



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

September 28, 2017

Gregory L. Fenves
President
University of Texas at Austin
110 Inner Campus Drive
Stop G3400
Austin, TX 78712

Dear President Fenves:

We, the undersigned, are Puerto Rican faculty members at the University of Texas at Austin. Some of us were born in the island; others are children of its diaspora in the United States. It also happens that Puerto Rico is also a key area of concern for each of us in our work as academic professionals. We all have devoted a great deal of our research and teaching as well as our spirit to the study of the geography and hydrology; legal, ethnic, social and medical history; arts and letters; and natural and archival resources of the peoples of this remarkable US territory. We still consider it our homeland, "Borinquen preciosa," our precious island nation. So goes an ageless popular song by Rafael Hernández that Puerto Ricans abroad everywhere remember and sing when nostalgia sways us.

As you may know from the news, last week Category 4 Hurricane Maria tore through our Borinquen. It made landfall early Wednesday morning in the southeast and left through the northwest by early afternoon. With sustained winds up to 160 mph on its eyewall, a 60-mile hurricane-force wind diameter and up-to-40 inches of torrential rain, it left a trail of staggering devastation across the archipelago. None of the 78 towns that make up its territory were spared the forces of nature that Maria unleashed. The Secretary of Agriculture declared that 80% of this year's crops were destroyed. Coastal flooding and river overflows left towns underwater and forced the evacuation of entire communities. Landslides in mountainside towns cut out road access and led to numerous casualties. Vast regions everywhere throughout the island are now isolated from each other due to bridge and road collapses, and essential goods like water, food, and fuel have no way of getting to places where they are needed.

Insurance experts are now estimating that Hurricane Maria, the worst ever to hit Puerto Rico since the late 1920s, could be the fifth costliest natural disaster ever on US soil, after Katrina in Louisiana, Harvey in the Houston area, and Sandy in New York City. Still, many suspect that the total human and material loss in this case could be even higher. Before Maria's strike, Puerto Rico's water, energy and communications infrastructure was already in frank deterioration due to defunding and bad management connected to our 72-billion-debt crisis and the current fiscal board's austerity measures. Winds from Hurricane Irma, a Category 5 hurricane that indirectly affected Puerto Rico just a week prior to Maria, were thus able to knock out more than sixty per cent of electric service and had a significant impact on the island's agricultural sector. Hurricane Maria's direct and merciless rampage has tragically plunged the island into a nightmarish, worst-case scenario. Media reports are just beginning to show the enormity of Maria's destruction.

We, the undersigned, are in the process of coordinating peoples and resources at our great university to help out in the rescue and reconstruction effort. We hope that the President's Office as well as other concerned members in our community take initiative regarding Puerto

Rico and other affected Caribbean territories and island nations in this time of need. We hope we can all galvanize the university as it did when it welcomed into its classrooms and libraries students and scholars from Louisiana colleges that had to rebuild after Katrina, and when it offered special financial and academic accommodations and counseling to UT families and students impacted by Harvey in Houston and elsewhere in Texas.

Here are some ways in which we think UT Austin could provide immediate help:

- Just as the University of Texas at Austin received students displaced by Katrina with open arms, it could offer lectureships, semester residencies, tuition waivers or emergency housing to students and faculty relocating from institutions of higher learning in the island.
- UT Austin could waive all overhead fees for research projects funded by the NSF or other such foundations supporting UT faculty collaboration with personnel of university systems in the island to facilitate maximizing the field and data analysis efforts in the island.
- UT Austin could either donate or sell at subsidized prices surplus equipment to affected labs, departments and other such academic centers in the island.
- UT Austin could facilitate access to its online library system to impacted faculty and students as temporary remote users while research facilities and services are repaired and reestablished throughout the local university systems.

Besides these immediate measures, we are also thinking of possible interdepartmental, national, and international research engagements and collaborations to work out long-term solutions to the increasing vulnerability of the Caribbean basin's natural and cultural ecosystem as it faces the ramifying consequences of climate change and the challenge of record-breaking, quickly intensifying hurricanes in years to come. We hope to count with your compassionate consideration in all these endeavors, and look forward to your ideas on how UT Austin can best participate in short- and long-term relief efforts to help resolve this developing humanitarian crisis.

Sincerely,

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