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Globe-trotting thinkers.

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## Brazil's Bold Steps in Higher Education

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Paulo Speller, Brazil's secretary for higher education.

I recently sat down with Paulo Speller, Brazil's higher-education secretary, during the Conference of the Americas on International Education, which was held in Monterrey, Mexico, in October. Brazil is a growing player on the world's educational stage—and Mr. Speller is playing a central part in that.

His role is the culmination of decades of pushing for democratic reforms in Brazil. As a student protest leader in the 1960s, Mr. Speller was tortured and then imprisoned for more than a year by the country's military regime.

He spent a decade in exile, before returning to Brazil in the wake of the 1979 Amnesty Law. He has since served as president of two federal universities—one in the Brazilian outback and another in the country's impoverished northeast. Before joining the

administration of President Dilma Rousseff in April, he helped found the Lusofonia Afro-Brazilian University of International Integration.

Mr. Speller took up his post at a particularly high-profile moment for Brazilian higher education. In 2010, the government announced plans to send a staggering 100,000 college students to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics at top-ranked foreign universities by 2015. More than 55,000 students have already gone abroad under Brazil's Scientific Mobility Program, with some 16,000 of them studying in the United States.

Mr. Speller is also overseeing the implementation of the most sweeping affirmative-action legislation in the hemisphere. The 2012 federal quota law requires the country's 63 federal universities to reserve half of their spots for Afro-Brazilians, indigenous students, and the low-income graduates of public high schools by 2016. The law builds on a decade of such policies in Brazil that have already benefited more than one million students from disadvantaged groups.

In the interview, Mr. Speller was optimistic that those policies would help democratize Brazilian higher education, while significantly increasing its scientific and technological capacities. However, he was also frank about the major challenges involved in meeting such ambitious goals. An edited version of our conversation follows:

Q. How are things going with the Scientific Mobility Program?

A. The program is going very well, although we've had to make some adjustments. For example, we decided to eliminate Portugal as a destination. About 30,000 students signed up to go there, but the idea is for them to have the chance to be in another country while learning another language.

We realized that there were a significant number of students without sufficient command of English, so we started a program called English Without Borders. It's a very large program that is in place in almost all federal universities. And the results are fantastic. Everyone wants to take part—professors, university officials, everyone. We are also giving students with intermediate-level English the chance to go three- or six-months early to the place where they plan to study in order to take intensive English courses. With these two important adjustments, the program is going very well.

Q. Where are most of the students going?

A. There are 30 some countries involved, and many countries are coming to us. I just received news of a meeting with the Finish education minister. Every week it's like that. Germany was just there. The U.S. secretary of state, John Kerry, was here [in August].

Q. How significant will the long-term impact of the program be for Brazil?

A. It should have a very big impact. Brazilian higher education is currently very classroom-centered. But what we've observed is that the top-ranked universities in the world offer greater incentives for students to work individually and independently, with minimal guidance from professors.

This is a big difference for Brazil. And now we're working to reintegrate the returning students. In some places, we've found resistance from program coordinators who don't

want to give credit for [foreign] courses. We need to adopt a much more flexible view of the academic experience abroad.

Q. The United States is scaling back or dismantling many affirmative-action policies and programs, but in Brazil you're going in the opposite direction. What do you make of that?

A. The impact of affirmative action [in Brazil] has been very encouraging so far, particularly when you see the growing presence of black students or public-school graduates, who have had to struggle to get to university. But the universities need more programs, and more effective programs to receive these students, because they are now arriving in much bigger waves.

Q. What about all the studies showing that the quota beneficiaries are doing as well or even better than the nonquota students?

A. They are doing well, but the new quota law is still very recent. They've barely started the first phase that sets quotas at 12.5 percent. Next year, that share will go up to 25 percent, then 37.5 percent, then 50 percent. These are huge numbers of students.

It's not enough for them to be fighters. They're at a real disadvantage because they come from highly deficient public schools that prepared them poorly. Universities have to be ready, not only with tutoring programs but also with scholarships that help them survive. We're talking about very poor students, many of whom come from areas that are far from the universities. They have to sleep, eat, and buy books—and have fun. That costs money; it's expensive. We are pumping a lot of money into social-assistance programs. But we need to spend even more.