

Analysis finds benefits to racial quotas in Brazilian higher education

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A racial quota system at one of the leading universities in Brazil raised the proportion of black students from low-income families, without decreasing their efforts to succeed in school, a major new study finds.

"Critics of affirmative action policies often argue that making it easier for people to get into college lowers their incentive to try hard academically. That argument doesn't stand up to our data," says Andrew Francis, an economist at Emory University and co-author of the study.

Francis conducted the research with Maria Tannuri-Pianto, an economist at the University of Brasilia. Their analysis of the short-term impact of racial quotas was recently published in the [Journal of Human Resources](#).

Affirmative action has been in place for decades in the United States, but it remains controversial, especially in regards to higher education. Some states have even taken steps to weaken the U.S. policy, which does not include racial quotas.

On October 10, the debate will come back to the forefront, as the U.S. Supreme Court hears arguments in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*. A rejected white student brought the challenge to the admission policies of UT, a flagship public university.

Brazil offers a diverse and vibrant environment to study how incentives affect education and race. The country's status as a rising star on the world stage was boosted by its winning bid to host the 2016 Olympics.

More African slaves were brought to Brazil than to all of North America. Many of their descendants have intermarried with other races in Brazil, including indigenous people and those of European and Asian descent.

"For a long time, Brazil was known as a racial democracy with little discrimination, but [social science research](#) in recent decades has shown that view was way off," Francis says. "Generally, the darker your skin in Brazil, the less education and money you have. Brazil is a country of stark contrasts."

Brazil is just beginning to experiment with its own brand of affirmative action. In 2004, the University of Brasilia became the first federal university to have a racial quota system. All students must pass an admissions exam in order to gain entrance to the university. The racial quota requires each department at the university to reserve 20 percent of its admission spaces for students who self-identify as black.

In order to conduct a comparative analysis, the researchers looked at two admission cycles before the quota system was enacted, and three admission cycles following implementation. The university cooperated with the researchers, giving them access to admissions scores, grades and other pertinent information.

More than 2,000 students were interviewed over the course of the study. They were asked to self-identify as belonging to one of five racial groups, from white to black and gradations between. Photographs were taken of more than 700 students. The photos were shown to a panel of Brazilians who were asked to rate the skin tones on a scale of one to seven, from lightest to darkest.

The results showed that the racial policies boosted the numbers of the darkest-skinned students overall, from 5.6 percent to 9 percent. The

successful applicants were from lower socioeconomic status families than the displaced applicants.

To analyze how the racial quota impacted student effort, the researchers looked at whether the students took a college preparation course, how many times they applied, and whether they applied to more competitive academic departments, like law and medicine.

"Based on our analysis of those factors, there was no evidence that students reduced their efforts due to racial quotas," Francis says.

The researchers also did a comparative analysis of grades. "The policy did not impact the grades of black students," Francis says. "There were some racial disparities before and after, with black students on average getting lower grades than white students, but the policies didn't exacerbate this difference."

Another aspect of the study was how the racial quotas affected racial self-identity. "We found some evidence that people misrepresented their racial identity after the quota system was enacted," Francis says. "Some of the [students](#) told the university that they were black, but during interviews for our study, they told us that they were not black. People of intermediate skin tone were more likely to make this switch."

People of the darkest skin tone, however, were more likely after the racial quota policy was implemented to identify themselves as black, both on their university application and for the study survey.

"The racial quota policy caused them to see themselves in a different way," Francis says. "It seemed to reinforce and foster investments in a black identity. Race is flexible and contextual, and our data shows that public policy can have an impact on racial self-identification."

In a recent case, the Brazilian Supreme Court unanimously upheld the constitutionality of the racial [quota system](#), giving the federal government a green light for implementing more racial quotas as it seeks to correct economic imbalances.

"We hope our data helps shape Brazil's racial policy," Francis says, adding that additional policy interventions need to be pursued. "College entrance exam scores are lower for blacks in Brazil for many reasons," he says. "If society is really committed to erasing inequality, policies have to impact people earlier in life than college."

Provided by Emory University

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