

NEW DOORWAYS TO COLLEGE





Developments in affirmative action add diversity to university admission pathways

Affirmative action in student admissions to Brazilian public universities is going beyond its original goal of increasing access to education by students from public schools and ensuring that the country's black, mixed-race and indigenous population is adequately represented in undergraduate education. State universities in São Paulo, where admission avenues were formerly limited to entrance exams, have introduced a broader selection of admission pathways designed to ensure applicant quality, including bonus points on examinations, National High School Examination (ENEM) scores and shortcuts to admission that do not rely on exams.

The new admissions framework announced in November by the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) is the most radical example of these recent developments. Starting in 2019, a system of ethnic-racial quotas will be put in place that reserves 25% of slots in the university for candidates who self-identify as black or mixed-race. The system is much more complex than the quota system instituted by law at Brazil's 63 federal universities in 2012. Places at UNICAMP will be offered through two parallel systems: 80% via admission examinations (one-quarter of these places are reserved for candidates who self-identify as black or mixed-race) and the remainder on the basis of

candidate ENEM scores (15% for candidates from public schools and 5% for black and mixed-race candidates). UNICAMP has also maintained its two-decade policy of awarding bonus points to candidates from public schools in both admission examination phases. "Our goal with these policy measures is to ensure at least half of our freshmen are from public schools, and to increase the percentage of black and mixed-race students from 20% currently to 37%, mirroring the proportion of these two groups in São Paulo State's population," states UNICAMP Entrance Examination Coordinator José Alves de Freitas Neto.

Other admissions policy additions have also been approved by the University Board and will go into effect in 2019, including specially formulated entrance examinations for indigenous people and the possibility, available at no other university in Brazil, for science Olympiad medal winners to gain admission without taking entrance exams—in both cases the number of spots will be defined by each university unit. "We have created possibilities that better people's chances of getting into university, showing that public universities can play an important role in developing new pathways for admissions," states physicist Marcelo Knobel, Dean of UNICAMP. "It's not just about inclusion, but about improving the admission process so we find top students, too," he says.

UNICAMP is also considering expanding an affirmative action program created at the university in 2012 known as PROFIS (Interdisciplinary Higher Education Training Program). The initiative selects top third-year high-school students from public schools in Campinas based on their ENEM scores and offers them a two-year training program with multidisciplinary content. At the program's conclusion, students with good grades are admitted to undergraduate degree programs at UNICAMP without having to take an entrance exam. There are plans to increase the number of cities who may participate in the program to reach a larger audience.

In recent years, the University of São Paulo (USP) and São Paulo State University (UNESP) have also reformulated their admissions policies. After a decade of awarding bonus points on entrance examinations for public school students and black, mixed-race, and indigenous candidates, in 2015, USP began offering admission slots through the Unified Admission Platform (SISU). SISU selects candidates for admission to federal universities based on ENEM scores. Of the 11,147 slots available at USP in 2018, 2,745 will be awarded via the SISU platform across three separate lists, with 423 places offered for candidates at large, 1,312 for students who completed high school in public schools, and 1,010 for public school students self-identifying as black, mixed-race, or indigenous. With its new admission policy, USP successfully increased the proportion of freshmen from public schools from 32.3% in 2014 to 36.9% in 2017.

A study by USP's Office of the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Student Affairs in 2016 compared the performance of students admitted through admission examinations and via the SISU platform across 22 undergraduate majors. At the end of the second semester, students admitted through entrance examination had outperformed SISU entrants in majors such as medicine, law and social sciences, whereas SISU students had the edge in courses such as materials engineering, economics, physics, and chemistry. In both cases, the difference was marginal.

In July, USP again changed its policy and instituted a system that will allocate half of its spots to public school students, with a portion of these reserved for candidates who self-identify as black, mixed-race, or indigenous. The initiative will be phased in, with 37% of admissions in each program reserved for public school students in 2018, 40% in 2019, 45% in 2020, and finally 50% in 2021. "This is the first time that USP has adopted an institutional policy on social and racial quotas," states USP's associate dean for undergraduate student affairs, Antônio Carlos Hernandes.



At UNESP, initiatives like these have been in place for some time. In 2013, the university pioneered a quota system similar to the one used at federal universities. Using the system, UNESP progressively expanded its public student allocation to 50% in 2018 admissions, with part of the allocation reserved for black and mixed-race candidates with the goal of enabling them to account for 35% of total admissions. According to the university's associate dean for undergraduate student affairs Gladis Massini-Cagliari, "UNESP has long been successful in attracting a strong freshman population from public schools, but it took quotas to meet the 50% target."

That target—of reserving 50% of slots for public school students and 35% for black, mixed-race, and indigenous candidates—was set as part of the São Paulo State Merit-Based Higher Education Inclusion Program (PIMESP) launched at the end of 2012 by the state government and adopted in varying formats by the three state universities. "PIMESP was launched in response to public demand that a larger proportion of university students come from public schools and reflect the diversity of our population. As a result, state universities have had to redesign their admission systems," explains Fernanda Estevan, a professor at the USP School of Economics, Administration and Accounting (FEA-USP) and an expert on affirmative action.

Students at the Federal University of ABC (*above*) and medicine students at UNICAMP in 2016 (*opposite*), where an admission exam bonus system helped recruit 70% of freshmen from public schools



A 50% target for freshmen from public schools led state universities in São Paulo to change their admission rules

In her habilitation thesis in 2017, Estevan investigated the effects of the admission examination bonus system introduced at UNICAMP in 2005, a then-innovative program designed to broaden social and racial inclusion in the university without resorting to quotas. “The program was beneficial and delivered positive results,” she concluded. The system was designed around a fact that, according to Estevan, was poorly explored in public debate. “It was based on statistical evidence that candidates from public schools whose admission exam scores did not differ significantly from those of candidates from private schools could perform very satisfactorily, and often outperform their private-school counterparts. Presumably, then, granting a 40-point bonus could help to bring talents from public schools to university.”

The researcher found that the system improved the chances of public school students being admitted to UNICAMP by 30%, in addition to increasing the proportion of students from low-income families. No undesirable effects from the bonus policy—such as students losing the incentive to make an effort to pass the exam—were observed. According to Estevan, there are indications that the bonus system had a positive influence on career choices by emboldening

public school students to venture into the most selective majors.

The program’s effects were constrained—the number of admissions from public schools plateaued at 35% of total admissions—by factors unrelated to its design. “When the system was first implemented in 2005, the number of candidates from public schools rose dramatically, but then remained flat the following year. This could be explained by a number of factors, such as the larger number of admissions on offer at federal universities and grants offered for tuition in private universities within the PROUNI (‘University for All’) program, but these would need to be examined in greater depth,” she explains. Renato Pedrosa, a professor at the Institute of Geosciences at UNICAMP who coordinated the admission examination from 2003 to 2011, notes that the percentage of individuals who complete high school in São Paulo has stagnated at 66% for the past decade—the national average is 55%. “We assumed it would increase, and with it the percentage of candidates from public schools applying for and passing the admission exams. But that didn’t happen.”

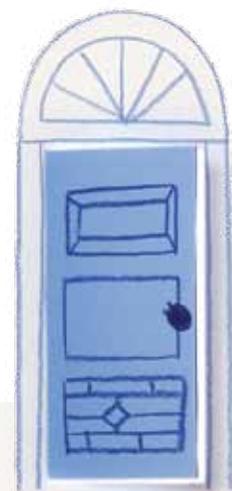
Two years ago, UNICAMP made an initial attempt to increase inclusion without having to resort to quotas by raising the admission exam bonus to 120 points. The proportion of freshmen coming from public schools was successfully increased to an average of 50% of the university’s total student body in 2016 and 2017, as required under PIMESP. However, this increase had unexpected effects: in highly competitive majors, such as medicine and architecture, in which the range of candidate exam scores is typically narrow, the bonus provided a large advantage to public school students, far exceeding what an

affirmative action program would be expected to provide. In less competitive degree programs, candidates admitted performing very poorly in their admission exams and later struggling to keep up. “The exaggerated bonus distorted the exam results,” Knobel acknowledges. According to the dean, the new hybrid system of bonus points, quotas and admission examinations is designed to be efficient in achieving social and racial inclusion while also attracting candidates with high potential.

Experience to date with quotas and other forms of affirmative action in Brazil has dispelled initial fears that student attainment and the quality of education would decline dramatically as a result. “When competition for admission is high, with more than 50 candidates per slot, there is virtually no risk of quota-aided students gaining admission unprepared. Because the number of high-performing candidates is always very high, there will always be plenty among them who are affirmative action beneficiaries yet able to succeed in university to become high-caliber professionals,” states Renato Pedrosa. The risks of using quotas, he says, are mostly concentrated in majors less in demand, where candidates can be admitted who are not prepared to pursue those majors. For Pedrosa, the idea that admission exams are the only appropriate method to determine whether an applicant is qualified for admission is false. “Students with the highest admission exam scores rarely are the best performers in college. We can craft admission pathways that will attract students with high potential even if they do have some weaknesses or are not adequately prepared for the admission exams.”

Sociologist Rosana Heringer has surveyed the effects of admission quotas at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), where she is a professor at the School of Education. She dismisses the idea that the system has had negative effects on the quality of education. “Students struggling to keep up and failing STEM courses may be somewhat more prevalent among quota beneficiaries, but in fact, this is common among the student population more broadly,” she states. “This has always been an issue in programs where there is little competition in the admission exam. In the pedagogy degree program, many students find it difficult to keep pace with reading assignments and have not developed good writing skills. In our licentiate in physics degree program, students often struggle with courses involving mathematics. We’re now also seeing these issues in some other majors, but the tools are there to address them.”

These tools fall into two major categories: providing the financial means for students to continue their studies, particularly through grants, and helping students through academic difficulties by providing pedagogical and psychological support. In Brazil, efforts have focused on the first category. Rosana Heringer is leading a research project that is evaluating how the education systems in Brazil and the US compare with respect to the admission and retention of black and mixed-race students. “In terms of admission to higher education, the systems in each country differ widely from each other. The proportion of people aged 18 to 24 attending university in the US is three times higher than here. There, college education is overwhelmingly paid for by students, although some may benefit



Limits of self-identification

Defining who is truly black or mixed-race and eligible under racial affirmative action policies remains controversial. A recent case of a white, blonde student who was admitted to medical school at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) after self-identifying as black has added fuel to this debate. After being denounced, the student withdrew. “Isolated cases of fraud don’t warrant abolishing a policy,” states João Feres Júnior, a professor of political science at UERJ, Brazil’s first university to

approve a racial quota policy, in 2002. The researcher, who heads UERJ’s Multidisciplinary Study Group on Affirmative Action, believes measures such as requiring students to appear in person for enrollment or creating evaluation committees can help prevent self-identification fraud.

Economist Álvaro Alberto Ferreira Mendes Junior, a professor at Cândido Mendes University, performed research on the subject in connection with his doctorate in economics at UFMG. He believes the racial quota system

has two main problems arising from subjective application criteria. “Self-identification criteria create a risk that a significant number of white applicants could be admitted. But if students are instead evaluated by a committee, we enter into dangerous territory where people are given powers to judge the color of an individual’s skin. This will not ensure fair treatment as applicants can be classified as either white or black depending on the evaluator’s judgment,” he states.



A FUVEST admission exam in 2016: admissions at USP were partly via admission exams and partly via the SISU platform

from household-income-based tiered tuition arrangements, student loans, and grants offered by philanthropic organizations. However, student debt has become a chronic and serious problem in the US," she notes.

There are also significant differences in student retention policies. "In the US, universities are highly committed to supporting students' academic success and take responsibility for offering a range of support services. In this aspect, we're still lagging," she states. Support mechanisms available at US universities include mentoring, tutors, and student help desks.

A common criticism of affirmative action policies is that they fail to address the two root causes of underprivileged and black people's struggle to gain admission to public universities: the poor quality of public basic education and social inequality. "I am in favor of inclusive policies, but I do not consider quotas to be an adequate solution," stated anthropologist Eunice Ribeiro Durhan, a professor emerita at USP, in a debate on quotas organized by the university's radio station, Rádio USP, in July. "It is trying to solve Brazil's problem of extreme social inequality through palliatives. Blacks are unable to get into universities not because they are prejudiced against, but because they are poor. Income is the single most important factor predicting academic performance. When you create quotas, you're really just sweeping the issue under carpet." Durhan coauthored a paper on affirmative action published in 2013 by the São Paulo State Academy of Science (ACIESP) as part of a research project coordinated by FAPESP presi-

dent physicist José Goldemberg. The paper calls for a reform of Brazil's primary education system to ensure students are adequately prepared but also recommends short-term solutions, such as creating preparatory courses and grant programs for underprivileged students.

José Eduardo Krieger, a professor at the USP School of Medicine who headed ACIESP when the Durhan study was published believes the concept of quotas is at odds with the nature of universities that are meant to be at the forefront of science. "Many countries are now discussing issues surrounding the sustainability of research universities. These universities play a vital role in training leaders and generating knowledge, but they also cost a lot of money to operate. Particularly in Europe, there is now a debate about the need to focus resources on a limited number of institutions so that they can continue to fulfill their role," Krieger states. A world-class university, he notes, must attract the best students regardless of skin color. "Besides not addressing the problem of Brazil's dramatically poor primary and secondary education system, quotas can hurt our research universities. We have only a handful of them in Brazil: the three state universities in São Paulo and about a dozen federal universities throughout the country. We need to tackle inequality without undermining the decades of efforts it has taken to build high-quality institutions," states Krieger, who also criticizes the feeble efforts of universities to seek out top talent. "You can't simply rely on admission exams. I have long advocated inviting science Olympiad medal winners to USP, as many universities do in the US and Europe."

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION MILESTONES AT BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITIES

2003

Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ) introduces social allocations in its admission examination: 20% for public school students; 20% for black or indigenous candidates; 5% for candidates with disabilities. The State University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UEMS) reserves 10% of admission slots for indigenous candidates and 20% for black candidates

2004

The University of Campinas (UNICAMP) begins awarding bonus points on admission examinations for students from public schools or who self-identify as black, mixed-race, or indigenous

2005

The private university grants program “University for All” (PROUNI) is instituted by federal act. To be eligible for a full tuition grant, candidates must pass the ENEM examination and produce proof that their monthly household income per person is not greater than 1.5 minimum salaries. A percentage of grants is reserved for individuals with disabilities or who self-identify as indigenous, mixed-race, or black

2006

The University of São Paulo (USP) grants a 3% bonus in both admission examination phases to candidates who have only attended public high schools

2012

The Brazilian Federal Supreme Court finds policies that reserve university slots for black, mixed-race, and indigenous candidates at public universities to be constitutional in a case examining the constitutionality of the quota system introduced by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

For sociologist José de Souza Martins, the affirmative action systems in place at USP and UNICAMP are at variance with the principles according to which high-level higher education institutions ought to operate. “True universities should seek to recruit the best talent, the finest brains, regardless of race, color, origin, gender, or religion. These universities exist not to do charity or to redress social wrongs but to recruit and train the best professionals,” states Martins, a professor emeritus at USP. “If we were addressing the issue in earnest as a society, we would have education policies in place that ensure new generations are adequately trained for the new professions of modern society before they reach university. Brazil hasn’t done this. We’ve left to our top universities the burden of paying our social debts. They are not equipped to solve this problem.”

A survey by São Paulo newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo* on the academic performance of 252,000 Brazilian undergraduate students in the National Student Performance Examination (ENADE) between 2014 and 2016 revealed that quota students performed as well or better than non-quota students in 33 out of the 64 undergraduate majors covered by the survey. In the other 31 majors, largely in STEM fields, their average performance was at least 5% worse. Guilherme Henrique Gomes da Silva investigated this weak spot in affirmative action policy—the deficit in STEM skills among students coming from public schools—in his doctoral research on STEM

education in 2016 at UNESP Rio Claro. Currently a professor at the Federal University of Alfenas (UNIFAL) in Minas Gerais, da Silva chose to study the role of STEM education in affirmative action policies to fill a gap he had identified in the literature on the subject. “When I joined UNIFAL in 2012, there was a prediction—often prejudiced—being voiced in the university community that failure rates in STEM majors, which were already very high, would increase further as quota students were admitted to federal universities.”

Da Silva interviewed professors and quota students at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCAR) and the Federal University of ABC (UFABC) and identified the strategies they perceived as most effective against STEM attrition. “Many students said bonding with their professors was critical in making it through the first year and continuing their studies,” states da Silva. One respondent reported how vexed he felt when he asked his calculus professor what a graph was and heard in reply that this was something he ought to have learned in elementary school. “This student never again dared to ask a question during lectures,” da Silva stated. “Quota students are often the targets of microaggressions causing them to question their ability to remain in college.” Not surprisingly, then, states da Silva, the availability of psychological support was mentioned by students as important. Grants for introductory STEM courses—which help



2013

The Quotas Act enters into effect, requiring federal universities to reserve 50% of admissions for students from public schools. Half of the admission slots are reserved for students with a per capita family income not exceeding 1.5 minimum salaries. Quotas are also established for black, mixed-race, and indigenous candidates, reflecting the racial makeup of each state



2014

Progressive targets come into effect under the São Paulo State Merit-Based Higher Education Inclusion Program (PIMESP), requiring 50% of university places to be occupied by students from public schools and 35% by black, mixed-race, or indigenous students by 2018. UNESP introduces social quotas in its admission examinations



2017

USP and UNICAMP introduce admissions quotas for candidates from public schools and black, mixed-race, and indigenous applicants as a form of affirmative action

aid grants. “We are expanding admissions from public schools, but we lack the funds to defray the added costs,” explains Mário Sérgio Vasconcelos, student retention coordinator at UNESP.

Affirmative action policies were implemented at a time when public universities in Brazil were expanding enrollment. A report titled “Faces da desigualdade no Brasil” (The faces of inequality in Brazil) from the Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO) found that access to higher education (including undergraduate, master’s and doctoral degree programs) had improved throughout Brazil. Based on data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) for the period 2002 to 2015, the study noted that the black student population in public and private universities had increased from 400,000 in 2002 to 1.6 million in 2015.

A criticism often leveled at affirmative action policies is that although they are originally proposed as temporary solutions they more often than not become permanent because the inequality that made them necessary remains.

UNICAMP’s Renato Pedrosa notes that racial quotas were prohibited in the US in a landmark decision by the Supreme Court in 1978: “Universities that implemented these types of policies eventually saw exclusion levels return to what they had been before those policies were implemented.” However,

American universities, particularly when they are publicly funded, are free to select students using different criteria, such as the diversity of the student body or targeting a given percentage of students from surrounding public schools.

Sociologist Arabela Campos Oliven, a professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), is conducting a study comparing the Afro-descendant inclusion policies used at UFRGS and at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In 1968, at the height of the civil rights movement, Illinois launched a program that aimed to attract 500 black undergraduate students, or the equivalent of approximately 5% of its student body. The program was successful at the time and remains in place today. However, it has been unable to recruit as many students as before. “A half-century later, there is now a qualified body of black leadership in university management, including the dean, and the number of black professors has increased, but the total number of black undergraduates has declined, from 565 in 1968 to 356 in 2014,” states Oliven. ■

A significant challenge is ensuring students can support themselves financially during their studies

students both financially and in gaining a more practical understanding of STEM subjects—and creating study groups in which quota students can support one another were also reported as having positive effects.

Another significant challenge in affirmative action policy is ensuring students can support themselves financially during their studies. At UFABC, where a quota system has been in place since 2006, half of freshmen are from public schools and one-third self-identify as black, mixed-race, or indigenous. Of the admission spots for candidates from public schools, 50% are reserved for candidates whose families have a per capita income of up to 1.5 minimum salaries. “We have about 2,500 low-income students and only 500 grants available to them,” states Fernando Mattos, associate dean for Extension and Affirmative Action at UFABC. UNESP has applied to the São Paulo State Government for a refund of the R\$16.6 million it spent in the year on student retention programs, including over a thousand rent allowance grants and 2,791 financial