

By Marlene M. Johnson

# All Eyes on Cuba

**THE WORLD IS WATCHING WITH EAGER ANTICIPATION** to see when Americans will be granted full rights to travel and trade with Cuba. For the first time in 50 years, U.S. citizens are talking about the possibility of visiting a place they had only spoken about in distant terms. Many Cuban Americans are excited about the possibility of visiting relatives that they have never been allowed to meet and seeing the place where their ancestors were born.

NAFSA has been working with our allies for decades to end travel restrictions to Cuba and in October, select NAFSA staff and I were privileged to travel, for the first time ever, to the island nation. We represented NAFSA at the Civitas Global Educational Service's "Cuba TIES, 1st Annual Workshop of Strategic Alliances for the Internationalization of Higher Education," which sought to explore opportunities for educational collaboration between U.S. and Cuban institutions and to better understand how we can work together. Our goal was clear: help further internationalize higher education between Cuba and the United States.

For NAFSA, participating in this workshop was an important step in our long-term commitment to normalize relations between Cuba and the United States. In 2004 NAFSA spoke out against President Bush's restrictions on academic travel to Cuba, and we continue to actively advocate for lifting all travel and trade restrictions to the island. As advocates, we were delighted when President Obama announced his commitment to "engagement rather than isolation" with Cuba, and President Castro expressed willingness to dialogue with the United States. Both presidents acted to further the interests of our two countries and our citizens. This was an opportunity for

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The University  
of Havana, Cuba

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us to begin the process of greater communication and learning about each other's systems, understanding each other's goals, and working together to find opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.

The Cuba TIES workshop was the largest and most diverse gathering of this sort to date in Cuba—thanks to the entrepreneurial leadership of Dairo Enrique Moreno, founder of Civitas Global Educational Services (GES), and the leadership of the University of Cienfuegos. We were honored to be among the nearly 40 U.S. university participants—from presidents, provosts, and faculty to study abroad and international student services directors.

It was also an honor for me to be invited to keynote the opening session of the workshop. Later, Jill Welch, NAFSA's deputy executive director for public policy and Matt Clausen, vice president of Partners of the Americas, presented information about President Obama's 100,000 Strong in the Americas Initiative, to encourage U.S. and Cuban universities to collaborate to apply for innovation grants in the future. Dorothea Antonio, senior director of internationalization services at NAFSA, used the structured networking opportunities to identify prospects for session presentations at NAFSA's annual conference to take place in Denver in May 2016.

Meeting at a newer, regional university—the University of Cienfuegos, in one of Cuba's smaller cities—was also particularly special. As is true in the United States and many other parts of the world, leaving the larger urban areas often gives one a different view of the country and its people, and it provides opportunities to learn about the entrepreneurial spirit unique to those regions. The faculty of the University of Cienfuegos is experienced in building international partnerships with universities in countries, so they have many of the necessary protocols and expertise in place to provide a framework for initiating a new relationship. They are anxious to add U.S. institutions to their list of partners, and this workshop provided an outstanding space for sharing ideas, understanding requirements, and reflecting on the obstacles that still remain.

One of the special aspects of our week was the opportunity to stay in private homes rather than western hotels. To watch a neighborhood wake up—entrepreneurs selling morning coffee to neighbors on their way to work, children being walked to school by their parents, the local street cleaner out at 6 a.m. every day, vendors pedaling through the streets with fresh bread, a parade down the main boulevard celebrating the birthday of a beloved General Cienfuegos who died in a plane crash years ago—was a personal intercultural experience. This and much more helped us absorb and reflect on the richness and challenges of life for the Cuban people.



## Cuba Engagement Initiative Activities at the NAFSA 2016 Annual Conference & Expo

**JOIN US** at the 2016 Annual Conference in Denver May 29–June 3, 2016, for the following sessions and events:

- **“Forging Productive Educational Partnerships between Cuba and the United States,”** presented by higher education leaders from the University of Cienfuegos
- **“Student Mobility between Cuba and the United States: A Relationship in Transition,”** exploring the impact of the changes in U.S. policies toward Cuba and the restoration of diplomatic relations on international education
- **“Cuban and Cuban-American Transitions: Opportunities of Engagement for International Education,”** speaker session by Guillermo Grenier, Florida International University
- **The NYFA Initiatives’ Film Series,** presented by the New York Film Academy, at the NAFSA 2016 Expo Soundstage

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on the NAFSA Cuba Engagement Initiative, visit [www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement](http://www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement).

**TO REGISTER** for the NAFSA 2016 Annual Conference & Expo, visit [www.nafsa.org/conference](http://www.nafsa.org/conference).

During my time on the island, I often reflected on the educational assets that Cuba offers as a potential partner for U.S. institutions. Cuba has long been recognized for its high-quality education system, from kindergarten through university education. For years, Cuba has led the world in its budget allocation to education at nearly 13 percent. The World Bank has recognized Cuba for having the best education system in Latin America and the Caribbean, and for its high-level teaching faculty. Cuba's success in education and health care and training of health professionals is a model for the world with social services that exceed those of most developing countries and in some sectors, are comparable to those of the developed nations.

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For us in the United States where health care is hotly debated, and recognizing that most of Europe has universal health care, it's clear that the United States can learn from Cuba, and I am hopeful that some of the advancements that Cuba has made will be lessons upon which we can draw.

In addition to what we can learn from the Cuban education system, it is important for the United States and Cuba to develop closer ties for several other reasons. Foremost, a closer relationship is essential to the United States having a healthier relationship in the hemisphere. Our isolation from Cuba has set a negative tone for so much of the U.S. engagement in the western hemisphere. In addition, our foreign policy must be informed by knowledge of the perspectives and interests of our neighbors, so this period of nonengagement will have negative consequences for years to come.

Cuban universities have a long history of collaboration with universities around the world. They are experienced in doing collaborative research and hosting students—a group of 10 Swedish students was on campus while we were there, for a two-month Spanish language course. So, they come to the table with U.S. institutions with well-developed protocols and considerable enthusiasm for the value of international engagement. They desire interested, committed faculty and administrators at U.S. institutions prepared to work with them on establishing programs that can work in the short term and have potential to grow in the future. And, they want our help getting the “blockade lifted.”

The rest of the world has been engaged in faculty and student exchange and collaboration with Cuban institutions for decades. Although a few U.S. institutions have been able to maintain research, faculty, and student collaboration during this period, it is critical that we take the opportunity provided by normalization to actively explore what we can learn and do together on this first stage of our journey toward lifting the “blockade.”

I am excited that the United States and Cuba are now on a path toward active engagement. Of course, NAFSA will

continue to support policies that foster engagement between our two countries. With the decisions of President Obama and President Castro to normalize diplomatic relations and open our two embassies and the U.S. administration's steps to begin to ease restrictions on engagement, there is a framework for the efforts of public leaders, education leaders, and nongovernmental organizations to establish relationships and strategies for achieving meaningful actions in the years ahead.

NAFSA will continue to offer resources for learning about Cuba and engaging with universities on specific projects. On December 17, NAFSA announced the NAFSA Cuba Engagement Initiative ([www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement](http://www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement)), a new program designed to promote sustainable partnerships between U.S. and Cuban academic institutions. The planned initiative consists of two interconnected projects that will lead to sustainable academic partnerships and mobility between the United States and Cuba: the Cuba-U.S. Higher Education Dialogue Project and the Educators for Cuba Campaign. Last fall, a round of grants for the 100,000 Strong in the Americas Initiative included a Cuban institution. At NAFSA 2016, the fourth Forum on Latin America will include a focus on Cuba. We will offer a thread of sessions on Cuba to inform your own thinking and planning. We have invited a number of Cuban faculty and university leaders to attend NAFSA 2016 to share their ideas and seek collaborators. Our Presidents' Day and Provosts' Summit will include an expert on Cuba to inform their perspectives on establishing ties, and we will also offer a session by renowned sociologist Guillermo Grenier, which will analyze the social forces driving the changes in the Cuban-American community in the United States and the Cuban society of the island nation.

The NAFSA policy stance on international travel is clear: We believe that travel is inherently educational. We will continue to advocate for lifting the embargo and to encourage all higher education leaders to do the same. For more than 50 years, U.S. institutions and citizens have been cut off from our nearby neighbor, based on a rationale that made sense to some policymakers, but which has produced no changes that serve our national security or the intellectual and economic engagement of the region. While much of the world—from Europe to Africa to Asia—has (to the extent permitted by the United States) engaged with Cuba, we are restricted by our own government and forced to miss valuable engagement and learning opportunities with potential Cuban partners. It is clear that with the embargo in place, everyone loses. Being unable to nurture relationships, engage in collaboration and trade, and contribute to each other's development makes it impossible for either country to reach our full potential. We are ready to engage with Cuba and learn from its deep commitment to universal free education and health care. We need to understand the role Cuba has played in providing health care and other development support around the world in response to natural disasters. Clearly, the embargo is a failed policy and it's time to lift it. Congressional action is required, which is why NAFSA's continued advocacy is critical. And it is also important that higher education, business, and agriculture leaders work together to make the case to Congress that lifting the embargo is in our nation's best interests and reflects our national values.

It is critical that NAFSA remain strategically involved in this new chapter in Cuba-U.S. relations, and I encourage all of our institutions and our citizens to explore what each of us can do to advance this agenda. Learn more at [www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement](http://www.nafsa.org/cubaengagement). **IE**

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