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## What the U.S. Can Learn From Affirmative Action in Brazil



President Obama and other White House officials are looking for ways to get more low-income students into college.

Last month's White House summit on low-income college students underscores a growing consensus in U.S. policy circles: that socioeconomic status should replace race as the basis for affirmative action. The new logic reflects both public opinion and recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings calling for greater scrutiny of race-based affirmative action.

However, it misses a key point. While underprivileged students have clearly been given short shrift in college admissions, numerous studies show the persistence of racial barriers, particularly at elite institutions. So why not design affirmative-action measures that take into account both race and socioeconomic factors?

Brazil is doing just that.

Over the past decade, the South American nation has carried out the hemisphere's most sweeping affirmative-action measures, which use both race and class as proxies for inclusion. Today, scores of public institutions and hundreds of private ones use quotas and other measures to guarantee spots for members of traditionally excluded groups. Beneficiaries include Afro-Brazilians, indigenous students, and the disabled, as well as graduates of the country's notoriously low-quality public high schools. And increasingly, those policies are being fine-tuned to single out the poorest members of those groups by factoring in their family incomes.

The federal quota law, which took effect in 2012, is intended to vastly expand the scope of those policies. It requires the country's 63 federal universities, which are free and among the most prestigious, to reserve half of their spots for disadvantaged students by 2016. Already, a majority of those institutions have adopted some form of affirmative action over the past decade.

The policies are changing the face of Brazilian higher education, and that of the top public institutions in particular, which have long been bastions of the white elite. However, the measures—in particular the racial quotas—have not come without a fight. As in the United States, Brazilian opponents of race-based affirmative action have taken their case to the country's Supreme Federal Court, arguing that the quotas constitute reverse discrimination. Critics also argue that the measures are inappropriate and unnecessary in the Brazilian context, given the country's long history of racial intermixing. Although Brazil was the last country in the hemisphere to abolish slavery, in 1888, it never adopted formal segregation.

Proponents, meanwhile, cite government studies showing the close correlation between race and poverty in Brazil—arguments that were used by the Supreme Federal Court in 2012 in upholding the constitutionality of race-based admissions policies. The ruling paved the way for passage of the federal quota law.

More than its impressive scope, the law is noteworthy in its attempt to undo multiple barriers to equal access in university admissions. Under its somewhat

complicated rules, the quota spots are reserved for students who attended all three years of high school at a public institution. Of those, half must come from families with combined household incomes of no more than 1.5 times the minimum wage (roughly \$450 per month), while the other half are not subject to income restrictions. Each of the two groups of quota beneficiaries is then further divided to reflect the racial composition of the state where the university is located.

The formula seeks to respond to concerns over loopholes in the quota system. The State University of Rio de Janeiro, which was the first university in Brazil to adopt quotas, in 2002, has come under fire for admitting a disproportionate number of students from the city's top public schools. Universities have also struggled with how best to determine who qualifies under the racial quotas—whether to accept self-identification or to establish “race boards,” which use their own criteria to determine the color of a student's skin. In one high-profile case in 2007, separate race boards at the University of Brasilia determined that one identical twin was black and the other white. The students sued, and the university was forced to admit both brothers under the racial quotas.

Despite such difficulties, Brazil's particular hybrid of affirmative action is gaining widespread public support. In recent months, the country's two most competitive institutions of higher education—the University of Sao Paulo and the State University of Campinas—have pledged to bring the share of disadvantaged students up to 50 percent over the next few years. Currently, public-school graduates represent just 28 percent of students at the University of Sao Paulo. Similarly, Afro-Brazilians make up 30 percent of the state's population, but just 13 percent of students at the country's flagship university.

For years, the two universities had resisted adopting sweeping affirmative-action measures, on grounds that disadvantaged students would not succeed in their competitive university environments. However, recent studies at both public and private universities have shown that quota beneficiaries are doing as well academically as their peers from the general pool. For example, a 2009-10 study

by Silene de Paulino Lozzi at the University of Brasilia, a federal institution that first adopted quotas in 2004, found no significant differences in grade-point averages or drop-out rates between the two groups.

Researchers have found similar results at the private universities, which are participating in the federal government's University for All Program, or ProUni. The program, created by presidential decree in 2004, provides tax breaks to private universities that reserve 10 percent of their spots for low-income public-school graduates, Afro-Brazilians, and indigenous students. As of last year, more than one million students had taken advantage of the program, which provides full and partial scholarships for those who qualify under the quota system.

The government is also tackling a key barrier to university admissions: the poor quality of the public schools. A federal law passed in August sets aside 75 percent of oil royalties for education, as part of a government pledge to raise spending in the sector from the current 6 percent of GDP to 10 percent by 2022.

None of those efforts would have been possible, however, without the strong support of former President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and his successor, Dilma Rousseff. Ms. Rousseff just submitted to Congress a bill that would establish quotas for government jobs, which takes into account both socioeconomic status and race.

In contrast, President Obama has made clear his ambivalence toward race-based affirmative action. In 2009, he rejected calls for an affirmative-action program for the public sector based on racial criteria, saying: "I think it is a mistake to start thinking in terms of particular ethnic segments of the United States rather than to think that we are all in this together and we are all going to get out of this together."

Mr. Obama's new emphasis on reducing the income gap, expressed both at the White House college summit and in his recent State of the Union address, reveals a similar tendency to view inequality as having purely economic roots.

However, as the Brazilian example suggests, replacing race-based affirmative action with measures based solely on economic class is not only unnecessary, it is misguided. If the United States really wants to promote equal access to higher education, it must take into account both factors.