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What changes with Cuba could mean

When I became Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) more than five years ago I was approached by a number of faculty who were interested in reactivating contacts with academics in Cuba. Those contacts had begun many years earlier when Paul Simon, the late Senator for Illinois, took several faculty members of the SIU system to the Caribbean island seeking possibilities for academic exchange.

After George W. Bush became president in 2001 the travel restrictions to Cuba were hardened, making it almost impossible to conduct any serious, long-term academic business in that nation.

Yet, I decided to try by contacting some people I knew at the University of Havana. By the time I arrived there in January of 2011, the Obama Administration had just relaxed travel restrictions, a positive step for academic exchanges.

As a Hispanic fully fluent in Spanish and coming from Obama's home state, I was received very warmly and began to negotiate an agreement with that university. The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) approved a proposal of mine to create a Cuban-Caribbean Center for the SIU system that would be financially self-sufficient.

We call that, "Academic diplomacy."

In 2012 we signed in Havana a Memorandum of Understanding between both institutions that was quite comprehensive and far-reaching in scope. Since then, there have been multiple reciprocal visits of scholars, a course from SIUE offered in Cuba, and a scholarly publication about Cuban issues jointly edited by faculty from both institutions, which was published this very week.

Now that the U.S. government is moving

Aldemaro Romero Jr.

forward in normalizing diplomatic relations between both countries, one may ask what this will mean for higher education.

Although we have yet to see the regulations to be issued by the Treasury Department of what can be done from now on by Americans in Cuba, there are a number of safe predictions one can make.

The first one is that for the first time, Americans will be able to organize and freely attend academic meetings in Cuba. I suspect that the first organization doing that will be the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), which is the prime group that welcomes scholars from Cuba from all disciplines.

In fact, LASA has been struggling in the past in having those meetings in the United States because of the usually unpredictable way by which the State Department gives visas to Cuban scholars coming to the U.S. That is why they have held their meetings in other countries, such as Canada.

Along those lines, we can expect that from now on the issuing of visas for Cubans wishing to come to the U.S. for academic purposes will be less erratic and more "normal."

Another safe prediction is that the number of U.S. citizens going to Cuba to study will increase dramatically. After all, Cuba has been for more than a half century kind of a "forbidden fruit" and many Americans are very curious about the culture and Cuban people.

The other one will be an increase for Internet communication infrastructure, something that President Obama already alluded to during his

speech. This will allow exchange of information between scholars of both countries. This has been hampered by very poor bandwidth in Cuba and a lack of permits for Cuban scholars to access U.S.-based academic databases and library materials.

In terms of specific areas of cooperation, the Cuban colleagues have shown a great deal of interest in collaborating on issues of natural disasters, environmental sciences, biotechnology, visual and performing arts, history, political science and mass communications. In fact, the SIUE Department of Mass Communications is already in conversations to bring a Cuban scholar to campus.

Another area of great potential is agriculture and commerce and that may have a great impact for Illinois. One of the biggest needs for Cuba comes in the form of food, and corn in particular is one of those staples in which they have great interest. In fact, if you wonder why so many Republican representatives seem warm to the idea of lifting the U.S. embargo on Cuba (something that will require action by the U.S. Congress), it is because they represent districts that are largely agricultural ones.

Therefore, the possibilities are big and broad for institutions of higher education in Illinois and elsewhere in the United States.

Now all will depend on the ability of university leaders in Illinois and elsewhere so seek these opportunities and capitalize on academic diplomacy.

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