

# DYNA EDITORIAL

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## Affirmative action in higher education in Brazil

As reported by the newspaper Folha de São Paulo [1] a recent study from the State University of Rio de Janeiro found that 70% of public higher education institutions in Brazil have adopted some kind of affirmative action program. Legislation is being discussed in Congress to make these programs mandatory, but the institutions are doing it voluntarily, or according to state legislation.

Public higher education in Brazil is tuition free, and admission can be very competitive for fields like medicine, engineering or law in prestigious universities, but very easy in less demanded fields such as education, geography or social work. Most affirmative action programs give quotas to students coming from public schools, while others give advantages to students considered black. Many combine these two criteria. There are more programs based on school origin than on race. In some institutions, instead of quotas, students considered underprivileged get bonus points in their university entrance examinations. Most programs also add a family income limit.

In Brazil, race information is collected by the census and other surveys by self-identification of “color”- white, black, brown (“pardo”) and yellow (that used to include Japanese and Brazilian native descendants, now placed in separate categories). In the 2008 national household survey, 48.4% of the respondents said they were white, 43.8% brown (“pardo”), 6.8% black, 0.6% Orientals, and 0.3% indigenous. Race-based affirmative action programs have to decide whether they will include only “blacks” or also “pardos”, and whether they will accept one’s self identification or would use some verification mechanism to avoid opportunistic behavior. In some institutions, applicants for race quotas have to submit pictures and other information, which is assessed by a committee, a difficult task given the high levels of miscegenation and lack of clear boundaries between the different “color” categories.

Since public higher education in Brazil accounts for only 25% of the enrollment, and since access of “blacks” and “pardos” to higher education is increasing irrespective of affirmative action programs, the impact of these affirmative action programs is probably not very large. There is also a national program called “Prouni” that encourages private institutions to offer tuition-free admission or partial subsidy

for low-income students in exchange for tax exemption. This program requires the students to reach a minimum score in a national exam for secondary school graduates (ENEM), and includes also “color” criteria. The 2008 higher education census found that 190 thousand students had full PROUNI benefits, with another 67 thousand with partial subsidy, figures to be compared with a total enrolment of 3.8 million students in the private sector.

There is an ongoing controversy about the use of race or color criteria for affirmative action, but a general consensus about quotas or bonus for low income or students coming from public schools, who would be in large part black or “pardos” in any case. Few universities, if any, combine affirmative action with programs to assure that students who would not otherwise pass the entrance examinations will complete their studies. Supporters of affirmative action programs have argued that the performance of quota students is similar or sometimes better than that of those who enter through the normal channels. The evidence for this is not clear, but, if true, it would mean either that the affirmative action programs are not needed, or that the university entrance examinations, as well as ENEM exam, are racially biased, or biased against students coming from public schools and low-income families, which is not likely. One argument in favor of point bonuses is that the entrance examinations are not a very good predictor of future achievement, so that performance of students somewhat above or below the passing line would not be different.

The fact is that a large number of students entering higher education in Brazil, with or without quotas, come from low quality secondary schools, and do not have the necessary competences to complete a good quality higher education program, leading many institutions to lower their admission and approval criteria, and many students to drop out. Affirmative action programs, by themselves, do not contribute to the solution of this problem.

[1] Antonio Gois, “70% das faculdades públicas já adotam cotas ou bonus”, Folha de São Paulo, August 30, 2010.

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