

By Gabrielle Malfatti and Caroline Donovan White

Fostering Positive Engagement Between Students and Host Communities

EDUCATION ABROAD IS GENERALLY FRAMED AS HAVING A POSITIVE EFFECT on the student traveler. We've historically focused on our students: we assess their learning, cultural engagement, and personal growth. When students from the United States arrive at their host sites abroad, they have much to gain from their interactions with people, culture, language, and other elements in their new surroundings. But what are the benefits to the host communities?

While we strive to create ethical partnerships that value and contribute to the hosting site and larger community, there are myriad ways education abroad programs impact local hosts—economically, environmentally, and socioculturally.

The University of Missouri (MU) has these concerns at the forefront of its relationship with Universidad de Cienfuegos (UCf) in Cuba. The partnership provides an opportunity to explore how reciprocity and mutualism

can look among partners when there are hefty economic imbalances.

The two universities' collaborative efforts began as a result of MU's participation in the first Taller de Alianzas Estratégicas para la Internacionalización de la Educación Superior (TIES) in 2015 in Cienfuegos. Following the initial meetings, discussions carried forward on both campuses to develop a framework for collaboration and mutual internationalization of educator preparation at both institutions.

In April 2016, the MU College of Education sent a second delegation to Cuba that included the dean, director of global engagement, and two other faculty. The conversations between the two deans further cemented the desire for collaboration, and it was agreed that a memorandum of understanding would be proposed to promote faculty and student exchanges as well as scholarly collaborations.

The visitors from MU left Cuba determined to develop reciprocal collaboration of mutual benefit. The leadership of both colleges outlined benefits they wanted to extract from the interaction, as well as strategies to creatively bring those benefits to fruition. While MU focused on creating a teach abroad opportunity for preservice teachers to grow in their multicultural understanding and global adaptability, UCf wished to gain access to academic networks in the United States through conference participation and campus visits. UCf also wanted to share lessons learned from the development of one of the most equitable and high quality PK–20 education systems in the world.

Subsequently, the deans visited each other's campuses and met with faculty and university administrators to establish the teach abroad program and enhance the English fluency of the UCf students. MU realizes it is nearly impossible for a Cuban university student to

In their July 2017 article for NAFSA's *Trends & Insights* publication, "Avoiding Collateral Damage: Education Abroad Programs and Their Impacts on Host Communities," Appalachian State University professors Kathleen Schroeder and Cynthia Wood offer a framework for considering the impact students can have on their host communities.

Economic impact: Students and faculty spend money in their host communities, producing a positive impact on the local economy. However, students and faculty often tend to visit hotel chains or restaurants affiliated with tour companies, which may exacerbate inequalities in the host community. Encourage students and staff to patronize locally owned businesses and learn about products that are unique to the region.

Environmental impact: The presence of students and faculty in another country can result in an increased carbon footprint, as more water, energy, and food is consumed. Teach students about the importance of, and collective responsibility toward, nature conservation. Urge students and faculty to minimize their carbon output wherever possible, including using water bottles, riding public transportation, and giving back to the environment.

Sociocultural impact: Sociocultural engagement is a goal for study abroad. And yet it needs to be viewed with an ethical lens to avoid exoticism, voyeurism, and the imposition of foreign cultural norms. During predeparture sessions, provide information about the country's cultural values and customs to prepare students for what they can expect. Once on site, develop intentional and meaningful opportunities for students and faculty to engage with the local community, such as through service projects or cultural events.



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In Cienfuegos, Cuba, the Universidad de Cienfuegos has built a partnership with the University of Missouri to deepen cultural exchange between the two institutions.

travel to the United States at this time, but bringing MU students to Cuba and creating opportunities for meaningful interactions supports the internationalization visions of both institutions.

Individual faculty members from the two schools are planning to work together on research projects and presentations that advance the mutual understanding of each other's educational systems, as well as their underpinning values, outcomes, best practices, and challenges.

This is merely one example of efforts toward more equitable, respectful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial academic partnerships.

International education leaders must approach the pursuit of these relationships with an awareness of some strategies that can be employed to lessen problematic host community impacts and increase ethical engagement with those hosts.

First, chosen program leaders should know the host locale well. Only an experienced leader will have the knowledge base to approach ethical issues in an informed way.

Second, local expertise and input is crucial. Even the most culturally and linguistically experienced program leader will benefit from an in-country counterpart or network to support the program academically, logistically, and culturally.

Third, those informed program leaders and in-country professionals must ensure that study abroad programs incorporate enhanced predeparture orientations to give voice to these ethical concerns. Leaders can work together to identify tensions to be discussed.

Before sending students to places in the world where U.S. or Western practices have facilitated adverse conditions for local citizens, those students should read materials that illuminate how locals may feel about the United States. Responsible predeparture orientation must include reflections on U.S. involvement in the host community.

Perhaps most importantly, as seen with the University of Missouri and Universidad de Cienfuegos relationship, an ethical partnership is built with long-term engagement in mind. A model partnership allows the parties to work together toward shared goals and plan for sustainability. This encourages the continuity and ability of partners to visit a campus and interact with faculty and students in their discipline. This planning inherently addresses mitigation strategies such as engaging local experts and working with the community on projects toward mutual benefits. In planning for student engagement in Cienfuegos, it became clear that any MU faculty or student traveling to Cuba must understand the history of U.S.–Cuba relations, the effects of the embargo, and current political situations in both nations.

Consideration of host community impacts—social, economic, academic, and emotional—should be an aspect of program development. This consideration is an educational opportunity for all, and one that can involve our dedicated faculty and talented students. ■

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