

# THE CHRONICLE

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## Slowly Enabling the Disabled

**Universities in Brazil and other countries are working harder to accommodate handicaps, but many challenges remain**

By MARION LLOYD

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Alan do Bofim feels his way through the crowded hallways of the State University of Rio de Janeiro, his retractable cane scratching at the concrete floor. Every few minutes he pauses to get his bearings. With the help of a fellow student, he finally locates his criminal-law classroom and eases into a desk in the front row.

Navigating the zigzagging corridors is one of many hurdles that Mr. do Bofim, who is blind, must overcome in his daily life as a law student. Most are even more daunting, like finding Braille editions of the books he needs. Getting a qualified reader to help him take his tests. Or simply catching the right public bus from his home, in a working-class suburb, to the university, in a concrete high-rise in central Rio de Janeiro.

"Everything is more difficult when you're blind," says Mr. do Bofim, 24, who is rail thin and speaks barely above a whisper.

"People think that hearing and feeling make miracles, but it's not like that."

Still, he considers himself fortunate to be attending college. In 2002 he failed the admissions tests for the city's three public universities, which, because they were tuition-free, were the only ones he could afford.

Several months later, however, he got an unexpected break. Rio de Janeiro's state legislature ordered the two public universities under its jurisdiction, the State University of Rio de Janeiro and the Darcy Ribeiro North Fluminense State University, to set aside a total of 5 percent of their seats for disabled students and members of the country's tiny indigenous minority. Mr. do Bofim retook the admissions test for Rio and was accepted at its prestigious law school, where he is now in the third of five years of study.

"It's a good system, because otherwise you would never break the vicious circle of exclusion," he says. He blames his low score on the earlier admissions test on the government reader assigned to help him, who he says was incapable of explaining the math problems.

Mr. do Bofim is one of several dozen disabled students — in a total enrollment of 25,000 — admitted to Rio under the state's new system, up from an average of one or two each year before the quotas, administrators say.

The system is among broader efforts in Latin America to improve living conditions for disabled people, who for centuries have suffered discrimination or simply been ignored. Those efforts vary widely by country. And while most Latin American nations define disability broadly as any mental or physical impairment, many do not guarantee any access to education for the mentally handicapped or those with mental illness.

That is particularly true of measures designed to improve access to higher education — recently adopted in Brazil and several other Latin American countries — which generally apply only to students with learning disabilities, blind and deaf students, and the physically handicapped.

Still, Brazil is considered a regional leader in both disability legislation and affirmative-action policies in general, which seek to address deep-rooted racial and social inequalities. Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery — in 1888 — and has one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world. It also has one of the region's lowest college-attendance rates: 9 percent of Brazilians between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in higher education, compared with 34 percent in Argentina (and 62 percent in Canada), according to a set of university-reform proposals made in July 2005 by the Brazilian government, seeking to democratize the country's higher-education system.

Several states in Brazil have reserved university seats for Afro-Brazilians, who represent about 45 percent of the population, and for graduates of public schools. But Rio State is the first to adopt quotas for the disabled, whose chances of reaching college are even more remote. While 14.5 percent of the country's 170 million people report having some disability, only 0.13 percent of university students are disabled, according to a 2004 education census by the government.

### Regional Change

That panorama is representative of Latin America as a whole, where disabled students have long been excluded from higher education. Discrimination starts early, at the elementary-school level. Students are either isolated in special schools, which rarely go beyond the eighth grade, or forced to compete in regular schools, without any tools to help them overcome their disabilities. A majority drop out before high school.

But the situation is starting to change. The watershed was the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Spain in 1994, at which the 92 participating countries agreed to try to accommodate "special needs" students in mainstream schools. That meeting was followed by the 1999 Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Persons With Disabilities, which committed signatories to take specific steps to improve conditions for the disabled. Since then governments from Mexico to Argentina have passed antidiscrimination laws and required that government buildings be made handicapped-accessible.

Thousands of public-school teachers in those countries are undergoing training in special education as well.

It may be years, however, before those measures result in more disabled students attending college, say disability activists. Only 20 percent to 30 percent of disabled children now attend school in the Americas (excluding the United States), according to the International Disability Rights Monitor's regional report for 2004, the most recent study available. The survey, which was conducted by the monitor's sponsoring organization, the nonprofit Center for International Rehabilitation, reports the highest percentages of enrollment in Canada and Costa Rica and the lowest in Bolivia.

In Brazil only 448,601 students with special needs were enrolled in basic education — defined as kindergarten through eighth grade — out of a total school population of more than 50 million, according to a 2003 study by the World Bank. Researchers also found that private schools either refused to accept disabled students or charged them extra for needed special services.

"How do you talk about higher education in a context like this?" says Rosangela Berman-Bieler, a Brazilian consultant on disability and development for the World Bank.

#### The Money Barrier

Poverty plays a major role in keeping disabled students from reaching college, she argues. "If you can buy a wheelchair, if you can have transportation to go to college, you will be there," says Ms. Berman-Bieler, speaking from personal experience. She was forced to drop out of college at 19 after suffering a car accident that left her a quadriplegic. Thanks to her family's relative wealth, she was able to return to finish her degree in communications. "There are all kinds of barriers, but people who have access to the system overcome all of them," she says.

Marcus Fernandes, a disabled statistician who just earned a master's degree from the prestigious Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, agrees. "I made it to college in spite of the system," he says, recalling his battle to remain in school after a car accident when he was 10 killed the rest of his family and left him paralyzed from the waist down.

His aunt, who took him in, paid to construct wheelchair ramps at his elementary and high schools and later bought him a specially adapted Fiat station wagon, which he operates by hand. "Because there is no handicapped access at the primary and secondary school," he says, "people just give up, so they don't make it to university."

Mr. Fernandes, 27, is luckier than most other disabled people in Brazil. Two years ago, after graduating with a degree in statistics from Rio State University, he landed a job at the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, after the enactment of a federal law reserving 5 percent of government jobs for the disabled. His other option was to work as a supermarket bagger, a position he found through a nonprofit group that provides vocational training for the disabled. When staff members met with him, he recalls, "I don't think they even looked at my résumé, since

there are so few of us who actually manage to study." He adds, ruefully, "People are fighting for that bagger job."

The situation is even bleaker for blind and deaf students, say experts. "If it's a physical handicap, it's just a question of access," says Valeria Oliveira, a professor of special education at Rio State. "But sensory deficiencies are much harder because teachers are not prepared." The university has yet to admit any deaf students, she notes, in part because none of the instructors there know sign language.

Ms. Oliveira directs a program at the university called Rompendo Barreras, Portuguese for "breaking barriers," which assists disabled students. Services include tape recordings of classroom texts and a modest computer center with software designed for blind students. The program offers five classes in teaching Braille and plans to add a course in sign language.

Disabled students say the cash-strapped program is not sufficient to meet their needs. For example, its Braille printer has been broken for more than a year. And the five-member staff cannot keep up with the demand for tapes of curricular material.

"It's very difficult to get what you want from a public university in Brazil. Not even the 'normal' students get all they need," says Inês Martins, a third-year law student who has glaucoma and relies on readers to help her with exams. "The state government doesn't give enough money, and when they do, it doesn't go to disabled students, because they are a minority."

#### Two Models to Follow

Although governments throughout Latin America have done little to improve access for the disabled to higher education, there are at least two notable exceptions: Peru and Costa Rica.

Starting last year, Peru's main public institution of higher education, the National University of San Marcos, began reserving 5 percent of its seats for disabled students. And the private Pontifical Catholic University of Peru has started giving disabled applicants a 10-percent bonus on its entrance exam. The measures are a response to the amended Persons With Disabilities Act of 2004, which calls for all universities to put into effect "special admissions policies" for the disabled.

Critics note that the measure does not specify timetables for the requirement, nor does it stipulate penalties for noncompliance. "This beautiful law is just on paper," says Jorge Paredes, a Peruvian disability-rights activist. He argues that the government should also provide disabled students with scholarships and access to medical care. "A sick person cannot study," says Mr. Paredes, who is a paraplegic and uses a wheelchair.

Costa Rica's four public universities have taken a different approach toward disabled students. Rather than adopt quotas, they are building ramps and elevators and stocking their libraries with books in Braille. They are also providing translators and readers for deaf and blind students, and computers equipped with disability-friendly software.

The University of Costa Rica has gone a step further, allotting a percentage of its budget for improving conditions for disabled students. The university's Center for Help and Services for Disabled Students provides counseling and resolves complaints. The result is a fourfold increase in the number of disabled students, from 43 in 1999 to 173 this year, says Roxana Stupp, the center's former director, who also led the graduate program in disabilities studies until this summer.

The program may be unique in the region in providing services for students with mild mental illnesses and personality disorders as well as physical disabilities, she says. And the university is looking into a certificate program for students with Down syndrome, to allow them to improve their skills in professions including preschool teaching and horticulture. Her success caught the eye of the University of Illinois at Chicago, which has hired her to open its Disability Resource Center.

"It's impressive to see how much the situation has transformed in five years," says Catalina Devandas, a Costa Rican disability specialist at the World Bank, who is a graduate of the university. She expects the trend to accelerate as Costa Rican government policies help more disabled students complete primary and secondary school.

"Education and specialized education is the only tool that disabled people have to integrate themselves into the work force," says Ms. Devandas, who has spina bifida, a debilitating defect of the spinal cord. "I can't do manual labor, so I'd better have a college degree."

Indeed, many experts cite Costa Rica as a model for other Latin American countries to follow. In most countries in the region, "the creation of legal protections has outstripped the willingness and/or ability of nations to implement and enforce them," the International Disability Rights Monitor report concluded in 2004.

Brazil, for example, has more than 250 laws dealing with the rights of the disabled. But critics say most of the legislation amounts to little more than good intentions.

"Our problem is not lack of laws. Our problem is excess of laws, confusion of laws, and lack of enforcement," says Wanderley Mariz, secretary of labor and employment in the Rio de Janeiro municipal government, who helped found the city's first disability commission while serving in the legislature last year. He notes that while the law prohibits denying disabled people access to education — a crime punishable by up to four years in prison — thousands of disabled children continue to be excluded from mainstream schools.

Similarly, the law requires universities in Rio de Janeiro to provide the necessary services for disabled students, including making campuses handicapped-accessible and assigning readers and interpreters for blind and deaf students, respectively. But the reality is far different.

"Disabled students are very discriminated against," says Mr. do Bofim, the blind law student at Rio State University. His professors rarely give him extra time to take tests, he says, even though he depends on a Braille reader. Since the university's library has few books in Braille, he is forced to rely on the library of the government institute for the blind, which has a large collection of Braille books. But its collection of law texts has not been updated in more than a decade, he says.

Other students complain of being mistreated by their professors, who they say resent having to adapt to disabled students' special needs.

"One professor told me that if I didn't learn to write by hand, he would give me a zero," says Alzira Perestrello, a recent graduate of the education program at Rio State, who has cerebral palsy. The disease makes it difficult for her to hold a pen, so she tape-recorded her classes and typed her papers on a specially adapted computer at home. She must also speak very slowly.

But none of those impediments kept her from graduating with honors. She now hopes to earn a master's degree in special education, to help other students overcome their disabilities.

"The education system must prepare everyone to reach university," she says, pounding her desk in excitement. "And I mean everyone. Being an educator means you don't get to choose who you teach."

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