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of Higher Education

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March 9, 2010

### **Push for Student Exchanges With Cuba Hits Obstacles, Both Political and Academic**

*By Paul Basken*

Washington

More than a year after he took office promising to put a welcoming new face on U.S. foreign policy, President Obama has left allies in higher education increasingly puzzled over one glaring omission.

Cuba.

Mr. Obama took several steps last year toward improving U.S. relations with Cuba, allowing relatives of Cubans to travel, communicate, and send money back to their home country. But he stopped short of ending a policy imposed by President George W. Bush in 2004 that effectively blocked thousands of American college students from making trips to Cuba.

The Obama administration hasn't ruled out further revisions in its Cuba policy. A senior administration official told *The Chronicle* that educational exchanges "could play a role" in future U.S. policy toward Cuba, "but no decisions have been made at this point. We are proceeding cautiously."

Critics among college faculty members say they understand the emotional politics surrounding Cuba and have been willing to give the administration time to develop a strategy. But some are growing frustrated and feel it's time for more assertive action.

"We need to have everybody raise hell," Wayne S. Smith, an adjunct professor of Latin American studies at the Johns Hopkins University told a gathering here on Tuesday of the Emergency Coalition to Defend Educational Travel. "Well, maybe not raise hell," Mr. Smith quickly added, "but this is simply unacceptable."

#### **Diminished Study Opportunities**

Mr. Smith is chairman of the coalition, a group of more than 400 college faculty members formed in 2004 after Mr. Bush imposed a series of rules designed to deter academic exchanges with Cuba. At the time, about 200 American universities were offering courses that involved studying in Cuba, serving some 2,000 students a year. Now, with rules sharply limiting eligibility, only 63 American students from 10 universities are in Cuba, the group said.

Its event Tuesday featured several other faculty members, and leaders of business groups that cater to foreign travel by students, who complained that Mr. Obama's vision of promoting a more interconnected planet seems to leave out Cuba.

"There was no Cuba exception to the president's statement to students in Turkey," Victor C. Johnson, senior adviser for public policy at Nafsa: Association of International Educators, told Tuesday's gathering. He was referring to comments Mr. Obama made in Istanbul last year, when he told college students that "exchanges can break down walls between us."

One major problem for advocates of academic travel to Cuba, however, may be that university administrators aren't so strongly behind their own faculty on the matter. Mr. Smith said that when he tried more than a year ago to get university presidents to sign a letter to Mr. Obama urging an end to the Cuba restrictions, he didn't have "any success at all."

Some in his coalition suggested the reluctance could be because universities feel too dependent on federal aid to risk antagonizing the administration. At least two universities raised that fear, said Robert L. Muse, a lawyer representing the coalition.

Others in the coalition expressed doubt about that theory, especially the notion that the Obama administration would engage in such retaliation. Some outside the group suggested the more substantial reasons for the reluctance of university presidents may have to do with questions about the academic quality of such exchanges.

#### Assessing Quality of Science

The American Association for the Advancement of Science sent a delegation to Havana in November that came away with tentative assessments of the state of Cuban research. The visitors focused their attention on the University of Havana, the country's most renowned institution of higher education, which graduates several hundred students a year in science fields, including chemistry and physics, said Peter Agre, winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

But Dr. Agre and other members of the nongovernmental delegation didn't have the time or opportunities to actually visit laboratories and interview students, he said. "Our job is to ascertain, Is there interest? and Is there anything we could help with?" Dr. Agre said after the trip, "and I think the answers to both of those is unequivocally positive."

Dr. Agre, who is director of the Johns Hopkins Malaria Research Institute, and others who made the four-day trip talked afterward in

interviews of the strong reputations of Cuban scientists in areas that include marine biology, medicine, and pharmaceuticals. Americans might not want to copy Cuba's socialist health-care model, but as they spend another year struggling to find a better system, "I think there is something we can learn" from the Cubans, Dr. Agre said.

And Cuba's island environment, including its tropical-forest ecosystems and regions of migratory fish, also make it a highly valuable research location, said Vaughan Turekian, chief international officer at the science association.

#### Questions of Access

Others, however, see Cuba as offering limited opportunities for meaningful research and teaching.

There's a "tremendous amount of hypocrisy by the educational system in the United States," said Jorge A. Sanguinety, president of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, an organization of social scientists. Faculty members "want to travel to Cuba under the guise of research," he said. "You cannot do real research in Cuba."

For example, Mr. Sanguinety said, American political scientists who come to Cuba find few options beyond reading government-authorized records and talking with government-approved specialists. Marine researchers often can't reach the shoreline, he said, because it's completely controlled by the military.

Many American faculty and students nevertheless want to come, he said, to "see the beaches" and other curiosities in a country whose economic conditions have left it something of a time capsule.

Mr. Smith, speaking after Tuesday's conference, rejected Mr. Sanguinety's assessment of the value of research in Cuba. Suggestions that political scientists and marine biologists can't do meaningful research in Cuba are bogus, he said.

He then turned and appealed to David E. Guggenheim, president of *Planet Ocean*, a marine-conservation advocacy group, who earlier told the conference that Cuba's relatively healthy coral reefs afford a prime opportunity for scientists studying ways to save such ecosystems. Mr. Guggenheim acknowledged, however, that he does in fact have trouble getting the necessary permissions for access from the Cuban government.

The question of academic merit has truth on both sides, said Carl A. Herrin, owner of a consulting business in Maryland focused on promoting international educational exchanges. Mr. Herrin said some colleges' interest in promoting study-abroad opportunities is

clearly tied to their belief that such programs will attract students.

It's "the eye-catcher today," Mr. Herrin said of Cuba. "You can ask a student, 'You want to go to Cuba?'—It has a different kind of feel to it than, 'You want to go to Mexico?'"

That's not to say there's no educational value, he said. "Do I think students are getting real measurable outcome from their experience of a year abroad? Yes, I do," he said. "It's thin, but there is growing research showing that it's worthwhile."

#### Concerns Within Cuba

And there are other longstanding complications to any potential revival of U.S.-Cuban relations, such as whether the Cuban government would accept a significant new flow of Americans, including students, and whether that might lead someday to educated Cubans wanting freedom to travel abroad. Fidel Castro has said that hostility from the U.S. government helps him maintain power, and it's not clear that he or his successor as Cuban president, his younger brother Raul Castro, takes a significantly different approach, said Lawrence B. Wilkerson, who served as chief of staff to Colin L. Powell when Mr. Powell was secretary of state.

"Full relations would make it difficult to rule as tyrannically as they do now, and they fear they might not be able to control it," Mr. Wilkerson, a visiting professor of government at the College of William and Mary who took part in the science association's trip last November, said in an interview.

And in Washington, there remains little indication that the Obama administration, for all its willingness to end Bush-era policies in numerous other areas, is willing to challenge the firm belief among political strategists that tackling Cuba policy is highly risky, given the importance of Florida in U.S. presidential elections and the strength of the vote of anti-communist Cuban exiles there.

Several participants in the conference Tuesday said they held out some hope for change in Cuba policy following the election in Massachusetts of a Republican, Sen. Scott Brown. His victory meant that Democrats no longer had 60 votes in the Senate. As a result, they said, the leading opponent of expanded U.S.-Cuba ties, Sen. Robert Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey, can no longer single-handedly threaten Mr. Obama's wider political agenda by depriving the party of the three-fifths majority necessary to move controversial legislation.

"Things may become possible that weren't possible before," Mr. Johnson, of Nafsa, said.

But the senior Obama administration official, who spoke on the

condition that he not be identified by name, urged caution. The White House "took some important steps toward Cuba in the first year of the Obama administration and will be considering others," the official told *The Chronicle*. "At the same time, Cuba has to do its part, and we have seen insufficient change in how Cuba views its own civil society."

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037