

Puerto Rican students at New York University ask to stay another semester

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Twenty-seven Puerto Rican students, who are attending New York University (NYU) through a program to aid survivors of Hurricane Maria, have requested that the NYU administration extend the program, citing the poor recovery and continued economic instability on the island.

The students were accepted for the spring 2018 semester as part of the NYU Hurricane Maria Assistance Program (HMAP), which allowed students at several universities in Puerto Rico to attend NYU for one semester. The program required that students continue to pay tuition to their home institution, while NYU would provide them with housing, food, health insurance and \$200 worth of credit at the university bookstore.

NYU President Andrew Hamilton, in November 2017, announced the HMAP, stating that the university was “pleased to make it possible for at least some of Puerto Rico’s college students to be able to carry on their studies here while their home institutions recover.”

Similar programs were also implemented at Tulane University, Cornell University and Brown University.

The HMAP recipients have noted in an open letter to Hamilton that the “program was established in order for us to continue our studies while our home institutions, and country, recovered from the destruction witnessed by the world after the passing of Hurricane María. Like you, we hoped our country and home institutions would have returned to their pre-natural-disaster state by this time. Unfortunately, the efforts to rebuild our Puerto Rico have been superficial at best and neglectful at worst.”

The open letter goes on to request that the students accepted as part of the program be extended “from its original one-semester plan to a two-semester plan.”

So far, the open letter has received 69 signatures, predominantly from NYU students. Two separate open letters, which included similar appeals, shared with NYU faculty and student groups have received 54 signatures and 32 signatures, respectively.

However, on May 2, Hamilton denied the students’ request to stay.

The appeal by the students is based on the widely recognized facts that the island’s infrastructure and university system have remained devastated since Hurricane Maria hit in September of last year.

According to the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) 2018 Fiscal Plan, the UPR, which includes 11 campuses, has suffered roughly \$132 million worth of damage as a result of hurricanes Maria and Irma. Enrollment in the university also dropped by over 3,000 students between the 2017 and 2018 financial years.

The UPR also recently announced that it has plans to raise tuition. According to the plan, a credit for undergraduate students will more than double from \$57 to \$115 in the coming year and will rise to \$157 per credit by 2023.

Many HMAP recipients have voiced uncertainty that they will be able to continue their studies at all if they are forced to return to the island.

Priscilla Malavet, a journalism student at UPR Rio Piedras in San Juan, who was able to attend NYU last semester, told *BuzzFeed*, “When I get back home I don’t know what will happen. I’m in the honors program, and we have to take certain classes to complete a thesis. I think I have to drop out of being an honors student because doing classes and a thesis, I cannot pay for it. It’s not just my classes—it’s paying for gas, electricity, apartment, water. It’s a lot of things you have to do.”

In fact, many residents of Puerto Rico still have

difficulty getting basic necessities such as electricity. It is estimated that roughly 22,000 residents remain without power, and the island's electric grid continues to remain unreliable. Despite this, the US Army Corps of Engineers, which was tasked with restoring the electric grid after Hurricane Maria, is preparing to leave the island.

Puerto Rico's infrastructure will likely be further devastated as this year's Atlantic hurricane season begins on June 1. North Carolina State University has already forecasted that there will be 14 to 18 named storms, out of which 7 are expected to reach hurricane strength—which is defined as having a wind force of 74 miles per hour.

Many students that attended NYU through HMAP have expressed concerns that returning to Puerto Rico will ruin their mental health. Carlos Matos, an electrical engineering student from the UPR, told *City Limits*, "I get triggered by flashlights. A lot of the professors at home won't understand you having anxiety episodes, even after Maria. A lot of professors, or the administration themselves won't understand depression."

Angela Elliston, a student at UPR Rio Piedras, also told *City Limits*, "I get triggered by knocks on the door. My heart just drops." She described the still damaged condition of her family home, noting, "My mom is trying to fix it and she's trying to find loans and insurance. The roof is a drain. When it rains, the water just falls from there. We have electricity in the house but we don't have a light because the water came in from there—it's dangerous."

NYU is swimming in wealth and is one of the largest private landowners in New York. The administration has exhibited no reluctance to destroy whole neighborhoods as they seek to expand in the city or utilize near-slave labor to build a satellite campus in Abu Dhabi. NYU has the closest ties to the US military-intelligence complex and is an active participant in war preparations, as has been recently exposed by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

NYU's Board of Trustees includes dozens of ultra-rich figures such as Laurence Fink, who is the chairman and CEO of the asset management firm BlackRock, which has invested in the continued exploitation of Puerto Rico. In 2017, BlackRock held more than \$110 million in Puerto Rican debt.

While NYU has claimed that extending the HMAP program would "cause harm" to the Puerto Rican university's "recovery efforts," for obvious reasons the administration remains silent on the devastating austerity demanded by the major financial firms to which NYU is tied.

The decision by the NYU administration to end HMAP and send students back to Puerto Rico while the island remains devastated is a reflection of the hypocrisy and callousness of the major American corporate university, which is among the largest private institutions of higher learning in the country.



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