

Brazilian Developments

each for-profit tends to specialize in only a small number of complementary programs. Indeed, the intense focus on job-specific curricula characterizes both an individual student's program of studies and the institutional mission of the for-profits. The traditional liberal arts education is not on the menu. The for-profit's focus on job specific programs is perhaps their most distinctive and nontraditional characteristic: students are prepared with a set of marketable skills for employers seeking students with those skills. The employer is the "client" and the student is the "product." Students enroll in for-profits to gain specific skills and to then be hired for specific jobs. And for-profits take pride in offering job placement after successful program completion. Even when factoring in the tuition costs, which tend to be above the tuition prices of comparable public institutions, the jobs students find after graduation tend to pay reasonably well. Thus the return on investment for the average student in a for-profit program in higher education is greater than a similar return for the average bachelor's degree graduate from a traditional institution (about 28 percent vs. 18.6 percent).

The Current Growth in For-Profits

The visibility, growth, scale, and performance of for-profits are renewing perennial policy questions in the United States, directed partly at for-profits and partly at *all* postsecondary education, including the questions: who should pay for it, who should provide it, and who should benefit from it? These questions will be raised afresh with regard to for-profits, especially as federal legislation for student financial aid is reconsidered. (For-profits depend heavily on federal financial aid to students.) Embedded in that policy debate are several "drivers" that are fostering the growth of for-profit provision, including: their access to investment capital, enviable job placement records, freedom from "shared governance" coupled with flexibility to enter (and exit) geographic and program markets, productivity efficiencies, economies of scale, and ability to capitalize on instructional technology. Added to these drivers are several that are fueling demand for all of postsecondary education (e.g., increasing returns to education) and that are mitigating the growth of public and private nonprofit institutions (e.g., shifts in governmental subsidies from institutions to individuals).

In combination, these factors drive up aggregate demand and push the price of postsecondary education closer to the institutional cost. In the United States, for-profits compare favorably in terms of average institutional cost (e.g., \$6,940 for two undergraduate semesters vs. \$17,026 for publics and \$23,063 for private

nonprofits). As individuals shoulder more of the costs of postsecondary schooling, price sensitivity will likely increase.

For-profits in the United States, viewed both as a significant departure *from* and as a natural extension of the U.S. system in higher education, appear to reflect the larger social and economic forces shaping the country.

Success and Perils in Evaluating Brazilian Undergraduate Programs

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It would seem natural that educational institutions be evaluated, since they have such a major impact on students' careers. Yet, the taboos are hard to break—in Brazil and elsewhere. In a previous government, a most courageous initiative was taken by the minister of education in 1995. For each major undergraduate program a test was created to evaluate how much students learned from the official curriculum. A grade would be assigned to each program, based on the mean performance of its students in their last semester of school.

The minister played all his cards in order to manage the acrimonious opposition of students, faculty, university presidents, and even his own staff. A barrage of legal attempts to block the testing threatened, up to the last hour, the implementation of the examination. The decisive element came from a poll conducted by the prestigious newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. Educated public opinion turned out to be massively in favor of the initiative, adding to the minister's political backing.

The System

For each major program, the system calls for eight leading professors to define the parameters of the specific examination. Professional exam makers then prepare the questions following these guidelines. A private foundation was selected to do the work of final preparation, administering (with rigorous proctoring), grading, and producing the numbers for dissemination. Brazil has ample experience in large-scale (multiple-choice) testing for university entry. Therefore, the task of testing 400,000 students on the same day was not such a formidable hurdle.

In the absence of standards for how much a graduating student should know, it would have been pointless to establish a passing grade or some form of absolute grading. In addition, regional disparities would create a thorny political problem. Instead, the ministry simply ranked the scores and graded them on a normal curve. The top 12 percent get an A. Those between 12 percent and 18 percent get a B. The center of the distribution—40 percent of the respondents—get a C. Below C come D and E, with symmetrical cutting points.

Taking the annual test, nicknamed *Provão* (“big test”), is mandatory, and students receive their individual test scores. However, while negotiating the law creating the test, the minister was not permitted to include the scores in the students’ academic records. Therefore, some students protest by leaving the examination blank. They are not immediately harmed, because individual scores are not published. But blank tests do negatively affect the grades of programs. As a result, many administrators, while approving *Provão*, regret that some students are damaging the reputation of their schools. While this complication is certainly an annoyance, it only affects a small number of programs.

The Impact of Provão

Provão has become a major theme in higher education. Some students hate it, and occasional boycotts still occur. Left-wing educators and politicians relish bashing it, since opposition to any form of testing remains a powerful issue in some groups. But the majority, not always very vocal, tend to approve the initiative. For instance, a recent document signed by the representatives of all associations of private higher education institutions offered positive comments on *Provão*, while being quite negative on other aspects of public policy.

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Whether one likes it or not, *Provão* has become the ultimate gauge of the quality of a course of studies. Students understand the test’s impact well; the same goes for school administrators. Like the owners of restaurants losing stars in the *Michelin Guide*, managers of programs that are demoted in standing are mortified—and for good reason, since programs with improved grades see an increase in the number of candidates and those that go down one grade, see drastic reductions. Programs with the grade E become in effect higher education pariahs.

Particularly in the case of private education (which includes around 70 percent of enrollments), a lowered

grade impacts a serious institution like a tornado. For lack of inspiration, some institutions react by painting their buildings. Dozens of anecdotes exist documenting drastic institutional reforms, and whatever managers can think of that might boost their standing in the next year. More concretely, the system has seen an abrupt increase in the formal qualifications of teachers since the first *Provão*.

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The test does have a number of problems—the question of value added being one of them. *Provão* measures both the raw material, the students, and the process imparted by the college. A study conducted by the author of this article and others indicated that 80 percent of the variance in scores is due to differences the students already presented when they first entered higher education. The results are purely relative within each program type and thus do not allow comparisons from one major program to another, a fact that is puzzling to many observers. Grades are not comparable from one year to the next, because there is still much trial and error in preparing the tests. Graduates from programs that hardly have a specific labor market connection are judged by very strict and narrow examinations. The quality of the examination also varies from one program to another. Yet, these limitations are not sufficiently serious to invalidate the overall results.

Serious research evaluating the impact of *Provão* on higher education has never been conducted. However, most dispassionate observers consider the test a major advance.

The Perils and the Disgruntled

When the new government was elected in 2002, a group of professors and teachers union leaders took charge of the Ministry of Education who were seriously disgruntled by the education policies of the previous minister. The number one enemy was *Provão*. The presidency of INEP—the Statistics and Evaluation Office in the ministry that is in charge of *Provão*—was given to a union leader whose career was dedicated to destroying the teacher evaluation system of the prestigious University of São Paulo. However, this official was unable to eliminate *Provão* right away because it had been created by means of a federal law. Instead, he appointed a commission composed mostly of hard-core enemies of *Provão*. The

commission came up with a report proposing the creation of an incredibly complex system of institutional evaluations and self-evaluations. While Provão did not disappear, it did become engulfed by the baroque complexity of the system. In addition, the report openly challenged the previous policy of ranking institutions, although the arguments seem technically weak in the opinion of the author of this article.

Provão was slated to almost disappear and be replaced by procedures requiring several committees and armies of experts to visit the programs. Whereas Provão involved the evaluation of results, the new policy is a return to the evaluation of the process, known to be highly vulnerable to politics, corruption, and influence. While there is nothing wrong in principle with institutional evaluation, the problem is that when the stakes are high, preventing fraud becomes a very complex and expensive process.

The middle-of-the-road public reacted negatively to the report. But more importantly, the new minister, Cristovam Buarque, was not happy with the direction taken by the report. He openly declared to the press that he was in favor of ranking institutions and was focused on the need to have additional ways of evaluating higher education.

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After a number of internal discussions, a new proposal was produced: keeping Provão but basing its results on samples, rather than on all students. The test would be administered every third year, instead of yearly. The new system would keep all the heavy institutional evaluation apparatus but allowed the Provão results to be presented separately. It also required that 30 percent of the questions be less narrowly focused on the specific programs—a definitely welcome change.

Provão defenders—this author included—were not happy with the new guidelines even though they are not as disastrous as those produced by the initial committee. The new system introduces elements making fraud and manipulation much easier, while Provão was practically immune to any such problems.

For better or worse, much has been left unstated and undecided in the new guidelines. The possibility remains that Provão will survive intact and, hopefully, prove to be effective. But it may be watered down to the point where it loses its most useful features. Unfortunately, the minister has not taken a clear stand one way or the other. ■

The Academic Profession in Brazil

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Brazilian society underwent drastic changes in the last decade of the 20th century. The opening up of the economy, a successful privatization program, and currency reform that put inflation under control for the first time in 30 years created a number of challenges for the Brazilian higher education system. In response, Brazilian authorities have introduced new evaluation instruments to upgrade the quality of undergraduate education and improve the academic profile of higher education institutions. The impact of these changes on the Brazilian higher education system as a whole was revealed in the data collected by the Brazilian Ministry of Education in a 1992 survey, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, as part of the International Academic Profession Project. Ten years later, a second survey on the Brazilian academic profession, funded by the Ford Foundation, was conducted by the University of São Paulo's higher education research unit. This second survey examined the impact the changes had on the working conditions of the academic profession in Brazil.

To ensure comparability, the team responsible for the second survey followed the sampling guidelines produced by the Carnegie Foundation 10 years previously. Also the questionnaire used in the second survey retained some of the questions from the first survey, while adding new questions aimed at deepening the understanding of the interaction between professionals and their institutional environment and academics' attitudes toward some relevant issues in Brazil's higher education policy.

The two surveys highlight important changes and continuities in the Brazilian academic profession. The profession's demographic profile has changed little. The proportion of women in the Brazilian academic profession, already comparatively high in 1992, grew even more—increasing from 4 out of every 10 academics to 6 out of every 10 Brazilian academics. The academic profession remains a middle-aged profession. The average age of professors in Brazil was 43 years in 1992 and 45 years in 2003. Attaining an academic position represents an important upward mobility for a significant proportion of Brazilian academics. In fact, 30 percent of the academics interviewed in 1992 had fathers with only four