

# A Step in the Right Direction



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Brazil has already implemented some important affirmative action programs in higher education, and the balance is overall positive. Some 71 universities — with free tuition, linked to the federal system of higher education — as well as different state universities now have some kind of preferential system of entrance benefiting disadvantaged students (those coming from public high schools, those self-declared "pretos," or blacks; "pardos," or browns; "indigenous"; or those with low incomes).

The best thing is that those policies were taken one by one by different university boards trying to adapt the principles of social or racial justice to their regional reality. Available data on the school performance of those students show that they are doing pretty well and are not putting any kind of stress on the system. The real stress comes more from the huge expansion of slots than from the admission system.

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Symbolically those policies are important in showing that being black (preto or pardo) in Brazil today is no longer a source of shame but rather one of pride. Descent from Africa is openly assumed and socially recognized. The policies also demonstrate that publicly financed universities must care for the quality of the education they offer without degrading the fairness of their admission when it becomes biased by class, race or color.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in Brazil is the temptation to introduce a systematic verification of self-declared color or race to prevent fraud in affirmative action programs. Race and color are social constructs. It is impossible to define their borders scientifically. Passing is something inherent to this kind of classification. It can be motivated by selfish economic protection

or by political altruistic reasons. The fear of fraud must be restrained to give a chance to these programs to flourish.

In one more decade, the stresses provoked by the expansion of public higher education, one of the most important legacies of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva — will hopefully recede, and the public system will be much more fair and universal both racially and socially.

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