UNITED STATES AND CUBAN GOVERNMENTS' RESPONSE TO A NEW INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM: LESSONS LEARNED

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> The United States will continue to enforce economic sanctions on Cuba and the ban on travel to Cuba until Cuba's government proves that it is committed to real reform.
>
> —George W. Bush, May 20, 2002

> Our current struggle becomes especially important as we find ourselves up against the hostility and aggression of a government, which is the sum of the most overwhelming powers that have ever existed.
>
> —Fidel Castro, July 26, 2002

For more than forty years the governments of the United States and Cuba have maintained an adversarial relationship toward one another. Much of the negativity is expressed through verbal accusations, but at times there have been several destabilizing and sometimes dangerous actions by one or both governments such as the 1962 Missile Crisis, massive Cuban migration to the United States in the 1970s and 1990s, and the economic embargo. Following the Cuban revolution in 1959, maintaining a hostile and suspicious attitude was policy for successive Republican and Democratic administrations, as well as the Castro regime. While the two governments continued their adversarial relationship, several universities from both nations began establishing academic and scholarly relationships. Decisions by these universities began with the United States Congress passing the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act, which unintentionally encouraged educational exchanges between the United States and Cuba.[1]

The purpose of this article is to highlight some important events that took place during the 1990s allowing American universities to develop partnerships with Cuban universities. In addition, it will provide a description of how a United States university established such a relationship by bringing a well-known Cuban scholar to its campus. Finally, the article will identify what was learned from this experience and what the future holds for the relationship.

A Historical Overview of the Policy and Events in the 1990s

During the 1990s, both countries took several political actions and created events that affected the ability of American universities to establish partnerships with Cuban universities. The following is a synopsis of some of those important actions and events:

The Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF) is a well-financed organization that is opposed to the current Cuban government and calls for the removal of Fidel Castro from power. CANF was successful at lobbying the United States legislative and executive branches of government to maintain the current relationship between the two governments. While CANF made substantial gains in winning significant political support within the United States government, they have had little success in ending communism, restoring freedom of speech and press, and establishing a stronger human rights record in Cuba.[2] CANF was opposed to any universities in the United States establishing partnerships with Cuban universities.

Castro declared the "Special Period in Time of Peace" in 1990 in response to the collapse of the Soviet Bloc Common Market (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), which left Cuba without trade subsidies and foreign assistance. The end of the Soviet bloc and the continued economic sanctions created by the United States trade embargo left Cuba facing severe economic hardships. Castro called for

renewed national unity and economic sacrifice to be shared by every Cuban citizen. He then reduced the rationing of basic necessities, such as food, oil, electricity. In addition, Castro scaled back on reforms introduced in the 1980s in areas that Cuba was most proud: education and health care.[3]

The Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 (Torricelli Bill) was an attempt by the United States Congress to tighten the trade embargo and to prohibit subsidiaries of United States corporations in other countries from trading with Cuba. The act also allowed the president to withhold United States foreign aid, debt relief, and free trade agreements with countries that provide assistance to Cuba.[4] Lawmakers wrote the legislation with the belief that an increase in economic hardship would lead to the only acceptable political change, the removal of the Communist party from power. A provision in the legislation was to increase academic exchanges between the two countries to expose ordinary Cubans to American democratic ideals.[5]

The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 was designed to coerce other countries to suspend trade relations and investment with Cuba. Under the legislation, lawsuits could be brought on foreign companies that traded with Cuba. The legislation codified all existing executive orders relating to Cuba, which transferred Cuban policy from the executive branch to the legislative branch.[6]

Birth of a New International Exchange Program

In November 1999, my wife and I presented a research paper at an educational and psychology conference in Havana, Cuba. At the conference, we met and spent considerable amounts of time with Dr. Planas (pseudonym name), an internationally renowned Cuban scholar in early childhood education. Before leaving Havana, I promised Dr. Planas that I would attempt to bring him to my university as a visiting scholar to conduct a series of lectures.

A visit by Dr. Planas fulfills one of our university's initiatives, "Teaching Across Borders Initiative," which promotes dialogue between scholars of many nations, even those nations with which we do not have strong relationships. My goal was to initiate professional links with Cuban and American scholars with similar expertise and interest, as well as providing an important forum on Latin America for students and the local community.

When I returned home, I discussed the proposal with our university's Director of Latin American Studies, who thought the idea was a realistic and important goal to internationalize the university. Over the next several months, we sought and secured funding through small grants and donations from members of the university and the local community. Securing money from governmental agencies is impossible: State and federal agencies are required by law not to fund any activities that involve Cuba.[7]

Once funding was secured, we entered the massive bureaucracy designed by both the Cuban and American governments to invite a Cuban scholar to an American university. The following descriptive overview outlines the necessary steps we took to bring Dr. Planas to our university:

1. My colleagues and I sent an official letter of invitation (with university seal) to the Director of International Relations in the Cuban Ministry, who tentatively approves the visit.
2. The Director's opinion was sent to the Minister of Education.
3. The Minister of Education tentatively approved the visit.
4. The approval was sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which gives final approval for all official international travel.
5. After gaining approval, a messenger brought the paperwork to the United States Office of Interests in Havana located in the Swiss embassy, which prepares the case for the Cuban Affairs Office at the State Department in Washington.
6. Once the case was completed in Havana, it is cabled to Washington.
7. The case was distributed among various agencies of the United States government to determine if the Cuban scholar was an acceptable risk to be allowed into the United States.
8. When the scholar was shown to be an acceptable risk, the case is cabled back to the United States Office of Interests in Havana.

9. The Office of Interests issued the visa and alerted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the traveler's passport must be sent to the Office.
10. A messenger picked up the passport with the approved visa at the United States Office of Interests and delivered the passport to the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the person who is receiving the visa is not allowed to handle his own passport during any of this process, until a few days before he or she leaves Cuba).
11. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the person to pick up his passport at the ministry.

Although the process for obtaining the visa is relatively clear-cut, our experiences were difficult and at times uncertain. As indicated, the first step was to send the official letter of invitation, a seemingly uncomplicated endeavor which quickly became a complicated ordeal. According to Dr. Planas, the timing and writing of the letter was important for the success of this project. We had to delay mailing the letter for several months because he was traveling to Mexico and believed the people making decisions about his travel would feel he was outside of Cuba too much and not spending enough time working at his center. Ultimately, we had to change the date for his visit from April 2001 to September 2001. The invitation was delivered to the Ministry in April 2001. In the middle of June, the Director of International Relations approved the visit. Dr. Planas told us the letter's wording had to be respectful of the Director's position in government, and the visit needed to be described as not being politically motivated, but beneficial for the country especially the Ministry of Education. We thought this was going to take a long time to be approved, which it was, however it turned out to be one of the easiest steps to achieve.

The next step was to demonstrate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that we were sincere about the invitation. We purchased the ticket in the United States and sent it directly to Dr. Planas who had it sent to the Ministry. Since Cuba does not have electronic tickets, we used the only company in the world that delivers letters and packages between Cuba and the United States—DHL.

Once the ticket arrived, we believed the approval process would be rapid and smooth. Quickly we realized we were living under a false assumption. To be successful in this type of endeavor, one needs an abundance of patience and perseverance. Each step toward approval is a slow process, and time was running out. August was approaching, a period when Cuba basically shuts down and the majority of people go on holiday. Government offices are poorly staffed or closed altogether, which meant that we had to get everything approved before August because Dr. Planas was flying to the United States the following month.

During this period, we were communicating with Dr. Planas via e-mail, sometimes as often as twenty times a day. To send an e-mail to Dr. Planas was not easy because his center has only one computer with e-mail access, which is shared by several people. Sometimes Dr. Planas had to borrow his friends' computers across the city to send messages.

As August approached, Dr. Planas's visa paperwork disappeared on its way to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. We only had until the end of August for him to receive a visa. Officially, the United States government needs at least fifteen days to review visa paperwork for official visitors from Cuba. For several days, I called directly to the United States Office of Interests in Havana and all they could tell me was that the paperwork had not arrived. Dr. Planas did not want to push the Minister's office fearing they would get upset and deny his request for a visa. Dr. Planas' wife became involved when she contacted the United States Office of Interests. She always spoke to the appropriate person who could only tell her that the paperwork was still lost. A colleague at Old Dominion University wanted to discuss alternate plans in case Dr. Planas did not get a visa in time, but our determination thus far encouraged me to convince her that we should continue with our current plans.

Amazingly, the paperwork reappeared and it was quickly approved by the Minister's office, but disappeared again when it was sent to the United States Office of Interests. After several days, the paperwork resurfaced, arriving at the Office a few hours before my call on August 30th. I called the Cuban Affairs Office in Washington and spoke to the Director, who said the fifteen-day rule (which states that approval must be granted fifteen days prior to the departure date) is strictly enforced, but he would

see what he could do. Right before I called, he was on the phone with a Congressman's office that was trying to pressure the Director to expedite a similar case. I could tell from his description of the incident that he did not like to be pressured into making decisions; I also believe the Director took pity on our case, because I went directly to him rather than have my congressional representative handle the case.

He suggested that I call back the next day once the cable arrived and he would have more information about our case. I called the next morning and he said that he received the cable and was in the process of sending the materials to the required agencies. He suggested that I call him that afternoon. When I called, he said several of his staff members were working on the case, but it could not not be approved until the next Tuesday, which was four days before Dr. Planas was to leave Havana. The next day, I received a call from the Director at my home letting me know that Dr. Planas's visa was approved and the cable was being sent to United States Office of Interests Tuesday morning allowing Dr. Planas to receive his visa on Tuesday. We never found out why it was approved so quickly.

After all the heartache and frustration managing the bureaucracies of two countries, Dr. Planas made it to our campus. This trip was historic for a number of reasons, but two stand out. This was the first time that our university hosted a visiting scholar from Cuba. Secondly, as a teenager he had lived in the United States for a year as an exchange student in North Carolina. During his visit, he mentioned to me several times that for the past forty-five years he had wanted to return, but was unable because of the political situation between our countries.

During this return visit, Dr. Planas met with and lectured to several groups of students and faculty in a variety of classes and meetings across campus. The topics ranged from curricular and pedagogical issues in early childhood education to Cuban education. At every encounter, the discussion eventually led to life in Cuba. While most of the people were interested in Cuba, remarkably very few knew much about one of our closest geographical neighbors. One of the most striking examples was his visit with a group of students involved in the "Model United Nations" organization. These students, who have an above average interest in the world, had little knowledge and understanding of modern Cuba except about the revolution and Castro. His interactions with faculty members were similar to the students; they had little knowledge about the educational and medical strides Cuba had undergone since the revolution. Dr. Planas met with a group of high school students who were receptive to his talk about life in Cuba, but again they had little knowledge about modern Cuba. At an elementary school and an early childhood center, he was able to interact with teachers and students. At the end of each visit, he met with the principals, providing his impressions of their schools and offering advice on how to improve the use of technology in the classroom.

In honor of his visit, the university sponsored the first annual "Pedagogy and Culture in Latin America Symposium" on September 14, 2001, three days after the terrorist attack in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. At first we were going to cancel the symposium, but decided it was necessary as a symbolic gesture that the university continue with its mission to be a center of academic and scholarly achievement.

The symposium was open to our students and faculty, educators from local colleges, universities, and high schools, as well as members from the local community. Dr. Planas was the keynote speaker, presenting the Cuban education model and its success at educating almost the entire population despite poor economic conditions. He co-led a discussion on school governance in the United States and Cuba with a faculty member in the university's college of education. Other symposium speakers were a visiting professor from the University of Buenos Aires, who discussed the representation of dictatorship and the transition to democracy in contemporary Argentina, and a professor from the college of business, who discussed his research on the interrelationship of business and pedagogy in Latin America.

Lessons Learned

Even though it took almost three years to get to this point, we are only in the initial stages of establishing an academic and scholarly partnership with Cuba. This experience has taught me a great deal

about our two governments and Cuba's history, geography, and society, and has given me some understanding of what is needed to establish such a relationship. There are three vital lessons learned when designing a successful collaboration with Cuba: (1) proper documentation, (2) official and unofficial contacts, and (3) patience.

Being ignorant of the laws can get you and your university in trouble. The United States Department of the Treasury does not look favorably upon universities involved with Cuban universities that do not possess the correct license issued by the Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. Once obtained, the licensed university can sponsor Cuban scholars to teach or engage in other scholarly activities, and pay them a stipend or salary. The licensed university is allowed to send its faculty and students to Cuba in order to conduct research, teach, and study.

Any traveler representing his or her university must carry a letter from the licensed university stating why this person is travelling to Cuba. The letter is important when reentering the United States. Since the September 11th terrorist attack, United States Customs officers are more vigilant than ever to make sure that travelers are who they say they are, and that they have the proper documentation to travel to a country that is considered an enemy by the government.

Although many American universities have established partnerships with universities around the world through letters, telephone calls, and e-mail, this method is not recommended for Cuban universities. Cubans appreciate personal contact with the people with whom they will be doing business. In addition, the mail service and telephone connections between the United States and Cuba are scarce and unreliable, which makes the sending of letters and e-mail difficult.

In early June 2002, the director of our study abroad program and I went to Havana to meet with Cuban officials to learn about the Cuban protocol for establishing academic partnerships and to meet with the people who will be involved in such a relationship. We met with Ministry of Education's director of international relations and the chief economic researcher. These two men are the governmental representatives who will eventually plead our case to the Minister of Education. Without the Minister's approval, the partnership cannot exist. Since there are many American universities collaborating with Cuban universities, the Ministry is taking a closer look at each new partnership to determine its viability and profitability for the Cuban people. Following our discussions with the director, he organized a meeting with the director of international relations and two professors at the prospective collaborating university. At that meeting, we were able to begin a dialogue about each other's institutions and learn about how each can benefit from a partnership. The outcome of both meetings was to begin a small program, a contingent of twelve faculty and students from our university. This group would be partnered with a similar group of Cuban students and faculty. During the visit, they would go to important Cuban sites, schools, and university classes, and engage in discussions about potential research.

It became abundantly clear throughout this process that to be successful you need an enormous amount of patience. Most forms of communication with anyone in Cuba are difficult, logistically and politically. Logistically, the Cuban infrastructure is poor; while politically, the United States government does not encourage relationships with any aspect of Cuban society. The bureaucratic structures in both countries are burdened with obstacles for success that can leave you frustrated and powerless. Unless you feel a Cuban partnership is extremely important, the amount of time needed to be successful in the endeavor is not worth the effort.

Conclusion

This slowly forming partnership has allowed people who would not ordinarily be working with each other to come together on this project. We believe the program will enhance collegial relationships within the university and create bridges between Cuba and the United States, in the spirit of initiating democratic dialogue between the two countries. It will enable faculty of both universities to forge professional links and to gain new insight and expertise on pedagogy and the programs' of education in Cuba. This project fulfills our Office of International Program's goal to advance our university's visibility in Latin America.

Our university would be the first higher education institution in the region to have a Latin American program with one of its foci on Cuba and Cuban education.

NOTES

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