

The Slow Democratization of Public Universities in Brazil

Gradually, the racial quota system begins to change the institution profile that elites saw as theirs. The reaction, concentrated in SP, exposes what Darcy Ribeiro called "oppressive tolerance" of racism.

Affirmative action was the term in English, established in the Kennedy administration (1963) to designate policies aimed at promoting equal employment opportunities for Black and white people in the United States. In Brazil, the term was loosely translated as *ação afirmativa* or *ações afirmativas*, as these policies were seen in a broader context—designed to reduce racial and social inequalities.

The consolidation of this policy within the higher education occurred in 2012 with the approval of the Law 12,711. That decree has determined that federal universities should allocate 50% of its enrollment for students self-declared as black, brown or native Indian with low income and had fully completed high school at public schools. The so called Quota Law would be implemented from the following year in all federal institutions of higher education.

The Pioneers

Nine years before the Quota Law was enacted, Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ) introduced a system allowing self-declared Black, Brown, and Indigenous students (PPI) to apply through the *vestibular*, Brazil's university entrance exam. Under this policy, 20% of seats were reserved for Black students, 20% for public school graduates, and 5% for individuals with disabilities.

Data from that year's *vestibular* showed that among 4,909 applicants, more than 1,900 identified as Black or mixed race, and nearly half came from public schools. In 2004, the University of Brasília became the first federal university to adopt racial quotas, reserving the same percentages as UERJ for self-declared PPI students.

By 2011, 125 institutions had implemented affirmative action policies.

Unesp and the Quota System

While USP and Unicamp continued to resist racial quotas, Unesp stood out in its most recent entrance exam, becoming the only state university to implement the model. That year, 15% of available seats were allocated to Black and Brown students, with the goal of increasing this share to 50% by 2018.

"Nothing Is More Unequal Than Treating Everyone Equally"

In 2009, Brazil's Democrats Party (DEM) filed a lawsuit against the University of Brasília, claiming that racial quotas were unconstitutional. Their argument relied on the principle that all

individuals are equal under the law—a principle used to discredit policies of inclusion. But they overlooked a fundamental truth: Black Brazilians have never been on equal footing. Enslaved for more than 300 years, they continue to fight daily for the validation of their culture, beliefs, and identity in a country that often denies its own racism.

Racism in Brazil has a particularly insidious characteristic—what Darcy Ribeiro called *oppressive tolerance*. Black people are tolerated only when they remain in their “place.” When they access traditionally white spaces—such as universities—they become perceived as a threat. As Dennis de Oliveira, a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences from USP and a member of NEINB (Interdisciplinary Research Group on the Brazilian Black Population), explains:

“When Black people are on the outskirts or in samba schools, they are tolerated. But when they occupy other spaces, they become an inconvenience.”

Racial quotas are not intended to penalize privileged white students; they are meant to correct historical injustices. According to Maria José de Jesus Alves Cordeiro, Ph.D. in Education from PUC-SP, the entry of Black students into universities is a recent achievement: “It began in 2002 with affirmative action policies—in other words, with quotas. In this sense, the Black movement’s struggle achieved an important milestone after centuries of exclusion.” Pedro Borges, a member of the Black collective Kimpa at Unesp in Bauru, adds: “Quotas are more than quotas. They’re a powerful strategy by the Black movement. Public universities were the last stronghold of the white elite. The movement deliberately sparked debate. The goal was to make racism visible and turn it into a public issue.”

Challenges Beyond Admission

Quotas alone do not guarantee that Black students will be fully accepted. As Dennis points out, racism is a *structural phenomenon*, present in every social sphere. Only a comprehensive set of public policies can begin to dismantle this structure and prompt deeper societal reflection.

Resistance to quotas remains especially strong in elite academic programs such as medicine, engineering, and law. A study by UERJ’s Public Policy Laboratory, *Four Years of Quota Policies: Faculty Opinions*, showed that faculty members who had taught quota students were generally more supportive of the system. This aligns with findings from Maria José’s doctoral research at the State University of Mato Grosso do Sul. Her study revealed that the academic performance of Black and Indigenous quota students matched—or even surpassed—that of non-quota peers. These students feel challenged and work hard to stay in school.

But admission isn’t enough. Black students must also survive in environments not designed for low-income individuals. Take Unesp’s Bauru campus as an example: it offers only 32 spots in student housing, and its dining hall operates only at lunchtime. Such infrastructure fails to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students. Moreover, the campus has been the site of racially motivated incidents.

A Broader Impact

The presence of Black students in higher education threatens not just traditional academic spaces, but also the broader social hierarchy. As more Black students graduate and access

leadership positions, they demand recognition and respect—pushing society toward greater equality. This process can ultimately benefit everyone, not just the Black community.

Another Side of Racial Quotas: The Social Byproduct

An article published in Issue No. 237 of the *Brazilian Journal of Pedagogical Studies*, titled *The Social Byproduct of Racial Quotas in Higher Education in Brazil*, offers a critical analysis of the country's affirmative action model. According to the article, of the 125 institutions with affirmative action policies in 2011—before the Quota Law—only five implemented quotas specifically for Black and Indigenous students: University of Brasília (UnB), State University of Mato Grosso (Unemat), State University of Maranhão (Uema), State University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UEMS), and the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp). Nine institutions had quotas exclusively for Indigenous people, but none had quotas solely for Black students. In total, only 14 institutions adopted explicit racial quotas.

The article argues that the main byproduct of racial quotas has been the emergence of *social quotas*, which are now more widely implemented. It notes:

“The demand for racially based affirmative action—initially the main goal—has resulted in more than two-thirds (69%) of available seats being allocated based on criteria other than race. This phenomenon is termed the *social byproduct* of racial quotas. The underlying ideological issue is that the real barrier to democratic access to public higher education is socioeconomic status—challenging the argument from the Black movement that it is racial history which justifies affirmative action.”

While it's true that the Black population is disproportionately represented among lower socioeconomic groups, experts argue that racial inequality cannot be reduced to class issues. Class is a product of an economic system; racism is rooted in a system of unfounded beliefs in racial superiority. The long history of racial injustice justifies race-specific affirmative action in a way that economic inequality alone does not.