

Bridging Ideological Divides: A U.S.-Cuba Study Abroad Experience

William Hernández Requejo, JD

Faculty, Organization & Management
Paul Merage School of Business
University of California, Irvine
Email: whernand@uci.edu

María Elisa Grandoné, PhD

Director of Undergraduate Programs
Paul Merage School of Business
University of California, Irvine
Email: mgrandon@uci.edu

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Setting

This case centers on a 2009 undergraduate business study abroad program between the Paul Merage School of Business at the University of California, Irvine, and partner institutions in Cuba. The nine-day program was conceived in the context of fragile diplomatic relations and stark economic contrasts, aiming to expose U.S. students to non-market systems and encourage reflection on global business models. It immersed 35 U.S. students in Cuba's distinctive economic environment.

U.S.–Cuba relations, consistently shaped by U.S. State Department sanctions and executive policy shifts, presented additional layers of complexity. The program coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution—a period marked by diplomatic tension. Subsequent changes under the Obama administration briefly eased some restrictions, only for them to be reimposed later. This required ongoing adaptation and resilience from program organizers.

Designing a U.S.–Cuba study abroad program meant overcoming deep-rooted skepticism on both sides. The planning process took two years of trust-building, site visits, cultural diplomacy, and behind-the-scenes negotiations to secure necessary approvals. Throughout this process, faculty from both nations engaged in dialogue with university administrators, legal experts, and government stakeholders. In many ways, the initiative became a form of *academic diplomacy*—a long-term project of mutual respect, cooperation, and pragmatic flexibility.

Case

Cultivating Institutional Support

To begin building partnerships, the School of Business faculty lead leveraged long-standing personal and professional relationships with Cuban academic leaders. Even with strong institutional backing, skepticism remained. Some Cuban officials questioned whether the program represented cultural imperialism. Cuban officials initially viewed the program with suspicion, asking pointedly, “*Why should we allow you to come here and preach about a system that has sought to undermine our revolution for decades?*”

Conversely, some U.S. students were skeptical about the value of studying a centrally-planned economy, with one asking, “*How can learning about a non-market economy help me in my future career in corporate America?*” Yet, to the faculty lead, this stark contrast made Cuba an ideal setting to foster reflective global learning.

The U.S. university worried about student safety and legal exposure. Extensive meetings, transparency, and careful documentation were critical in overcoming these barriers. Risk management protocols were comprehensive. Contingency plans addressed political unrest, medical emergencies, and communication breakdowns. Legal teams on both sides reviewed each element of the program to ensure compliance with rapidly shifting regulations.

Ultimately, faculty worked not only as educators but also as diplomats, mediators, and translators across systems. Their persistence transformed a seemingly-risky idea into a viable program.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum was co-developed with Cuban academic partners, promoting shared ownership and mutual respect. The program included lectures, site visits, cultural excursions, and interactions with local entrepreneurs. It was designed to challenge assumptions about capitalism, entrepreneurship, and development, while fostering deeper intercultural awareness. The program’s structure reflected four guiding themes:

1. Understanding Economic and Financial Issues – Students explored Cuba’s dual-currency system, the structure of state-owned enterprises, and the dynamics of an emerging private sector.
2. Learning Through Immersion – Students were encouraged to engage directly with local communities.

3. Challenging Ethnocentrism – The program systematically pushed students to examine their cultural assumptions and how those shaped their interpretation of Cuban society.
4. The Importance of Cross-Cultural Communication – Emphasis was placed on adapting communication and negotiation strategies across cultural and political divides.

Pre-Departure Orientation

Before departure, the program initiated a rigorous orientation process. The faculty asked students to reflect on their expectations and document what they had heard about Cuba. These assumptions—often reflecting stereotypes from media or political rhetoric—surfaced and were openly discussed.

Students read articles from diverse U.S. media outlets alongside Cuban publications and citizen blogs. They were introduced to readings on socialism, Cuban economic history, and recent reforms. Debates around capitalism versus socialism, freedom versus stability, and growth versus equality were framed not as binary choices but as lenses through which to analyze complexity.

The faculty emphasized that Cuba's system, though unfamiliar to most students, was not without rationality or merit. They urged students to move beyond judgment and adopt a posture of critical humility.

During the Program

Each day of the program began with a briefing and ended with a structured debriefing session. The formal program included state-owned enterprise visits, guest lectures, cultural tours, and informal gatherings with local Cubans. Students were encouraged to observe, question, and document what they experienced in real time.

In one classroom session, a respected Cuban professor gave a candid lecture on U.S.–Cuban relations—while a government official sat silently at the back. Despite the obvious surveillance, the conversation was allowed to proceed, albeit within certain boundaries. As students would later describe, critique in Cuba was often cloaked in respectful tones and communicated through body language—*las miradas*, or “the glances,” became part of the learning.

The contrast between systems forced students to confront contradictions in their own assumptions. Visiting informal markets, they observed entrepreneurial behaviors that defied textbook expectations. Seeing resilience in the face of scarcity, they began to appreciate different models of productivity and value. Participating in community events and sharing meals with Cuban families, they discovered a human richness often absent in economic reports.

After the Program

Returning home, many students reported lasting changes in perspective. Some altered academic trajectories, others pursued careers in international development or comparative economics. Several maintained contact with Cuban academics or initiated further research into Cuba's evolving private sector.

Students also wrestled with the ethical responsibility of representing their experiences without oversimplifying or exoticizing Cuba's reality. Frustrated by simplistic portrayals of Cuba in the U.S., many became advocates for a more nuanced view. They spoke of their experiences in classrooms, job interviews, and policy forums, attempting to bridge the same ideological divides they had experienced abroad.

The long-term impact extended beyond individual transformation. The program itself became a model for designing meaningful exchanges in sanctioned or authoritarian environments. It demonstrated the educational power of intercultural dialogue, even under difficult circumstances.

Yet sustaining the program remained difficult. Cuba's worsening economic conditions—marked by shortages of food, gasoline, and electricity—alongside an exodus of key academic collaborators, made further iterations challenging. Still, the positive impacts of the program on the students and the faculty endure.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What is the value of supporting study abroad programs in sanctioned or authoritarian environments? What is the value of supporting study abroad programs in locations that may be experiencing mild political unrest or social tension?
- What strategies best prepare students to engage thoughtfully and respectfully with unfamiliar political and economic systems?
- What role do informal interactions play in promoting intercultural understanding, and how can programs be designed for them intentionally?
- How do national narratives and media representations shape how students and faculty perceive and engage with host-country institutions?
- What ethical considerations should guide educators when operating programs in authoritarian or politically sensitive environments?
- How can partnerships between institutions in ideologically divergent countries be structured to ensure mutual respect and shared program ownership?
- What would it take to make a program like the one in this case sustainable over time, given the demands on faculty and administrative time and the uncertainty of the political landscape?