

The Pursuit of Equity in Brazilian Higher Education

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The Brazilian Supreme Court is about to decide if affirmative action complies with the National Constitution. In 2003, the senate of the University of Brasília decided to reserve 20 percent of its places to BBI (black, brown *pardo*, and indigenous) Brazilian candidates, starting in the 2004 admission process. After this move, several public higher education institutions adopted affirmative action programs, either by their own decision or following state laws. In 2009, the right wing Democratas political party filed a lawsuit at Brazilian Supreme Court, claiming that the University of Brasília's racial quota system violates no less than nine fundamental precepts of the Constitution. The decision about this case will determine the future of affirmative action in Brazil. Mainstream and specialized press are publishing opinion articles trying to sway opinion supporting one position or another. Amazingly, all articles "prove" that affirmative action is either the deliverance or a threat to the whole Brazilian higher education system.

THE INEVITABLE BIAS OF ENTRANCE EXAMS

Brazil had to wait until the early 20th century to see its first universities established. Already in 1911, the minister of justice and internal affairs passed a law determining that access to public higher education institutions needed to be through a universal exam, which became known as *vestibular*, since the candidates outnumbered the available places. This law had the intention of introducing equity to the selection process: instead of being chosen among the elite, the best prepared would be admitted in a democratic and impartial procedure that offered the same chances to all. One century later most institutions still organize and enforce their own admissions processes, although the Ministry of Education is trying to implement a national SAT-like exam. Over the years, the Brazilian public was led to perceive the *vestibular* university entrance exam as a fair and reliable admission procedure. However, studies have shown that even where the tests are carefully prepared to depend more on reasoning and verbal capabilities than on memorization, candidates from wealthier backgrounds have more chances of success. Some degree of test bias is unavoidable.

THE BEST EDUCATION: PRIVATE K–12, PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the 1990s, expansion of the higher education system has been mainly among private for-profit, lower-quality institutions. Currently only 25 percent of the 5.5 million enrollment involves the higher-quality public institutions, which are constitutionally forbidden to charge tuition fees. Due to lack of appropriate investment, public K–12 education quality decreased drastically since the 1960s. Expensive private fundamental education schools that explicitly prepare their students to succeed via the *vestibular* to

the best public universities are preferred by those who can afford such cost. As a consequence, this exam model became a validated instrument for social exclusion: the most-coveted places in the best public universities are occupied largely by white middle- and higher-class candidates. Studying in public schools became a reliable proxy for social class.

THE EQUITY DEBATE

Demands to make the *vestibular* system of public universities more equitable started in the 1990s. Following the World Conference against Racism, held in Durban in 2001, pressure on quotas for students from public schools and for BBI gained momentum. Soon, the debate was engaged on the press and intellectual circles all over the country; discussions became highly polarized. Organized social movements, especially black activists, demanded racial quotas in all public universities using arguments of historical reparation for a past of slavery and racism. However, intellectuals who really trust the fairness of the *vestibular* agenda claimed that the implementation of affirmative action would be unfair to candidates who score better in the tests and would certainly reduce the academic level of the public universities.

The most controversial issue was whether race could be used as an affirmative-action criterion. Due to the radicalization of the debate, quotas became a synonym for affirmative action in Brazil. Several universities (some sources claim that 70% of all public higher education institutions) enforce some form of affirmative action, most often quotas for public schools. Meanwhile the federal government created the University for All Program (ProUni), where private universities are granted tax

reductions if they waive tuition fees for a number of students from public high schools, among them a percentage of BBI. Curiously, although it benefits 500 thousand students and in practice implements public school and racial quotas, this program was never subject to the fierce criticism directed to the affirmative-action programs in public universities. The Brazilian elite apparently perceives the prestigious public institutions as their exclusive grounds.

RELIABILITY OF SELECTION

As far as academic performance is concerned, quota systems that reserve places for a fixed number of students independently of demand may admit students who are not at all prepared for high-quality higher education. Anecdotal reports confirming in that way from several institutions are most often ideology driven, inconclusive, and unreliable—depending more on preconceived opinions than on hard data. In contrast, a recent comprehensive study compared the academic results of Unicamp, a top-tier research university in the state of São Paulo, with those of UFBA, the federal university of Bahia. Since 2005, the former adopts a bonus system for students from public high schools and for self-declared BBIs. The latter has a quota system, reserving nearly half of its places to essentially the same population. Unicamp's data showed that students from public schools admitted with a bonus in average performed better than their counterparts from private schools. This means that the students admitted under the affirmative-action program are in fact more prepared than those they replaced. At UFBA, as in any quota system, the candidates who were not admitted due to affirmative action had the lowest performance in the *vestibular* entrance exam. The

academic performance and dropout rate of students admitted under the quota are not worse than that of those with the equivalent *vestibular* classification in the period prior to the quota years.

A large number of students entering higher education, with the help of affirmative-action programs in Brazil, come from low-quality secondary schools. Yet, this policy does not mean they lack the talented or necessary competences to complete good-quality higher education. Given the right conditions, top students from disadvantaged backgrounds outperform their colleagues after one or two semesters at the university. Their dropout rate may be higher than average in some institutions but not higher than that of the other candidates they replaced. As a fringe benefit, the institutions become more diverse, providing a better environment for education.

The real institutional and social consequences of affirmative action in Brazil remain unclear because the first cohort is still graduating. Regardless of the Supreme Court's decision, the success of affirmative action in Brazil showed that selecting students based only on performance in one battery of tests is far from being a fair, unbiased, democratic, and equitable process. The whole admissions model must be revised in the years to come.