna Shalala.

Today, Centro has grown into a renowned institution with departments specializing in original research, much of it linked to social action; novel approaches to education, including the training of students and faculty in areas of Puerto Rican studies. Centro is also a publisher of research, including CENTRO Journal and books related to diasporan history. Centro recently launched a cutting-edge website. The institute’s outreach efforts include linking to community and community organizations and the presentation of free events featuring Puerto Rican history, arts and culture, and, of course, preservation. The Centro Library and Archives has grown into a nationally esteemed organization for the preservation of the history of Puerto Ricans in diaspora and is the premier research resource on the diaspora.

Centro’s original motto — “Aprender es Luchar, Luchar es Aprender“ — represented its driving concern to generating new knowledge that contributes to individual and community self-affirmation, and empowerment. Centro’s new motto — "Understanding, Preserving, and Sharing the Puerto Rican Experience in the United States“ — is emblematic of its growth as an institution, continuing its original concern and augmenting it with the goals of outreach, collaboration, and dissemination.