

By Janet Hulstrand

Developing Study Abroad Programs in Cuba

WHILE SEMESTER-LONG U.S. STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS have been allowed in Cuba for many years, with President Barack Obama's signing of an executive order in 2011, which allowed short-term programs to be offered, the number of opportunities for U.S. students to study in Cuba has grown rapidly.

And while the opening and easing of relations between Cuba and the United States has continued apace in the years since then, there are still special considerations in planning such programs.

Considerations

"Both the U.S. and Cuba still have significant travel restrictions in place," says Jim Hall, president and CEO of World Strides, which partners with faculty and administrators to develop education abroad programs. He adds, "The first regular commercial direct flights between the two countries only began in early September 2016... and although the infrastructure has improved, there is much still being developed and refined concerning U.S.-Cuban travel."

"The recent influx of visitors from the U.S. is causing a strain in Cuba, particularly in Havana," says Erika Ryser Garcia, assistant vice president of program management and development at the Institute for Study Abroad, Butler University (IFSA-Butler). "Hotel rooms are hard to find, there are not enough buses to meet the demand, translators are stretched thin. The fast pace of changes inside Cuba,

and travel issues such as dealing with visas, make it challenging to know what you need and how to get it. It requires staying constantly tuned in to changes as they occur."

Establishing a new program in Cuba also can be challenging, Garcia says, because many of the well-known institutions in Cuba are already full, with as many partnerships as they can take on. But, she adds, "Many lesser-known institutions, in and out of Havana, are of extremely high quality, and new programs are encouraged to seek them out for partnership." She adds, "IFSA-Butler is helping institutions overcome hurdles to establishing new programs by collaborating on customized student and faculty experiences."

"I think that one of the key challenges to providing programs in Cuba is the discrepancy between our perception of policy changes and actual infrastructure," says Beth Laux, director of learning abroad in the University of Utah's Office for Global Engagement. "It's important to remember that while the interpretation of U.S. and Cuban policy is changing, the infrastructure to support those changes still has to be built." For example, Laux explained, some of the

A class at the University of Cienfuegos in Cuba



DAIRO MORENO



On the campus of the University of Cienfuegos

restrictions on communication have been lifted; however, communication still has its limitations. Obtaining reliable access to the Internet can be difficult, often causing lengthy delays as institutions try to coordinate program details. She adds, “We’ve had similar experiences with financial transactions and other regulatory processes.”

There are also considerations related to dealing with restrictions on the types of activities that U.S. citizens are allowed to engage in in Cuba. According to Dan Keller, vice president of operations for World Strides, “We have to work within the rules of the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and with Cuban government agencies. The program requirements are mandated by OFAC, not by the Cuban government, to ensure that American students engage in meaningful ‘People-to-People’ activities with Cubans, with a guideline of six hours per day of such activities, that is, no tourism. Arranging these activities with Cuban government agencies requires much coordination.”

“One of the challenges we faced was developing a community engagement program,” says Laux. “Traditionally, there have been restrictions on the type of volunteer work that students could do in Cuba. Over the past few years, those restrictions have relaxed a bit, but there is still some ambiguity in how the new policy guidance is enforced and interpreted. We resolved that issue by allowing students to engage in indirect service while we continue to assess the evolving interpretations of U.S. and Cuban policy.”

It is not always easy to obtain accurate academic content for the courses, Laux says. “This is an exciting time to teach a course on Cuba. The rate of change in the country is incredible, and that fosters very interesting and

engaging class discussions. But several of our faculty have indicated that this dynamic can make it difficult to find scholarly materials for the course. As soon as materials are published, they seem to be out of date. It is a constant battle for professors to make sure that the course content is accurate and reflective of current conditions in Cuba.”

According to Garcia, another effect of the surge in U.S. visitors is that resources are being diverted from Cubans to the tourist sector. “For example, in the heat of summer, many public offices are asked not to use their air conditioners—to make sure there is enough energy fueling the tourist sector. ... Also, few Cubans have access to fish and seafood, although it is widely available to those eating in hotels and private restaurants.” She adds, “As educators, we need to be conscientious of this situation, and examine how we can contribute to solutions.”

Ruth Behar, professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, and coauthor, with Richard Blanco, of the blog *Bridges to Cuba*, created and taught several semester-long programs in Cuba starting in 2010. “Cuba offers students the opportunity to immerse themselves in a vibrant and evolving culture that is as complex as it is contradictory, refusing easy explanations,” she says. “At the same time, it shouldn’t be looked upon as a bottomless pit from which to extract ‘raw materials’ to be processed by sophisticated American students. Opportunities need to be created for American students to interact with Cuban students and for them to work together on research projects and creative pursuits. *Bridges to and from Cuba* need to be sincere and real, to create lasting exchanges for people in Cuba and the U.S.”

“The identification of common interests for cooperation constitutes one of the basic elements for achieving

strong and lasting relationships,” says Ibrahim Amhed León Tellez, director of the Center for Local Development and Management Studies at the Universidad de Granma in Cuba. He adds, “I believe that significant progress has been made, which has enabled greater cooperation between Cuban and American universities. However, the most important steps are still pending. A fuller and sustainable cooperation requires the removal of all restrictions and the blockade imposed on Cuba by the United States. This will help to foster a climate of respect and trust.”



Williams Cruz Perdomo (guide), Anna Pruett (student), Danny Miedzinski (student), Arley Perera Perez (above, producer), Maykel Alfonso Alvarez (below, sound operator), Devon Kodger (student), and Rafael Conzalez Meneses (camera)

Lessons Learned and Tips

“Many of the best practices that apply to programs in other parts of the world also apply to program development in Cuba,” Laux says, adding, “My first suggestion is to plan ahead. Given the rapidly changing policy interpretations and the status of new infrastructure, I would recommend that universities start the planning process at least 12–18 months in advance.” She also urges those planning new programs not to reinvent the wheel. “There are organizations that have established strong ties in Cuba that can be extremely helpful. Our programs collaborate with providers such as CIEE and World Strides. Partnering with these organizations was critical in our ability to communicate with our on-site partners, and to identify academic and logistical resources on the ground.”

The University of Utah has two faculty-led programs that include time spent in Cuba: one focuses on entrepreneurship, the other on political science, public administration, and community engagement. They are both embedded in semester-length courses that take place on the main campus in Salt Lake City. “The travel portion of the program takes place over spring break and fall break,” Laux says. “The great thing about this model is that the postprogram reflection is folded right into the course content once the students return to the U.S.”

For programs just getting started, Garcia recommends partnering with another U.S.-based educational organiza-

tion that is already operating in Cuba. She also stresses the need for advance planning. “We are encouraging our partners to plan well in advance and to consider offering programs in months when demand is lower,” she says. “March and May tend to be very congested, and programs find a particular strain on buses and hotels during those months. We also work with our partners to place students in private homes, which helps address the hotel shortage, provides a look into Cuban daily life, and helps support small businesses.”

In December 2015, Gerald Hooper, professor of film and video at Drexel University, took a group of students to Cuba for an intensive two-week course in documentary film production. “I set it up from scratch, with EICTV, the Cuban Film School, and a pre-eminent film school for all of Latin America. We established a formal relationship with EICTV, and the class was cotaught with one of their faculty members, Enrique Colina. It was an incredible collaboration.” He adds, “Fortunately, EICTV had already been running three-week workshops with University College London and Ryerson University in Toronto, so they had a model in place that we were able to use. Still, there were many things to work out, and it took some time. I started to develop the program about a year before we actually went.” In the past year, Drexel University has also embarked on a partnership with the University of Cienfuegos in Cuba.

Michelle Ranieri first went to Cuba as a student in 2010. Now resident director for IFSA-Butler in Havana, her advice for faculty looking to build programs in Cuba is to be patient and optimistic. “Things in Cuba run on a different timetable than in the U.S., and to try to change that can be seen as imperialistic. Cubans value relationships more than business, and when you’re here you’ll have to learn to do the same.”

Opportunities

“U.S. study abroad programs in Cuba are important for cultural exchange and enrichment, and for the strengthening of professional and friendly relations between [our] people,” says León Tellez. It benefits both sides, [when students] share knowledge and experience from different perspectives and contexts...These programs also stimulate international cooperation between Cuban and American universities and contribute to showing the possibilities and working results of Cuban institutions of higher education. This also contributes to improving their international positioning, and a greater openness to internationalization.”

“There are endless topics for students to study in Cuba, including the political system, the health system, gender and sexuality, tourism, the educational system, the visual

NAFSA Engages with Cuba

As momentum continues toward the full restoration of diplomatic ties between the United States and Cuba, NAFSA's commitment to internationalization partnerships, academic exchanges, and joint research to develop new opportunities for higher education leaders to collaborate is stronger than ever.

On October 24, 2016, NAFSA and the Republic of Cuba Ministry of Higher Education signed a memorandum of understanding in Washington, D.C., signifying a joint commitment to building higher education partnerships between the two nations and to advocating for the lifting of remaining trade and travel restrictions on Cuba. The agreement signaled Cuba's interest in supporting the engagement of its higher education institutions, in Havana and throughout the country, in the internationalization landscape with U.S. institutions.

Concurrent to this meeting, NAFSA was privileged to be in Cuba for the 2016 Scientific Conference of the University of Cienfuegos, including the 2nd Workshop of Strategic Alliances for the Internationalization of Higher Education (Cuba TIES). NAFSA's then Executive Director and CEO Marlene Johnson was the keynote

speaker, and a representative from the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education warmly addressed the audience.

As Johnson noted, NAFSA views the Cuba TIES workshop as an integrally important way to develop internationalization partnerships, promote academic exchanges, and encourage joint research to support the normalization process between the United States and Cuba.

Higher education professionals from eight Cuban universities participated, along with representatives from Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. The discourse of the event focused on the internationalization of higher education and inspired attendees to consider opportunities and strategies for collaboration. Since the first Cuba TIES Workshop in 2015, five U.S. colleges and universities have signed agreements with the University of Cienfuegos, and many delegations have traveled back to Cuba to continue the important partnership building.

NAFSA is privileged to be part of this important moment in history, knowing that higher education plays a vital role. In addition,



recognizing that connecting students, scholars, educators, and citizens across borders is a critical tool for mutual understanding and building a more secure and peaceful world, NAFSA is committed to advocating with Congress until all remaining trade and travel restrictions have been removed. Learn more about how to be part of the NAFSA Cuba Engagement Initiative, both by developing sustainable partnerships with Cuban higher education institutions and by advocating to lift remaining trade and travel restrictions, at www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement, and consider joining our efforts to educate members of Congress on this important issue by participating in Advocacy Day 2017 on March 13-14, 2017.

arts, music and dance, religious expression, and the continuing search for a utopian revolutionary ideal, even as capitalism encroaches more and more on daily life," says Behar. She stresses the opportunities for study outside of Havana. "Almost all of the programs are based in Havana, which is understandable because of the many resources the city offers." But, she adds, "Programs will need to be dispersed throughout the island, to provincial cities such as Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Santa Clara, Camaguey, and Santiago de Cuba, to distribute resources. This will also give students the opportunity to get to know more of the island and its different regional histories and traditions."

Anna Pruettt and Danny Miedzinski were senior film students at Drexel who went to Cuba in 2015 with Hooper's documentary film class. "I had never been around people who had so little but valued so much," Pruettt says. "People in Cuba are incredibly resourceful and innovative, constantly finding solutions to the problems that the rest of the world doesn't have to deal with." For her, the best part of the experience was getting to be inside people's homes and speak to them about issues in the city. "It's one thing to visit an incredible country, and another to delve into the problems that the community faces," she says. "I was inspired by the people and places I saw in Cuba. For the

rest of my life, I will be able to look back on the spectacular innovation and warmth that radiates through the community in Havana, and remember that there is always another solution to every problem."

Miedzinski agrees that interaction with people from the local communities was the best part of the experience for him. "Whether exploring Old Havana with our crew, sitting for coffee at night with our hostel hosts, or interviewing residents as our subjects, every person we spoke with expressed similar traits of caring and ingenuity. These were some of the most innovative, patient, and down to earth folks I've ever had the pleasure of living and working with." He adds, "My experience in Cuba helps me remember why I am so interested in documentary film. Everyone has a story and is waiting to tell it. Thinking back on Cuba reminds me to stay open minded, to recognize innovative talent in unlikely places, and to see the beauty in this world even in the most unexpected places. Cuba was unforgettable, and I'll take that experience with me forever."

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