DAVID ROCKEFELLER CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Mission

The David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS) at Harvard University works to increase knowledge of the cultures, histories, environment, and contemporary affairs of Latin America; foster cooperation and understanding among the people of the Americas; and contribute to democracy, social progress, and sustainable development throughout the hemisphere.

The Author

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Case Study

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DAVID ROCKEFELLER CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Case Study:

Building Academic Collaborations between the U.S. and Cuba

by
Lorena Barberia

This case describes the institutional collaboration developed between Harvard University and the Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine (IPK) through the Cuban Studies Program of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS). Founded in 1937, the IPK is Cuba's leading training and research center on infectious diseases and the primary reference institution for Cuba's public health system.

Historical Background: The Onset of a Partnership

With the break between the United States and Cuba in the early 1960s, relations between Harvard and leading Cuban institutions became limited to occasional meetings between scientists and physicians at international meetings and conferences. In the mid 1990s, however, contacts became more frequent as the Clinton Administration changed U.S. policy to promote people-to-people exchanges. The U.S. State Department began to increase the number of visas issued to Cuban scientists and the U.S. Department of the Treasury encouraged educational and research institutions to travel to Cuba by issuing specific licenses. In 1996, Paul Farmer, Professor in the Department of Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School (HMS), invited Jorge Pérez Ávila, then Medical director of the IPK's Hospital and of the Santiago de las Vegas AIDS Sanatorium, to Boston. En route to the Partners In Health (PIH) community clinic in Haiti, Farmer visited Cuba the following year. Brought together by their work treating AIDS patients, the two physicians began to correspond and to think of how their visits to each other's clinics could be transformed into activities to strengthen the pressing urgencies each faced. Though the settings contrasted sharply, each saw the potential that could be achieved by their collaboration.

Box 1. Harvard University-IPK Collaboration

The public health initiative developed by Harvard and IPK has three main objectives:

1) To increase scientific collaboration and exchange between the IPK and Harvard;

2) To improve understanding of the functioning of the Cuban healthcare system, the success achieved by Cuba in controlling at eradicating infectious disease and the role of institutions such as IPK in the public health system; and,

3) To support the development and dissemination of public health work currently underway in Cuba's scientific and research laboratories and institutions.

Two years later, in 1998, the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS) received a two-year grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to initiate a program of academic exchanges with Cuban scholars and institutions. The grant provided an unusual opportunity to DRCLAS. Fortuitously, public health and medicine were identified as key priorities. That same year, John R. David, Professor of the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and Harvard Medical School, wrote to

Gustavo Kourí, the Institute's director general, to explore opportunities for developing exchanges to advance research on tropical diseases. Kourí invited David to visit the IPK to learn more about its work in tropical disease research, and David travelled to Cuba funded by a DRCLAS faculty grant supported by the newly received MacArthur grant. Upon his return to Harvard, he helped link the first Cuban scientist from the IPK, Roberto Fernández, the IPK's Biosafety Chief, with Melvin First's lab at the Department of Environmental Health at HSPH through a visiting scholarship provided by DRCLAS. As the first Cuban DRCLAS visiting scholar, Fernández spent two months that year at Harvard learning about the certification procedures followed by biosafety level 3 laboratories (BL-3) labs at Harvard that allow scientists to work safely with known or possible human pathogens classified at level 3 such as the human immunodeficiency virus. He returned to the Institute to set up its first ever BSL-3 lab.

Box 2. DRCLAS Cuban Visiting Scholars in Public Health and Medicine at Harvard University*

Roberto J. Fernández
Research Area: Certification Procedures for BL-3
Harvard Host: Melvin First, HSPH
Spring 1999

Mayra Mune Jiménez[1]
Research Area: Dengue Virus Vaccine with DNA Immunization
Harvard Host: Donald Harn, HSPH
Fall 2000

Jorge Pérez Ávila
Research Area: HIV/AIDS in Cuba
Harvard Host: Paul Farmer and Arachu Castro, HMS
Summer 2001

Lisette Pérez
Research Area: HIV Load Viral Testing
Harvard Host: Bruce Walker, HMS
Fall 2001

Beatriz Sierra[2]
HLA Class I genes and Dengue in Cuba, 1981-1997
Harvard Host: Phyllis Kanki, HSPH
Spring 2002

Vivian Kourí Cardella[3]
Research Area: Genotypes of Kshv in Cuba
Harvard Host: Jae Jung, HMS
Fall 2003

Alicia Reyes Jímenez[4]
Research Area: Resource Allocation for HIV/AIDS
Harvard Host: Arachu Castro, HMS
Spring 2004

Raúl Díaz[5]
Research Area: Molecular typing of Mycobacterium tuberculosis
Harvard Host: Eric Rubin, HSPH
Fall 2004

Jorge Maestre Mesa
Research Area: Virulence regulators of Mycobacterium tuberculosis
Harvard Host: Eric Rubin, HSPH
Fall 2004

Rayner Rodríguez
Research Area: Cytotoxic T-lymphocytes in the Immune Response to Bacterial Infections
Harvard Host: Michael Starnbach, HMS
Fall 2004

Jorge Pérez Ávila
Research Area: Quality of Life of People living with HIV/AIDS
Harvard Host: Arachu Castro, HMS
Spring 2005

*The bibliographical citation for each scholar is a reference to the work produced as a result of their residency at Harvard.

Institutionalizing the Collaboration

The remarkable benefits from these initial exchanges, as well a May 2000 visit to Harvard University by a senior IPK delegation comprised of Gustavo Kourí, Jorge Pérez Ávila and María Guadalupe Guzmán, motivated the two institutions to sign a formal memorandum of understanding in a meeting in Havana in January 2001. This meeting included a nine-member delegation of faculty from HMS and HSPH and DRCLAS staff. The formal agreement outlined a plan to strengthen research ties between the two institutions and to develop academic exchanges between faculty and students in areas such as research on tuberculosis, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, bacterial and viral respiratory infections, dengue, mycology, and applying the disciplines of molecular biology, molecular epidemiology, immunology and social science analysis

to infectious diseases. The collaboration, which has come to fruition through academic exchanges and joint teaching and research endeavors, has resulted in a project that has become the most extensive, long-standing scientific collaboration and exchange between Cuban and U.S. scientists in the areas of public health and medicine in the last half century.

Building Impact

Eleven IPK researchers have travelled to Harvard University to undertake short-tem residencies with DRCLAS support between 2000 and 2005 (see Box 2). Hosted by Harvard faculty, the outcome of the research projects undertaken during these short-term residencies have led to joint publications in leading scientific and medical journals such as *Human Immunology*, *AIDS* and *Tuberculosis*. These residencies, supported by DRCLAS initially through a grant from the MacArthur Foundation and subsequently by the Ford Foundation and the Wilbur Marvin Fund, have been crucial in helping advance training for Cuban scientists and scholars. For example, Mayra Muné Jiménez, a senior scientist in the IPK's Department of Virology, carried out a short-term residency in the lab of Donald Harn to advance dengue vaccine research tied to her doctoral degree in virology. Lissette Pérez and Alicia Reyes Jiménez also used their residency at Harvard to advance completion of their master's theses in virology and health economics, respectively. Raúl Díaz spent four months working in Eric Rubin's laboratory at the HSPH's Department of Immunology and Infectious Diseases conducting research on tuberculosis, one of the diseases that causes a high burden of disease and death in low-income countries. He describes the impact of his visit as follows:

> "After a two-and–a-half-year wait for a visa from the United States, the experience I acquired in Eric Rubin's lab was incredible and far beyond my initial expectations. My mentor is a very competent professional, who works both as a microbiologist and a medical doctor, and he is an exceptional human being. Working with Eric, I learned how to use very sophisticated techniques in comparative genomic research and to value the scientific and academic rigor that exists at Harvard. I was given access to the most advanced technology and the most up-to-date scientific information that is available in my field, as well as to an excellent system of human resource building."

Over the course of the last decade, Harvard students and faculty also traveled to Cuba in growing numbers. In the last eight years, Harvard medical students such as Brian Somoano MD '02, Ellen H. Chen MD '02 and Grace López MD '04, spent time in residence at the IPK

Box 3. A View from a Harvard Medical Student

"I first went to the IPK in 2005 in the summer after my first year of medical school. That summer, I was exposed to a health care system completely different than that which I had learned in Boston. I learned that quality health care could be delivered in a resource-poor setting and that technology is helpful but not necessary in caring for patients. The mentors that I met at the IPK taught me that the greatest resource we have in medicine is our ability to thoughtfully approach clinical problems while connecting in a meaningful way to the patients who we serve. I have since returned to the IPK several times and stay in contact with mentors and peers there. It has become an institutional home for me, and has influenced me in the same way that MGH, Brigham and now UCSF have shaped the physician that I have become."

Melissa S. Burroughs, MD, HMS'08
Resident Physician
Department of Medicine
University of California, San Francisco

Hospital to learn about in-patient care and the importance of patient-doctor relationships in Cuba. They worked under the supervision of Jorge Pérez Ávila and Arachu Castro, their HMS advisor. The impact of these residencies at the IPK has shaped the practice of medicine (see Box 3). These residencies have also contributed to honor's thesis research at HMS. For example, the time Melissa Burroughs, HMS'08 spent working in Havana allowed her to contrast Cuba with Puerto Rico and sparked her interest in writing a thesis on the differences in HIV-related stigma and discrimination faced by people of different skin colors.

Moreover, the two institutions have sponsored joint courses, seminars, conferences and workshops on immunology and infectious diseases, the Cuban health system, dengue, health reform, and resource allocation for AIDS (see Box 4). With HMS, HSPH and MacArthur Foundation support, 11 HMS and HSPH faculty organized and delivered a three-day immunology course at the IPK in December 2001. The course involved more than 300 Cuban scientists and physicians from the IPK and other Cuban scientific institutes. Reflecting on the impact of these types of jointly organized courses, Michael Starnbach, Harvard Medical School Professor in the Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics and a course organizer, noted that:

> "We were taken aback by the extraordinary interest in the presentations by a wide cross-section of the Cuban scientific community… IPK scientists would often cluster with Harvard faculty for lively interchange regarding the scientific basis of what was presented and about the potential of using the information for infectious disease interventions in Cuba. The attendees that engaged in these discussions were extremely well-educated, and had significant knowledge of the current state-of-the-art in the fields covered by the course. This knowledge base was obtained despite the extraordinary difficulty in obtaining copies of important scientific papers, despite limited access to the internet, and despite the very limited resources available to conduct their own research. I cannot overemphasize how excited the Cuban scientists were and are to have made contact with Harvard faculty, and the dialogue that began during the course in Havana is continuing through e-mail interactions and the impending visit of several scientists from IPK.
>
> As for the future of these interactions, I view the exchanges as an opportunity for Harvard faculty to provide information on the methods and approaches taken at the medical and public health schools towards the study of diseases important in Cuba and worldwide… Some of these studies will involve databases and research reagents that are unique to the Cuban scientific enterprise. The value of the information provided to Harvard faculty by IPK scientists may become increasingly important as the United States begins to face diseases such as dengue that have been an enormous public health problem in Cuba and where it has largely been controlled. These diseases have not been a problem in the United States, but will likely be introduced as globalization increases. "

A delegation of senior Cuban scientists and scholars from the IPK participated in an April 2003 "Harvard School of Public Health Forum on Dengue: The Cuban Experience, Surveillance and Control, Immunopathology, Social Aspects, and Vaccine Development." In a reciprocal fashion, they shared their experiences with Cuba's general dengue control program, including aspects such as mosquito control, surveillance and laboratory research and clinical aspects and treatment with their international colleagues. Although the U.S. State Department denied visas to Dr. Kourí and Dr. Juan Bisset without explanation, the HSPH forum was a rare opportunity for Cuban public health officials to discuss their experiences on setting

up a successful control strategy. During the meeting, a number of faculty members from Harvard and distinguished dengue specialists made presentations on such issues as the latest advances in vaccine development, the social impact of dengue, comparative lessons from control strategies in other countries, including the Centers for Disease Control's strategy in Puerto Rico. Colleagues from the University of Massachusetts Dengue Group, one of the most active in the U.S., also covered immunologic aspects of dengue. It should be noted that dengue has continued to develop as a long-lasting area of collaboration as Arachu Castro from HMS has been, since 2001, in the faculty of the IPK´s International Dengue Course, the largest international dengue course in the world– gathering over 150 participants every other year.

Indeed, inspired by her teaching in these courses, Castro recently completed a book on the social conditions contributing to the increase of dengue transmission in Latin America. The foreword was written by María Guadalupe Guzmán, the Head of the IPK's Virology Department, and the book is being considered for publication by the World Health Organization (WHO).[6]

Box 4. Harvard-IPK Jointly Organized Public Health and Medicine Congresses, Seminars and Workshops

Seminar of the Cuban Public Health System
Led by Arachu Castro, HMS and Lorena Barberia, DRCLAS
Harvard Medical School
September 2001-Spring 2002

Immunology and Infectious Diseases Course at the IPK
Led by John David, HMS and HSPH, Michael Starnbach, HMS, and Eric Rubin, HSPH
Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine
December 2001

The Impact of Health Systems Reform in the Control of Infectious Diseases in Latin America
Led by Paul Farmer, Jim Yong Kim and Arachu Castro, HMS and Gustavo Kourí and Jorge Pérez, IPK*
Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine
April 2002

Harvard School of Public Health Forum on Dengue: The Cuban Experience, Surveillance and Control, Immunopathology, Social Aspects, and Vaccine Development
Led by John David, HSPH and Gustavo Kourí, IPK
Harvard School of Public Health
April 2003

Pioneering Medical Research in Cuba
Led by Paul Farmer and Arachu Castro, HMS with Jorge Maestre Mesa, Raúl Díaz and Rayner Rodríguez, IPK
Harvard Medical School
December 2004

Resource Allocation Practices in the Prevention and Care of AIDS in the Caribbean at the IPK**
Led by Arachu Castro, HMS and Jorge Pérez, IPK
Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine
March 2005

* Co-organizers from PAHO are not listed, but include Daniel López Acuña and Eduardo Levcovitz.
**Proceedings available at:
http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/cuba/faculty/public_health#

The Impact beyond the Main Actors

A significant and important aspect of Harvard-IPK collaborations is that they have provided opportunities for engaging beyond bilateral discussions to include the public health community across the globe, most particularly with researchers and policymakers in neighboring Latin American and Caribbean countries. For instance, some 50 public health officials, decision makers and academics from throughout the region convened at the conference titled "The Impact of Health Systems Reform in the Control of Infectious Diseases in Latin America" in April 2002, in Havana, Cuba, to analyze the successes and limitations of various public health systems in the prevention and control of infectious disease in the region. The meeting was organized by Harvard Medical School (Program in Infectious Disease and Social Change in the Department of Social Medicine), DRCLAS, the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba, the IPK, the National Institute of

Hygiene, Epidemiology and Microbiology (INHEM), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, WHO's Regional Office for the Americas, Division of Health Systems and Services Development; Division of Vaccines and Immunizations; Division of Disease Prevention and Control), and the WHO/World Bank/United Nations Development Program and Special Program for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR).

The collaboration has also led to increased understanding at Harvard University and across the United States of the achievements and challenges confronting the Cuban public health system. In partnership with the Program in Infectious Disease and Social Change at HMS, DRCLAS sponsored an ongoing 2001-02 Seminar on the Cuban Public Health System. Taught by Harvard faculty, visiting Cuban scholars and distinguished international health researchers, the seminar analyzed how Cuban public health officials have maintained their effectiveness in setting up successful control strategies for infectious diseases, such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, dengue, and immuno-preventable diseases, even in the context of dramatic economic adjustment. The proceedings of the seminar were edited by the co-organizers of the seminar, Arachu Castro and Lorena Barberia, DRCLAS Program Associate, and published as a David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies working paper in 2003. The edited volume of lectures continues to be used in the curriculum in several courses at leading medical and public health schools in the United States.[7]

A Halt in Exchanges

Following the inauguration of George W. Bush as President of the United States in 2001, U.S. policy towards Cuba reversed many of the changes that had been introduced in the mid 1990s. A key turning point that had an especially important impact on Harvard's scientific exchanges with the IPK occurred in 2002 when then-Undersecretary of State John Bolton charged that "the United States believes that Cuba has at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort." Although no evidence has been produced to certify that Cuba has a biological weapons effort since these allegations were made, this assessment and the passage of more restrictive legislation by the U.S. Congress following the attacks of September 11, 2001 have resulted in an increase in the number of required reviews by U.S. agencies in the case of visa petitions by Cuban scientists and scholars seeking permission to enter the United States. The increase in administrative processing undertaken by U.S. authorities initially caused prolonged delays in the issuing of a response by the State Department on non-immigrant cases. Soon after, however, a policy of automatic visa denials was instituted.

After 2003, the number of denials issued by the U.S. State Department to Cuban scholars and scientists, even those who had visited the United States many times in the past, began to increase markedly. In many cases, the United States denied Cuban scholars visas based on section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which specifies criteria to bar the entry of employees of the Cuban government and members of the Communist Party of Cuba deemed detrimental to U.S. national security interests. Harvard University also experienced significant difficulty in securing visas for Cuban academics invited as distinguished visiting scholars in the context of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies' institutional exchange program. Between 2002 and 2005, the U.S. government approved only 16 of the 30 invitations that Harvard extended to Cuban scholars. From April 2005 to June 2008, the U.S. State Department has denied entry to all Cuban scholars who have requested a non-immigrant visa to travel to Harvard University.

U.S. policies toward educational exchanges with Cuba were also restricted by the Bush Administration starting in 2004. Following the recommendations of the Commission for the Assistance to a Free Cuba chaired by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, new restrictions were imposed on U.S. students, faculty and staff undertaking academic studies on the island by the United States Treasury Department Office for Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the agency charged with enforcement of the U.S. embargo on Cuba, in June 2004. OFAC amended the 1963 Cuban Assets and Control Regulations prohibiting U.S.-based undergraduates and graduate students from participating in study or research programs in Cuba of less than ten weeks. Restrictions on U.S. university faculty invited to teach in Cuba for less than ten consecutive weeks were also introduced.

While the effect of the shift in U.S. policy effectively limited the flow of Cuban scientists to Harvard and also reduced the number of Harvard faculty and students who could undertake travel to the IPK, counterparts at both institutions remained committed to the exchange and worked to continue the collaborative programs that had been started and also initiated new projects. In addition, in response to biological warfare allegations, Cuban institutions including the IPK have invited foreign delegations to check out the nation's biotech facilities and encouraged scientific exchanges that would provide a clear window into this sector.

Looking Ahead

The number of concrete initiatives and outcomes resulting from this collaboration are striking. In the research field, two initiatives, one underway and another planned, merit special attention. Based on joint research by Harvard and IPK faculty working as co-investigators, both projects seek to formulate and analyze

important questions at the forefront of the global health agenda, as well as to ensure that research findings from these studies are directed towards those who need them the most.

a) Medical Anthropology Research on the Impact of AIDS Treatment

In 2004, Arachu Castro and a research team from the IPK headed by Jorge Pérez initiated a joint research project on the impact of the provision of effective AIDS therapy on the quality of life and the illness experience of AIDS patients in Cuba. The project, based on interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of people living with AIDS in Cuba, seeks to explore whether the transformation of AIDS –from an inevitably fatal disease to a chronic and manageable one—has decreased stigma and increased the quality of life of people receiving effective therapy. Supported by a Ford Foundation grant to the Cuban Studies Program at DRCLAS, as well as grants made to Harvard Medical School by Atlantic Philanthropies and the William Milton Fund, the initial results of the study have already begun to raise important questions and to reveal insights on how the social experience of AIDS is affected by access to effective therapy and how, in turn, changes in social experience alter the social construction of stigma. One area of study that has been identified with major implications at both the research and policy levels is the understanding of why Cuban women are not becoming infected with HIV in a greater proportion than men as has happened in the rest of the world.[8, 9]

Jorge Pérez, co-principal investigator of the study, came to Harvard as a DRCLAS visiting scholar to work on this project on two occasions. He describes the impact of the study for Cuba in the following manner:

> "Since 2001, Cuba has guaranteed the provision of antiretroviral therapy (ART) to all people diagnosed with AIDS with the fundamental objective of improving the well-being of the patients and increasing their life expectancy. Clinical evidence shows that, since ART has been provided in Cuba, survival of people with AIDS has improved and opportunistic infections and deaths have decreased. However, the effect of the provision of ART on the quality of life of people living with AIDS in Cuba had not been studied. We therefore conducted a cross-sectional study with a representative sample of the 1,592 people who were receiving ART in Cuba in 2004. The sample included 354 people, which we interviewed using multi-disciplinary instruments: a quality of life questionnaire (MOS-HIV), which has been used in other countries (such as Mexico, Peru, Spain, Italy, the United States, Thailand, and Singapore), and open-ended interviews that follow the life history method of anthropology. On average, the Cuban study scored as high or higher than all of the countries listed above [10]. The results of our collaborative study enhance clinical evidence: today, Cubans living with AIDS are living longer and maintaining a high quality of life—results that were validated with an international instrument."

An additional outcome of the joint research on the impact of AIDS treatment has been the launch a new project: the Latin America and Caribbean Initiative on the Integration of Prenatal Care with the

Diagnosis and Clinical Management of HIV and Syphilis, which was inspired by Cuba's integration of prenatal care with the prevention and management of HIV and syphilis. The Initiative, directed by Arachu Castro, was launched in Panama in November 2007 with support from the Ford Foundation, UNICEF, and the Ministry of Health of Brazil's International Center for Technical Cooperation on HIV/AIDS (CICT). Comprised of a consortium formed by the National AIDS Programs from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, the Regional Office of UNICEF for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Regional Support Team of UNAIDS for Latin America, the Pan American Health Organization, and Harvard Medical School, the role of the Cuban National AIDS Program is to provide advice and technical support to the Initiative, based on their experience providing high-quality care in a low-resource setting. The involvement of Cuba stems from the academic collaboration between Castro and Pérez on AIDS research.

The Initiative has been lauded by Mark Connolly, Senior Adviser for UNICEF in Latin America and the Caribbean, for its inclusion of the key organizational players across the region. As Connolly stated, "the cooperation will thrive because it is country-driven and the on-the-ground experts are the ones driving the agenda, setting the goals, and committing their own national resources to provide opportunities for families to access quality services." He added that "the Panama meeting provided some of the top leaders in national AIDS responses to have frank discussions about the quality of health services and the chance to radically re-orient approaches to sexually transmitted infections and HIV detection and treatment. The outcomes of the initiative may well raise the 'gold standard' of health care, especially for excluded populations, in Latin America and the Caribbean."

As is described later in more detail, the Cuban Studies Program at DRCLAS played a pivotal role in the onset of this project by securing resources through the Ford Foundation to launch the Initiative.

b) Research on the Pathogenesis of Histoplasmosis

Scientists from HMS, HSPH and IPK are developing a research collaboration to examine the pathogenesis of histoplasmosis, a fungal disease endemic in Cuba and much of the Caribbean, along with parts of the American Midwest. Characterized by a range of presentations, research on this disease is critical as little is known about how the organism, *Histoplasma capsulatum*, causes histoplasmosis, which manifests itself in a wide variety of presentations, ranging from asymptomatic infection to life-threatening disease, particularly among immunocompromised individuals, Because the disease is common in Cuba, the IPK has collected a large number of clinical isolates that presumably represent a broad range of the potential biodiversity of this organism. The Institute also has a group of talented and highly trained scientists studying histoplasmosis. A

major barrier to advancing research on this disease in Cuba has been the inability of Cuban scientists to apply the many new tools available for studying fungi because of lack of access to advanced equipment and materials. The collaboration would combine the expertise that Harvard has to offer in microbial genetics and immunology with the with the IPK's expertise and unique collection of a large number of clinical isolates of *Histoplasma capsulatum*.

To carry out the joint research project, the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies is working to secure the resources to support the first stage of the project by supporting the visits to the IPK of HSPH Professor Eric Rubin and HMS Professor Michael Starnbach, as well as the visits to Harvard University by the Cuban team working on histoplasmosis under the coordination of Gerardo Martínez-Machín, director of Bacteriology and Mycology at the IPK. Following these initial visits, the Harvard and IPK teams will work together to launch a joint multi-site study.

As Eric Rubin describes,

> "The compelling motivation for initiating the joint research project on histoplasmosis is that it is a neglected disease belonging to the family of diseases for which market-driven resources are rarely devoted to studying. In the United States, there have been outbreaks in Cincinnati and the Ohio River Valley. Little is known about histoplasmosis and, of the few number of research scientists engaged in the study of this disease, Cuban scientists are the only ones that posses a significant strain collection of the organism causing this disease. Through this research collaboration, the long term impact would be to improve the way this disease is managed including in the United States."

A Key Partner: The David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies

Since the onset of the exchanges between Harvard University and the IPK, DRCLAS has played an instrumental role in making possible the most extensive scientific collaboration that has been undertaken in the area of public health and medicine between the United States and Cuba. Since the Center's inception in 1994, one of its priorities has been to reestablish and expand ties with Cuban scholars and institutions through its Cuban Studies Program. By fostering sustained collaboration with the IPK, the Center has contributed to the realization of that priority and to dramatically increasing its impact.

The importance of DRCLAS has been threefold:

- The Center has led the charge to ensure that these collaborations could move forward in the face of significant and sometimes daunting administrative and legal challenges. The United States embargo on Cuba imposes several important restrictions on the types of academic exchanges and

collaborations that are legally permitted. Moreover, the Cuban Assets and Control Regulations that codify these restrictions have been modified frequently in the course of the last decade. DRCLAS first obtained a specific license to cover travel-related transactions to Cuba incurred by Harvard students, faculty and staff in connection with university-sponsored programs from the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the United States Department of the Treasury (OFAC) in 1999. Since then, the Center's Cuban Studies Program has been steadfast to adhere in every respect to U.S. laws and regulations that govern transactions with Cuba (for a description of past and currently held OFAC licenses, see Appendix 1). The Center has sought the necessary legal counsel to operate under a general license from the U.S. government for its academic activities with regard to Cuba, and has also worked to renew the several additional specific licenses to support the research endeavors it has secured over the course of the last decade. DRCLAS has been one of the most successful institutions to secure U.S. licenses for both research and teaching in Cuba on an ongoing basis.

- DRCLAS has provided considerable financial and human resources to sustain these collaborations through its own institutional budget and by channeling grant awards. It has also leveraged these resources with funding from partner institutions. Initially, a MacArthur Foundation grant to DRCLAS for its Cuban Studies Program provided the seed money to support the visits by Cuban doctors and scientists to Harvard and the reciprocal planning visits to Havana. In subsequent years, Ford Foundation grants to the Cuban Studies Program and endowments from private donors have enabled projects to move forward. The urgency to sustain these projects has persisted, and today the Center continues to lead efforts with its partners in the foundation and donor communities to ensure that these initiatives will continue to thrive. Oversight of the program is provided by the Cuban Studies Committee that is compromised of 12 faculty members from across the university and 2 staff members who serve in an *ex oficio* capacity. The faculty co-chairs of this committee, Jorge I. Domínguez and Arachu Castro, are both recognized as Cuba experts in their respective fields. DRCLAS has also backed its Cuban Studies Program with well-trained, experienced staff. Lorena Barberia has directed the Cuban Studies Program for eight years and worked closely with Yadira Rivera for the last four years. In addition, staff members in the finance, external relations and development, student services, events and publications areas of DRCLAS also lend their expertise to enable initiatives to move forward.

- Since its inception, the Cuban Studies Program has dedicated a major portion of its efforts to supporting the training and research of Cuban scholars and scientists at Harvard. These visits have been an important catalyst for the launching of collaborative initiatives with the IPK. DRCLAS has

supported residences at Harvard by Cuban scientists and scholars from one to four months. While in residence at Harvard and working on their own research projects, Cuban scholars have benefited from interacting with Harvard faculty and students, using Harvard University library resources, as well as participating in conferences and seminars to present their research findings. The research visits have provided Cuban scholars, medical doctors and scientists with the resources to be able to carry out studies which, given technical and material difficulties in Cuba, would either take much longer or not be able to take place. In addition, the visits have had an important impact in terms of increasing knowledge at Harvard and beyond about the high quality, cutting edge research that is being undertaken by Cuban researchers on important public health problems with worldwide benefits. Yet, these visits have not been easy to make happen. The U.S. State Department has frequently denied visas to IPK scientists and physicians. The Cuban Studies Program has engaged the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, as well as the U.S. State Department on specific individual visa petitions, tracking cases across periods as long as two years and persisting in pushing for reconsideration in those cases where visas have been denied. This behind-the-scenes work is time-intensive and requires persistence. With a commitment to both dedication and persistence, the Center has successfully managed to secure more than half of the visas for its collaborators at the IPK across the last decade. It has also provided the administrative support and hosted these scholars for the duration of their visits to the university.

Conclusion: Ensuring an Alliance for Impact

Throughout the last ten years, DRCLAS has worked to restore and enhance cooperation between its own and Cuban academic communities, not unmindful that such scholarly relations may promote peaceful changes within and between the two countries. While U.S. policy obstacles towards these types of cooperative efforts mounted in recent years, the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th U.S. President in January 2009 has raised expectations that the U.S will reevaluate its hard-line stance and introduce changes that will seek normalization in bilateral relations. DRCLAS hopes that it will be able to resume exchanges with the IPK, as well as with Cuban scholars in various fields. Indeed, these expectations have increased as the U.S. State Department approved a visa for Dr. Jorge Pérez Ávila to travel to Harvard University for a month-long residency in April 2009.

The scientists, physicians and scholars engaged in the Harvard-IPK collaboration are committed to addressing questions that are part of an international body of knowledge that transcends the traditional borders of nation-states. In a range of important diseases and health policies, the benefits from their work

together have been significant and even more so in light of the significant obstacles that have had to be overcome for Cuban and Harvard researchers to work together.

December 2008 marked the 70th anniversary of the IPK and a celebration will be held in June 2009 with hopefully several Harvard University faculty in attendance. The importance of this collaboration has been significant for both parties. Harvard's Paul Farmer observes that much more than "pure research" is at stake in this collaboration: "The IPK has singled out a number of ranking infectious threats, including TB, dengue, malaria and HIV. Comparatively speaking, these are not ranking threats within Cuba. But these diseases constitute huge problems for the poor world. There is no effective vaccine for any of them, and they are the leading infectious diseases in the world today" he says. These concerns are echoed by Gustavo Kourí, director general of the IPK, who notes,

> "The collaboration between Harvard University and the IPK is very useful to both institutions but, most of all, it has a great potential of helping countries in which morbidity and mortality caused by preventable infectious diseases is very high. As the situation in Cuba shows, the main determinant of good health is not the national income of a country, but having the political will to rank health as a human right priority for the whole population—with independence from economic status, skin color, gender, or living location. In this sense, the Cuban health system, which is universal, free of charge, and accessible, is a great example to other countries that want to achieve the right to health for all. The involvement of Harvard professors brings a comparative, multi-disciplinary, and innovative perspective to the analysis of public health in Cuba and of the ways in which the Cuban experience can be used abroad."

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