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UC Irvine Paul Merage School of Business faculty and MBA students collaborate with peers at the University of Havana

MBA residential helps build Cuban entrepreneurial infrastructure for international trade

Irvine, CA – (March 30, 2016) – UC Irvine (UCI) Paul Merage School of Business professors William Hernandez Requejo and John L. Graham led a week-long residential program in Cuba for 30 Merage School MBA students. Held March 21-26, the residential was delivered in collaboration with the Center for Research in International Economics (CIEI) and the Center for the Study of Management Techniques (CETED) at the University of Havana, and coincided with President Barack Obama’s visit to Cuba, the first visit by a U.S. president in 88 years.

“Commercial relations between the U.S. and Cuba have been silent for fifty years. Through our collaborations with the University of Havana we are working to rebuild the capability to again exchange goods and services efficiently with our close neighbors,” says Graham. Hernández adds, “The program designed with our UH counterparts for our UCI students first emphasized a general understanding of the Cuban reality, both the strengths and weaknesses. Then we introduced our MBAs to peers at UH, and the fun began.”

Similar to the first program Hernandez and Graham coordinated in Havana in 2013, the 2016 residential included lectures by University of Havana professors on economics, politics, psychology, and foreign direct investment (FDI). Students also visited businesses in the areas of:
• **Food production** - Students toured an organic farm and privately owned restaurants, both reminiscent of the fledging free-enterprise movements in China and the Soviet Union in past decades.

• **Health care delivery** - Students got a glimpse of the workings and challenges of the Cuban health care system by visiting a medical clinic and primary care doctor’s office. During their visit, the doctor described the daily routine of caring for the 1,100 people in her assigned neighborhood, and the challenges of monitoring the Zika virus and managing chronic diseases such as diabetes.

• **Tourism** – In the short run, American demand for Cuba is outstripping the current tourism infrastructure. The students learned firsthand about room shortages and the lack of modern internet communications at hotels.

• **Infrastructure development** – Some of the group visited the Ernest Hemingway Museum. On display there was the newly constructed conservation laboratory made possible by a $500,000 donation from Caterpillar Inc. given shortly after the company named its distributor for Cuba. Once the embargo is lifted, Caterpillar will provide the equipment to strengthen the industrial infrastructure across the island.

Perhaps the most innovative part of the 2016 residential was the meetings between teams of UCI and UH students, and executives at Cuban businesses.

“The richness of this MBA residential is unprecedented. Our students were exposed to aspects of Cuban life and commerce previously hidden from the rest of the business world,” commented Hernández. “Particularly, it’s this face-to-face interaction that is so critical to building international commercial relationships. Through this experience and their continued collaboration with students from the University of Havana, these upcoming business leaders are helping facilitate the development of a mutual understanding between our two countries.”
Upon returning home, some of the Merage School MBA students will continue to collaborate with their Cuban student counterparts to develop business plans for companies they visited during their trip. Among the companies included are two state-run organizations: Copextel, a computer hardware distribution and commercialization company, and TecnoAzucar, the largest sugar production, distribution commercialization organization in Cuba, and two cuentapropistas (state-sanctioned, private enterprises) including an entrepreneurial firm specializing in 3D printing, and a burgeoning hair salon and spa that is seeking to expand. The Merage School and University of Havana students will work together in virtual teams over the next two months to finalize the business plans.

“We expect this initial program and those that follow will catalyze a network of international interpersonal relationships among the students. All of the work our students and the Cuban students are doing together is consistent with President Obama’s path-breaking efforts to build peace through trade and will further enhance the burgeoning entrepreneurial infrastructure in Cuba,” said Graham.

William Hernández Requejo teaches at The Paul Merage School of Business. He holds a Juris Doctorate from Georgetown University Law Center, in Washington D.C., a Master’s Degree in Spanish, and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of California, Irvine. Hernández is also the executive director of the Center for Global Leadership at the Merage School. Additionally, he consults in the areas of international management, international business development, international negotiations and organizational development. Recently Hernández Requejo was selected as an international expert by the United Nations Development Program and the Ministry of External Commerce (MINCEX) on the subject of foreign direct investment negotiations.

John L. Graham is a professor emeritus in marketing and international business. He currently serves as faculty director for the Center for Global Leadership at the Merage School. Graham and Hernández have collaborated on two books, Global Negotiation and Inventive Negotiation.

About The Paul Merage School of Business at UC Irvine
The Paul Merage School of Business at UC Irvine offers four dynamic MBA programs – plus PhD, specialty masters and undergraduate business degrees – that graduate world-ready business leaders with the exceptional ability to help grow their organizations through strategic innovation, analytical decision-making, information technology and collaborative execution. While the Merage School is relatively young, it has quickly grown to consistently rank among the top 5 percent of all business programs worldwide through exceptional student recruitment, world-class faculty, a strong alumni network and close relationships with both individual business executives and global corporations. Additional information is available at merage.uci.edu.

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**Editor’s Note: The Merage School MBA students and professors and their University of Havana counterparts are available for interviews.**