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Building bridges with Cuba Illinois educators share agricultural knowledge

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Among Mario Pablo Estrada García's souvenirs from his trip to Southern Illinois University is a stack of books including "A Compendium of Corn Diseases" and "A Farmer's Guide to Soybean Diseases."

The Cuban biotechnology researcher also collected a stack of papers from SIU College of Agricultural Sciences researchers on the latest soybean herbicide systems, no-till productivity and even one on the advantages of double cropping wheat with pumpkins.

But it was at the end of the university's Belleville Research Center Field Day when Estrada found a wealth of information. He met around the center's kitchen table with researchers, faculty and university officials sharing ways to help Cuba improve agriculture and entrepreneurship.

"There are many important things that I can take back," Estrada said.

"The university takes into account the teaching of the farmers' and the publics' knowledge of agriculture, nutrition and vitamins. People use this information to increase production, and what this makes is very good for society. We can produce more and better. It's a very exciting opportunity," he said.

## Working Together

Estrada is director of agricultural biotechnology research for the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in Havana. He was at SIUC as part of the SIU/U.S. Embassy — Havana Grant Program “Connecting Cuban Entrepreneurs.”

The program has established a collaboration involving a team of faculty and business development and entrepreneurship staff from SIU and those from the Universidad de Pinar del Río in Havana. Cuba also has a similar relationship with the University of Pennsylvania.

The program’s goal is strengthening Cuba’s entrepreneurship and small business development educational programs and support system while providing technical assistance to entrepreneurs and small business owners, explained Kyle Harfst, SIUC executive director of economic and regional development.

He said other future activities also will include the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos, the Universidad de la Habana and other entities in Cuba.

Earlier in the week, Estrada shared a presentation about his center’s research and innovations.

He first pointed out that Cuba’s literacy has been 100 percent of the population since 1961 and the life expectancy has risen from 62 to 78.5 years in 40 years.

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