

BRASA Resolution against threats to Higher Education, October 2017

The Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA), the largest international association of Brazilian scholars, repudiates the deep budget cuts, withholding of faculty and staff salaries, and attempts to shutter university campuses that currently threaten higher education in Brazil. These measures reverse the gains of a generation of expansion of access to higher education in Brazil. They undermine an educational sector that makes vital contributions not only to the national economy, in the form of research and development, but to Brazilian democracy itself. These budget cuts have particularly deleterious implications for the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), the Federal University of Latin American Integration (Unila) and the Federal University of International Lusophone Afro-Brazilian Integration (Unilab).

UERJ confronts grave crisis brought on by withholding or late payment of faculty and staff salaries over the past eighteen months. UERJ is many months behind in payments of regular faculty. Hundreds of staff positions have been eliminated. Faculty face adverse conditions, with compensation uncertain. Staff and maintenance cuts have left campus severely deteriorated and unsafe.

Unila, in Foz de Iguaçu, has been threatened by a proposed federal congressional amendment that, if passed, would shut the campus permanently, and would turn Unila into the Federal University of Western Paraná, eliminating its autonomy. The amendment has been withdrawn in the face of popular opposition, but may be revived if vigilance relaxes. Unilab, which has campuses in Ceará and in Bahia, faces the same type of threat.

UERJ, Unila and UNILAB have been at the forefront of expanding access to higher education in Brazil. UERJ was the first university in Brazil to institute affirmative action, greatly expanding the percentage of Afro-descendant and low-income students enrolled in the last fifteen years. Unila, created in 2007, has welcomed enrollment from the underserved population of rural western Paraná, Mato Grosso do Sul, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, as well as students especially from neighboring countries of Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay. The student population of Unilab predominantly comprises Afro-Brazilian students and students from Portuguese-speaking Africa. Measures to undermine these institutions deprive funding for universities that have done the most to make access to higher education a right rather than a privilege.

While the cases of UERJ, Unila and UNILAB are dire, they are part of a broader panorama of substantial cuts to funding for research and maintenance at state and federal universities. Given Brazil's current economic challenges, some budget cutbacks are inevitable. But funding cuts have been deepest in disciplines that have been at the forefront of expanding access to higher education, and in funding for services like subsidized meals. These cuts undermine university education where it is most accessible, and restrict access where that education remains well-funded.

BRASA condemns these destructive policies and stands in solidarity with university faculty, staff and students in Brazil.

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