

# U.S.-Cuba relations expand, broadening work and experiences of Penn community

Text by [Lauren Hertzler](#)

This week, [Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw](#), an associate professor in the [Department of the History of Art](#), will lead a group of [Penn](#) alumni to Cuba to experience its rich culture—specifically its arts community.

They'll meet leading Cuban artists in their studios, visit Ediciones Vigía, where handmade books are created, and attend theater, music, and dance performances.



*The normalizing of U.S.-Cuba relations has enabled the Penn community to more easily travel to the island nation for research.  
Photo by Kai-Young Chan*

It'll be Shaw's fifth time traveling to the island in three years. Late last spring, she led a group of 22 Penn undergraduate students to Havana for an intensive, weeklong travel course.

"It's important Penn has this connection to Cuba because if the University is interested in being active globally, we really have to engage as much of the globe as possible," Shaw says. "Making these connections for our undergrads and alumni will help poise the University to work with Cuba in a really active and dynamic way."

It's a historically significant time for Americans to be traveling to Cuba, and vice versa. In 1961, during the Cold War, the United States withdrew diplomatic recognition of

the Cuban government and each country closed its respective embassy. The severed ties affected substantial engagement between the two countries, including travel, trade, and financial transactions. Formal diplomatic relations weren't restored until this past July—more than five decades later. The U.S. embassy was reopened in Havana, as was the Cuban embassy in Washington, D.C.

Just last month, the two countries announced an agreement to restore scheduled commercial airline service. Still, U.S. travelers must meet specific criteria to visit Cuba—for instance, they should be in the clear if they're going to visit family, for educational or professional research purposes, or to participate in a public performance, clinic, or workshop.

**[Kai-Young Chan](#)**, a fourth-year graduate student in composition at Penn, says his travel to Cuba in November was mostly smooth—“indeed comparatively easier than before.”

“I was told that there used to be only two chartered flights in the morning, but the day I was leaving, there were as many as six and the small airport was packed with people,” Chan says.

Chan was chosen by the American Composers Forum to be part of its artist delegation to the 28th season of the Festival de Música Contemporánea de La Habana (Havana Contemporary Music Festival). It was the first time in the festival’s history an entire delegation of musicians and composers from the U.S. was able to attend in person.

Chan and his group, which included three other Penn alumni—Jeremy Gill, Jennifer Higdon, and Ingrid Arauco—attended concerts, dance performances, jazz clubs, a drumming workshop, and even a world-famous recording studio. It was typical for Chan to interact with young, local musicians during his stay, he says.

“They are very curious about the life as a musician and the recent development of contemporary music in the States, since access to recently composed musical scores—even basic music supplies like strings and reeds—are still limited over there,” Chan says. “I believe the situation is similar across other disciplines, and there is much room for more intercultural conversations and understandings that could bring inspiring ideas to people of both countries.”

**[Amy Sadao](#)** says to see the way the Cubans celebrate creative work, specifically dance, visual art, and music, was “extraordinary.” Sadao, the director of Penn’s **[Institute of Contemporary Art](#)**, led a group of Penn alumni to Cuba during the Havana Biennial Art Exhibition at the end of last May.

“Art is a huge part of everybody’s life there, it seems,” says Sadao. “They have such pride around their work that we’ve had a low ability to experience.”

**[Debra Schilling Wolfe](#)**, executive director of the **[Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice, and Research](#)** in the **[School of Social Policy & Practice](#)**, traveled in September to Cuba with a 15-person appointed national research delegation sponsored by the Child Welfare League of America and the Coalition for Research to Practice. The purpose of the trip was to understand how Cuba cares for its children, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

“Our learning can help inform the work that we do domestically, as well as provide our government insight as relations between the two countries open up,” Schilling Wolfe says.

Schilling Wolfe and her cohort were introduced to a variety of places and initiatives, including a maternity home for high-risk pregnancies, a program for youth with developmental disabilities, a children's shelter, the Literacy Museum, the University of Havana, and the National Union of Lawyers.

"The diversity of perspectives on the research delegation—there were people from nonprofits, the academic sector, and more—allowed us to critically evaluate how Cuba's children are cared for," Schilling Wolfe says.



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"Our findings are being disseminated both nationally and on Penn's campus. I was even able to present what I found on the health care model in Cuba to Penn Nursing students."

Since relations were restored, [Oriol Sunyer](#), a professor of immunology and microbiology at [Penn Vet](#), says he hopes to see an influx of collaboration between researchers in the U.S. and Cuba.

This past summer, Sunyer's lab, which focuses on the basic and applied aspects of the fish immune system, benefited from the in-person expertise of Mario Pablo Estrada Garcia, who is director of agricultural biotechnology research for the

Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, a scientific center in Havana.

"The U.S. is the most developed country in the world and it has a tremendous development and support for science," Garcia says. "At the same time, Cuba has hugely invested in science in the last 55 years. Penn Vet is a top place for basic science and the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology is successful in applied science. Both institutions have the same objective: to improve animal health. There is a complementation and we need to work together in order to increase the exchange to achieve better results for both sides."

Garcia came from Cuba in July and stayed in Philadelphia for two months. Working every day until 8 or 9 p.m., he was able to clone a novel gene and make DNA sequences, but, most importantly, he says, "Dr. Sunyer and I planned and designed a lot of future projects to work together."

For instance, this month Sunyer and Garcia, in collaboration with a researcher from Prince Edward Island University in Canada, will begin an experiment in salmon using a vaccine to enhance the fish mucosal immune system. This would be the first approach to control the marine parasite sea lice in salmon through a vaccine instead of a chemical poured into the ocean, Garcia explains.

"This is just one example of the many benefits that could be produced by our scientific exchange," Garcia says.

Originally published on **Thursday, January 21, 2016**.