

SABBATICAL EXPERIENCE



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HURRICANE MARIA

Hurricane Maria, the most devastating hurricane in 85 years, struck Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017. Hurricane Maria was categorized as the worst natural disaster on record in Puerto Rico as it caused a catastrophe that triggered a major humanitarian crisis in the island. The death toll in Puerto Rico is believed to be far higher than the official toll of 58. The estimated loss ranges from 1,000 to more than 4,000 lives.

Also, reports from different community organizations have indicated that Puerto Rico is far from having completely recovered from the effects of the disaster. Nevertheless, these community organizations — many of them no-for-profit organizations—took the lead in providing relief across the Island. One of these organizations is the “University Institute for the Development of Communities” located at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez (UPRM). During more than seventeen (17) years of its existence, this organization has been helping impoverished communities across the island. After Hurricane Maria, the Institute focused all its efforts to help in the process of the island’s recovery. The Institute at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) in Mayagüez “has adopted a participatory **action research** methodology that involves professors, students and the communities themselves, which are not considered as mere beneficiary participants, but as active subjects contributing to the transformation of the reality in which they are involved”. (<http://www.redsolidaridad.org/instituto-universitario-para-el-desarrollo-de-las-comunidades/>).

Since I am trained in action research, the opportunity to work with the UPR helped me to expand my knowledge on action research, which was primarily focused on service-learning activities. In view of the mission and

the efforts of UPR for rebuilding the Island of Puerto Rico, I took a sabbatical to do the following:

1. Join the Institute at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez for an academic year in its undertaking to help Puerto Rico recover from the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria. My participation was by means of working directly as a volunteer among the communities or the areas that Hurricane Maria affected the most. (See Attachment).
2. As part of my work with the Institute, I also collected data regarding the experience, perceptions, etc. of the participants in the projects for the purpose of presenting the findings to the college community. The survey used to collect data was adapted from Gelmon et al., *Assessing Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*. Boston: Campus Compact, 2001 and translated into Spanish.
3. This experience also helped me to enhance my teaching effectiveness and my techniques on how to develop service-learning activities, something that may not be possible through a normal workload assignment. An article about action research, teaching and service-learning is being developed and will soon be sent to a peer-reviewed journal.

From this experience I learned the following:

Action research as a problem-solving “community” process. When action research is applied to service-learning activities in the community, it turns into a progressive problem-solving process led by individuals working with others in teams or as parts of a “community of practice”. When applied in the classroom, the problem-solving process is an individualistic process in which the teacher is solely involved in the development of action research steps.

Identify key players in the community. One of the things learned when working with the Institute, was the importance of identifying and acknowledging community leaders as crucial and significant persons in the decision-making process. In other words, knowing the community leaders facilitated action and change as the leaders felt empowered and respected, they work toward a common goal developed to change their own communities.

The necessity of providing a guide with expectations, tasks, etc. In order to participate in service-learning activities, students at the UPR were equipped with a written guide in which all the requirements, tasks, assignments, and expectations were listed. The Institute created a very comprehensive written guide to make sure that students and all participants in the service-learning activities were informed of the requirements for completing the service-learning task. This practice can be transferred to service-learning activities in any college setting.

Establish a connection between the course and the service-learning project. I learned that students must understand the connection between the service learning course and the service and learning objectives to be achieved at the service site. By clearly establishing this connection, students were able to identify their role and the role of each of the participants.

Have all participants together at the beginning of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, the Institute conducted a presentation for students who were going to be part of the service-learning activities. In this presentation all the professors who were involved in the project talked about their courses and their expectations. Additionally, some community leaders were present and talked about their experience working with students in the past and about the success of the collaboration between UPR students and their communities.

Be flexible. Participants of service-learning activities should understand that the preparation process for an activity at a service site is not always predictable. Our flexibility for changing and adapting to situations and unforeseen circumstances can assist the partnership in working smoothly producing positive outcomes for everyone involved.

Assess service-learning activities. An assessment tool should be developed to assess service-learning activities after be completed. The UPR in Mayagüez assessed the activities at the end of the semester and professors involved met and assessed all service-learning projects using a rubric created by the Institute. This assessment tool is based in the four stages of action research.

Although my knowledge about action research and service learning increased tremendously, I learned that my island needs me more than ever. Therefore, during every trip I make to Puerto Rico, I always volunteer my time and energy to help people in need—I know we are far from full recovery. I consider this as one of the most valuable and important lessons of this sabbatical.





BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Dr. Sonia Maldonado Torres was born in Puerto Rico and completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. She possesses two Masters' degrees — the first one in Guidance and Counseling from the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, and the second one in Educational Psychology from the University of Albany-SUNY. She also completed a doctoral in Education and Leadership from Fielding University - California.

She has been working at Hostos Community College (HCC) for the past 18 years and is presently working as an Associate Professor in the Teachers Education Unit where she teaches courses in the areas of bilingualism, multiculturalism, special education, language arts, and creative arts among others.

Dr. Maldonado Torres has published her work in different educational peer reviewed research journals. Her research interests are mainly focused on 1) Latino students' preferences in learning, 2) Students' graduation and retention, 3) English Language Learners (ELL), and 4) Multiculturalism among others.

