
Institutions seek expanded exchange in Cuba

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Last October, the Institute of International Education led a delegation of college and university officials from the United States on a cultural immersion trip to Cuba, the first of what officials hoped would be many following the [return of diplomatic relations with the country](#).

Since then, thousands of students and dozens of officials from U.S. institutions have traveled to the island in the expanded version of cultural exchange agreements between the two nations. And while U.S.-Cuba study abroad programming is not new, new possibilities for collaborative research and development are beginning to emerge for a wide range of U.S. colleges, while maintaining traditional roots of cultural immersion.

“For a long time, study abroad was the only route to Cuba. But we learned how much potential there is from both sides, and interest from both sides to collaborate on a deeper level,” says Clare Banks, Assistant Director for International Partnerships with IIE.

Last month, a group of five HBCU presidents traveled to Cuba on to meet with faculty members and to share perspectives on mutual interests and ways to build capacity for U.S. and Cuban institutions.

For example, said Tom Joyner Foundation spokesperson Neil Foote, “Central State University has a huge environment and water resource management program, which is a huge opportunity,” for collaboration around environmental capacity-building. “The intent was to be exploratory, and we received perspectives about the political, social and economic conditions faced by the Cuban people, and how our schools may be of help in improving some of those conditions,” he said.

Organizations like IIE and the Tom Joyner Foundation partner with colleges and universities to broker relationships between the schools and the country in new areas of partnership. According to Banks, leaders and faculty have growing interest in addressing mutual research areas like agricultural development, environmental sustainability and public health, and through series of conference calls, white papers and travel, the group helps universities to

identify areas of mutual interest, while working to reduce cultural and programmatic obstacles to partnerships.

Among those obstacles, the misnomer that the United States is introducing the concept of international study and research to Cuba, which Banks says have existed there for years.

“What we have now are true, mutually beneficial collaborations. There’s a high level of knowledge on both sides, especially because Cuba has had existing partnerships in Caribbean and in African nations. We are the ones coming late to the game; they aren’t starting from scratch, and we don’t have to teach them a lot.”

IIE’s program has attracted participation from diverse systems and institutions, including several institutions from the California State University and the City University of New York Systems joining Ivy League University of Pennsylvania and public Florida Gulf Coast University as part of the Cuban exchange consortium.

Sarah Lawrence College lays claim to the nation’s [longest consecutive-running Cuban study abroad program](#). Established in the early 2000s, the program allows a maximum of 16 students to take a full course load at a number of Cuban institutions, including the University of Havana and the Instituto Superior de Artes, the nation’s prominent art institution.

According to officials, the cultural immersion boosts exposure to different methods in teaching and learning and promotes growing knowledge base in the fine arts.

“Students get to spend the semester in a completely different culture, and learn about something outside of the typical college experience,” said Chris Olson, Assistant Director of International Programs at Sarah Lawrence. “We’ve had Hispanic students who weren’t native speakers vastly accelerate their mastery of the language. A lot of students are taking courses in arts, dance and music, but overall it opens their eyes to possibly studying abroad again.”

Expanded collaboration between academics at the two countries is an opportunity Shaw University President Tashni Dubroy embraces.

“Partnering with countries like Cuba in a global exchange program will heighten the authenticity of our academic programs, as our classrooms will come alive when students are taught social, political and economic concepts, and able to travel overseas for experiential learning opportunities,” she said.
