

For Whom the Quotas Count: Negotiating Blackness in Brazilian Higher Education

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The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how Black quota students in Brazilian universities negotiate and manage race under an affirmative action policy. The federal policy sanctions the use of reserved spaces for underrepresented students based on race, ethnicity, class, ability, type of primary or secondary school attended, as well as for students who lost a parent in the line of civil duty. The use of quotas to implement affirmative action in federally funded universities was legislated in 2002 and declared constitutional in 2012. The race-based quota system has allowed more Black students to attend quality universities, however, at what expense?

Occurrences such as Black students being steered toward less rigorous majors (Francis and Tannuri-Pianto 2013), having to deal with subtle yet offensive comments or actions called microaggressions from professors and peers (da Silva 2012), and the negative effects of self-identifying as Black (Schwartzman 2009) are some examples of the unintended consequences of the quota policy. Scant attention to outcomes such as these suggests a need for other methods of analyzing policy that move away from traditional practices. Furthermore, race continues to be a complex issue in Brazil where more than half of its citizens identify as multi-racial. As a result, this complicates understandings of race in general and who should benefit from quotas in particular.

Using a critical ethnographic design, this study examines how self-identified Black university students negotiate race and other identities under a policy mandated to cultivate opportunity on one hand, within institutional environments that restrict opportunity on the other. I interviewed students who represent seven federal, state, public and private universities in Brazil, conducted observations of university quota

implementation, and used critical discourse analysis of official policy documents to reveal how Black students proactively manage their identities and policy understandings despite institutional challenges.

In conversation with new realities in higher education, this research unpacks postsecondary institutions as simultaneous sites of advancement and hindrance while questioning their relationship with students generally and underrepresented students specifically. Although Brazil provides the setting for this study, it serves as one case in the larger global context of addressing the multifaceted relationship between universities, minority students, and policies that at times miss the mark when confronting issues of equity (Moses 2010). Centering underrepresented student experiences elucidates what promotes and deters their academic success. Additionally, while traditional education policy research relies on the expertise of policy analysts, this study shifts and widens the field to consider student perspectives as equally integral to the policy process.

In the context of globalization and a greater reliance on neo-liberalist ideals by decision makers, access and equity in higher education becomes more vital and even more complex (Altbach 2010; Naidoo 2011). As such, a critique of the terms in which access and equity are expanded is equally valuable. Examining Brazil's navigation of the use of affirmative action and racial identity through the perspective of underrepresented students illuminates an under-theorized space from which to evaluate these terms.

References

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