Photos throughout this article were taken during a June trip to Cuba by SIU School of Law students.
Fifteen students and faculty from Southern Illinois University traveled to Cuba this June as part of a joint class on comparative law and global citizenship. Despite the economic sanctions the United States has maintained against Cuba since the 1960s, SIU has nurtured a long and rich relationship with the island nation, involving many visits and exchanges over the course of the past 20 years.

Prior to leaving for Cuba, the students spent three weeks learning about its history, government, politics, culture, healthcare and educational systems. The 10-day trip included stops in Havana, Vinales in Pinar del Rio, and the city of Trinidad, a World Heritage Site.

The goal of the trip was for students to learn about Cuba’s unique legal system and engage in a critical comparison between it and the legal system of the U.S. In addition, organizers wanted to increase students’ cultural competency by exposing them to people in a foreign country. Melinda Yeomans, associate director of the University Honors Program was also involved in organizing the trip, which she says was important toward making the participating students global citizens.

SIU maintains relations with key Cuban officials who have visited the SIU campuses or with whom SIU faculty and staff have collaborated in Cuba. Through these efforts, SIU has become one of the principal U.S. institutions developing relations and exchanges in Cuba. These activities have advanced scientific research and encouraged collaboration on critical and significant areas of study that benefit SIU, the Carbondale community, the state of Illinois, and Cuba.

A History of SIU-Cuban Relations

In the mid-1990s, then-SIU President Ted Sanders encouraged international activities and students of the university, including a relationship with Cuba. In 1996, Illinois State Representative Edgar Lopez and Charles Serrano, an education policy analyst, visited campus from Chicago to speak to Latino students. In a meeting with Sanders, Serrano spoke about the possibility of collaboration between SIU and Cuban counterparts in areas such as social services, agriculture, and biotechnology. Serrano and Lopez had developed relations with Cubans and offered to share their contacts to benefit SIU. The relationship with Serrano continued over the years as he and his associates arranged many other trips and exchanges.

In January 1999, Second Secretary Johana Tablada from the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, D.C. visited Springfield, Illinois. Because the United States and Cuba did not have diplomatic relations at the time, each country maintained an Interests Section in the capital city of the other country rather than an embassy. Tablada was the first Cuban official to address a legislative body in the United States since the Cuban Revolution in 1959. She came to thank the Illinois legislature for...
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Cindy Buys, now interim dean and acting associate dean of the SIU School of Law, taught the Legal Globalization class on Cuba again in 2016, but this time, it was jointly offered with SIU’s undergraduate Honors Program under the supervision of Dr. Yeomans. Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Lori Stettler also accompanied the group to Cuba on this trip.

In the fall of 2016, the U.S. State Department awarded a team at SIUC a grant titled, “Connecting Cuban Entrepreneurs,” to assist with the development of small business in Cuba. Dr. Kyle Harfst and Ms. Lynn Andersen Lindberg of the SIU Research Park and Dean Buys traveled to Cuba in February 2017 to meet with U.S. and Cuban government officials, economists, lawyers, and small business owners to further the grant project.

In July 2017, Dr. Mario Pablo Estrada Garcia, Chief of the Animal Biotechnology Division of the Center of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (CIGB) in Havana, Cuba visited the SIU Research Park in Carbondale. SIU officials met Dr. Estrada in 2001, when he was a supervisor at the CIGB in Cuba. Today Dr. Estrada is a world-renowned researcher and one of Cuba’s leading scientists.

At Dr. Estrada’s invitation, in December 2017, a group of eight faculty and administrators who were part of the State Department grant project participated in a conference on biotechnology and agriculture in Varadero, Cuba. This visit also led to an invitation to participate in Cuba’s foremost Agricultural Fair and Conference, Feria Internacional Agropecuaria y Alimentaria (FIAGROP), in March 2018. SIUC Chancellor Carlo Montemagno, led a small delegation of SIU faculty and staff to Cuba to participate in that conference and to meet with Cuban officials to further relations.

passing the first resolution asking Congress to end the Cuban embargo for humanitarian reasons. While there, Tablada met with SIU officials.

In October 1999, Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, head of the Cuban Interests Section in D.C., visited SIU. Later that same month, Illinois Gov. George Ryan led a large delegation to Cuba, which included several officials from SIU. He was the first sitting governor to visit Cuba since the Cuban Revolution. While in Cuba, Gov. Ryan had a seven-hour meeting with Cuban President Fidel Castro. The purpose of that first delegation was primarily humanitarian. Ryan delivered 15 tons of medicine, food, and clothing worth $4 million, and facilitated the establishment of a Chicago Tribune bureau in Cuba and the ability of more Catholic priests to work in Cuba.

In February 2001, the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon visited Cuba with SIU President James Walker and a thirty-person delegation. That mission had an educational and public policy focus. While there, Simon met with President Fidel Castro for a six-hour discussion of health care, agriculture, medical schools, and educational systems.

Following the transfer of power from President Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl Castro in December 2008 for health reasons, Cuba began implementing a number of reforms, including the legalization of many small and mid-sized businesses and sales of private homes. To better understand and explore these changes, the first Legal Globalization course on Cuba at the Law School began in 2014 in conjunction with Dr. Suzanne Alotbello Nasco, then with the SIU College of Business. After learning about Cuba though daily classes on history, politics, business, and government, the group traveled to Cuba for a week in June 2014. The student group was joined by three School of Agriculture professors and Professor Cynthia Sims of Workforce Development, who conducted research on colorism. While in Cuba, the group met with several lawyers and small business owners to learn about the development of small businesses, such as restaurants, cleaning services, cell phone repair services, and travel services.

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The death of Fidel Castro and the election of President Donald Trump in November 2016 renewed debate about the status and future of U.S.-Cuban relations. In its first year, the Trump Administration tightened the U.S. trade and travel restrictions on Cuba. The Trump Administration also significantly reduced staffing and services at the U.S. embassy in Havana; however, it has not severed diplomatic relations. In April 2018, Cuban President Raul Castro stepped down and Cubans selected a new president, Miguel Diaz-Canel. Although President Diaz is widely seen as a protégé of Raul Castro, having a government that is not led by a Castro for the first time since 1960 may allow for further thawing of relations between the two countries.

**Brief Synopsis of SIU-Cuba Exchanges:**

- SIU Architecture Professor Jon Davey took students to Cuba to tour notable art and architectural sites and points of interest in December 2001.
- SIU hosted its first Cuban graduate student, Lourdes Albo, in 2001.
- Dr. Luis Estruch Rancano, a member of the Cuban Council of State, and Lourdes Bassue, Second Secretary of the Cuban Interests Section in D.C., visited SIU in May 2002.
- Foreign language students from SIUC and SIUE participated in a study abroad program in Cuba in 2002.
- A research delegation of 18 people from SIU, including SIUE Chancellor Vaughn Vandergrift and SIUC Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management Larry Dietz, traveled to Cuba in 2006. The visit resulted in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between SIU and the José Martí Center in Havana.
- Alina Castro, daughter of Fidel Castro, spoke at SIUC as part of Latino Heritage Month in September 2008.
- The Paul Simon Public Policy Institute (PPI) at SIUC hosted a conference, “US-Cuban Relations: Warming Up or Cooling Down?” in February 2010. Featured speakers included Fulton T. Armstrong, senior staff member on U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Douglas Farquhar of the National Conference of State Legislatures, and an expert on Cuba and international exchanges at the state and local levels.
- Dr. Rodrigo Alvarez Cambras, founder of the Frank Pais International Orthopedic Research Center in Cuba, hosted a group of Carbondale area professionals in Cuba in 2010. In November 2011, Dr. Alvarez and his wife reciprocated by visiting Carbondale.
- At the invitation of the U.S. government, three SIU law professors visited the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay as observers between 2011 and 2012. That lead to a Southern Illinois University Law Journal symposium in 2013 in Carbondale, “Guantanamo Bay: What Next?” in which national and international scholars and U.S. government officials examined the history of the U.S. presence and use of facilities at Guantanamo Bay.
- In 2012, SIU Chancellor Rita Chang travelled with a small contingent from SIU to Cuba to execute a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Havana.
- In May 2014, Second Secretary Rodney Gonzalez Maestrey of the Cuban Interests Section visited SIU in Carbondale and Springfield to express the indebtedness of the Cuban people toward SIU and the Carbondale community for their ongoing support.