

# ALMA MATER WOULD BE PROUD

CHELSEA SMITH

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

*Student leadership can be seen in all parts of the world in different campuses' organizations, clubs, or groups. This essay will focus on the historical significance of a Cuban student organization during the Revolution in Cuba. The Federación Estudiantil Universitaria (FEU) and other student-run groups aided the 26th of July Movement to overthrow Cuba's tyrannical leader, Fulgencio Batista. This essay will then analyze the actions of the Cuban student groups and identify ten key components of student leadership. Student leadership can change society, and the FEU is one exemplary example of change.*

Each year, a new group of young students begins classes at the University of Havana, Cuba. On this day, it is a tradition of the freshman class to walk up the grand staircase in front of the university, toward a statue of Alma Mater. She sits with arms wide open to welcome the students into her home; here, they will learn and develop new skills over the next few years. Education is vital to the success of society, and students have proven themselves to be powerful leaders who can facilitate real changes in society.

Cuba has a history full of war, revolution, and great leaders. When thinking of the Cuban revolution, one often thinks of Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and Camilo Cienfuegos. However, few people realize the impact students at the University of Havana had on the revolution and the vital role they played in the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista. While Batista was originally elected into power in 1940, he was soon voted out in 1944. Later, in 1952, he would once again rise to power after a quick and violent seizure of the government. Not long after that,



“Alma Mater,” University of Havana, Cuba. Photograph by Chelsea Smith.

his presidency turned into a ruthless dictatorship (“Cuba Overview,” 2013, p. 2). During Batista’s reign, more than half the country was impoverished, approximately one million citizens were illiterate, private property no longer existed, and citizens could no longer vote (Pineda, 2016).

The youth felt they deserved social and political change, but they also knew that these changes would not come easily. As the students matured, they witnessed their country deteriorating. They noticed a higher homeless population, greater poverty levels, and an overall poor quality of living. The general public turned to their government for help but noticed that instead of devoting time and resources to aiding their people, the government was spending money on lavish living for their leaders. The government leaders began to notice the restlessness of the nation. In order to suppress the general public, the government began stripping citizens

of their individual rights. Soon, citizens found themselves starving, living on the streets, and surrounded by government leaders who could not care less. Their only option was to join the rebel forces and risk everything up to and including death. A group of students studying at the University of Havana began to see the impact of the Revolution and decided to aid in the fight against tyranny. On March 10, 1952, the University Student Federation (FEU) was created. They declared that “The University Never Surrenders and is Never for Sale” (Museo, n.d.).

The group of students began by spreading their message of freedom through public demonstrations, typically ending with the arrest or death of a few of the members of the organization. The FEU also helped to create other pro-revolution organizations, one of which was called the Revolutionary Directory. The main goal for the Revolutionary Directory was the illumination of social classes in Cuba. In February of 1956, men and women from all walks of life began to join the movement. Beggars, business owners, workers, students, blacks, whites, all came together to defend the idea of equality for all humans (Museo, n.d.).

By August 1956, José Antonio Echeverría, the student leader of the FEU, agreed to join forces with Castro and the 26th of July Movement led by other freedom-fighters. On March 13, 1957, the students of the University of Havana came together to take back their country from a tyrannical leader. A group of students piled into trucks and drove to the Presidential Palace with hopes of killing Fulgencio Batista and beheading the anti-revolutionary forces. However, upon arrival, Batista’s army opened fire on the trucks of students, killing most of them before they could exit the vehicles. The few remaining students entered Batista’s home through the south end of the Palace. The student movement managed to fire off a few rounds at Batista before he fled to the fourth floor of the Palace through a hidden door near his office. While Batista hid, the remaining students were slaughtered or captured by Batista’s army (Museo, n.d.).

During the strike on the Palace, another student-organized group planned to overtake a radio station and broadcast messages from the rebel army. These messages would announce Batista’s death at the hands of the students and encourage other Cubans to take up arms and fight with Castro’s army. However, the group was intercepted and only a small

part of their message was broadcasted. The FEU leader, José Antonio Echeverría, was killed during a police shootout after fleeing the radio station (Museo, n.d.). José Antonio Echeverría is still to this day regarded as a hero among Cubans. He, along with many of his classmates, made the ultimate sacrifice.

Batista's army attempted to cover up the horrific scene by patching the bullet holes throughout the Palace, but they could not hide the ones left in the marble staircase. Pictures of these holes appeared in the newspapers the next morning (Museo, n.d.). For some, this was seen as a terrible defeat for the rebel soldiers, but for many others, it was seen as a cry for action. These young people gave their lives to a cause they believed would liberate Cuba and bring forth a brighter future.

Although the student group was not successful in the assassination of Batista, they proved that anyone, young or old, could aid in the war effort. Students and faculty contributed to much of the change during the revolution and continued to provide support even after it had been won. Rebel armies continued to push against Batista's rule until Castro's army pushed Batista off the island of Cuba and overthrew his government by appointing new political leaders. Although Castro and the 26th of July Movement were ultimately responsible for winning the war against Batista, they were not the only influential organization fighting for equality during the revolution. Students and teachers joined in the fight and made a large impact on the outcome of the Revolution and on society as a whole. Nine months after the victory over Batista, the students and faculty at the University of Havana formed the military organization "Brigada Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría" (BUJAE). The organization was 600 persons strong. Members trained like any other military organization, but students also continued their studies while aiding the BUJAE (Museo, n.d.).

The bravery and wit of the Cuban student revolutionaries have had long-lasting effects on Cuban life. The entire Republic of Cuba views studying as a high priority, has major respect for the students, and wants students to succeed. Gaining an education is an important part of any culture, but the Cuban culture perceives studying as a priority for young people.

After his victory in 1959, Fidel Castro implemented a countrywide literacy program in hopes of educating the country (Wolf, Hernández Penton, Beltrán Marin, and Romero, 2011, p. 225-226). This focus on education resulted in more than 700,000 Cubans learning to read by 1961 (Figueredo, 2016). In addition to this, Raul Castro has made major changes in certain underdeveloped sectors of vocational schools in Cuba allowing students better access to educational resources like books and writing materials (Wolf et al., 2011, p. 225-226).

While this is the story of Cuban students, students all over the world are using education to gain insight into the world and change society for the better. Gaining an education gives students an opportunity to become leaders who will change the world in which they live. Becoming a leader does not simply happen overnight. It takes education, drive, and determination to be a truly successful leader. In order to be a good leader, ten commitments are recommended, and the FEU student movement follows them all.

First, good leaders must clarify their values (Zorina et al., 2018). This usually takes place in college. Many students feel bombarded with political ideologies, religious views, and lifestyle choices. This is the time when young adults begin to think for themselves and find their own voice. Students begin to identify what has meaning to them in their lives, and what does not; they begin to develop an identity and solidify their values and beliefs. Freedom and equality were vital values for the student groups, identified in the early stages of the revolution by many individuals.

Second, leaders must set an example (Zorina et al., 2018). In addition to identifying individual values, leaders must live their lives based on those values. Leaders cannot truly value something they do not practice. For example, it would be difficult for a student to truly value good grades if he or she does not study to earn good grades. The individual students of the FEU may have shown their values through day to day activities, such as the inclusion of all people in discussions or activities.

Third, envisioning the future is essential for powerful leaders (Zorina et al., 2018). Based on their values, leaders must imagine their ideal future and work towards that goal. Students must find a purpose in life, often

related to their major or career path, which will benefit the student or society as a whole. The purpose should be attainable, and the student must create a plan of action for achieving their goal(s). The students envisioned a future free from a tyrannical government system where all people could be treated equally.

Fourth, the leader must enlist others (Zorina et al., 2018). Leaders identify other people with common goals or values. They create groups or organizations centered around these ideals and lead the group toward the end goal, using the individual skills and talents of the group. Jose Antonio Echeverria, the leader of the FEU, enabled all these like-minded students to join together in hopes of securing their ideal future.

Fifth, a good leader must search for opportunities (Zorina et al., 2018). Leaders take initiative and look for ways to move their group forward, either towards their end goal, or towards smaller goals that build up to the end goal, such as increasing group size or obtaining funding for group activities. The FEU looked for opportunities to advance their group, eventually joining together with Castro and the 26th of July Movement.

Sixth, leaders must experiment and take risks (Zorina et al., 2018). All groups will hit dead ends, but great leaders will find ways to circumvent these roadblocks by enabling followers to try new things. These new techniques may be risky, but they may also be worth the risk. The FEU took a risk and attempted to assassinate Batista in the Presidential Palace in order to reach their goal of a free society.

Seventh, leaders must know how to foster collaboration (Zorina et al., 2018). If the group is unable to successfully collaborate, the end goal will not be reached. Leaders must build trust with the group members and facilitate relationships between the members. José Antonio Echeverría united the group and allowed them to work together peacefully towards a common goal.

Eighth, leaders strengthen others (Zorina et al., 2018). They enhance self-determination and enable group members to build trust and confidence within themselves and the group. José Antonio Echeverría strengthened the group and recognized individual members for their part in attempting to overthrow the government.

Ninth, recognizing contributions is an aspect of leadership that cannot be eliminated (Zorina et al., 2018). Members of the group must be commended for the good work they do to help the group succeed. This acknowledgement drives motivation and creates more productive group members; they should be held to high, attainable standards.

Tenth, leaders celebrate the values and victories of the group (Zorina et al., 2018). No victory is too small. Celebration creates a positive atmosphere and promotes productivity. If the group feels they are not winning enough small battles, members may become discouraged and leave the group. Lastly, the FEU group celebrated their attack on the Presidential Palace, even though it appeared to have failed. The group knew their message had reached the public and it was only a matter of time before more people joined the revolution and fought for freedom and equality. The student movement was vital to the overthrow of Batista's government, and an excellent example of student leadership.

On graduation day, after receiving their diplomas, the students once again gather at the staircase in front of the University. This time, they stand behind Alma Mater. Once the entire graduating class has made it to the staircase, they descend the steps. They leave Alma Mater, and head toward the city. In their hands, they hold the power to change the world.



“Alma Mater,” University of Havana, Cuba. Photograph by Chelsea Smith.

## REFERENCES

- Cuba overview: History, political and economic conditions, and U.S. policy. (2013). *Congressional Digest*, 92(7), 2-32.
- Figueredo, R.A. (2016, July). *Cultural Impact of Revolution* [Oral Presentation].
- Museo de la Revolucion. (n.d.). FEU [Museum exhibit label]. Old Havana, Cuba.
- Pineda, D. R. (2016, June). *Cuban Political System* [Oral Presentation].
- Wolf, S., Hernández Penton, F. A., Beltrán Marin, A. L., & Romero, O. (2011). The Cuban vocational education and training system and its current changes. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 9(1), 223-240.
- Zorina, A. V., Yarullina, A. S., Akhmetova, L. A., Shaimardanova, M. R., Nikishina, S. R., & Garipova, A. A. (2018). Leadership in the university student environment: How to become a person-oriented leader. *International Journal of Instruction*, 11(4), 271-286.