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Subsidizing Terrorism Or Academic Freedom?

By ADAM EMERSON *The Tampa Tribune*

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TAMPA - Dozens of Florida university professors have suspended plans to study in Cuba because a state law froze thousands of dollars earmarked for their work.

The law, which went into effect this summer, bans the use of any money channeled through the state's public colleges and universities for travel to federally designated terrorist states, including Cuba.

Today, lawyers with the American Civil Liberties Union are in a Miami federal court trying to stop enforcement of the Florida law, which they say violates academic freedom by restricting opportunities the U.S. government allows.

Researchers at nearly every Florida public university are affected, including many at the University of South Florida. Their work takes them to the farmland of communist Cuba, where they study how crops have been grown and distributed since the fall of the Soviet Union 15 years ago. They study Cuba's marine life, its art and history, its immigration patterns to the United States.

"It's hard for me to believe that this Legislature would have passed this if they really thought about the tremendous impact this has on research in this state," said Noel Smith, curator of Latin American and Caribbean art at USF's Graphicstudio and a plaintiff fighting the state law.

The law prohibits the use of state money for research trips to Cuba, Iran, Libya, Sudan, Syria and North Korea. It extends to private grants that are channeled through universities to individual researchers, which is how most private awards are distributed.

Last spring, state Rep. David Rivera, R-Miami, pushed the bill because "I don't think Florida taxpayers support the idea of their money, or public resources, being used to subsidize terrorist governments," he said.

The restrictions, however, place Florida researchers at a competitive disadvantage, university faculty say. With Florida out, researchers in other states have greater access to thousands in private awards that typically go to the state closest to Cuba.

"Why should someone in Montana or Oklahoma be able to compete for these awards?" said Damian Fernandez, director of Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute, which has about \$50,000 in private grants reserved for student and faculty travel to Cuba that it cannot use.

Fernandez added that restricting travel money to terrorist countries limits study of their threats to the United States. "One of the first laws of strategy is know thy enemy," Fernandez said.

Immediate Criticism

Rivera proposed the measure after an FIU professor and his wife were accused of spying on behalf of Cuba.

Despite unanimous support in the state House and Senate, the plan drew immediate criticism from university professors and leaders, including state university system Chancellor Mark Rosenberg.

Rivera countered their arguments by saying that faculty can "lecture, publish, write and study issues related to terrorist nations in Florida."

But researchers say they cannot complete their studies without access to the people and historical documents in those countries.

Frank Muller-Karger, a professor at USF's College of Marine Science, has money from NASA to make coral reef maps of the Caribbean to better understand how sea life moves with ocean currents. He wants to create accurate maps but cannot use the money to travel to Cuba and verify the satellite imagery of Cuba's coasts he has.

"We now can't get information about what reaches our coastal waters from Cuba," Muller-Karger said.

Carmen Diana Deere, the director of the University of Florida's Center for Latin America Studies, planned to travel to Cuba to follow up a 1991 study in which she surveyed the country's rural residents to learn their household income levels. She wants to go back and see if changes to the nation's state farm system affected the standard of living.

"What happens to Cuba matters in terms of immigration in the U.S.," said Deere, also a plaintiff in the ACLU lawsuit. "It's the kind of topic we should be doing."

Her study would cost about \$100,000 and would have been funded by the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Deere said.

Lisandro Perez, a professor of sociology at FIU, planned to use some of the travel money awarded to the university's Cuban Research Institute to meet with people who might help his study of Cubans in 19th century New York.

New York University Press has agreed to publish his book, Perez said. "I've already got a third of it written."

Used State Funds Rarely

Most of the Florida researchers interviewed say they rarely used state funds in previous travels to Cuba. The Cuban Research Institute relied on private foundations to pay for its work. "We did not want the argument that taxpayers of the state of Florida were footing the bill for travel to Cuba, even though it was a legitimate part of what we do," said Perez, who founded the institute 15 years ago.

The U.S. Treasury Department issues licenses that allow researchers to study in Cuba. "The state law runs afoul of federal law," Florida ACLU legal director Randall Marshall said.

The ACLU will fight enforcement of the law while the courts decide its constitutionality.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the United Faculty of Florida, the union for Florida's professors, are gathering names of researchers affected by the law as they consider their own legal fight.

"Florida is digging its own academic grave with this legislation," said Tom Auxter, the union's president.

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