



Office of the Dean

21 March 2025

President Search Committee, University of Puerto Rico San Juan, Puerto Rico
Letter of Recommendation for Dr. Edwin J. Barea Rodriguez

Dear Search Committee Members,

I write this letter of recommendation to enthusiastically support Dr. Edwin J. Barea Rodriguez for the position of President of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). I have known Dr. Barea Rodriguez for 12 years through the organization, Partnership for Undergraduate Life Sciences (PULSE). We have worked together on several projects over these years, in which he has shown excellent & creative leadership, outstanding negotiating skills, a wide understanding of the challenges in modern higher education, and a deep passion for student success. In reading through reviewed Dr. Barea Rodriguez's vitae and application letter, I am convinced he has developed the leadership qualities, administrative experience, and academic excellence that UPR seeks in its next president. Below I will highlight attributes that I have witnessed, had solid knowledge of, and have experienced in ways that I believe make him an outstanding candidate for President of the University of Puerto Rico.

A few notes on my perspective on leadership. I have served multiple roles at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD: 52% LatinX/Hispanic; 22% Black in student population) over my 27 years at this university. This included serving as interim provost, dean [current role for past 13 years], and department chair [8 years]. More importantly in the last dozen years, UHD had 5 presidents and 5 provosts. In these two leadership roles there were exceptional leaders and others quite capable but not particularly inspiring or visionary. I believe that Dr. Barea Rodriguez will be one those exceptional leaders at UPR that I have had the privilege of working with at UHD.

Academic and Administrative Leadership. Dr. Barea Rodriguez's vitae shows extensive academic leadership. From my understanding of his institution, he has served several positions during a period of leadership changes, above and below whatever administrative level he was at. I think his accomplishments shows his adaptability and steadfastness to his personal mission to further the success of his university. More directly in my experience, I have seen Edwin lead many efforts in PULSE, some that have required difficult conversations with his fellows in PULSE. Dr. Barea Rodriguez does not shy away from difficult conversations and is adept at managing them without diminishing anyone he is conversing with. PULSE is a collection of academic leaders from across the USA, from every institution type in higher education. As such, it is filled with accomplished egos. Edwin was instrumental in helping PULSE understand and act on its lack of inclusiveness to serve all university types and very meritorious academic leaders. It took skill and bravery managing these conversations to address the organization's blind spots.

I would like to make a comment on Edwin's administrative path & experience as it may appear untraditional for a candidate for university president. As a vice-provost and associate

dean, he worked for a provost and dean, respectively. It is clear from his application letter and resume that he had autonomy and took creative initiative to act on key academic issues at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). In his supportive administrative roles, he has an impressive list of accomplishments, where *his work* brought success to them. As a provost and dean, we rely on colleagues in this role *to do and lead* a project to success. This kind of experience is tremendously valuable in presidential leadership as it speaks to a deep understanding of what it takes to bring success to initiatives.

Student Success and Inclusive Excellence. From the earliest interactions that I can remember with Edwin in PULSE, his north star in our activities has been student success. While PULSE's programming focus on faculty & departmental development and transformation, Edwin is always clear in workshops he has done what the real target audience is – students. Hence, I think Dr. Barea Rodriguez has the critical balance needed in a high leadership position to understand the causal connections between faculty and university development and student success.

In these challenging times, it is important to emphasize that Dr. Barea Rodriguez has a deeper & wider understanding of inclusive excellence than most people I have come across where *no one* is excluded, and *all* are welcome into the opportunity to expand their minds and enter exciting careers. I say this as a grant principal investigator in the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Inclusive Excellence program.

Dr. Barea Rodriguez is particularly accomplished in bringing financial resources through federal funding to enhance student success. The Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE) and Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC), each of which brings programming to enhance belonging and achievement in science to undergraduates are highly competitive awards. Edwin has leveraged these to greatly enhance student success in STEM at UTSA. Additionally, Edwin led the UTSA STEM Transfer Center, where he developed important experience working with first-generation and older students, many returning to school after many years in the workforce. This experience brings an important perspective to academic leaders seeking to broaden access and success towards degree completion. At my institution, these students disproportionately give back to the university, so Edwin's focus here is valuable as a university president.

An important aspect of student success and inclusive excellence is the physical spaces we create for students and faculty. Edwin's work in this area while he was associate dean was impressive, and valuable at his university and was impactful to me. At my university, we were getting our first laboratory building for the sciences. Important to my thinking as owner of the project were my conversations with Edwin, from which we developed a building that projected belonging and a passion for excellence. While, spending anytime with Dr. Barea Rodriguez will reveal is passion for developing the mental spaces for success, coupled to imagining and building the accompanying physical spaces is fuel for cultivating excellence for a university community.

Having served on our most recent president search at the University of Houston-Downtown, Dr. Barea Rodriguez's experience in developing inclusive excellence for student success is unique. This experience includes his knowledge and execution of evidence-based student success strategies; building genuine environment that further develops inclusive excellence; knowledge of modern students as a teacher and mentor; and having had research program in the biosciences. I bring up the last as it one of the biggest resource challenges universities will be facing in the coming decade in developing & sustaining first class research.

Further, Dr. Barea Rodriguez's roles in PULSE have given him opportunities to learn the variety of challenges other universities face and how they are addressing them, providing him a

rich boots-on-the-ground view that can be effective in working with the provost, deans, chairs, faculty, staff, and students of UPR.

Dedication & Talent towards the Advancement of UPR & Puerto Rico.

Dr. Barea Rodriguez has had an ongoing relationship with Puerto Rico's higher education community for as long as I have known him, and it has ramped up considerably in recent years. This is clear from his statement of interest and working with him in PULSE. I know at a personal level that he holds a deep desire to return to Puerto Rico and return to make a difference in promoting educational excellence.

Edwin's social ability to connect with people and draw them into action is exceptional. I think this skill and Edwin's joyful & determined passion will be invaluable in building community relationships with stakeholders throughout Puerto Rico, which will lay an excellent foundation for bringing in financial resources to the university.

Leadership Style & Closing. In watching 6 presidents in my years at UHD, I have seen six different personalities and a few leadership styles. What have stood out for me have been those whose behaviors (not their personal description of themselves) are those who practice is collaborative and service leadership with their university community and the city they serve. This requires a wealth of personal energy, commitment, and talent for connecting with people with humility and respect. I believe Dr. Barea Rodriguez will be this kind of university president. Edwin reminds me of one of our impactful interim presidents, President Michael Olivas*, who helped UHD through a difficult period, by bringing fresh exuberance to the university and reigniting community interest in UHD. Like Michael, Dr. Barea Rodriguez is one who brings a joyful enthusiasm that is infectious, inspiring, and that can bring excitement to the University of Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Akif Uzman".

J. Akif Uzman
Dean, College of Sciences & Technology



* <https://www.law.uh.edu/news/spring2022/0422Olivas.asp>