

The Multi-Disciplinary Institute at Rio's Federal Rural University is a Subject of International Research

Students of Duke University (U.S.A.) visited the Nova Iguaçu campus to conduct research on academic mobility

By: Bruna Somma

In the last few years, Brazilian public universities have become more inclusive and representative. In the case of the Rural Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ also known as the Rural University), there was also the creation of new campuses such as the Multi-disciplinary Institute (IM) in Nova Iguaçu that was created to meet the demand for a quality federal institution in the region. A group of students from Duke University, a university in the U.S.A., noticed this fact and became interested in developing, in partnership with the Rural University, a research project on the subject. The project is called "The Cost of Higher Education in the Baixada Fluminense." Its first phase occurred in late June of this year with the visit of eight students and two U.S. professors to the IM. The trip had as its goal the collection of data and information about how the Rural University's Baixada campus worked to promote social mobility at the institution.

The group wants to outline the socioeconomic profile of students that make it into federal universities today and gain their perspectives. To do that, they conducted a series of interviews with students and professors of the IM. Additionally, they participated in methodological preparation classes and reading historical documents about the region and Brazil's educational policies during their three week stay. They will pitch the project to grant agencies in October 2017.

The U.S. group had already taken an interest in Brazil-so much so that they spoke Portuguese. One of those students is John Victor Alencar, born in Recife, but raised in the U.S. since childhood. He was the first in his family to attend university and he hopes that this study can help him understand the inclusion of the popular classes in public universities. "I love studying Brazil because it's my culture, but I don't understand much because I don't live here", Alencar said.

A more inclusive university

The U.S. group also got to now the Seriopédica campus and participated in a meeting with the Central Administration. The objective was to grasp the big picture of Brazilian education in the last few years. The rector, Ana Dantas, the vice rector, Eduardo Callado, the IM director, Alexandre Fortes, the outreach director Katerina Coumendouros, the undergraduate dean Lígia Machado, the dean of Student Affairs César da Ros, and students from the IM also attended the event.

Brazil's public university admissions process was one of the main topics of discussion. With the implementation of the Unified Selection System (Sisu in Portuguese) and the quota law (approved in 2012 to reserve 50 percent of university slots to black Brazilians), the university student population became much more diverse. Now, blacks and public school graduates can get a slot, an area that before was dominated by the elite's representatives. "Today graduates from public high schools make up 50 percent of our university graduates. Economically disadvantaged students are well represented numerically as well. Thus, we can say that the Rural University has a pretty inclusive makeup," Lígia Machado emphasized.

The dean of student affairs, César da Ros highlighted the importance of financial and housing assistance for the student body. He also explained that in the U.S. students get a scholarship to study in a private university. In Brazil, even if the student gets in to a public university, he or she needs financial aid to stay in. “The importance of student aid in the current university context guarantees that we can keep the inclusion and the people here as well as diminish the failure and absence rates,” explained Da Ros.

Based on all of the information gathered in Brazil, the U.S. group plans on writing articles or maybe even a book.

“Starting in September (the beginning of the U.S. academic year) they will be able to write grants to get new resources to continue their project using all of the information they brought from Brazil. A March 2017 seminar to assess the project is already planned. Some of the Rural University will also travel there [to Duke],” Alexandre Fortes concluded.

Translated by Travis Knoll