

## OUR VIEW: Study in Cuba could help

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In a welcome move, President Barack Obama's administration plans to relax travel restrictions to Cuba for religious groups and students interested in studying there.

This has great potential to improve relations between the U.S. and the small communist island — and students should seize the opportunity to study there. It's possible these travel exemptions could be taken away in light of even slight tension with the country.

While OU doesn't have a study-abroad program in place with Cuba, universities such as American University, Duke University and Florida International do.

Visiting Cuba should help students gain a greater understanding of a country that has experienced a U.S. embargo for the last 50 years.

The embargo is considered a failure by many, but U.S. officials continue extending it. Instead of forcing Fidel Castro and the communist party to release their stranglehold on democracy in Cuba, the embargo has arguably empowered these figures, allowing them to blame the U.S. for all of Cuba's problems.

Even Daniel Griswold of the Libertarian Cato Institute think-tank in Washington, D.C., has criticized U.S. policy toward Cuba.

"The embargo has made the Cuban people a bit more impoverished, without making them one bit more free. At the same time, it has deprived Americans of their freedom to travel and has cost U.S. farmers and other producers billions of dollars of potential exports," Griswold said in a June 2009 editorial in *The Guardian*.

Some lawmakers have recognized the futility of sanctions against the country, but little progress has been made because of enduring disdain for the socialist country.

The chances of the embargo being lifted against Cuba will increase if more students gain a greater understanding of the country.

Granted, Cuban officials will likely do their best to control exactly what students see in the country, there should be little worry that students will be swayed by their tactics. It's a safe bet that most Americans are aware of the Cuban government's ongoing human rights abuses.

Allowing people to travel to and businesses to invest in Cuba will only help the country get on course for democratic change.

A similar situation is happening in China. While the government is still an authoritarian regime, normalized U.S. relations with the country have helped it open up in ways that were unimaginable 40 years ago.

Let's hope this light improvement on travel restrictions to Cuba will lead to a similar reality.