

Conference on Autism and Asperger Syndrome

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What is Autism? What symptoms characterize Asperger Syndrome? What are the differences between the two? These were just a few of the questions answered by panelists and doctors, Yessika Varela, Nicolás Linares, Simón E. Carlo, Yacilet Jiménez and Ana Miró, at the conference on Autism and Asperger Syndrome. (“*Hablemos de autismo y asperger*”)

Last Thursday, September 11, 2008, students, professors and community members gathered at the Figueroa Chapel Amphitheater, at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez (UPRM), to familiarize themselves about these two disorders. At the conference the video, “*No todos somos iguales*” made its debut. The video showed the successful experiences of three UPRM students, Carlos Osvaldo Rodríguez, Carlos Enrique Rodríguez, and Manuel Ferreira, who even with Asperger Syndrome were able to obtain degrees in Engineering.

Professor Teresita Cruz, Associate Dean of Students, explained that this particular disorder, Asperger Syndrome, sparked her interest because it isn’t a commonly known disorder and it has distinct necessities. This special interest motivated her to speak with other professionals about the disorder and what it consists of.

“This special interest is what made me decide to make a video about these young UPRM students, so that other students, who have the same disorder, would know that they could earn their degrees too,” said Cruz, who was in charge of coordinating the conference.

According to the panelists Yessika Varela and Yalizet Jiménez, Asperger Syndrome is one of five developmental disorders identified in the diagnostic manual, and statistics about mental disorders. This condition is characterized by developmental difficulties in the areas of socialization, the ability to communicate, motor skills, and other behaviors.

The panelists noted that Autism, although it is similar to Asperger Syndrome, is defined as a severe developmental disorder that occurs in the first three years of an infant's life. Autism affects the normal brain functioning, which impacts the areas of social interaction, and communication skills, more specifically a marked difficulty in non-verbal and verbal communication. This disorder affects each individual in a different way and to various degrees.

The conference's fundamental purposes were for the Committee on Law 51 to comply with their responsibility to divulge information about handicapped persons, and to train future specialized professionals in the field of Special Education. (Law 51- law about the integration of services for handicapped citizens)

"The principal objectives were to prepare experts, on the Island, that work with handicapped persons, to carry out research about these disorders, and to emphasize the importance that holds the University for these students, that through education they may improve their quality of life," said Cruz.

Other conference objectives included creating awareness among the general college population about students with these disorders. "We are interested that UPRM, professors as well as the general community, does its part so that students with these disorders are able to achieve their academic goals in a shorter time period," stated Cruz.

One of the conference assistants, Leslia Rivera, Case Manager for the Mayagüez association of Handicapped Persons, felt that the activity was very enriching, in the sense that it educated the audience about Autism and Asperger Syndrome.

“The panelists filled in the missing information for many parents of children with Autism or Asperger Syndrome, who don’t know what to do. Also, I was surprised by the help that the students give to their fellow students with limitations, it let me know that we can still count on the youth,” revealed Rivera.