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Thinking allowed

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The innovative program called We Are One People has opened new doors on the path to higher education for 15 young Cubans at the biggest campus in the United States, Miami Dade College. Many of these students have been barred from universities by Cuba's dogmatic educational czars because of the students' articulate and well-founded criticism of the dictatorial regime that governs the country, or because of their association with (horrors!) dissidents.

That should be a badge of honor, but in Cuba they were branded political heretics and cast out of the tightly controlled educational system for daring to speak their minds. Now, in Miami, they will have a chance to study English until March and then other courses in the curriculum. The idea is that after finishing the program they will then return to Cuba to share what they've learned with others who have not had their opportunity, according to Juan Antonio Blanco, director of the Center for Caribbean and Latin American Initiatives (CLACI) at Miami Dade College.

Their costs are covered by the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba, a Miami-based nonprofit whose objective is to promote the growth of civil society on the island nation. This imaginative initiative places the advantages of free education, with no strings attached, within the reach of young people rejected by the educational system in their own country.

In Miami, they will enjoy the blessings of a free country and a learning program that offers a broader vision of education and human potential than anything they would find in Cuba.

The college provides a window to the world that does not exist in Cuba's shuttered confines.

The government's ideological barricades are slowly being breached by the efforts of dissidents, visits by Cuban exiles and more-frequent travel abroad by Cubans now that the government has dropped the requirement of an exit visa for nearly everyone on the island.

But the universities remain bastions of political dogma where free thinking and new ideas are spurned.

Upon their return to Cuba, the students will be able to transmit the treasure of new ideas that open wider horizons for Cuba's future, free of the stifling propaganda that poisons official discourse on the island.

More broadly, the We Are One People scholarship lays the foundation for a genuine and significant student-exchange program.

Now, it's no longer a simple matter of American students visiting Cuba to take classes in their universities. Now, for the first time, a group of students from Cuba comes to Miami to receive classes in a university recognized for its academic achievements. Now, it's no longer a one-way street, although there is a long way to go before Cubans have ready access to colleges and universities available in this country.

More programs of this kind should be established on campuses across America for Cubans who seek knowledge free of the straitjacket of "approved thinking."

Contact with a free society will benefit not only the Cuban students, but Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits, as well as civil society in Cuba.

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