

**Academic exchange: Cuba & United States**  
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I am thankful for the opportunity to share my experience and ideas in this forum again.

As some of you know my background to speak on academic exchange between the United States and Cuba has different reasons:

I am the founding director of CASA in Cuba, the largest and most immersed US-based study abroad program here. Since we started in 2015 to work with Casa de las Americas and University of Havana in 2015, we have hosted more than 300 students, many faculty and university leaders.

Before working in Havana, I coordinated the Cuban Studies Program at Harvard University. I worked closely with AdF and JID. During the first 15 years, Harvard hosted 12 academic conferences on Cuba and 87 scholars from Cuba from disciplines ranging from Anthropology to Zoology. Showing what is possible in both directions.

My personal Cuban-international academic journey started twenty years ago, when I came to Cuba as an exchange student from Humboldt University Berlin and studied at the University of Havana. But probably most importantly for me as an historian I also had the privilege to spend some years researching and writing on the transformation of education during the revolution in an international context - to be published as a book.

My brief intervention today centers on today's problems and opportunities in US-Cuban academic exchange with a brief review of our history. I start with some analytical observations, discuss current trends in higher education in the US, remind us of the significance of academic exchange, to then end with a focus on current problems and opportunities in the context of US-Cuban relations today. In order to think more strategically and operate more efficiently I believe it is important to make some conceptual distinctions because they each have different motivations, objectives and frameworks. I distinguish three different types of academic exchange and collaboration:

1. **Scholars and Professors** who travel abroad to do research and/or teach in another country.

Many of us here in the room have been a traveling professor either in Cuba or the US.

This practice is probably as old as universities themselves. In the case of Cuba and the United States we can identify its origins with the Cuban and American Academies of Science in the 1860s as institutions, and the prolific Felipe Poey as individual, then Harvard's Summer School for Cuban teachers in 1900 on a more massive scale. This was likely the beginning of organized study abroad, summer schools and cultural diplomacy on a global scale.

2. **Students** who travel abroad to study in a foreign country and culture. This can be short term, for a week or two, in their native language. Or with a more immersive character, for a whole semester or year and in the local language. It happens at a decisive, young age - therefore has an important component of education and formation of cultural and political values and worldviews. Study Abroad does not only alter and enrich the students' views of their host country but also changes perspectives on their home country - and, obviously, enriches them as individuals.

3. **Joint Projects and Forums.** Such as this one, LASA. And many others. They may be bilateral or multilateral/international in their format and usually focus on common problems, themes of mutual interest. They may or may not result in publications or other output that can have a larger impact, just like the previous two categories of academic exchange. More on this later.

For those interested in the rich history of these exchanges since the revolution I recommend Milagros Martinez and Sheryl Lutjens book.

The Cuban revolution of 1959 has put this country on the academic, research and political agenda. It is not a secret to this audience that the enormous prestige and support this revolution enjoyed

especially in the global south, first as a potential "third way" during the Cold War, then after the Bay of Pigs Invasion, as a socialist revolution led to an explosion of Cuban and Latin America Study Programs, Publications, Philanthropy and much more. From that point on Cuba as a research object became relevant for political scientists, economists, historians, anthropologists, and many others. And while Cuba's education and university system expanded significantly, and the study of the United States became a matter of strategic and security interests centers here, academic programs for the study of the United States - in all its complexities - remain limited. They started with a Catedra for the Study of the US at UH, grew into the CEA which developed into CEHSEU and now there is also of course CIPI and ISRL. But I think Cuba lacks rich, inter-disciplinary academic programs that study and produce knowledge on the shared histories and cultures of both countries in all its richness and contradictions. This is an opportunity. There is work to be done.

So what are the current trends of international academia on the US side? Let's take a brief look at recent statistics.

All numbers are of course greatly affected by the pandemic and the travel restrictions that most countries imposed. Yet we can identify important trends. All numbers are from open doors, a special service of the International Education website that surveys almost two thousand colleges and universities each year.

1. International Scholars that travel to the US.

50% growth to almost 140,000 just before the pandemic. Cuban scholars: only 25.

2. What are these scholars' primary activities and which disciplines stand out?

The vast majority, three quarters of all scholars who visit the US come to do research. Only 1 in ten teaches.

Almost 4/5 of all visitors focus on what is called STEM fields, that is Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine. Social Science and business together only 10%. This is an opportunity for Cuba.

### 3. Shifting from Scholars to **students**:

The growth here has been even more spectacular: from 100,000 American students studying abroad when the Berlin wall came down to almost 340,000 just before the pandemic with a strong renewed growth tendency thereafter. Half of the students going for a short term, summer or winter, and another half for various longer-term formats.

**4. Cuba**, as we can see is not among the hot spots, but relative to its size and population it may well have been among the top destinations during the Obama years. 4,607 students from the US came to study here in 2015/16. Cuba was listed as the country with the highest growth rate (58%) of all destinations. As you can see disciplines among outgoing students are more varied than incoming scholars.

These are, in summary, some of the important trends among the internalization of higher education. Despite some tendencies to the contrary, there is a continued commitment among major universities to increase international education especially among less privileged minorities.

In the case of Cuba, there is proof from the Obama years that there is great interest in academic exchange with Cuba. But obviously the political environment has much changed since then. Which is why I want to end with a few observations on the current obstacles and opportunities. But not without first highlighting of the importance of this Academic exchange. Most importantly: despite 53 years without diplomatic relations and severe travel restrictions the academic community through many examples showed that dialogue and cooperation to mutual benefits are possible. Of course, we

have learned at different moments that this exchange can also be politicized. This is why I want to emphasize the recommendation of Mario Bronfman, the longtime representative of the Ford Foundation for Central America who helped financing many important academic projects with Cuba: "Any cooperation has to respect national sovereignty (...) and not to interfere in internal matters."

Which are the main obstacles for academic exchange between Cuba and the United States that we face today?

But since I am a notorious optimist, I want to end with a look at the opportunities.

Now, what are some of the pending tasks for actors in US Cuban academic exchange?

I want to end with a personal note: I apologize for not being able to be physically present with you this morning. In fact, I may be the only one physically present in Cuba but participating virtually. The reason for my presence-absence is related to US-Cuban academic exchange. I recently had an accident with a complicated bone fracture. And the reason why I am in good shape, with good spirits and able to record this video for you is this: I was treated by one of Cuba's best surgeons. This Cuban doctor told me two things: one that conferences and workshops with surgeons and researchers from the United States helped to professionalize his team and medical practices. And two, the research for his PhD and his medical specialty he could only conclude because colleagues from the United States helped him get crucial information from medical journals he as a Cuban scientist could otherwise not have used accessed, because, as we discussed, the sanctions also include digital resources.

These are two tangible lessons about why it matters what we do: First, the sanctions against Cuba limit the advancement of knowledge and research and may contribute to human suffering - and second: thanks to the continued academic exchange and of some courageous individuals and institutions on both sides, much valuable progress has been made.

Thank you very much!