

DEBATES

## Education in Latin America: Advances and Challenges

by Gabriel Ondetti, *Associate Editor* | Missouri State University | gabrielondetti@missouristate.edu  
and Indira Palacios-Valladares, *Associate Editor* | Missouri State University |  
indirapalacios@missouristate.edu

schools along with differential access to postsecondary education remain serious issues to be addressed. Financial resources for private and public education of course play a key role for access and quality at all levels. The contributors to our *Debates* section take up these issues, outlining problems and sketching some proposals for solutions. They provide an excellent entry into related debates that will be pursued at the Congress about more and less promising avenues towards new social contracts. ■

In recent decades educational enrollment in Latin America has increased greatly, especially among women and the poor. At the primary level it is now close to universal. Since education has long been viewed as a tool for achieving social mobility, national integration, and economic progress, this is undoubtedly a positive development. Nevertheless, rather than allaying concerns about education, increased enrollment has only served to focus them on a number of unresolved issues. Do existing educational practices adequately serve an increasingly diverse student population? How can learning outcomes be improved in order to bring students closer to international standards? Should universities base their admissions decisions purely on merit, or should they favor disadvantaged groups? Should public universities charge tuition, or should the state guarantee a free college education to all who are admitted?

The articles featured in this *Debates* section address these and other questions. Néstor López examines the evolution of Latin America's primary and secondary schools over the past 20 years. He stresses the rapid gains in enrollment in the 1990s and the subsequent slowdown in the last decade. López argues that poverty poses a key obstacle to the achievement of universal education, but he points out that school practices that "deny the identity" of an increasingly diverse student body also impede retention, especially at the secondary level. Christian Daude's contribution examines intergenerational educational mobility, or the extent to which people tend to surpass the educational level achieved by their parents. He paints a relatively somber picture, presenting evidence that Latin America lags behind other regions on this variable. At the same time he offers suggestions for increasing mobility, including early childhood

interventions in health, nutrition, and education.

The article by Edward Telles and Marcelo Paixão explores one of the more surprising trends in tertiary education in recent years: the rapid rise of affirmative action in Brazilian university admissions. Since 2001, a society that once resolutely denied the existence of racial discrimination has seen the majority of its federal and state universities adopt quota systems aimed at increasing the number of poorer and darker-skinned students. María del Carmen Feijóo examines how educational systems have treated another group that has traditionally faced discrimination, women. While acknowledging the importance of the major increase in female educational enrollment in Latin America in recent decades, Feijóo stresses the persistence of a wide array of formal and informal practices that hold women back from pursuing the most prestigious and remunerative career tracks.

Finally, José Joaquín Brunner delves into the increasingly contentious question of how to finance public universities. He surveys the different approaches in the region, ranging from the entirely public formula in Cuba to the predominantly private one in Chile, where tuition payments have contributed to massive students protests. In the coming years, he says, rising university enrollments will only intensify the dilemma faced by policy makers, forcing them to make the difficult choice between increasing the financial burden on students and their families and seeking new sources of revenue. ■