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"You can't give with one hand and take away with the other": lessons and challenges for student retention in Brazilian federal universities.

"Não pode dar com uma mão e tirar com a outra": lições e desafios para a permanência estudantil nas universidades federais brasileiras

"No se puede dar con una mano y quitar con la otra": lecciones y desafíos para la retención estudiantil en las universidades federales brasileñas.

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Abstract: This article provides a brief overview of the advances and challenges faced by students in Brazilian federal universities in recent times, considering higher education as a right and affirmative action as an important tool for promoting the diversification of students accessing public higher education. It analyses, on the one hand, the main achievements, lessons learned, and insights gained from the adoption of affirmative action and retention policies. On the other hand, it identifies and reflects on the main challenges posed for the expansion and consolidation of student retention in federal universities. From a methodological point of view, it is characterized as a reflective essay, based on a set of researches carried out mainly by the Laboratory for Studies and Research in Higher Education (LEPES) at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) in recent years. As a result, the text points to important advances achieved in the coverage and institutionalization of student retention policies in Brazilian federal universities. At the same time, it signals the importance of expanding and diversifying these programs, aiming to meet the diverse demands of the student body.
Keywords*:* Higher Education; Student Retention; Federal University; PNAES; Student Support.

Resumo: O artigo tem como objetivo fazer um breve balanço dos avanços e desafios relacionados à permanência estudantil nas universidades federais brasileiras no período recente, tendo como referência a educação superior como direito e as ações afirmativas como ferramenta importante para promover a diversificação dos estudantes que acessam o Ensino Superior público. Dedica-se a analisar, por um lado, as principais conquistas e lições a partir da adoção de ações afirmativas e políticas de permanência. Por outro, procura identificar e refletir sobre os principais desafios colocados para a ampliação e consolidação da permanência estudantil nas universidades federais. Do ponto de vista metodológico, tem um caráter de ensaio reflexivo, a partir de um conjunto de pesquisas realizadas principalmente pelo Laboratório de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação Superior (LEPES) da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) nos últimos anos. Como resultado, o texto aponta para avanços importantes obtidos na cobertura e na institucionalização das políticas de permanência nas universidades federais brasileiras. Ao mesmo tempo, sinaliza a importância de expansão e diversificação destes programas, visando o atendimento a demandas diversas apresentadas por parte do público estudantil.
Palavras-chave*:* Educação Superior; Permanência Estudantil; Universidade Federal; PNAES; Assistência Estudantil.

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Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo brindar una breve visión general de los avances y desafíos que enfrentan los estudiantes en las universidades federales brasileñas en los últimos años, considerando la educación superior como un derecho y la acción afirmativa como una herramienta importante para promover la diversificación del alumnado que accede a la educación superior pública. Analiza, por un lado, los principales logros, lecciones aprendidas y perspectivas derivadas de la adopción de políticas de acción afirmativa y retención. Por otro lado, identifica y reflexiona sobre los principales desafíos para expandir y consolidar la retención estudiantil en las universidades federales. Desde un punto de vista metodológico, consiste en un ensayo reflexivo, basado en una serie de investigaciones realizadas principalmente por el Laboratorio de Estudios e Investigaciones en Educación Superior (LEPES) de la Universidad Federal de Río de Janeiro (UFRJ) en los últimos años. Como resultado, el texto destaca los importantes avances logrados en la cobertura e institucionalización de las políticas de retención estudiantil en las universidades federales brasileñas. Al mismo tiempo, subraya la importancia de ampliar y diversificar estos programas, con el fin de satisfacer las diversas necesidades presentadas por el alumnado.
Palabras clave: Educación Superior; Retención Estudiantil; Universidad Federal; PNAES; Asistencia Estudiantil.

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Introduction

The phrase that gives this article its title was said by a student from UFRJ (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), during research carried out by LEPES between 2021 and 2022 aimed at evaluating the implementation of the quota law, Law 12.711 of 2012 (BRASIL, 2012), which was completing 10 years of implementation at that time (Heringer and Carreira, 2022). The students' statement signals the risk that students who, on the one hand, benefited from affirmative action policies, may not be able to fully engage with and complete their courses due to difficulties encountered throughout the program and the inadequacy of retention policies implemented by universities.

Among the many conclusions and recommendations of that study, we highlight the importance of broadening the notion and meaning of student retention, including, in this broad concept, aspects such as "welcoming, respect, active listening, simplification of exclusionary bureaucratic procedures, comprehensive information on academic opportunities, curricular changes, access to foreign language courses, broad and comprehensive accessibility, dialogue between different instances of the university" (op. cit., p. 523), among other elements.

This conclusion resulted primarily from the data we collected from quota students and students belonging to student collectives who, at that time, were formulating and demanding

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different actions and programs necessary to guarantee effective retention and academic success – understood here as the completion of the course – for the majority of students.

At the same time, and because of the same research, the analysis carried out on the place of affirmative action policies and student retention policies in Brazilian federal universities revealed a much more challenging scenario (Carreira and Souza, 2022). While students demanded a wide range of actions and programs, universities generally reserved a more limited space for student retention policies and affirmative action in their institutional development plans and in the reports of their own evaluation committees, among other documents. Often, through interviews with administrators and faculty, we have perceived that Brazilian federal universities have implemented affirmative action and retention policies stipulated by law (the decree creating the National Student Support Program - PNAES of 2010, the quota law of 2012, the quota law of 2023, and the National Student Support Policy Law - PNAES of 2024), limiting themselves to what was mandatory and complied with current legislation.

At the end of the research, we asked ourselves: have Brazilian federal universities truly embraced the cause of democratizing and diversifying their student body? We also ask ourselves: are Brazilian federal universities aware of their institutional responsibility not only to comply with affirmative action policies and student support programs, but also to rethink their own role in society, to recognize how much they need to advance in diversifying knowledge production, seeking solutions for Brazilian society, constructing new research problems, and understanding the role that diversifying their student body plays in making all these transformations happen?

Certainly, the answers to these questions are not simple and imply a deep reflection on the place that public universities – in this case, federal universities – occupy in the Brazilian social imaginary, both from an inspirational point of view, as a horizon of possibility, and in terms of representation of possibilities for upward social mobility and transformation of individual trajectories.

The affirmative action policies adopted by the Brazilian government starting in 2012 have contributed to making the possibility of entering public universities a more attainable aspiration for many young students from public schools, quota students, Black, mixed-race, Indigenous, Quilombola, and disabled students, who have begun to consider these institutions as a viable aspiration after completing high school.

We have a significant number of university students who are the first generation in their families to reach this level of education. The range of possibilities for entering higher education has expanded. It's not just about imagining that path, but actually reaching that

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educational level, which has become more accessible thanks to affirmative action. At the same time, these students find themselves, upon entering, in a university that was not prepared to receive them and fully integrate them into university life. The narratives of quota students and first-generation students in numerous studies conducted over the last few decades document experiences and feelings of inadequacy, displacement, and unfamiliarity with the academic world and with the whole set of practices and values that circulate there.[2] .

On the other hand, much of the literature that has focused on student retention policies points out that there is no single formula to guarantee students' academic success and that it is necessary to combine different strategies that include material support and mechanisms that facilitate learning, academic performance, and students' sense of belonging at the university (Heringer; Dias; Toti; Prado, 2025).

In this sense, this article aims to contribute to the reflection on the importance of integrated actions, involving different actors within institutions, actions that can truly promote the retention and successful completion of the course for most students. To contribute for this reflection, this article has the goal to do an overview of the advances and challenges presented to student retention in federal universities in a recent period having as a reference higher education as a right and affirmative actions as an important tool to promote diversification of students that access public higher school.

The expanded access, achieved through a set of measures combining affirmative action and system expansion, did not benefit everyone equally. A significant profile of students arrives at Higher Education with specific demands that will impact their retention. These students not only face financial difficulties in maintaining their studies but also face academic and symbolic challenges (Heringer; Dias; Toti; Prado, 2025).

In this article, we will focus on analyzing, on the one hand, the main achievements and lessons learned from the adoption of affirmative action and retention policies. On the other hand, we will identify and reflect on the main challenges posed for expanding and consolidating student retention in federal universities.

It is necessary to observe the changes that have occurred during this period. It is necessary to observe the policies that have been successful in welcoming and promoting the retention of students benefiting from affirmative action programs who have entered federal universities. At the same time, it is necessary to observe the challenges that remain present in this field.

[2] Examples of studies that demonstrate these findings include: Dantas, 2025; Souza e Silva, 2003; Carneiro, 2018; Menezes, 2019, among others.

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This is not a simple task. Much has been done, much has been tested, little has been evaluated, and we need more and better tools for monitoring and evaluating these policies. The implementation of the new National Student Support Policy, through Law 14.914/2024 (BRAZIL, 2024), is a great opportunity to take a closer look at the different actions adopted by federal universities.

From a methodological point of view, it is characterized as a reflective essay, based on a set of researches carried out mainly by the Laboratory for Studies and Research in Higher Education (LEPES) at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) in recent years. Taking as a starting point the research on the assessment of the Quota Law (Heringer and Carreira, 2022), we will delve into specific aspects of the development of student retention policies in Brazilian federal universities, also analyzing results from other laboratory research, including the study "Beyond material support: advances and challenges for student retention in Brazilian federal universities" (Heringer et al., 2025).

The article is divided into five sections, including this introduction. In the next section, we will present a brief overview of the expansion of Higher Education and the diversification of the public accessing federal universities over the last 20 years, highlighting some of the public policies implemented during this period.

In the third section, we will address some of the achievements and lessons learned from the implementation of retention policies, focusing on the material, academic, and symbolic dimensions of student retention.

In the fourth section, we will discuss the challenges that still exist for the full retention of most quota students, whether first-generation or those with some type of vulnerability that should and can be addressed by university policies.

In the final considerations, we present a synthesis of the main points raised throughout the article and propose some recommendations for institutions, as well as developments for new research agendas.

A brief contextualization of the expansion and diversification of the public university.

Brazilian higher education has undergone significant changes in the last 20 years. For the purposes of this text, this period is defined by the beginning of the first affirmative action policies in federal universities, with the University of Brasília (UnB) as the first to adopt affirmative action for black students in 2003. It extends from the creation of the PNAES (National Student Support Program) in 2007 (Brazil, 2007b), through an ordinance and its update in 2010 through a decree (Brazil, 2010), through the adoption of the Program to Support Restructuring and Expansion Plans

ISSN 2238-8346
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of Federal Universities (REUNI) in 2007 (Brazil, 2007a), through the adoption of the National High School Examination (ENEM) from 2009 (INEP, 2009), the Unified Selection System (SISU) in 2010 (MEC, 2010), the Quota Law in 2012 (Brazil, 2012) as a mandatory measure for federal universities, and, more recently, through the new Quota Law in 2023 (Brazil, 2023) and the creation of the National Student Support Policy (PNAES) in 2024. (Brazil, 2024; Vargas, 2014; Sampaio, 2014; Neves, Sampaio and Heringer, 2018; Barbosa, 2014; Heringer, 2025).

Public universities in Brazil, historically marked by elitism and limited access for most young people, have become, since the beginning of the 21st century, a space that is progressively more open to students who are the first generation in their families to enter higher education, and are gradually beginning to receive students who did not initially have this prospect in their lives.

Throughout the 2000s and up to the mid-2010s, we observed an increase in the number of places available at federal universities and other federal higher education institutions, accompanied by a diversification of their student body (Heringer and Carreira, 2022). The expansion, starting with REUNI, was characterized by an increase in the number of places available, the number of university *campuses* , and the creation of new universities, in addition to the expansion of evening classes.

It is important to note, recalling Vargas (2014), based on his work on REUNI at UFF (Universidade Federal Fluminense), that the implementation of this policy was by adhesion and the universities had to respond to different conditions in order to receive the resources made available by the program. Among the criteria for joining REUNI were increasing the number of new students and expanding student Support policies, in order to increase student retention and reduce dropout rates (Gouveia, 2009; Vargas, 2014).

Another important movement, which promoted policies to democratize public higher education, was the adoption of the ENEM (National High School Exam) as the main selection mechanism for federal higher education institutions. With this measure, adopted in 2009 following adjustments made to the exam, it was possible to simplify the access mechanisms, a process enhanced by the creation of the Unified Selection System, SISU, which made it possible to reduce the cost of the student selection process and improve the occupancy of vacancies nationwide (Klitzke, 2018).

Another relevant policy in this process of democratizing public higher education was the strengthening of the PNAES (National Student Support Program), which began in 2010. The program's objectives specifically aimed to democratize conditions for young people to remain in higher education, with the goal of reducing retention and dropout rates (Brazil, 2010).

ISSN 2238-8346
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Among the areas of focus of the PNAES (National Student Support Program) are: housing, food, transportation, health care, digital inclusion, culture, sports, early childhood education for students' children, and participation and learning for students with disabilities. The implementation of this policy was carried out through the transfer of budgetary resources to universities and other federal higher education institutions, which focused especially on initiatives to provide financial support through scholarships, food support, transportation support, and housing support.

While opportunities for access to federal higher education have expanded since the 2000s, Brazil has also witnessed the adoption of affirmative action policies aimed at increasing access to higher education for students from public schools, lower-income families, Black, mixed-race, Indigenous, and disabled students. These policies originated primarily from pressure from organized social movements, such as the Black movement and the Indigenous movement, which for decades denounced the exclusion experienced by these groups regarding access to higher education. Initially, such measures were implemented in isolation, through decisions made by state laws or university boards at each institution. However, after continued political mobilization and pressure on the federal government and the National Congress, bills that had been under consideration for decades proposing affirmative action gained greater support, leading to the approval of Law No. 12,711 of 2012, which became known as the Quota Law (BRASIL, 2012; Feres Júnior, 2008).

As this law reached its tenth anniversary, a debate began regarding the need to evaluate these policies, with a view to future decisions on whether or not to continue affirmative action policies in the country. Although the 2012 law provided for mechanisms to monitor its implementation, in practice this monitoring did not occur, and the sectors involved in this debate identified the adverse political climate in which this debate would take place, in a conservative context resistant to proposals for the continuity of these policies.

Given the absence of evaluation mechanisms on the part of the federal government, researchers and activists in favor of affirmative action have developed studies aimed at analyzing the impacts of these policies and contributing to the public debate surrounding the continuation of these programs. Among the studies developed, we highlight the research coordinated by researchers from UERJ (Rio de Janeiro State University) and AFRO/CEBRAP (Research and Training Center on Race, Gender and Racial Justice of the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning) (Campos and Lima, 2025), and the research carried out by LEPES/UFRJ, in conjunction with Ação Educativa (Heringer and Carreira, 2022).

ISSN 2238-8346
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Both studies pointed to promising results regarding the success of affirmative action as a mechanism for democratizing access to higher education, numerically demonstrating the increased presence of Black and mixed-race students in public higher education. Heringer and Carreira (2022) point out, for example, that the proportion of students enrolled in federal universities who entered through some form of quota system increased from 6% in 2010 to 35% in 2019, combining places according to the different criteria provided for by law.

Starting in 2015, the economic and political crisis worsened, leading to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and inaugurating a period of political instability, with a government characterized by fiscal adjustment policies that affected various activities of the federal government, including social policies and resources for universities. With regard to public higher education, after a continuous growth in enrollments since the beginning of the previous decade, there has been a decline in the number of enrollments since 2017 (Heringer, 2023).

The four-year period from 2019 to 2022 was marked by significant changes in the conduct of public policies for Higher Education, with direct impacts on federal universities. The interruption or weakening of inclusion and democratization policies implemented in previous decades occurred alongside a reduction in public investment and increased tensions surrounding university autonomy, resulting from initiatives by the Ministry of Education that expanded its intervention in federal educational institutions. In a document released in 2021, the National Association of Directors of Federal Institutions of Higher Education (Andifes) highlighted that the effects of successive budget cuts were aggravated by regulatory measures, opinions, and presidential vetoes that restricted personnel management and compromised the functioning of universities. In this context, the challenges faced by institutions went beyond the issue of day-to-day funding, also encompassing the sustainability of research activities, postgraduate studies, and scholarship programs. This scenario jeopardized the ability of public universities to maintain their functions of scientific production, training of qualified human resources, and contribution to the social and technological development of the country (Heringer, 2024).

The Covid-19 pandemic, between 2020 and 2022, further aggravated the situation of reduced enrollment, with a significant decrease in the number of applicants for the ENEM exams and an increase in student retention, the number of course withdrawals, dropouts, and absenteeism (Sampaio et al., 2022; Senkevics et al., 2022).

ISSN 2238-8346
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A gradual recovery in enrollment and the number of new students would begin to occur in the period after 2023, with the start of Lula's third term. There was also a partial recovery in budget allocations for public universities, although at levels still lower than those at the beginning of the 2010s.

In the new political context, starting in 2023, the discussion about renewing the quota law was resumed in the National Congress, at the initiative of parliamentarians in the progressive field.[3] . Throughout 2023, public hearings were held that incorporated demands from organizations within the Black, Indigenous, and Quilombola movements. The new Quota Law was signed into law by President Lula in November 2023. The law reduced the maximum income limit for this type of quota system from 1.5 to 1 minimum monthly wage per capita and also prioritized student support for quota students who are in a vulnerable situation at the time of entering higher education. It also formalized the availability of open competition places for all students competing in the Sisu (Unified Selection System) and established mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating its compliance, with the provision for follow-up and evaluation by the Ministry of Education, together with other instances of the Federal Government, with a provision for evaluation every ten years and the publication of annual monitoring reports.

As a more recent measure regarding public higher education, we bring to light the approval, in 2024, of Law No. 14,914, which created the National Student Support Policy (PNAES) – and which, at the time of submission of this article, was awaiting regulation (Brazil, 2024). This legal instrument proposes a comprehensive systematization of a set of actions that, for the most part, already existed, but are now consolidated into a legal text with greater standardization.

The approval of this law represents a milestone in the institutionalization of student support in Brazil by giving a permanent character to the policy previously regulated by Decree No. 7,234/2010 (Brazil, 2010). The transformation of a government program into a state policy responded to a historical demand from the leaders of federal higher education institutions and the teams responsible for implementing student support actions, based on the understanding that retention policies constitute an essential component of the democratization of higher education, since they broaden the conditions for the continuity of studies for students in situations of social vulnerability and, consequently, increase their possibilities of completing the course (Heringer, 2025).

[3] Based on the proposal presented by Representatives Maria do Rosário (PT-RS), Benedita da Silva (PT-RJ), Damião Feliciano (PDT-PB), and 52 other signatories, through Bill No. 5384/2020, discussions began regarding the updating of the Quota Law. Federal congresswoman Dandara Tonantzin (PT-MG) took over as rapporteur for the project in March 2023 and led the process until its approval in the same year.

ISSN 2238-8346
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Among the innovations introduced by Law No. 14,914/2024, the broadening of the concept of student retention stands out. The policy shifts from exclusively emphasizing the provision of financial and material aid to more explicitly incorporating programs focused on academic support and the development of student trajectories. This change reflects the recognition that remaining in higher education results from the interaction between different dimensions of institutional support. As argued by Heringer et al. (2025), retention should be understood as a process that integrates financial support, academic support, and symbolic recognition, favoring the full participation of students in university life.

Another important advance concerns the definition of the policy's priority audience. Article 5 establishes that beneficiaries of affirmative action policies constitute one of the priority groups for access to the actions foreseen by the PNAES (Brazil, 2024). In addition to this criterion, the legislation provides for the consideration of different vulnerability indicators, such as family income, origin in public schools, admission through affirmative action quotas, and disability status, allowing for overlap between these factors. By incorporating this perspective, Law No. 14,914/2024 reinforces the articulation between access and retention policies, in line with the changes promoted in the Quota Law by Law No. 14,723/2023, which establishes priority for quota students in situations of social vulnerability in accessing student support policies (Brazil, 2023).

Since the law is still in the process of being implemented, it is currently more prudent to focus on analyzing the implementation of retention policies in the period 2010-2024, carefully observing the main advances and challenges in implementing actions in this field. We believe that by examining this recent experience, we will be better equipped to plan for the future.

Achievements and lessons learned from the implementation of retention policies.

In this section, we will address some of the achievements and lessons learned since the creation of PNAES in 2007, strengthened by the decree in 2010, focusing on the implementation of officially called student support, taking into account the material, academic, and symbolic dimensions of retention policies.

In the history of actions developed by federal universities in this field over the last 20 years, we can initially identify a predominance of actions traditionally allocated within the scope of the material dimension, aimed at granting financial aid in the form of scholarships, and aid aimed at housing, food and transportation (Vargas and Heringer, 2016). This is the classic concept of student support that prevailed predominantly throughout the first decade of implementation of these policies.

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There was a budget increase in resources allocated to retention policies. This increase was progressive from 2010 onwards, with a growing expansion of resources allocated to PNAES during the period, reaching 1.5 billion in 2015 (Lima and Ferreira, 2026).

In a survey conducted in 2016, based on data collected in 2015, we identified that most federal universities at that time offered some type of aid or scholarship aimed at supporting students in socioeconomically vulnerable situations. These grants varied in their names but were mainly intended for immediate support (Vargas and Heringer, 2016). The figures we gathered for 2015 indicated that 100% of the 63 federal universities existing at the time offered the Bolsa Permanência (a scholarship program created by the Ministry of Education in 2013); and 76% offered some type of scholarship or aid for students in socioeconomically vulnerable situations, mostly associated with specific benefits such as housing or food. Of the 63 universities, 98% offered student housing or housing support, and 90% offered university restaurants or meal support. What stood out in the analysis carried out at that time was the diversity of aid offered and the autonomy of universities to define eligibility criteria, amounts, period of granting these benefits, etc. (Vargas and Heringer, 2016).

Over the years, with the advancement of affirmative action and greater institutional experience in implementing student support, Brazilian federal universities have diversified their forms of student support. Over the years, actions aimed at other aspects foreseen in the PNAES decree have been expanded, such as health care; digital inclusion; culture; sports; daycare; pedagogical support; and access, participation and learning of students with disabilities (Brazil, 2010). Beyond financial aid, including housing and food, we observed that the main areas in which universities offered support in 2015 were related to healthcare and childcare Support. Nevertheless, the prevailing view was focused on meeting basic needs such as housing, food, and transportation.

In a new survey conducted in 2023, we observed an important transformation in this scenario, with the inclusion of new types of benefits and support and a greater balance between actions aimed at material, academic and symbolic permanence (Heringer et al., 2025). This survey revealed that Brazilian federal universities have significantly diversified their actions aimed at student retention and have not limited themselves to material support. Within the framework of the classification proposed in the survey itself, inspired by Reis (2009) and Vargas and Heringer (2016; 2017), it was possible to observe the significant growth of actions aimed at academic retention and symbolic retention. We highlight the expansion of academic support actions, which aim to "promote learning and improve assessments and, consequently, academic performance, while the objective of symbolic support is characterized by expanding and promoting the sense of belonging to the institution" (op. cit., p. 196).

ISSN 2238-8346
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Several universities have begun offering scholarships or financial aid in an integrated manner, considering the needs of different students and a comprehensive socioeconomic assessment of the student's situation.

Compared to 2015, the 2023 survey identified a greater presence of pedagogical support actions, which were previously less prioritized within the scope of retention policies, and which have become more prominent, including the provision of tutoring, mentoring, and support for teaching materials, among other measures. As the study points out (Heringer et al., 2025, p. 198):

> We identified that the most frequent type of support across the 69 universities is psychological support, present in 63 of them, followed by pedagogical support (56), sports and cultural activities (55), health services (49), and leisure activities (47). Even with all the difficulties in locating data on the websites, in the case of academic support, it was possible to identify that at least one type of support is offered in all of them, with 70% of the universities offering all the modalities we identified. (...) The most recurrent actions in relation to pedagogical support are individual consultations (63.8%), followed by workshops (56.5%), mentoring/tutoring for subjects with high failure rates (34.8%), lectures (42%), and actions for incoming students (27.5%).

Symbolic support actions also gained prominence, with the emergence of student collectives and their specific demands, leading to greater institutional attention to actions translated into programs for welcoming and supporting student collectives. According to the study mentioned earlier (Heringer et al., 2025, p. 199):

> Based on the data collected from the websites, we identified that the most frequent symbolic support policies are those aimed at students with disabilities, present in 51 (73.9%) of the universities. Following that, with a very similar frequency, programs aimed at indigenous and quilombola populations appear in almost 70% of universities, as well as those designed with a focus on race and gender, also in almost 70%. Furthermore, we identified that 40 universities (58%) have initiatives for the LGBTQIA+ population, 30 (43.5%) have initiatives for foreigners, and 20 (29%) have initiatives for the refugee population. It was also possible to identify that 38 universities (55.1%) have programs and actions that encourage student groups.

Essentially, what the most recent studies have shown is a greater balance between the provision of actions and programs related to these three dimensions (material, academic, and symbolic), demonstrating a greater articulation between actions aimed at student retention in federal universities and a search to respond to the specific and diverse demands of students.

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Another relevant aspect is the growing concern with improving procedures for disseminating information, selecting, and granting scholarships and aid to students, through the optimization of schedules, efforts to unify calls for applications, and initiatives to improve mechanisms for clarifying doubts and verifying supporting documentation. These actions, although still in their initial stages, reveal a pursuit of greater effectiveness and transparency in processes on the part of universities.

Despite the progress mentioned in this section and identified through various studies, we can also point to significant challenges in implementing retention policies. Some of these aspects will be presented in the next section.

Challenges still exist for the full retention of most students.

In this section, we will point out some challenges that still exist for the full retention in public higher education of many quota students and first-generation students, or those who present some type of vulnerability.

One of the main challenges for the effective implementation of the National Student Support Policy relates to guaranteeing funding compatible with the expansion of responsibilities assigned by Law No. 14,914/2024 (Brazil, 2024). The consolidation of student support as a permanent policy requires stable and sufficient resources to ensure the implementation of planned actions, a condition that contrasts with the recent scenario of budgetary constraints faced by federal higher education institutions. Data released in 2025 highlights this contradiction by indicating that the discretionary budget of federal universities, excluding spending on benefits for employees, totaled R$ 5 billion in 2024, an amount lower than the R$ 6.7 billion recorded in 2016 and the R$ 5.5 billion of 2019. These resources fund essential expenses for the operation of universities, including infrastructure maintenance, payment for basic services, campus cleaning, and student support programs. In this context, the expansion of retention policies foreseen in the new legislation is hampered by budgetary constraints that compromise its effectiveness. If this situation of underfunding persists, the risk increases of a reduction in the number of students served and a weakening of the institutions' capacity to ensure adequate conditions for their retention, compromising the progress achieved in the process of democratizing higher education.

Beyond this structural limitation, we also consider it appropriate to address other obstacles to the full inclusion of quota and first-generation students in Brazilian federal universities. At this moment, we reflect on aspects highlighted in recent studies by

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LEPES (Martins, 2022; Prado, 2021; Abreu, 2025; Dantas, 2025; Santos, 2024; Crespo, 2024; Pessoa, 2024; Brito, 2023; among others).

From the point of view of the material difficulties associated with remaining a student, the challenge of reconciling work and study remains, affecting a significant number of quota students (Pessoa, 2024). Although there has been an expansion of scholarship and aid policies aimed at increasing material support, we observe that these actions are not able to benefit all students who request them. On the other hand, for a certain profile of quota and first-generation students, the value of a grant or even an academic scholarship is not enough to cover basic needs, leading to the need to resort to other types of income, often through paid internships, informal jobs, intermittent work, including weekend jobs, and jobs that require low qualifications. The current characteristics of the Brazilian labor market, which is less regulated, increasingly platformed, and with weaker employment relationships marked by self-employment and micro-entrepreneurship, present opportunities and, at the same time, new challenges for students who cannot rely on family support to cover their expenses and need to resort to other strategies for entering the labor market (Fundação Itaú et al., 2025).

In the case of student mothers, these conditions are exacerbated by the difficulty in reconciling the care required by motherhood with academic activities. As demonstrated in recent studies on the subject (Abreu, 2025; Moura, 2024), student mothers not only face overload due to their own family dynamics and traditional patterns of gender relations and family configurations but also encounter difficulties arising from inadequate and insufficient conditions in federal universities to accommodate them. These obstacles manifest themselves in physical and infrastructural barriers; in the lack of flexibility of regulations aimed at home-based learning; and even in the prejudice of teachers and technicians regarding the presence and needs of student mothers (Ibidem).

In the area of institutional infrastructure, it is not only student mothers who face difficulties. It is common for quota students and first-generation students to report the precariousness of services aimed at student well-being in many federal universities. This precarious situation translates into inadequate spaces for studying, eating, resting, and socializing and interacting among students. Once again, budgetary constraints often end up limiting the institutional capacity to respond to these different demands, which are not only aimed at quota and first-generation students, but affect the well-being of all students. It is important to recognize, however, that quota and first-generation students are generally the most affected by the precarious infrastructure on university campuses, as they are often the ones who live in more distant locations and face poorer quality public transportation,

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especially in large cities, marked by patterns of residential segregation (Casal and Heringer, 2023; Pessoa, 2024).

The journey of quota students or first-generation students at public universities is frequently fraught with challenges from both an academic and institutional standpoint. In this area, we highlight the persistence of bureaucratic systems in many institutions regarding student support application procedures. In research on the assessment of quota law (Heringer and Carreira, 2022) and in other studies conducted by LEPES (Pessoa, 2024; Santos, 2024), criticism of the procedures for drafting, disseminating, and managing calls for applications for scholarships and student aid was recurrent. We also identified that this information is not always explicit and well explained on university websites and other communication tools (Heringer et al., 2025).

On the other hand, we observe that the curriculum structure itself and the rules for managing the academic flow are often inflexible, creating difficulties for the adaptation of students who, for various reasons, are unable to follow the regular course schedule. These difficulties translate into excessive prerequisites in subjects, little flexibility for course withdrawal and re-enrollment, a limited offer of elective subjects, and few possibilities to diversify the curriculum with learning in other areas, among other aspects (Vargas, 2025; Borges, 2022).

In the broader field of academic retention, quota students and first-generation students report in different studies the difficulty in their relationship with professors, with the classroom often being a place of exclusion and vulnerability (Pessoa, 2024; Borges, 2022; Brito, 2023). Although the classroom is identified by authors such as Vicent Tinto (1987) as the ideal space for promoting student retention, we observe that in many cases it ends up being an unwelcoming space, reproducing prejudices and devaluing the knowledge brought by a diversity of students (Honorato and Borges, 2023). The constraints also extend to difficulties in the field of learning, reading and interpreting texts, lack of preparation in relation to some content due to the precariousness of the high school education received, or even a kind of "nostalgia" on the part of some teachers in relation to an ideal student model, who arrived at the public university without difficulties, without weaknesses in their education (Heringer and Carreira, 2022; Honorato and Borges, 2023).

These difficulties are often exacerbated by the assessment formats adopted, by the persistence of content with little diversity in the subjects, whether in terms of themes and authors studied (Dantas, 2025; Guimarães et al., 2020), or by the lack of additional training in areas such as foreign language teaching, for example, which would make a big difference for quota and first-generation students.

ISSN 2238-8346
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As a result of all these aspects and others not detailed here, the academic journey of quota students and first-generation students at public universities is frequently marked by what the literature has already identified as a lack of a sense of belonging to that environment, as a mark of inadequacy or a perception that this is not their place, that these students would not have the right to be there. This perception is more frequent among quota students or first-generation students in more selective courses, in which they are often still a minority, despite the advancement of affirmative action (Dantas, 2025; Bonaldi and Viricimo, 2026).

Many of the aspects mentioned here call into question the consolidation of student retention policies and the prospects for academic success of these students. We know that the lasting effects of the difficulties faced during the Covid-19 pandemic have worsened this situation in many cases, and that these factors have contributed to the spread of a veritable "epidemic" of mental health disorders among students during this period (Honorato and Borges, 2025; Macedo et al., 2020; Sampaio et al., 2023). The resilience needed to face all these social and institutional barriers can lead many students to become demotivated regarding their chosen course or even the prospect of completing higher education, generating an accumulation of frustrations and a lack of interest in finishing this stage of their training.

Given this scenario, and despite the lessons learned from the retention policies implemented during this period, we observe that there is still a long way to go for federal universities to become spaces not only of expanded access, but of full experience and learning for all students who reach this level of education.

Final considerations

The data and reflections presented throughout the text reveal important advances in the implementation of retention policies in Brazilian federal universities. On the other hand, they also point to challenges that must be faced for the full success of these policies. If we observe the nature of the challenges, we identify that many are a result of aspects that operate in the daily routine of the educational process and are part of medium-term institutional constructions. To some extent, these processes are not implemented automatically from a legal text and, in some cases, are not entirely contingent on the availability of resources, although we know that budgetary balance is fundamental for the full realization of retention policies. However, there are dynamics that extend beyond the economic aspect and are distributed across different institutional spaces. In these final considerations, we highlight some points of attention for continued reflection and deepening of knowledge regarding student retention in universities.

ISSN 2238-8346
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One aspect that stands out from the analysis is the limited availability of systematized data that would allow for qualified monitoring of the effectiveness of retention policies. We are familiar with dozens of case studies detailing specific institutional experiences that greatly enrich knowledge in the field. However, we emphasize the importance of building, systematizing, and analyzing data that tracks the trajectory of beneficiaries of retention policies over time.

It is also relevant to articulate research on the trajectory of students benefiting from student retention policies, comparing them with beneficiaries of academic scholarships, including scientific initiation, tutoring, scholarships in extension projects, etc. These activities should increasingly interact within the university dynamic, to consolidate the perception of different academic experiences as a factor in student retention.

To observe this trajectory, it is very important to improve the various monitoring tools available. We draw attention here to the *dashboard* developed by the University of Texas at Austin, presented in a previous work (Heringer, 2022).

We shall mention the importance of developing longitudinal studies that follow specific cohorts of students and can highlight the effects of retention policies over time at different points in their academic trajectory. We highlight here the example of research carried out by Martins (2022) for the cohort of students entering UFRJ in 2014. We also draw attention to the work of Fellin (2025) with the analysis of data on quota students at UFRGS (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul).

We consider it appropriate to highlight that data collection is relevant not only from the point of view of academic research, but also for guiding and monitoring public policies. The systematization of information allows university administrators, course coordinators, vice-rectors, and other management bodies to identify early situations of student retention and potential dropout, enabling faculty and other administrators to act quickly, minimizing the effects of any difficulties encountered along the student's path.

Monitoring, analyzing, and reflecting on student retention policies over the past 20 years also allows us to observe that these policies are tools in motion. They are not finished but are in a continuous process of expansion and improvement. This trend can be observed by analyzing the fact that, as specific demands are met, such as the significant digital inclusion during the pandemic, maternity policies, specific actions for people with disabilities, among others, addressing these aspects does not exhaust all demands. Conversely, as in the very dynamics of the struggle for rights that has traversed the process of building citizenship since the 19th century, in a reflection deepened by Marshall (1967), it is significant to observe that, when some rights are

ISSN 2238-8346
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contemplated and guaranteed, they open the space for the emergence of the demand for new rights, making it possible to broaden the very conception of justice and citizenship.

We are therefore experiencing, in contemporary times, the broadening and expansion of the very concept of permanence, which is becoming more complex, with new layers that still need to be addressed, and with the need for further exploration and development of new actions. In contemporary debate, it is possible to perceive, for example, the emergence of specific programs for migrant students, students from quilombola communities, refugee students, or students in asylum situations, among other groups.

The mapping we carried out in 2023 (Heringer et al., 2025) itself suggests an expansion of actions aimed at different student groups, with the inclusion of initiatives that were not even considered before.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the need for institutions to be much more committed to the success of all students, in the most varied aspects, with the possibility of having more trained professionals prepared to deal with the new situations that arise. This set of actions is essential to prevent the metaphor stated in the title of this article, of the university "giving with one hand and taking away with the other" the possibility of access and academic success for students, from continuing to be repeated.

It is important to develop a new understanding of who the current university student is and what difficulties they face in fully engaging with their studies. It is also important that faculty and other staff be able to view these new students without prejudice from a socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial standpoint.

We want diverse universities, renewed and transformed by this diversity, and that can effectively reflect the richness of the contributions of all segments of Brazilian society. This university will become increasingly entrenched and better equipped to effectively contribute to strengthening democracy, human rights, and building equality in Brazil.

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