

The IM's Aula Magna debates higher education access for youth

By Ricardo Portugal-Press Secretary for the IM/Trans. Travis Knoll

The new freshmen of the Multidisciplinary Institute (IM) in Nova Iguacu, RJ, as well as returning students, were received on Wednesday, August 14, by the esteemed President of the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Prof. Dr. Ricardo Berbara. In his welcoming remarks, he touched on the current national crisis, painting a somber picture of the budget cuts to public federal universities.

The topic of the Aula Magna of the institute was "The Cost of Opportunity", the speakers for which included the UFRRJ's Dean of Research and Graduate Education, Professor Alexandre Fortes, and the professor, anthropologist, and dancer, Katya Wesolowski, of Duke University (U.S.A.).

Besides President Ricardo Berbara, the opening roundtable of the event included the Vice Director for the IM, Prof. Dr. Marcos Benac, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Prof. Dr. Joecildo Francisco Rocha, the Associate Dean for Outreach, Prof. Dr. Gabriela Rizo, the representative for the Dean of Outreach, Prof. Roberto Lélis.

Eight-semester Pedagogy student Carine Resende, representing Student Government (DCE) also gave brief remarks to the new students. She called on the freshmen to participate in student activities developed by the organization, in the struggle for the maintaining of a free and high quality public education in the nation. She also encouraged students to work toward greater access for students in the Baixada Fluminense.

In his talk, Prof. Berbara praised the academic performance of the IM throughout the years, which, according to him, has become one of the most productive institutes in the area of the human and social sciences, with a particularly strong focus on Geography and Computer Science. The President pointed out that the IM has built over the last decade diverse national projects, projects which integrates the institute with the university, the country, and international actors, such as Duke University (U.S.), now its partner university. He gave a serious warning to those in attendance about the current political trajectory of Brazil. According to the university president, we should not have any hopeful expectations regarding the moment in which we are living in the country today, nor for the specific moment faced by the UFRRJ. Berbara added that the 2016 coup was not carried out merely to topple the ex-president Dilma Rousseff, disrespecting the results at the polls, that elected her with 52 million votes. The coup goes beyond the particular offense against democracy in our country and constitutes one part of a project to create a new political model for the country: One of exclusion, one that destroys the public sector. He also argued that this new model will not permit the growth of the IM, which is a typical project of social inclusion created during the last 12 years. Thanks to such projects, the UFRRJ grew from 5,000 to 20,000 students and tripling the number of its professors, The President condemned the endangering of this social inclusion project during the current political moment, without mentioning the institutional barbarity that the coup brought to the fore, such as the restrictions to habeas corpus and the presumption of innocence, coercive questioning, rewarded testimony, and other attacks to the Democratic Rule of Law.

Because of all of this, the President of the UFRRJ emphasized that the university, one of the few institutions of influence in the Baixada Fluminense, cannot lose any chance to condemn the chaotic atmosphere, with both public health and public education in crisis as well as pensions to be sacked and later privatized. That's in addition to 14 million unemployed Brazilians, unemployed due to the adverse

moment and the anti-popular project we are facing. To face this crisis head on, he said, we need to widen our gaze to see all that is around the university, searching for partnerships with social movements and with society's excluded.

Worldwide Phenomenon

Professor Ricardo Berbara is of the opinion that the current phenomenon in the country is nothing more than the fruit of what is also occurring abroad, where a new culture of "fear of the other" spreads rapidly to the four corners of the earth. In Brazil, this ideological concept of the "individualized me", distanced from everyone else in pursuit of individual aspirations, has been gaining force through the culture introduced through the coup-de-ta and should be also fought against in the academic sphere. The president also told the audience that the UFRRJ, like all public federal universities, suffered a cut in their investment capacity of 40 percent this year. In 2018, there will be another cut of \$R 5 million in the Rural's budget, which will require a great general effort in search of ideas and projects to get out of the crisis and defeat this exclusionary and unjust model. In the marketplace of ideas and projects will take place the great confrontation to overcome the environment generated by the crisis, not only in Brazil, but also in all of the Americas and the entire world.

Finally, he reminded the audience that, historically, it was in the darkest movements when the public university knew how to give responses that helped the country out of political and economic impasses. In this period, the challenge for the new students staff, professors, and administrators is the creation of a solidary network that integrates the departments and disciplines in the search for ideas and projects that are opposed to the avalanche of the neoliberal and exclusionary model.

The speaker was followed by the vice director of the IM, professor Marcos Benac. He gave a warm welcome to all the new students and all of the administrative staff and highlighted the importance of the IM as a center of knowledge production, technology, and academic production within UFRRJ. He also showed a preoccupation with the political and economic landscape of crisis which Rio de Janeiro and the nation were going through. He used the opportunity to call all to dedicate themselves to the responsibility to work, in a joint intellectual effort, to produce, reflect, and to find a way out of the crisis.

The Dean of Undergraduate Studies Prof. Joecildo Francisco Rocha began his talk highlighting how special of a moment the arrival of the new students to the UFRRJ was for the institution. He suggested that the freshmen seek not only technical knowledge in the academy but also the formation of citizenship, something so necessary for life in a society. He deemed the UFRRJ's partnerships with institutions like Duke University, spearheaded by professor Alexandre Fortes when he was director of the IM, as fundamental. He highlighted the presence in the university of various integrated programs, such as the PIBID, the PARFOR, the Accessibility and Inclusion Program, the PPGPACS, the PPGEduc, noting the presence in the event of all of the discipline coordinators of the IM.

The next speaker was Prof. Gabriela Rizo, Associate Dean for Outreach, representing the Dean of Outreach, Prof. Roberto Lelis. She called the attention of the newly enrolled to the fact that learning in the awareness of knowledges would form them as thinking individuals to not only socially ascend but to also form solidary human beings. Here, she pointed out, we have the chance to show the best of what we have to society helping to construct a more just world.

"The Cost of Opportunity"

This was the theme of the talk by Dean Alexandre Fortes. He told the audience that he began to use this expression through a collaborative research project that has been developed with Duke University over the last several years. And now he has a notion of the effort made by families, students and social movements in defense of public education, in the sense of guaranteeing the democratic access expansion for college-age students, making possible the building of a better future for workers' children and for the country. Professor Fortes said the idea was to build a movement that could resist this adverse movement characterized by the rollback of social rights. Because these rights, despite the fact that the country is still behind in terms of university access, the governments of Presidents Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva and Dilma Rousseff the number of working class students 18-24 years old graduating from public and private universities from 9 percent to 18 percent.

Now, with the reduction of the education budget and investments, all of these social gains are at risk. Because of this, Fortes argued that the mobilization of society in defense of these social conquests was fundamental. Despite having doubled the number of students with access to the university, we are still behind many Latin American countries and some Asian countries like South Korea. Therefore, the university conversation that needs to happen is with the local residents, with unions, with social movements, with schools, and with churches.

With this objective in mind, the documentary video "The Cost of Opportunity" was created. According to the Dean of Research and Graduate Education, the film clearly established the bridge between the university and the popular segments of the region, because it shows students that have this opportunity for growth and the seeking of a better quality of life. In the Baixada Fluminense, a region noted for social exclusion and injustice, a public university emerges like the UFRRJ's IM, that breaks with that predominant logic. The film shows the experience of our partnership with Duke University, showing the positive experiences of those students that gained for themselves the right to study in a public university of high quality, and also their families, that fought for this right alongside them.

Katya Wesolowski, an anthropology professor at Duke University spoke next. She emphasized that education is fundamental for any society that seeks development. The expansion of higher education, according to her, needs to be focused in regions of need, such as the Baixada Fluminense, where a high-quality education does not exist that would present an opportunity for the community's social advance.

Professor John French emphasized in his speech the success of the Duke/UFRRJ partnership, where the students from here went to the US university and students from there came here, exchanging information and learning about two distinct realities.

The rapper Dudu do Morro Agudo was the last to speak before the showing of the film. He talked about his partnership with the Rural, a relationship that goes way back. He noted that the film was the result of interviews that were done with students and their families telling stories of the struggles and difficulties of reaching public higher education. Dudu explained that he worked with children and adolescents and that, in the majority of cases, there does not exist the possibility of enrolling in the university. In large part, youth only reached second grade before ending their academic life. Seeing this, he decided to play a part in searching for incentives for the students to continue. The film, produced with Duke student Stephanie Reist was a tool that awoke interest in the children and youth of the periphery. In all the places he is invited to give a talk, Dudu do Morro Agudo shows "The Cost of Opportunity" and the video has shown itself capable of stimulating search for a better quality of life through study.

Readers may access the original Portuguese-language article [here](#).