

U.S. Engagement in Uruguay: The Long-Term Benefits of Academic and Educational Exchange Programs

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Academic and educational exchanges have been a long-standing component of U.S.-Uruguayan relations. On the U.S. side, its Embassy in Montevideo and the Fulbright Program lead this effort by offering scholarship programs for Uruguayan academics, leaders, and students to study in the U.S. (Fulbright Uruguay 2021). With the creation of Uruguay's National Agency for Research and Innovation (Agencia Nacional de Investigación e Innovación – ANII) in 2007, Fulbright opportunities for PhD and master's students have been funneled through ANII, which co-finances the initiative. This has enhanced bilateral efforts to promote skills acquisition, boosted the number of scholarships, and Uruguayan involvement in the process. In recent years, these exchange programs have helped to incentivize English language education and bilateral research collaborations in Uruguay on such topics as agricultural productivity, infectious disease, and climate resiliency, among others.

Through 2018, 90 percent of Uruguayan Fulbright recipients undertaking studies in the U.S. have been master's students and the remaining 10 percent, PhD students. The most popular areas of study have been entrepreneurship (32 percent), engineering (24 percent) and economics (13 percent). 79 percent of former Fulbright recipients have returned to undertake professional careers in Uruguay, principally in education (38 percent), as researchers (38 percent), in business (32 percent) and innovation fields (26 percent) (Centro de Investigaciones en Economía Aplicada, UM, 2018).

One robust area of collaboration has been around the promotion of English language learning in Uruguayan schools. This reflects an ongoing U.S. Embassy-led effort to promote the exchange of teaching professionals between the U.S. and Uruguay. 38 percent of these have been teachers and school directors at the primary and 62 percent at the secondary level. 19 percent of all participants have been school directors while another 19 percent have been science teachers, 14 percent math teachers, and 10 percent English teachers (Centro de Investigaciones en Economía Aplicada, UM 2018). The U.S. Embassy in Montevideo invests between 12 and 15 thousand USD annually in this effort, which historically has been channeled through the Uruguayan Administration of Public Education (Administración Nacional de Educación Pública – ANEP). A highly regarded program, it has been credited with increasing the Teaching Performance Index of the participants by an average of 10 percent (Centro de Investigaciones en Economía Aplicada, UM 2018). Complementing this has been the American Fellows Program, which facilitates US experts coming to Uruguay to work at ANEP for a full year. One key result of this program is the recent publication of an English textbook for use in Uruguay’s public secondary schools, the result of intensive collaboration between Uruguayan teachers and program fellows from the US (ANEP 2021).

In recent years, academics returning to Uruguay after completing PhD and master’s programs in the U.S. have helped to advance bilateral networks between Uruguayan and US universities, primarily in economics and related social sciences. This has created additional opportunities for young academics to study in the U.S. In addition, since 2014 the Department of Social Sciences at the Universidad Católica del Uruguay has regularly invited U.S. academics to teach in its Winter School in Methods and Data Analysis, an effort aided on several occasions by the U.S. Embassy’s “Montevideo Public Diplomacy Small Grant Program.” To date this has included 15 professors based in U.S. universities (out of a total of 24 professors invited from abroad), and the Winter School has become a reference point for instruction in methodologies of data analysis throughout Latin America, with several regional PhD programs sending their students to the school annually (UCU 2021).

The steady flow of Fulbrighters and other academic exchange opportunities with U.S. institutions have helped to increase the capacity of Uruguayan science and applied research. One notable area has been agriculture research, where since the 1970s Uruguay’s National Institute for Agricultural Research (Instituto Nacional de Investigación Agropecuaria – INIA) has promoted the pursuit of PhD degrees in the US for their technicians. An initial partnership with Fulbright has since grown into bilateral partnerships between INIA and several U.S. universities (INIA, 2021). As of 2021, the twenty active partnerships between INIA and U.S. universities include collaborations with Cornell University, Colorado State University, the University of California-Davis, and the University of Wisconsin (INIA 2021). These, in turn, have evolved into joint research ventures and advanced INIA’s applied research capacity in particular, in the agricultural sector. Out of a total of 200 INIA researchers, approximately 70 studied in the U.S. as a result of these partnerships, which accounts for around 50 percent of the institute’s professional staff.

Collaborations between U.S. and Uruguayan researchers and research agencies have led to a variety of other valuable outcomes. The INIA also maintains a bilateral agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for research on limiting crop damage from birds (MGAP 2021). Under this umbrella, the Universidad de la República has developed additional research initiatives to address grain contamination and increase the climate resilience of food safety programs, among other topics. A formal agreement between the Pasteur Institute and several U.S. universities, which includes participation of the INIA and the Universidad de la República, has helped to incentivize the study of myiasis, an infection acquired through fly larvae and a relevant issue for Uruguay (INIA 2020).

It is also worth highlighting ongoing U.S.-Uruguay collaboration in the areas of biofuel, renewable energy, and climate change. As part of the Biden administration's climate change agenda and within the framework of the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas (ECPA), Uruguay has participated in a series of exchanges to deepen collaboration in the areas of energy and climate change (ECPA, 2015; OEA, 2021). A project carried out through an INIA-USDA agreement and financed by ECPA is currently examining agro-energy production. In a similar vein, a partnership between INIA and the International Research Institute for Climate and Society at Columbia University launched a project addressing climate risk management, with an emphasis on water resources (INIA, 2019). Such efforts build on previously established channels of cooperation, such as a project evaluating opportunities to increase biomass production as an industrial energy source, which led to a series of exchanges and internships for Uruguayan researchers in the U.S. (INIA, 2011).

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