



## Affirmative Action in Brazil

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The use of race-based affirmative action policies in American university admissions has decreased in favor of race-neutral policies (Long, 2007). In recent times, Brazil seems to be following America's example and experimenting with affirmative action in an effort to increase access to higher education for Black, Brown, and low-income students. A Brazilian perspective on affirmative action in university admissions provides interesting insight on the struggle to increase access and equity in higher education around the world.

Brazil's public universities are tuition free, although students must pass a comprehensive entrance examination in order to gain admission. There are no other admission requirements such as grades, interviews, or essays (Pedrosa, Dachs, Maia, Andrade, & Carvalho, 2007). The admissions process, based solely on a pass/fail examination, relegates many Afro-Brazilians to private universities. Public universities are strongly preferred over private universities because students must pay tuition at private institutions. However, for students who are not admitted to a public university, private institutions are their only viable option for pursuing higher education (Marion, 2004).

Approximately 50% of Brazil's population is Black or of mixed heritage. However, only 2% of university students are Black, according to the 2000 Brazilian census. Moreover, only 5.3% of

Black students aged 18-24 reach postsecondary education, compared to 20% of Whites aged 18-24, according to the Pesquisa Nacional de Amostra por Domicilios (PNAD). The PNAD gathers and analyzes statistics on Brazil's population.

Race and ethnicity often overlap among disadvantaged populations. This is definitely the case in Brazil, where the poor are often also Black. For example, Black Brazilians earn approximately 42% of what Whites earn (Telles, 2004). Also, low-income students are underrepresented among university students. As a result, more Whites than Blacks are enrolled in postsecondary education at all income levels (PNAD, 2004).

### "AMERICAN STYLE" AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

In 2001, the State University of Rio de Janeiro began using quotas to increase the number of Black and Brown students admitted. Originally, 40% of the spaces in an entering class would be reserved for Black and low-income students. This figure was reduced to 20% due to complaints and inquiries from critics of affirmative action (Marion, 2004).

These critics suggested that poverty increased inequality in education, not racial discrimination. For example, Stone (2007) noted, "Most of the

people who apply for the quotas are poor. The people against it are the rich" (p. 1). These critics also suggested that "American style" affirmative action would transform Brazil into a racist society (Stone, 2007). However, some scholars noted that racism already existed in Brazil in the form of discrimination in education and employment (Marion, 2004).

In 2004, the State University of Campinas' Academic Senate proposed affirmative action policies aimed at increasing the number of public school graduates, low-income, and Black students at the university. To accomplish this task, extra points were added to an applicant's entrance examination score if they graduated from a public high school and/or self-identified as Black, Brown, or Native Brazilian. According to Pedrosa, et al. (2007), an applicant received 30 points if they graduated from a public school and 10 points if they were Black, Brown, or Native Brazilian. Therefore, status as a public school graduate received a greater weight in the admissions process than race.

These methods were similar to the methods used by the University of Michigan to evaluate its undergraduate applicants prior to 2003. At that time, prospective freshmen were given extra points during the admissions process if they were a member of a racial and ethnic minority group. In

### *Brazilian Postsecondary Educational Attainment by Income and Race*

<u>Income</u>	<u>Black, Brown, Native Brazilian</u>	<u>White</u>
Lower Quintile	0.4%	1.9%
Upper Quintile	30.6%	47.6%

fact, race and ethnicity received more weight than the applicant's SAT score. This method was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (Long, 2007).

Interestingly, Brazilian university administrators claim they are instituting "American style" affirmative action (Stone, 2007). Although, the method emulated by the State University of Campinas was ruled unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court. It appears that Brazil may be experimenting with "American style" affirmative action methods that were ruled unlawful in the United States. Or, Brazil may be utilizing methods that are most appropriate for its government, social structure, and culture, which are all different from the United States.

Given Brazil's current process, it may appear that public high school students are at an unfair advantage in the application process because they receive extra points on the entrance examination. However, more private high school graduates than public high school graduates are admitted to the State University of Campinas. Additionally, it has been shown that public high school graduates perform better academically than private high school graduates once admitted. For example, a recent study (Pedrosa, et. al. 2007) demonstrated that public school graduates were more likely to score lower on the entrance examination than

private high school graduates. However, after one year, the grade point averages of public high school graduates were higher than private high school graduates (Pedrosa, et. al. 2007). In that study, the aforementioned method of adding extra points to examination scores was successful at increasing the number of public high school students and Black students admitted to the State University of Campinas.

This is, arguably, a better alternative to the quota method first instituted by the State University of Rio de Janeiro. Under the quota system, students have no real incentive for examination preparation. Seats in the entering class were already reserved for them, based on their race and socioeconomic status. The State University of Campinas offers a more balanced approach. Applicants still need to study and prepare for the examination. However, under the quota system, an applicant could be admitted based on their race and socioeconomic status.

#### DEFINING RACE

One underlying problem with the affirmative action process in Brazil is the attempt to define race. In Brazil, one's race is largely self-determined. Racial categories are somewhat ambiguous when compared to the United States or South Africa, where racial groups are more distinct. For many Brazilian students, the university admissions process is the first time they have ever had to officially declare a race. The Brazilian census racial

classifications are Black, Brown, White, Asian, and Native Brazilian. Within those classifications, many Brazilians classify themselves even further using terms such as light brown to define themselves.

#### CONCLUSION

Examining affirmative action in university admissions from an international perspective produces insightful ideas that can be beneficial to all nations struggling to increase access and equity in higher education.

Despite inequalities that exist, the United States still has one of most equal distributions of education in the world (Hamilton, Huntley, Alexander, Guimaraes, & James, 2001). By instituting affirmative action policies in university admissions, Brazil is on the road to increasing access and equity. However, affirmative action is not a "one size fits all" initiative. A policy that is successful in the United States may not be successful in Brazil and vice versa.

The strategy utilized at the State University of Campinas would probably be considered unlawful in the United States. As previously stated, a similar policy at the University of Michigan was ruled unconstitutional. Thus, it seems highly likely that Brazil's cultural and political characteristics will influence the evolution and outcomes of affirmative action-based admissions policies.

#### About the Author

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