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Diversity in Academe

Affirmative Action, Brazilian-Style



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State officials have vowed to appeal a court ruling that ordered the State U. of Rio de Janeiro to halt its affirmative-action plan. Above, students and visitors gather on the university's Rio campus.

By Marion Lloyd

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Six years after Brazilian universities began embracing affirmative action, higher education in Brazil is no longer the domain of a mostly white elite.

Since 2003 more than 1,300 institutions of higher education have adopted quotas for Afro-Brazilians and graduates of public high schools. The government has also created 10 public universities and dozens of new campuses in poor areas in an effort to expand access to higher education for the underprivileged.

But the debate over the quota system—racial quotas in particular—continues to inflame passions in a country that has long considered itself a racial democracy.

Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, in 1888. Today the descendants of slaves officially make up nearly half of the country's 190 million people, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, the government census bureau. Proponents of quotas for Afro-Brazilians argue that only Nigeria has a larger black population. But centuries of

racial intermixing, which was initially encouraged by Portuguese colonizers seeking to whiten the population, have made it famously hard to classify Brazilians by race.

Take the case of Alan and Alex Texeira, identical male twins who applied for admission to the federal University of Brasilia in 2007 under the racial quotas. After analyzing photos of the brothers—a required step for accessing the university's quota system—separate "race boards" determined that one was black and one was white.

Opponents of the racial quotas argue that poverty, not race, is the main obstacle to getting a university education in Brazil. The country's more than 130 public universities are free, and competition at most of them, particularly the 55 federal universities, is brutal. Private universities enroll about 80 percent of the 4.5 million students in the higher-education system. But in a nation where per capita income is just \$7,350 a year, and the distribution of wealth is among the world's most unequal, most families cannot afford to send their children to private universities.

"You're not discriminated against because you're black, but because you're poor," argues Flávio Bolsonaro, a state legislator in Rio de Janeiro. He filed a legal challenge after the State University of Rio de Janeiro adopted the country's first quota for higher education, in 2003. In June a state tribunal upheld Mr. Bolsonaro's claim that the measures violated Brazil's Constitution, which outlaws all forms of discrimination, and ordered the university to halt its affirmative-action measures.

State officials have vowed to appeal the court ruling. "The quota program values the public-school education and makes reparations from a racial point of view," Sérgio Cabral Filho, governor of Rio de Janeiro state, told reporters recently. "Contrary to what some say, it is not a racist program. Brazil has a duty to the blacks, and it's about making reparations."

Data from the 2000 census—conducted before the first quota policies were adopted—showed that just 2 percent of university graduates were black and 12 percent were *pardo*, a Brazilian catch-all term for those of mixed European, African, and American Indian descent. Nearly one in four Afro-Brazilians were illiterate, compared with one in 10 whites. Blacks and *pardos* also earned on average half the salary of whites, inequalities that have remained virtually unchanged for a century.

Still, many critics of the quota system argue that forcing Brazilians to identify themselves by race—a practice the critics say may be appropriate in the United States, but not in Brazil—incites racial tensions.

In 2007 opponents of affirmative action torched the dormitory rooms of visiting African students at the University of Brasilia and spray-painted racial epithets on the walls. The university, whose excellent reputation draws students from throughout Brazil to the nation's capital, was the first federal university to adopt affirmative-action policies, in 2004.

Supporters of the measures argue that such incidents confirm the need to address deep-rooted racial discrimination after centuries of slavery.

"The quota policy is necessary in Brazil," says Marília Costa Morosini, dean of the school of education at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, an elite private institution in the country's predominantly white south. "It's the only solution."

Her university is among the more than 1,200 private universities, out of a total of about 2,800, participating in the federal government's University Program for All, known by its Portuguese acronym ProUni, which extends tax credits to private institutions that adopt quotas of up to 20 percent for black students and public-school graduates. (Because of the poor quality of most of the country's public high schools, proponents of affirmative action argue that graduates of those schools should be considered disadvantaged. In addition, public-school graduates usually cannot afford to take the yearlong preparatory courses for university admissions exams, further limiting their chances of gaining admission to highly competitive public universities.) The program benefits more than 130,000 students each year who could not otherwise afford to attend college, say government officials.

The policy is among a raft of measures put into effect by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a left-leaning former union leader who took office in 2003 vowing to combat racial prejudice. Lula, as he is popularly known, also set the ambitious goal of increasing college enrollment to 30 percent of high-school graduates by 2010, up from 20 percent at the start of his administration.

Legislation that would establish quotas for Afro-Brazilians and public-school graduates in the federal universities passed in the Chamber of Deputies last fall and is currently under debate in the Brazilian Senate.

"The fact is that, even with so much debate, an increasing number of universities are adopting affirmative [action] policies in their programs," Maria Paula Dallari Bucci, federal secretary of higher education, wrote in an e-mail message to *The Chronicle*. Since 2003 at least 35 federal universities and 43 state-run universities have adopted quotas or bonus systems for disadvantaged applicants, according to a study by the Program for Race Policies in Brazilian Education, housed at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. (The federal government does not keep figures on the number of universities that have adopted affirmative-action measures.)

Students accepted under the ProUni program tended to do better than the regular applicants, Ms. Bucci says, "which demonstrates their appreciation for the opportunity afforded them."

Still, even proponents of the measures argue that quotas for higher education alone are not sufficient to ensure that minority or low-income students succeed.

"Just bringing them in isn't enough," says Patricia Somers, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Texas at Austin, who has studied affirmative action in Brazil. "Many won't graduate. And what happens to them after they graduate?"

Ms. Somers argues that the government should create quotas for faculty members as well, who are overwhelmingly white, and increase financial support and tutoring for students accepted

under the quota system. She also says the government must address racial discrimination in the workplace.

Despite the challenges, however, Ms. Morosini, the education dean at the Pontifical University, says the quota system is gaining acceptance in Brazil. "There may be some legal setbacks," she says. "But it's just a question of time before affirmative action becomes the norm."

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