

**“Building Bridges Over Troubled Water:  
A Guide to Developing Academic Relations  
with Cuban Institutions”**

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## **Abstract**

American academics are increasingly interested in developing academic study abroad and exchange programs in Cuba. A lack of information and communication on this topic severely hampers such efforts, as does the inherently problematic nature of operating such programs. This essay examines the major issues and problems in developing academic programs in Cuba while offering proven methods of effectively confronting these issues. By developing programs in Cuba, the article suggests that American higher education can play a leading and effective role in improving relations between the two countries.

## **Introduction**

While interest in developing academic programs in Cuba among American colleges and universities has increased dramatically over the past four years, few institutions have availed themselves to the myriad of opportunities for collaboration that exist in Cuba. In large part this reflects the host of complexities that await the scholar who seeks to develop a project in Cuba. These range from U.S. Department of Treasury licensing procedures, opposition by vocal U.S.- based minorities, communications costs and problems, security concerns and an overall climate of uncertainty concerning the future of bilateral relations between the countries. While these problems have limited the development of such programs, they have not dampened interest in them.

This article examines these and other issues of concern for faculty and administrators who are interested in developing academic programs on the island. Given the paucity of dialogue between the governments, the role, and importance, of academic institutions in promoting relations is correspondingly higher. In addition, such institutions have an obligation to provide opportunities for their students to study cultures and political, social and economic systems different than their own. Few places, if any, on this hemisphere offer the opportunities in this regard that Cuba does.

The data presented here is largely based on the experience gained in establishing and developing the Cuban Studies Institute at Tulane University. The Institute promotes sustained academic collaboration and exchange with Cuban counterpart organizations and scholars, cultural exchange and international dialogue. It incorporates a broad network of collaborative relationships with the University of Havana and other universities as well as over two dozen other intellectual, government and non-government organizations.

In addition, the Institute organizes the Summer in Cuba Program. This was the first undergraduate program nationally offered by an American Center for Latin American Studies and offers a wider array of courses than any other such university

sponsored program in the US. In addition, the Institute offers conferences on topics related to Cuba, a Speaker's Series on Cuba, a book exchange program and short courses in Cuba in areas such as conflict resolution and disaster mitigation. The Institute also promotes research and the interdisciplinary development and integration of Cuba-related topics and material into the university curricula through advising, academic matchmaking, licensing facilitation and travel grants for professors and graduate students engaged in work in Cuba.

The Institute has also been involved in the promotion of cultural relations between New Orleans and Havana. New Orleans, a city much more "Caribbean" than "Southern," shares much history with Cuba, and specifically Havana. Not only are both cities approximately the same size, but both share a past of Spanish colonial rule, trade relations, and economies dependent on tourism, sugar and maritime commerce. In addition, the Cuban, Creole and African descendent populations, strengths in tropical and other medical services, and commitment to architectural preservation further bind these communities.

### **Legal Issues in Program Development**

One factor limiting the development of academic programs in Cuba is a lack of knowledge concerning the legality of such initiatives. Indeed, people often think such programs are illegal, and often they are correct. Almost any reader of this essay could go to Cuba tomorrow legally under American law; but unless they fall into certain categories, they cannot spend any currency there! As such, they would have to be "fully hosted" by someone not subject to American law. Journalists regularly employed in a news gathering capacity, diplomats and certain other categories of people may travel largely unencumbered to Cuba, and spend money, under what is called a General License issued by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in the Department of Treasury. This office administers financial sanctions against countries such as Iraq, North Korea, Libya and Cuba.

All other legal categories of travelers must apply for a license from OFAC. Since October, 1995, these include academics, enrolled degree-seeking undergraduate and graduate students, humanitarian agency workers and religious leaders engaged in specific activities. The license, if granted, permits one to spend up to \$100 U.S. per day for food, lodging and incidental expenses. Purchases of artwork, videos and informational materials such as books and journals are not subject to these spending limits. It is important to recognize that anyone subject to American law, which includes immigrants and those with dual citizenship, must abide by these regulations or face stiff fines and/or incarceration. With such a license, an academic may travel to Cuba for a limited duration of time and for a specific purpose.

The preparation of a license application is a simple process, which in essence involves preparing a letter providing basic information responding to the OFAC regulations. Such an application should be submitted at least seven weeks prior to anticipated departure. The main obstacle in the licensing process, if one fulfills the necessary requirements, is the delay involved in OFAC reviewing the application and making a determination on it.

Some observers have accused OFAC of deliberately stalling on such applications to reduce the number of applicants or to cause one to cancel the trip. Irrespective of the frequently compelling nature of such assertions, it is important to recognize that OFAC is understaffed given the scope of their responsibilities and this clearly does not expedite the process. The result is that often licenses are granted one or two days prior to departure, if even then. People have even received licenses days after they or their group were scheduled to depart! Naturally this wreaks havoc with one's travel plans, especially when one considers that only licensed travel agents may make reservations for travel to Cuba, and only *after* they have received a copy of your license.

Given the complexities of the licensing process, scholars are well advised to read and follow the regulations closely, submit their application with plenty of lead-time, and

be patient and persistent. Proper follow up does facilitate the process, as does, when necessary, the mobilization of political support of congressional representatives and the higher administration of the sponsoring college or university.

In the end, licensing is always a problematic process given the confluence to political pressures on OFAC and their mission. On the other hand, when one does finally have a license, they are through the most difficult part of preparing for their trip. While this overview has offered general information on the licensing process, there is no substitute for a thorough examination of the regulations, which are easily obtainable, along with a list of authorized travel providers, through the web site or fax on line services offered by OFAC.

### **Academic Issues in Program Development**

If and when one clears the hurdles involved in obtaining the license, they will find that working in Cuba is not only stimulating but that there are almost unlimited opportunities for academic collaboration, exchange and program development. It is the experience of this writer that Cubans on the whole are eager to collaborate at the individual and institutional levels. This eagerness is combined with a strong sense of punctuality and follow through which makes it one of the most rewarding and pleasant places to work, research or study.

In developing study abroad programs, concerns of academic quality and the politicization of the syllabus and program are often raised by the oversight committees of sponsoring universities. Given people's perceptions of Cuba, the responses they elicit, and the highly vocal nature of segments of the Cuban-American community, the concerns raised in this regard are often stronger than with other countries.

In order to minimize these issues, several points should be kept in mind. First, Cuba is not the only place where programs run the risk of politicization, and whatever academic standards are applied to a Cuba program should also be applied to others

that a university operates, and vice versa. Second, academic quality concerns should be shared and discussed candidly with the Cuban counterpart organization. On the whole, Cuban institutions recognize the difficulties American institutions encounter in establishing and operating such programs, and are genuinely responsive to and respectful of their concerns.

In addition, the sponsoring university can develop the syllabus in such a manner that the more highly charged issues are dealt with in a way which does not compromise the course. It is important to realize that Cuba possesses extensive intellectual resources, and that finding highly qualified instructors for given topics is not problematic. Depending on the nature of the class and program, specialized agencies may also be interested in being program hosts or sending guest speakers. Generally, well-trained professionals who are also capable of offering high quality courses staff these agencies.

### **Administrative Issues in Program Development**

While academic quality is a crucial issue, which requires close and constant attention, administrative issues will likely consume more time. While few people realize this at the outset, the development and organization of a program in Cuba, whether study abroad or faculty exchange-based, requires disproportionately more resources than similar programs in most other countries.

High communications costs and unreliable telephone, fax and email services to Cuba are just the beginning. Depending on where the sponsoring institution is located, the local Cuban-American community may voice strong opposition to the program to the administration of the college or university as well as to the press and congressional representatives. Hate mail should not surprise the organizer, nor should a difficulty in establishing an effective dialogue with one's opponents. While the younger generation of Cuban-Americans is on the whole more curious about Cuba and more interested in traveling there, on the whole this does not extend into much of the cohort who witnessed the revolution. While it is important to stress the objectives of the program,

the steps taken to ensure academic integrity, and the nature of academic freedom, those who oppose the program will probably continue to do so.

During the program development phase, counterpart selection will require travel to Cuba, a complex task in itself discussed above. Once there they will find that given the present orientation of U.S. foreign policy, American academics are often initially regarded with some degree of suspicion. While people to people exchanges are a goal actually shared for different reasons by both governments, the U.S. government has explicitly encouraged such exchanges as a means of subverting the Cuban government. Although the Cuban government is well aware that many Americans and specifically academics are highly critical of U.S. policy, their concerns in this regard are nevertheless understandable. The result is a need for an incremental process of trust building which can culminate in the establishment of a program, whether it is study abroad, exchange or research collaboration.

The selection of participants on both sides of the equation is also critical for the success of the program. Unlike many other countries and for the reasons just discussed, for American academics in Cuba there are no self-regarding acts. Just like mountaineers tied together on a glacier, when one slips all risk being pulled down. Individuals not sensitive to the environment in which they operate and/or who lack a requisite degree of diplomatic skill jeopardize much more than their own research or program, but that of their colleagues.

In a study abroad context, the same concerns also apply to student selection. Keeping the group small and carefully selecting the participants on the basis of an interview in addition to their application can assist in the screening process. Previous experience in a developing country context is also helpful. This is especially so in Cuba, where many visitors who stay more than a few days describe it as somewhat of a "hardship post." Given that the interests and priorities of a student are often different than those of a professor, the value of an orientation session is correspondingly higher. Here it is important to stress the avoidance of activities which have the potential of



jeopardizing the program and the need to be circumspect in one's activities. Common sense makes a *lot* of common sense in Cuba.

Just as currency restrictions complicate travel to Cuba, they also complicate one's stay in Cuba. American credit cards cannot be used on the island, and the types of travelers checks accepted there vary with time. The licensed travel provider arranging the trip should have current information on which brands of traveler's check are accepted. Overall, there is little or no need to obtain Cuban pesos as almost all transactions for tourists and Cubans alike are now in American dollars. While some traveler's checks can be changed in hotels and exchange houses, it is always a good idea to have plenty of dollars in small denominations to avoid problems. Unless they have a credit card drawn from a bank outside of the United States, this is especially the case for the directors of a study abroad program who may find themselves suddenly in a dire need for cash in the event of an emergency.

One's living arrangements, whether student or professor, exert great influence over the degree of cultural immersion an international experience offers. Unfortunately, homestay arrangements are more problematic in Cuba than many other countries. While previously such arrangements were not permitted under Cuban law, new regulations now permit individuals to rent out part of their residences. In an effort to avoid stimulating competition with the hotel industry, however, such rentals are taxed in a manner which makes them cost about the same if not more than many hotels. In addition, the facilities offered in homes often lack the amenities that many students and scholars desire, such as flushing toilets, furnished kitchens and a telephone. As a result, one's enthusiasm for the homestay experience may quickly wane unless they are chosen carefully.

In addition to those concerns, if one seeks to lodge several individuals in numerous houses, the counterpart agency in Cuba will probably become involved. While this can solve many problems, it also can cause others which may limit the authenticity of the experience.

Security and health issues also figure prominently in the concerns of students, parents and researchers alike. While crime has increased slightly over the past several years in Havana, it probably remains the safest Latin American capital and perhaps one of the safest cities of its size in the hemisphere. As a result, petty crime comprises the majority of risk due to the discreet but pervasive police presence and the strict application of public safety laws.

While the ability of the Cuban government to provide health services to their population has declined in recent years due to economic problems, there has been an increase of services for fee- (read dollar) paying patients. Facilities for such services are better supplied than many other hospitals in Cuba. In the event that a medical evacuation was necessary, this can be arranged through the U.S. Interests Section. It is worth noting that while the U.S. and Cuba have no diplomatic relations, the U.S. staffs the largest mission in Cuba.

### **Conclusion**

The process of setting up academic programs in Cuba has been variously described as a “snakepit” and a “mine field.” And while the content of this essay may appear to substantiate these assertions, it is in no way intended to discourage those interested in establishing a program there. A good deal of patience, persistence and diplomacy can bring a program to fruition, and it will certainly have been worth the effort. The effects go beyond the exchanges, and at this point in time American higher education is leading the reintegration of Cuba and the United States into their respective social fabrics. By doing so academics and students alike are achieving what governments have failed to do.

## **Biography**

Nicholas Robins holds a Ph.D. in Latin American Studies from Tulane University, with concentrations in political science, history and community development. He is director of the Cuban Studies Institute of the Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. Dr. Robins also is adjunct professor in the Schools of Business and Public Health and Tropical Medicine.