In the culminating scene of the novel *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), the hero and protagonist, Ti Noel, reflects that the greatness of humankind emerges from the need to take on tasks. The Spanish expression that Cuban author Alejo Carpentier uses is *imponerse tareas*, which literally might be translated as *to impose tasks on oneself*. Through meaningful work, Ti Noel finds that humanity expresses its transcendence.

After more than a half-century embargo, American and Cuban state colleges and universities are presented with an opportunity to take up the seminal task of building relationships and partnerships where few existed: Our countries are on the brink of dramatic increases in tourism and other exchanges. As president of Salisbury University (SU), a member of the University System of Maryland (USM), I believe that it will benefit our campus to embrace this opportunity, and I encourage leaders at other public institutions to do the same.

As a Latin Americanist by training, my interest in Cuba goes back over 40 years and I’ve been fortunate to twice visit the island. Most recently, in February, I was honored to be a member of a delegation from AASCU at the 10th International Congress on Higher Education in Havana. AASCU and the Institute for International Education (IIE) sponsored the largest group of American higher education leaders to ever attend the conference. As part of that delegation, I explored with my Cuban colleagues opportunities for collaboration between the USM and Cuban campuses. The conference, for all of us, was full of promise and excitement. Our host nation, Cuba, greatly values education and is ready to work with us.

All this occurred in eager anticipation of President Barack Obama’s impending visit to Cuba, just weeks later. It was apparent to the Americans there that building partnerships in higher education holds a potential to help shape the future of a broader relationship with our neighbor to the south.

To be clear, American and Cuban institutions of higher learning have not been complete strangers over these many years. Some of the leading research universities and renowned private colleges in the U.S. have been collaborating with top universities and research centers in Havana for some time. These partnerships have helped maintain a flow of ideas between our nations during the decades that diplomatic isolation kept us apart.

As important as these higher education connections are, however, they still have been limited. The task at hand now is for American state colleges and universities to commit ourselves to linking with sister public campuses outside Havana. As our countries strive to form a new relationship based on mutual understanding, trust and respect, academic partnerships need to expand, both geographically and among all types of institutions. As history teaches us, such exchanges of people and thought can be transformative.

One mechanism that already advocates for and supports collaboration is the Cuba Engagement Initiative of NAFSA: Association for International Educators. To date, more than 140 higher education institutions have joined this initiative, including SU. By my count, however, less than 10 percent of its American members are comprehensive publics. Can we do better? I encourage fellow AASCU institutions to join us and, as Ti Noel reminds us, to impose on ourselves the task of this meaningful work.

As Salisbury University moves forward this year with forging collaborations in Cuba, we are finding these parameters helpful:

*Cubans who own vintage automobiles in mint condition often hover outside of the best hotels, hoping to interest Americans in a trip down memory lane.*

Salisbury University President Janet Dudley-Eshbach, as part of the AASCU delegation, at the International Congress of Higher Education in Havana earlier this year.

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*By Janet Dudley-Eshbach*
1) Partner with a regional state college or university outside of Havana: We want to grow together with a Cuban university that shares our mission of serving a regional population, focusing on career development for the workforce, and educating citizens to be engaged members of a civil society.

2) Build a partnership based on equality and collegiality: We must guard against any hint of “Prometheus bringing fire to the masses” in working with Cuban partners. Cuban public universities do not need to be saved. The Cuban people do not need to be saved. In fact, they may have much to teach us. There are lessons to be learned from their culture, society and values.

3) Start with faculty exchange: There will be many logistical challenges with educational exchange for years to come. We plan to begin by focusing on faculty mobility and collaboration in teaching and research. Student mobility can certainly come later. Bringing faculty together generates the sort of creative energy that launches many projects and, at least in the early stages, the logistics for faculty may be easier than coordinating student visits.

4) Make sure mobility happens in both directions: Many of my faculty members want to visit Cuba. While I encourage that interest, we also must create opportunities for Cuban faculty to visit us. We might need to provide housing, faculty mentors in host academic departments, and myriad levels of support, such as short-term health insurance, transportation and guidance in the changing visa/immigration arena.

5) Start student exchange with a few brave first-adopters: Again, logistics may be difficult for some time. Instead of fighting this with big groups, we can send one or two students each year, especially those with advanced Spanish language and cultural skills. Likewise, we might establish a graduate assistantship for Cuban students or some other mechanism to invite them to visit our campus.

Cubans have an indomitable spirit, despite many hardships. They are very friendly and burst into smile when they hear my fluent Spanish. Speaking the language obviously is an enormous advantage to opening doors and gaining deeper understanding. I hope more are able to open such doors, knowing, of course, that it will take time and resources to build successful partnerships between public colleges and universities in both countries. Yet, I know the investment is worthwhile for Salisbury and will be for many AASCU member institutions.

While Salisbury University is among the first state colleges and universities to pursue new partnerships in Cuba, we are not alone: The State University of New York – Potsdam, for example, sponsored a delegation of 16 faculty and administrators to Cuba this past summer to launch exactly this type of initiative with a public university outside Havana. I am rooting for Potsdam. I hope they and their Cuban counterparts are successful, inspiring other AASCU members to do the same.

The Cuban author Alejo Carpentier is considered by many to be the father of the 20th century Latin American literary aesthetic we have come to know as “magical realism.” He was among the first to depict in his writing a human reality in Latin America that seems fantastical, while also revealing truths that are deeply rooted in local traditions, cultures and histories. Telling a narrative today about a world in which students and professors, especially those from public colleges and universities, move freely between the campuses of our two nations may seem like a fantasy. But, as Ti Noel reminds us, if we impose this task upon ourselves, it may change us—and others—which has its own magic.