

IM/UFRRJ Promotes Debate about High School and Higher Education Access

By Ricardo Portugal-IM/UFRRJ Press Office/Trans. Travis Knoll ([Leia em português](#))

As part of the second semester programming for 2017, the UFRRJ's Multidisciplinary Institute (IM) in Nova Iguaçu on August 16 hosted a roundtable event on "High School in the Baixada Fluminense: Prospects for entering higher education." The event was part of the IM's Academic Integration Week in partnership with Duke University (U.S.A.) to welcome incoming students. The table was coordinated by IM professor [Márcia Pletsch](#), PhD in Education and a National Council of Scientific and Technological Advancement (CNPq) researcher. John French, Professor of Latin American History at Duke University with a specialization in Brazil, professor Alexandre Rodrigues de Assis, Math professor and alumnus of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), who has a Masters in Education and works with developing pedagogical material for elementary school math teachers, professor Simone da Conceição Januário, with a degree in Letters from the UFRRJ, and elementary school professor in the state and municipal schools in Rio de Janeiro, and Duke University undergraduate student Mitchel Ryan Mitchell Ryan were also present.

Professor Márcia Pletsch began the event by greeting all of those invited guests and the attending public. She gave a special welcome to the UFRRJ's freshmen. She used the opportunity to show solidarity with the students, professors, and administrative staff of the UERJ, that have gone four months without receiving their salaries, which has made it impossible for the university to begin this semester's classes. Professor Marcia also showed solidarity in her speech with the professors of Duque de Caxias, who two weeks ago were targets of police violence when they protested inside City Hall against the loss of rights guaranteed by their work plan.

Student Mitchel Ryan also touched on some elements of his research here in the Baixada Fluminense. He started off with the importance of the existence of a public university in the region, a form of leverage for regional development for the populations around it, populations which are victims of a process of inequality and exclusion from basic rights such as education and quality of life. He emphasized that the future of our country is tied to the increase of the population's access to high school and university education of high quality. Mitchell cited the Baixada Fluminense as a specific case, with its 13 municipalities, as a flagrant example of heightened levels of exclusion, social inequality, and clientelist policies, where access to public education should be the central goal and basic concern of public governance. This environment of abandonment predominates despite the region having a significant percentage of the state GDP in the state and one of the highest concentrations of youth in the country. The U.S. student stressed that this population drives local and regional economic production and that, despite this, only a small percentage of this youth has access to a university education. He highlighted the importance of this educational, binational, exchange between the UFRRJ and Duke University that brought together a research team of ten U.S. students and twelve Brazilians, not to mention eight professors, two administrative staff, and an entrepreneurial rapper. In June 2016, the group spent three weeks of collaborative work in the Baixada Fluminense and in March of this year, collaborators visited Duke University in the U.S. for a nine-day exchange and an all-day conference on March 27, 2017. Mitchell emphasized that research carried out by the group showed that in the last decade, enrollment in public and private higher education tripled in the country. He argued that the biggest result of this partnership was the production of a documentary video about the IM/UFRRJ created by the rapper, filmmaker, and community educator Dudu do Morro Agudo and the U.S. student

Stephanie Resit titled “The Cost of Opportunity” telling the stories of many of the difficulties of students and their families to enter university.

The second speaker was Simone da Conceição Januário. To the new students of the Rural (and the returning ones as well) she highlighted the new public higher education vision in the region, shown by the Multidisciplinary Institute, which was not the first public university to function in the Baixada Fluminense since the UFRRJ already existed in Seropédica. However, the IM is the first university easily seen by the Baixada, that really pays attention to it and makes us think about not only academic and scientific formation, but the humanistic base of students. This base is contextualized in a new social reality of benefit to a region so needing of citizenship. She explained that she entered the IM/UFRRJ in 2011 and from 2014 onwards, while studying Letters, formed an organization along with other students working on the manual artisanal binding of books that were later taken to the public school where she works in the [Municipality of Paracambi](#). Professor Simone pointed out CIEP-Garricha, a “Alegria do Povo”, located in the Lajes neighborhood of Paracambi as an example of a public school that suffers with the barriers of Baixada residents to public higher education. It receives a large part of the students from high school in the locality, whose prospects for enrollment in higher education is very low given the characteristics of geographic distance in relation to the central university hubs. This distance imposes transport and driving difficulties on those who dream of attending university.

In this sense, the primary challenge, according to her, is to motivate the student to continue studying once high school is done. Professor Simone, along with other professors, has sought through reading, to help students get informative and formational content about the benefits of ongoing education geared to a university education. This is important because, according to her, the Paracambi high school students did not know until then about the existence of the Rural campus in Seropédica nor Nova Iguaçu and how to get to those places and define the area of study they want to pursue. To have some idea about the importance of this work, professor Simone informed the audience that Paracambi has over 70,000 residents with about 30 percent of those in the between the last year of elementary school and the last year of high school.

A specific year-long project was done with twenty students from the CIEP Garrincha-A Alegria do Povo among the 100 students that were on track to finish high school in 2016. The project went from 2014 to mid-2015 and culminated with the students’ visit to the Multidisciplinary Institute. The IM gave full support to this new encouraging and incentivizing initiative. The students that visited for the first time participated in workshops debates, and a talk with Professor Leandro, who teaches Pedagogy. Through this process, the students gained a new vision not only of the need, but also the possibility of access to public higher education, an unreachable reality or fact for them until then. All of this happened thanks to a targeted mentorship. Simone said the result was encouraging. Of the 100 students at the CIEP, 10 made it to public university. Of these ten, three made it into public university. The great challenge is, going forward, to make sure that the university can reach those municipal schools, establishing a positive dialogue that stimulates the search for higher education.

Márcia Pletsch made a quick intervention that noted that the IM/UFRRJ adopted the National Plan for the Education of Elementary School Professors (PARFOR) created during the Workers’ Party government (PT). This program confronted a dramatic reality in the Baixada: Until 2009, around 48 percent of elementary schoolteachers did not have higher education experience, in addition to the substantial number of teachers that were teaching outside their area of study. This initiative, under the auspices of the UFRRJ was considered a success graduating various classes in Letters, History, Pedagogy, and a double major in Philosophy. Pletsch emphasized the importance of this program for the formation of the region’s teachers, a result of the coordination of public education systems with the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro.

The program, according to professor Marcia, made possible the arrival of public school teachers into university and those professors brought their knowledge of the existence of a high quality public university in the Baixada Fluminense to their students. This helped to break a disinformation barrier, because many people still do not know about the IM/UFRRJ here in the region and they do not recognize the university educational public space as a right of the local population.

The next speaker was Professor Alexandre Rodrigues de Assis. He began greeting the new students of the UFRRJ as a resident of the region, born here, who nonetheless had to go to Rio de Janeiro to find a university education that he could not find here. In the 1980s, he said, worries about the flight to Rio and violence were already a common concern as were concerns over teaching scholarships to pursue a career in teaching, an extremely important factor for needy studies in deciding whether to continue an academic life. He argued that in that era, the central concern was to take the recently graduated high school student, prepare him in nine months for a test and throw him into a university without further concerns over his humanistic education. However, that was not sufficient. Beyond the acquisition of theoretical and scientific knowledge, a formal commitment to the question of critical citizenship was necessary.

With that, professor Alexandre reinforced the opinions of professors Simone Januário e Márcia Pletsch about the necessity of strengthening relationships between the public university and groups of elementary schools. He cited the case of the Pestana Rangel Education Institute (IERP), located in the center of Nova Iguacu with a social reality not that different from that cited by professor Simone in regard to higher public education access.

In this environment, the primary subject that Professor Alexandre [Rodrigues] touched on was to know how we are preparing students to perceive the economic and sociopolitical realities that encircle them, [a reflection] able to make them reflect on issues like abortion, racism, the liberty to choose one's own religion, and others, or if we are only simply preparing them for the labor market. That involves the influence of the State as the regulator of these issues. He proposed a reflection on how and why these processes occur.

A troubling statistic shared by the speaker and announced by the Ministry of Education-speaking on the number of slots in public higher education- was that 20 to 30 percent of all university slots in public universities in the country go unfilled. Naturalizing the discourse of the current government, according to Professor Alexandre [Rodrigues] is complicated. Going off of this context, he asks why we should keep open universities like the UERJ and also why we should open new university campuses like the [CEDERJ](#) in Paracambi, the IM/UFRRJ in Nova Iguacu. If we have a transport system (the train, the subway, the bus) capable of taking students who live in faraway regions to the major urban areas.

He explained that the actual IERP was created by the Rangel Pestana School Group and the Education Institute of Nova Iguacu. In the 1940s, the two institutions joined to form the [Rangel Pestana Education Institute](#). This public school, affiliated with the state government of Rio de Janeiro, needs help. Last year, students occupied the institution demanding a better quality of teaching and improvements to the basic conditions in the school, since, in its current condition, it denied students an important space for expression. The professors accompanied the students and joined this questioning process. Many activities sprung from the IERP occupation, such as discussion groups, theatre classes, graffiti classes, debates over ["A School Without Political Parties"](#) etc. He thought it a shame that the National Institute for Studies and Statistics (INEP) did not have numbers on the IERP, making research on its performance impossible. It is not evaluated because the government treats it like a "teachers' certification course", without touching the question of evaluating its performance. This evaluation only appears in the [National] Education Census.

The professor concluded by affirming that education is a process of social development. It is not life preparation. It is life itself!

Professor Marcia Pletsch made some comments on Alexandre de Assis' talk. She said that since arriving at the IM/UFRRJ, she has prioritized connecting the university with elementary education networks. First because such a process makes knowledge production possible from the starting point of the social, economic and political, and cultural realities of the local communities around it. Second, this connection favors an exchange between these two educational niches, facilitating youths' access to higher education. She highlighted two programs that resulted from this joint effort. One was the Institutional Program for Incentivizing Teaching (PIBID) in which 500 scholarship recipients from the Rural become active in public schools in the Baixada. The second is the Special Education and Educational Inclusion Institute (ObEE), a fundamental program that also connects higher education activities to elementary education, involving not only students, but also public-school teachers.

John French warned that there exists an implied form of alienating thinking about education. In reality, all people related to one another (fathers, mothers, children, brothers, cousins, friends, etc.) are educating one another. That is, all are educators in some sense, If you know something that the other person does not know and you pass that knowledge on to them, then teaching happens. A central question is to understand education as a liberating tool, not only individually, but collectively. Another important question is responsibility. If you do not know something about a certain subject, you should learn. But, in some moment, you will have to teach the same thing to someone else. This cyclical education process is a chain of information and as such it structures society. Professor French pointed out that we need to end this idea that we professors are "us" and the students are "them." In reality, all people play the role of professor when they teach and of students when they learn something.

Photos: Project poster for "The Cost of Opportunity, joint project between the IM/UFRRJ and Duke University (U.S.A.).

Roundtable Discussants: Simone de Conceição Januário, John French, Márcia Pletsch, Alexandre de Assis and Duke student [sic.] Mitchell Ryan.